

Post-Publication Revised Draft

Atiśa The Great Middle Way of Mere Appearance

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Published version with original pagination should be cited:

Apple, James B. 2022. “The Great Middle Way of Mere Appearance.” Pp. 601-614 in Edelglass, W., Harter, P.-J., & McClintock, S. (Eds.). (2022). *The Routledge Handbook of Indian Buddhist Philosophy* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/10.4324/9781351030908>

Abstract

The famous eleventh-century Bengali Atiśa (982–1054) was a master of Madhyamaka (Middle Way thought and practice) who upheld a lineage based on Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti that descended down to Atiśa’s direct teachers Bodhibhadra and Avadhūtipa. Atiśa’s lineage of the Middle Way of Nāgārjuna was contemplative in nature and did not utilize epistemological warrants (*pramāṇa*) to realize ultimate reality. Atiśa’s Middle Way synthesized the teachings of Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti, bringing together compatible elements of their teachings for soteriological efficacy in progression on the path. Atiśa outlined an undifferentiated Madhyamaka tradition that advocated the use of consequences (*prasaṅga*) that exposed contradictions in others’ assertions and employed other-acknowledged inferences to gain insight. Atiśa offers the modern reader a rare glimpse into an integrated Indian Buddhist Middle Way philosophy composed of a nominalism of “mere appearances” (*snang ba tsam*) in which both objects and cognitions are dependently designated and are therefore mere imputations (*prajñāptimatra*). Atiśa advocated a mentalist theory of Madhyamaka in which the mind, as mere appearance, is not established as independently real and is a mere nominal designation free from the extremes of existence and nonexistence. Atiśa referred to his middle way of mere appearance as the “Great Middle Way.” In its overall orientation, Atiśa’s Middle Way outlines a program of meditative cultivation that results in a nondual awakening whereby all conceptual thought has been eliminated and not even nonconceptual wisdom exists in Buddhahood.



Figure 1. Portrait of the Bengali master Atiśa Dīpaṅkaraśrījñāna. Early to mid-12th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. < <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38006>>. Open Access. Educational use, not for sale. The depiction of Atiśa wearing of a yellow hat (*zhwa ser po*) signifies the Kadampa (*bka' gdams pa*) tradition's rigor for adherence to monastic ordination rules.

Introduction

Atiśa, also known as Dīpamkaraśrījñāna (982–1054), is famous as a master from the ancient Indian Buddhist land of Bengal and for his journeys in Indonesia and Nepal. In the last thirteen years of his life, he became one of the most influential Indian Buddhist masters ever to set foot in Tibet. His Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings, encompassing instructions on entering the way of bodhisattvas up through highly advanced practices of the esoteric secret way of mantras, came to influence all subsequent traditions of Buddhism in Tibet. Atiśa followed a lineage of Indian Buddhist Madhyamaka (Middle Way) that was based on the teachings of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti and influenced by his direct teachers, including Bodhibhadra (fl. c. 1000), a scholar-monk at Nālandā; the contemplative-monk Vidyākokila (fl. c. 1000); and the tantric yogi Avadhūtipa (fl. c. 1000). Atiśa’s Madhyamaka lineage was upheld and actively taught in Tibet among communities of his Kadampa (*bka’ gdams pa*) followers until it was superseded by forms of Madhyamaka infused with epistemology that developed at the famous Tibetan monastery of Sangphu Neuthok (*gsang phu ne’u thog*) in the twelfth century (Apple 2019a).

Atiśa’s lineage of the Middle Way was contemplative in nature and did not utilize epistemological warrants (*pramāṇa*) to realize ultimate reality. Still, although not advocating the employment of epistemological warrants for Buddhist meditative realization, Atiśa did utilize reasoning (*yukti*) for the direct cognition of insight. He grounded his use of reasoning from scriptural authoritative texts attributed to the Buddha that demonstrate a continuity in the use of reasoning within Buddhist tradition. He denied a substance-based ontology while preserving a Buddhist soteriological program that accepts causality in the efficacy of conventional practices of moral discipline and meditation. Atiśa offers the modern reader a rare glimpse into an integrated Indian Buddhist Middle Way philosophy composed of a nominalism of “mere appearances” (*snang ba tsam*) in which both objects and cognitions are dependently designated and are therefore mere imputations (*prajñāptimatra*). Atiśa advocates a mentalist theory of Madhyamaka in which the mind, as mere appearance, is not at all established and is a mere nominal designation free from the extremes of existence and nonexistence. In its overall orientation, Atiśa’s Middle Way outlines a program of meditative cultivation that results in a nondual awakening whereby all conceptual thought has been eliminated and not even nonconceptual wisdom exists in Buddhahood.

Historical Context

Atiśa lived at a unique juncture in the history of India and Tibet. He resided in India during a revival of the East Indian Pāla Dynasties (760–1142) of Bihar and Bengal. During this time, Bengal was an “international” region with trade routes on land from Assam and Burma passing through ancient Buddhist pilgrimage holy sites of Magadha, including Vajrāsana, the “Diamond Seat,” where Śākyamuni Buddha attained awakening, located in present-day Bodh Gayā, India. The international environment of northeast India also included maritime routes connecting the Bay of Bengal to harbors in South and Southeast Asia (Acri 2016). The Pālas ruled over the northeastern lands of Bihar, West and North Bengal, and explicitly claimed to be Buddhist in their inscriptions: they utilized the Dharma wheel of the Buddha’s teachings on the top of inscribed copperplates and, in the colophons of manuscripts they sponsored, described themselves as “entirely devoted to the Buddha” (Sanderson 2009). Furthermore, the Pālas supported a perpetual endowment of donations for the Buddhist monastic community and established a network of major monasteries, including the prestigious centers of Vikramaśīla and Somapura. Atiśa, the Princely-Lord, came of age, studied, meditated, and taught during this buoyant time of maritime Buddhist Asia.

The Pāla dynastic period was permeated with the religious practices of esoteric Buddhism, or Secret Mantra practices. This form of Buddhism, based on groups of texts called tantras, was primarily disseminated from master to disciple. Institutional monastic esoterism and the esoterism of siddhas, accomplished adepts on the margins of society, dominated the Buddhist culture of the time. By the late tenth and early eleventh century, during the lifetime of Atiśa, Buddhist monastic communities and siddha culture had undergone almost two centuries of blending and accommodation. The accommodation of esoteric Buddhism into monastic communities was influenced, in part, by a highly competitive environment between Buddhists and non-Buddhists seeking patronage and economic support. Esoteric Buddhists lived in a cultural context, where Buddhists who did not support esoteric practices, as well as non-Buddhist esoteric practitioners including the diverse groups of Śaivas (followers of Śiva), contested for prestige and authority. These groups took part in a whole range of ascetic and ritual practices.

While residing in India before his journey to Tibet, Atiśa served as a monastic official at monasteries in Bodh Gayā and Vikramaśīla. One way to understand the form and content of the Mahāyāna Buddhism practiced and taught by Atiśa is to compare Atiśa with his esteemed colleagues at Vikramaśīla. Most of Atiśa’s colleagues there followed various forms of Yogācāra thought and worked with the philosophical traditions of epistemology based on the texts of the seventh-

century Buddhist thinker Dharmakīrti. His colleagues at Vikramaśīla were also holders of diverse monastic ordination lineages: Atiśa’s colleague Jñānaśrīmitra, a prominent scholar who initially upheld Saindhava *śrāvaka* views, advocated a form of Yogācāra thought that asserts that cognitive images (*ākāra*) are real. Jñānaśrīmitra also formulated a sophisticated version of the exclusion (*apoha*) theory of language based on complex epistemological arguments (McCrea and Patil 2010). Atiśa’s senior colleague and teacher Ratnākaraśānti was ordained in the Sarvāstivāda school at Odantapurī. Ratnākaraśānti composed numerous works on subjects such as valid cognition, the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*), Yogācāra, and Tantra, as well as Buddhist verse metrics (*cansaḥśāstra*) and riddles (Isaacson 2013). In terms of his viewpoint, Ratnākaraśānti articulated a middle way based on Yogācāra principles that incorporated the theory of the three natures (*trisvabhāva*) with an emphasis on self-awareness (*svasaṃvedana*) as equivalent to luminosity (*prakāśa*) (Apple 2018a). Atiśa’s junior colleague Ratnakīrti followed a nondual consciousness (*citrādvaitavāda*) understanding of Yogācāra and articulated sophisticated arguments against the Nyāya school’s God-like being called “Īśvara” (Patil 2009). In contrast to all of his known Vikramaśīla colleagues, Atiśa followed a lineage of Madhyamaka based on Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti that was transmitted through his teachers Avadhūtipa, Bodhibhadra, and Vidyākōkila, with whom he studied in his youth. Such differences between Atiśa and his colleagues may have been a contributing factor in Atiśa’s decision to leave Vikramaśīla for Tibet.

At that time, the kings in West Tibet were seeking to rejuvenate Buddhism in order to replicate the order, ethical principles, and stability that Mahāyāna Buddhist ideals had brought to the Tibetan Empire during the seventh to ninth centuries. In seeking out Atiśa as the rejuvenator of Mahāyāna Buddhist ideals, the Tibetans likely initially considered him a descendant of the great bodhisattva-scholar Śāntarakṣita, who was also from Bengal. Śāntarakṣita was responsible for establishing the first ordained monks in Tibet and contributing to the translation of texts and the construction of Tibet’s first monastery of Samyé (Blumenthal 2004). Although Atiśa and Śāntarakṣita may have been from the same region, Atiśa lived in an era of Indian Buddhism different than Śāntarakṣita’s: while Śāntarakṣita was a Mūlasarvāstivāda monk who blended Yogācāra and Madhyamaka philosophies like Śāntarakṣita, Atiśa upheld the Mahāsāṃghika ordination lineage and was a follower of the Madhyamaka tradition of Candrakīrti. Atiśa was also a lineage holder of a number of Yoginī tantras, such as the Laghuśaṃvara Tantra and Hevajra Tantra, which were only introduced into Tibetan culture in the late tenth century by Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055). Tibetans at this time were not fully familiar with these areas of monastic discipline, Madhyamaka philosophy, and esoteric Buddhism that Atiśa brought with him to Tibet.

Writings

Throughout his life in India, Indonesia, Nepal, and Tibet, Atiśa composed over 100 works. Recent publication of his collected writings in Tibetan organize his compositions into those related to view, conduct, union of view and conduct, and Secret Mantra practices. Atiśa focused his writings and teachings on essential practices and integrative meditative cultivations leading to the nondual realization of full buddhahood (Miyazaki 2007). Such essential practices consist of teachings that Atiśa distilled from the vast corpus of Buddhist scriptural and commentarial literature that was preserved at the monasteries of Vikramaśīla, Nālandā, and Somapura. He composed several works focusing on essential practice, including the *Essential Summary* (*Garbhasaṃgraha*), the *Essence Clearly Explained* (*Hṛdayanikṣepa*), *Lamp for the Summary of Conduct* (*Caryāsaṃgrahapradīpa*), and *Bodhisattva's Jewel Garland* (*Bodhisattvamaṇyāvalī*). In these works, Atiśa emphasized cultivation of the awakening mind, moral conduct, and practices for generating merit.

The *Open Basket of Jewels* (*Ratnakaraṇḍodghāṭamadhyamakopadeśa*; Miyazaki 2007b; Apple 2019a, 63–113) is one of the primary works among Atiśa's collected writings and perhaps the most extensive of his extant writings composed in India. Within this work, Atiśa cites sūtras and tantras that provide one of the most thorough overviews on the awakening mind (*bodhicitta*) in Indian Buddhist literature. Atiśa's *Lamp for the Path to Awakening* (*Bodhipathapradīpa*; Apple 2019b) is his most well-known work. The text contains sixty-eight verses outlining the integration of three forms of discipline, including the vows of the monastic disciplinary code (*prātimokṣa*), bodhisattva precepts, and the precepts of the Secret Mantra Vehicle. Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna practices and cultivations are also discussed. Written in response to questions from King Jangchup Ö in West Tibet around 1042, Atiśa's *Lamp* became “one of the most influential of Indian texts received by Tibetans” and was “the model for mainstream Tibetan monastic Buddhists for the next nine hundred years” (Davidson 1995, 293). *The Song with a Vision for the Realm of Reality* (*Dharmadhātudarśanagīti*; Blo bzang rdo rje rab gling 1999; Apple 2019b), which elucidates the *dharmadhātu*, or *realm of reality*, provides a summation of Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical views on reality in a little over 140 verses. Atiśa discusses the *realm of reality* in the first twenty-five verses, fourteen of which are based on the work of Nāgārjuna. Atiśa then summarizes Buddhist views (vv. 26–96), beginning with Madhyamaka and descending to Vaibhāṣika tenets, follows this with non-Buddhist philosophical tenets (vv. 97–142), and then provides concluding verses (vv. 143–147) (Apple 2019b).

Atiśa's Madhyamaka thought has traditionally been understood based on his *Entry to the Two Realities* (*Satyadvayāvatāra*), *Special Instructions on the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakopadeśa*), and *Commentary on the Difficult Points in the Lamp for the Path to Awakening* (*Bodhimārgapradīpapañjikā*, D. 3948; Sherburne 2000). *Entry to the Two Realities* and *Special Instructions on the Middle Way* are considered by traditional Gelukpa historians the two foremost textual teachings (*gzhung*) on the view (*lta ba*) within Atiśa's works (Apple 2019a, 270). *Entry to the Two Realities* succinctly lays out in twenty-eight verses a general exposition on the two realities. Atiśa composed this work between 1012 and 1025 while residing in Sumatra and studying under Serlingpa. Serlingpa inquired about Atiśa's philosophical views in a letter, and Atiśa composed this set of verses as a response. Atiśa wrote *Entry to the Two Realities* as an attempt to transform Serlingpa's philosophical view from a Yogācāra position to a Madhyamaka one. This introductory text on Madhyamaka presents Atiśa's understanding based on the synthesis of a number of previous Indian Madhyamaka thinkers. *Special Instructions on the Middle Way* is Atiśa's advice for self-transformation through the practice of Madhyamaka, given in Lhasa at the request of Ngok Lekpai Sherap. The brief text provides instructions for how Mādhyamikas meditate, cultivating the three wisdoms of learning, reflection, and meditation within the context of meditative equipoise and postmeditative wisdom construed through the purviews of conventional and ultimate reality.

A General Explanation of, and Framework for Understanding, the Two Realities (*Bden gnyis spyi bshad dang/bden gnyis'jog tshul*; hereafter *A General Explanation*) is a late eleventh-century Indo-Tibetan Madhyamaka text that records oral teachings attributed to Atiśa on the two realities (*satyadvaya*). The text furnishes an exposition of the Middle Way thought of Nāgārjuna based on an exegesis of conventional reality and ultimate reality within the framework of Mahāyāna path structures found in texts attributed to Maitreya-nātha (Apple 2019a, 171–266). *A General Explanation* provides an early account of points of Madhyamaka exegesis that would go on to become polemical points of debate in later decades and centuries in Tibetan Buddhist thought. Atiśa discusses such points – whether Mādhyamikas have a thesis, an inference that is known to others (*gzhan la grags pa'i rjes dpag*), the object that is negated (*dgag bya*), the negation of self-characteristics (*rang gi mtshan nyid ≈ svalakṣaṇa*), and the notion that two things are “a single nature but different conceptual isolates” (*ngo gcig ldog pa tha dad*) – in a late eleventh-century Indo-Tibetan Buddhist historical context. The text emphasizes that correct conventional realities are indicated through nonimplicative negations (*med dgag*) and that things are mere appearances that are transactually designated without being established.

Atiśa's Middle Way Thought

Atiśa was an adherent to Madhyamaka thought and practice with a basis in the works of Nāgārjuna. For Atiśa, Nāgārjuna was a towering figure of Buddhist culture who not only had great insight and realization but also sparked innovations in other areas such as politics and medicine. Atiśa cites and comments on a number of texts attributed to Nāgārjuna – such as the *Commentary on the Awakening Mind (Bodhicittavivarāṇa)*, *Twenty Verses on the Great Vehicle (Mahāyānaviṃśikā)*, *Verses on the Heart of Dependent Arising (Pratītyasamutpādayakārikā)*, and *Stages of Meditation (Bhāvanākrama)* – that he considered vital to understanding the Middle Way. These texts were not yet fully translated into Tibetan by the eleventh century and are often not included in the exegesis of Madhyamaka by later traditional Tibetan scholars or by modern scholars. As such, Atiśa followed a commentary attributed to Nāgārjuna, *No Fear from Anywhere (Akutobhayā)*, for his interpretation of verses found in the *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā)*. Atiśa understood Nāgārjuna's devotional praises, such as the *Hymn to the Realm of Reality (Dharmadhātustava)*, as complementary to his works emphasizing reasoning, such as the *Sixty Stanzas on Reasoning (Yuktiṣaṣṭikā)*. Nāgārjuna was thus the principal master of Atiśa's Madhyamaka in this holistic and inclusive way of interpretation. Atiśa also considered Nāgārjuna to have lived for 600 years and to have written esoteric Buddhist works. Moreover, Atiśa described his teachers' visionary encounters with Nāgārjuna as part of an ongoing revelatory lineage of Madhyamaka. Atiśa also considered Candrakīrti had lived for 400 years in India and been a direct disciple of Nāgārjuna.

Atiśa's Madhyamaka lineage represented a contemplative tradition that emphasized a cultivation of the resolution for awakening, the development of compassion, and the realization of emptiness leading to the inconceivable state of buddhahood. Although reasoning does have its place in Atiśa's system, he advocated a faith-based Madhyamaka that valued the instructions of the spiritual teacher and held predictions, prayers, and meditative cultivation in high regard. Atiśa's Middle Way synthesized the teachings of Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti, built on the basis of Nāgārjuna's teaching. In both India and Tibet, Atiśa pedagogically utilized the works of Bhāviveka – particularly his *Blaze of Reasoning (Tarkajvālā)* and *Jewel Lamp of the Middle Way (Madhyamakaratnapradīpa)* – as an introduction to Madhyamaka and then taught advanced students Candrakīrti's system as exemplified in the *Introduction to the Middle Way (Madhyamakāvatāra)*. Atiśa primarily synthesized the teachings of Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti by bringing together compatible elements of their teachings for soteriological efficacy in progression on the path. He emphasized the commonality

of Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti's teachings, as both pertain to practices within conventional reality to reach the goal of realizing ultimate reality while downplaying any minor points of philosophical difference between the two thinkers. Atiśa identified this commonality between Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti as "the stairway of correct conventional reality" (*yang dag kun rdzob kyi skas*), providing him with an avenue for advocating conventional practices, such as moral discipline and meditation, as the dependently arisen means that lead toward the goal of realizing ultimate reality.

Atiśa's Madhyamaka thought and practice underlie his understanding of advanced bodhisattva practices within both the Perfection and Secret Mantra Vehicles. In Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism, the term "vehicle" (*yāna*) is a metaphor for the way or path that a bodhisattva takes to achieve Buddhahood. The exoteric way is the vehicle of the Perfections (*pāramitā*) in which a bodhisattva practices perfections, such as morality, patience, and wisdom, as outlined in Mahāyāna scriptures (i.e., sūtras). The esoteric way is the vehicle of Secret Mantra in which a bodhisattva receives a consecration from a qualified preceptor in secret to utilize *mantras*, *maṇḍalas*, and *mudrās* to quickly achieve Buddhahood as outlined in Mahāyāna ritual texts (i.e., *tantras*). Atiśa called his understanding of Madhyamaka, or the Middle Way, "Great Madhyamaka." Atiśa's classification of Great Madhyamaka, in brief, represents his effort to differentiate the meaning of the *Perfection of Wisdom* as taught by Nāgārjuna from its meaning as taught by the Yogācāra scholar Asaṅga. Atiśa consistently upheld a Madhyamaka view over and against Yogācāra ontological tenets in all of his known works. Along these lines, Atiśa rejected the utilization of epistemological cognitions for the realization of emptiness. As Atiśa states in his *Entry to the Two Realities* (v. 10),

Direct perception and inference are the two valid cognitions (*pramāṇas*) accepted by Buddhists. The deluded whose vision is narrow say that emptiness is understood by these two.

For Atiśa, the science of epistemology and logic was a secular science common to Buddhist and Indian non-Buddhist schools. Cognitions derived from epistemological warrants were, for Atiśa, only utilized at the level of conventional reality to refute opponents. According to Atiśa, valid cognitions are only conventional and are not in the domain of ultimate reality, nor are they able to realize ultimate reality. Along these lines, Atiśa also disparaged the practice of debate in his *A Brief Treatise on the Method of Practicing the Great Vehicle Path* (*Mahāyānapathasādhana-varṇasamgraha*; Sherburne 2000, 452–53):

Neglecting one's hard-to-tame mental stream while practicing argument in order to learn debate, or engaging in the explanation of the teaching in every moment of the day and night for worldly things

such as fame and so forth, life quickly passes on without purpose and one degenerates from the supreme path.

However, although Atiśa did not advocate the practice of debate, this does not mean that he rejected the use of reasoning (*yukti*) – for Atiśa, reasoning is an essential method that leads to the direct realization of insight. Reasoning thus signifies an “internal” Buddhist form of critical analysis that is different from the “external” epistemological devices used to defend Buddhist Dharma and defeat non-Buddhist opponents.

A General Explanation specifies that the object of negation of reasoning is a conceived object based on conceptualization that imputes things as either existent or nonexistent. The object negated by reasoning consists of conceptual thought that imputes an object as existing with its own character. According to Atiśa, things appear to be substantially existent but, under analysis through reasoning, are realized to subsist without essence. Atiśa refers to appearances without substance as mere appearances. However, Atiśa stresses in this work that unestablished mere appearances are not refuted by reasoning. Rather, appearances are overturned through antidotes cultivated while practicing the path, particularly the path of vision (*darśanamārga*) and the path of meditation (*bhāvanāmārga*). The vision of gnosis cultivated in Atiśa’s Middle Way meditation instructions, in brief, dissipates the cognition of appearances as real. *A General Explanation* offers an early distinction between objects negated by an antidote (*gnyen po’i dgag bya*) while implementing the path and objects negated by reasoning (*rigs pa’i dgag bya*) when searching out the inherent existence of something (Apple 2019a, 207–8).

Atiśa states “four great reasons” (*gtan tshigs chen po bzhi*) for the cultivation of insight in meditation in his *Commentary on the Difficult Points in the Lamp for the Path to Awakening (Bodhimārgapradīpapañjikā)* and also in *A General Explanation*. The “four great reasons” proving emptiness for Atiśa are: (1) the reason refuting production according to the tetralemma (*mu bzhi skye’gog gi gtan tshigs; catuṣkoṭyupādapratīṣedhahetu*), (2) the “diamond-splinters” reason (*rdo rje gzegs ma’i gtan tshigs; vajraṅahetu*), (3) the reason of being neither one nor many (*gcig du bral gyi gtan tshigs; ekānekaviyogahetu*), and (4) the reason consisting in dependent origination (*rten ’brel gyi gtan tshigs; pratīyasamutpādahetu*). Atiśa’s four reasons constitute a system of analytical procedures to prove the absence of intrinsic essence in all things. For Atiśa, the (4) reason consisting in dependent arising is based on the argument that because things arise due to causes and conditions that are mutually related, they therefore lack an intrinsic essence. Atiśa claims that the reasoning of dependent arising (*rten ’grel gyi rigs pa*) contains all four reasonings within it. The (1) reason refuting production according to the tetralemma, or four points, is an analytical procedure

which demonstrates that things lack intrinsic essence because (i) something already intrinsically existent cannot dependently arise, and, likewise, (ii) something nonexistent cannot arise. Things also cannot arise (iii) through being existent and nonexistent at the same time, nor (iv) through being neither existent nor nonexistent. The (2) diamond-splinters reason (*rdo rje gzegs ma*), metaphorically like a diamond that crushes the rock of substantial views, is an analytical procedure that examines the possibility of intrinsic essence from the point of view of the cause. The (3) reason of being neither one nor many, which examines both the cause and effect in determining the possibility of intrinsic nature, argues against things having intrinsic identity or intrinsic plurality in proving the lack of intrinsic essence in things.

Atiśa's system of positing four reasons for proving emptiness is different from Kamalaśīla's, which includes five reasons (Keira 2004, 10–13). Atiśa leaves out the reason refuting the production of existent and nonexistent things (*yod med skye 'gog gi gtan tshigs*, **sadasadutpādapraṭiṣedhahetu*) that is discussed by earlier Mādhyamikas. *A General Explanation* clarifies that these reasons are based on the reasoning of dependent arising and that all four reasons are accepted as consequences that nonimplicatively negate the intrinsic existence of things but do not negate the mere appearance of causes and effects. The mere appearances that arise from causes and effects are overturned through antidotes cultivated while practicing the path.

Based on statements in the Kadampa *Collection on the Two Realities* and *A General Explanation*, Atiśa followed a lineage of Madhyamaka that advocated the use of consequences that exposed contradictions and employed other-acknowledged inferences (Apple 2019a, 39). In fact, *A General Explanation* contains the earliest extant mention of the four types of consequence used by Mādhyamikas. The four types of consequence are (1) consequences that compose contradictions (*'gal ba brjod pa'i thal 'gyur*, **virodhacodanāprasaṅga*), (2) the inference that is known to others (*gzhan la grags pa'i rjes dpag*), (3) the evidence that is not established due to the equivalence with what is being established (*bsgrub bya dang mtshungs pa'i ma grub pa*), and (4) the equivalence of the reason. Atiśa explains these four as follows:

The text of the Ācārya Nāgārjuna states (1) consequences that expose contradictions (*gal ba brjod pa'i thal 'gyur*); (3) a pseudo-sign similar to what is to be proven; (4) equivalence (*mgo bsgre ba*): “If you accept in this way, because the reason is not different, you must accept this as well.” These are bound to the opponent. (2) Inference that is known to others (*gzhan la grags pa'i rjes dpag*) in which one states: “If you yourself accept in this way, your own understanding is contradictory with this conclusion.” The property of the subject and

the entailment are bound with the opponent and are established by their acceptance. Even though these arguments by consequence are proclaimed through four reasons, they are not different than being included within the reason of dependent-arising. (Apple 2019a, 204)

Atiśa did not accept that the Madhyamaka posits a thesis (*dam'cha' ba* ≈ *pratijñā*), nor that a Madhyamaka concedes to the principle of common establishment. The early Kadampa commentaries provide evidence that Atiśa's early followers accepted his position on Madhyamaka reasoning of not adhering to the principle of common establishment (*ubhayasiddhatva*), which became in later Tibetan scholarship the contentious issue of “commonly appearing subjects” (*chos can mthun snang ba*) (Apple 2019a, 39).

The principle of common establishment, traceable to statements made by Dignāga (fifth to sixth century), was that the reason and subject must be established for both parties in a debate. That is, for both parties in a debate, there must be something that similarly appears (*mthun snang ba*) in order for logical debate and discussion to take place. Some Mādhyamikas in India accepted this principle; others did not. Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla, and Jñānagarbha accepted it at least on the conventional level (Keira 2004). Candrakīrti, on the other hand, appears to be one of the few scholars within Indian Madhyamaka traditions not to have followed the rule of common establishment. Atiśa followed this lineage tradition (Apple 2019a, 38).

Atiśa compares the reasoning process to two sticks, which, after rubbing together and generating a fire, burn up and become nonexistent. Although Atiśa does not state his textual source, he draws this example from the *Chapter on Kāśyapa* (*Kāśyapaparivarta*), which is cited in the *Jewel Lamp of the Middle Way*. Kamalaśīla also cites this sūtra in his *Stages of Meditation* (*Bhāvanākrama*) and *Commentary on the Dhāraṇī* “*Entering into Non-Conceptuality*” (*Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇīṭīkā*) as an example to illustrate that although the analysis of reality is indeed the nature of conceptual thought, it will nevertheless be consumed by the fire of correct wisdom produced by it (Apple 2018c). In his *Open Basket of Jewels*, Atiśa states that “the wisdom of individual analysis (*so sor rtog pa'i shes rab*) itself turns into clear light.” Atiśa's Indian disciple Prajñāmukti is even clearer in his *Commentary on the Special Instructions* (*Madhyamakopadeśavṛtti*; Apple 2019a, 285–86):

That the very wisdom which individually discriminates is not established either means that analytical cognition negates itself. Since wisdom is a particularity of an entity, when an entity is not established, the very wisdom itself is also not established, just like when a tree is not established, the wood and so forth are negated. As it

is said, “In this regard, a fire which burns fuel, having burned its fuel does not remain.”

These passages indicate that, for Atiśa and his followers, reasoning is a conventional process that dissolves itself when seeking to establish the existence of an object. Analytical reasoning which dissolves itself is preparatory for wisdom – more specifically, for non-conceptual gnosis (*nirvikalpajñāna*). The texts suggest a difference between discernment (*prajñā*) at the level of learning and the reflection, reasoning (*rigs pa'i shes rab*), and non-conceptual realization that constitute gnosis (*jñāna*). The numerous reasonings which appear in Atiśa’s works and his Kadampa commentaries are meditations that lead the reader through merelogical forms of analysis to dissolve the conceptual thought that reifies things and their relations.

Atiśa did not differentiate Madhyamaka into separate schools. Instead, he utilized the texts of various Madhyamaka authors for pedagogical and soteriological purposes. Atiśa introduced his students to the thought and practice of Madhyamaka with the works of Bhāviveka. To support more advanced levels of understanding, Atiśa closely followed the works of Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva.

According to Atiśa’s Madhyamaka, most prominently in the *General Explanation* (Apple 2019b, 191–266), all appearances are based on ignorance and composed of ignorance. Appearances are not nonexistent but rather false, erroneous, and mistaken. The synonyms of the conventions of mere appearance in Atiśa’s nominalistic Madhyamaka are mere name, mere word, mere convention, and mere imputation. For Atiśa, the subjective perceiver, the appearance of the cognition, and the appearance of the mind, which is like an illusion, are only imputedly established. Thus, the cognizer, what is cognized, and the phenomenal awareness that occurs in such a conjunction of ephemeral conditions lack any substantive ontological status, either conventionally or ultimately, in Atiśa’s Madhyamaka.

A key Madhyamaka classification that structures Atiśa’s thought and practice is the bifurcation of all things in the universe into the categories of two realities: ultimate reality and conventional reality. As Atiśa states in his *Song with a Vision for the Realm of Reality*, ultimate reality is a purified appearance of nonappearance like the center of space, known through individually intuited knowledge. For Atiśa, the “ultimate” is a conventional expression, also embodied by the phrase “realm of reality” (*dharmadhātu*), consisting of selfless nonappearances that are realized with nonconceptual pristine awareness (*jñāna*). The realm of reality, for Atiśa, is a naturally pure object of realization that is the ever-present real state of things that may be cognized in meditative equipoise but is not completely actualized until full buddhahood.

Conventional realities are appearances that arise due to causes and conditions. Though all conventional realities are false and deceiving, they are not nonexistent. Rather, they are mere appearances, subject to the principle of cause and effect imputed through dependent arising. In Atiśa’s system, conventional realities are classified either as mistaken or correct when viewed from different perspectives in relation to the cognitive understanding of ordinary individuals or the realizations of those who have reached the path of vision. The three ways of identifying (*’jogs lugs*) mistaken and correct conventional realities are explained based on Candrakīrti’s *Introduction to the Middle Way*. Conventional realities are dependently designated in relation to the perspectives of (1) the worldly (*lo ka pa*), (2) philosophical tenets (*grub mtha’*), and (3) yogic awareness (*rnal’byor pa’i blo*). *A General Explanation* posits correct and mistaken conventional realities based on the nature of dependent arising in relation to yogic awareness. This understanding of the dependent arising of conventional reality in correlation with its states of awareness accords with what Wangchuk (2009) has called “the relativity theory of the purity and validity of perception” in Madhyamaka works such as Candrakīrti’s *Introduction to the Middle Way* (6.27) and Śāntideva’s *Introduction to the Practice of Awakening (Bodhicaryāvatāra)* (9.3–4a). In the words of *A General Explanation*, “things are not higher or lower; awarenesses are higher or lower” (Apple 2019a, 180–81). Atiśa accepted the distinction between correct and incorrect conventional realities even though he considered conventional realities false and unreal. This distinction is structured within a framework of shifting perspectives as one progresses along the path in accord with Bhāviveka’s *Blaze of Reasoning* commentary on the *Heart of the Middle Way* and Candrakīrti’s *Introduction to the Middle Way* (Apple 2016). As outlined in the following paragraphs, Atiśa refers to this progress on the path as the “stairway of correct conventional reality.”

Mistaken conventional realities are appearances of ignorance that impute impermanent and empty things as either existent or nonexistent. Mistakes are impermanent and cause suffering, and they are also deceptive and false. Mistaken appearances are like the hair that is perceived by someone suffering from eye disease. *A General Explanation* states that its acceptance of mistaken conventional realities is similar to how True Aspectarians (*Satyākāravādins) posit aspects, or cognitive images (*ākāra*). This process is comparable to Candrakīrti, who, as pointed out by MacDonald (2009, 151), skillfully adapts the Sautrāntika theory of cognition on the conventional level to justify his own views. Atiśa’s position on the status of external objects is similar to the presentation of “internal” Madhyamaka (*nang gi dbu ma*) in the *Jewel Lamp of the Middle Way* (D, 280a3–81a3; Del Toso 2014). However, Atiśa also states in his *A General Explanation* – in correlation with Nāgārjuna accepting appearances as mind in works such as the

Stages of Meditation and in terms of the mind as mere appearance, a perspective equal to correct conventional reality – that all sentient beings are one single continuum (*rgyud gcig*; 712.1–713.5). All sentient beings are considered one continuum, for even though they have differences of karmic conditions, they share an undifferentiated self-nature (*rang gi ngo bo la tha dad med pa*) that is free from the two extremes of intrinsic essence. Atiśa also asserts consciousness to be one group (*rnam shes tshogs gcig*, **ekavijñānakāya*) or one single flow, as opposed to the six distinct types of consciousnesses (*ṣaḍvijñānakāya*) found among mainstream Buddhist schools (Apple 2019a, 213, 399–400). Positing one group entails that one single consciousness moves to individual objects in dependence upon individual sense organs rather than six distinct active sensory consciousnesses that arise based on the contact of a sensory faculty with a sense object. In this way, the *General Explanation* presents a mentalist theory of Madhyamaka in which the mind, as mere appearance, is not at all established and is a mere nominal designation free from the extremes of existence and nonexistence.

Correct conventional reality for the yogi, according to Atiśa, occurs only after completing the path of vision, a stage on the path when emptiness is directly cognized in a non-conceptual manner. Correct conventional realities are considered nondeceptive, nonerroneous, and trustworthy in that, from this perspective, appearances are realized to be unproduced like an illusion, and objects are cognized as essenceless entities. Although correct, they are conventional due to arising through causes and conditions and are thus considered illusions of pristine awareness. Correct conventional realities are nonerroneous illusions and are imputations conducive to purification, since the causes of purification have nondeceptive individual results. This accords with appearances of “purified worldly knowledge” mentioned by Bhāviveka in his *Heart of the Middle Way* and his *Blaze of Reasoning*. Atiśa refers to correct conventional reality, following Bhāviveka, as the stairway of correct conventional reality (*yang dag kun rdzob rnam kyī skas* ≈ *tathyaśamvṛtisopānam*). Atiśa’s understanding of correct conventional reality offered him an avenue for upholding the conventional practices of moral virtue that eventually lead to realizing ultimate reality, practices that some critics argued were undermined by Madhyamaka analysis.

Based on these factors of Madhyamaka thought and practice, Atiśa outlines a program of bodhisattva training that integrates the cultivation of wisdom and compassion with the development of an awakening mind at both the ultimate and conventional levels. The ultimate awakening mind – the birthless, luminous, nonconceptual realm of reality equated with emptiness – is cultivated during meditative equipoise. The conventional awakening mind is cultivated during postmeditative practices. In this program of training, the two levels of the

awakening mind are integrated and stabilized, having the essence of emptiness and compassion. A snapshot of instructions for this integrated cultivation is found in the *Open Basket of Jewels* (Apple 2019a). Atiśa states,

Regarding the training, first the mind did not come from anywhere and will not go anywhere at the end. The mind does not abide anywhere and is without color and without shape. The mind does not arise from the beginning nor does it cease at the end. The mind is empty of inherent existence and has the nature of clear light. One should recall this again and again.

On the other hand, one should stabilize through accustoming the awakening mind to love and compassion. One should completely purify the mind and stand firm, being continuously mindful of each moment of thought with mindfulness, awareness, thoughtfulness, and conscientiousness.

The *Open Basket of Jewels* then discusses how the integrated awakening mind is protected and increased while the bodhisattva advances through the ten stages as outlined by the *Sūtra of the Ten Stages (Daśabhūmikasūtra)*. In the course of the training, the bodhisattva alternates between cognizing the nonconceptual space-like realm of reality in meditative stabilization and then viewing things as illusions in the postmeditative state. The alternation, however, ceases at the stage of buddhahood.

According to Atiśa, based on numerous citations from the hymns of Nāgārjuna, at the stage of buddhahood, the purified realm of reality directly and constantly fuses with the Dharma body (*dharmakāya*), the ultimate cosmic reality of buddhahood, without any mental element or gnosis existing at all. Atiśa emphatically advocated in his works that buddhas are completely fused with ultimate reality in a nondualistic fashion whereby all conceptual thought has been eliminated and not even nonconceptual wisdom exists. Throughout his writings, Atiśa references Mahāyāna *sūtras*; *tantras*; and the works of Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva as authoritative texts for this standpoint. In his *Open Basket of Jewels*, he provides an extended discussion, based on the works of Nāgārjuna, of the point that buddhahood does not have any mind or mental factors. Related to Atiśa's understanding of buddhahood as bereft of any mental qualities is his position that a buddha does not have a continuum of wisdom. This issue is specifically related to the interpretation of a partial stanza in Śāntideva's *Introduction to the Practice of Awakening* (9.15ab) that states, "upon conditions having their continuum cut, an illusion does not arise even conventionally." Atiśa directly repeats this portion of Śāntideva's stanza in his *Entry to the Two Realities*

(vv. 23cd). An early Kadampa commentary to this verse, likely following an oral tradition of Atiśa's teachings, explains that appearances occur due to various causes and conditions, and if the continuance of the conditions for such appearances is interrupted, then appearances will no longer arise even conventionally. For Atiśa and his Kadampa followers, all appearances are due to ignorance and are composed of ignorance. Therefore, when the conditions for any type of appearance are exhausted, including wisdom or gnosis (*jnāna*), then such appearances will no longer occur. In addition to this discussion within the *Entry to the Two Realities*, Atiśa directly addressed the status of gnosis at the level of a buddha in his Commentary on the *Introduction to the Practice of Awakening (Bodhisattvacāryāvātārabhāṣya)*, a summary of Śāntideva's *Introduction to the Practice of Awakening*. Several sections of the text are composed in the form of a dialogue with the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī to address difficult points of exegesis. Atiśa discusses the gnosis at the level of a buddha in a section describing the vision of liberating gnosis (*rnam par grol ba 'i ye shes mthong ba ≈ vimuktijñānadarśana*) at the level of a buddha. Atiśa's discussion in this work clearly demonstrates that he did not accept that a buddha would have a continuum of wisdom. On this point, Atiśa's understanding is congruent with a strict Madhyamaka understanding of the nature of buddhahood found in the works of Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva (Apple 2019a, 43–44). This understanding of buddhahood would not be followed by a majority of Tibetan scholars, particularly after the time of Chapa Chökyi Sengé (1109–1169).

In his works, Atiśa outlined an undifferentiated Madhyamaka tradition. In *Open Basket of Jewels*, he emphasizes that his teachings focus on the lineage of Nāgārjuna and defends “the Mādhyamika followers of Nāgārjuna” as having no faults. His *Commentary to the Lamp for the Path to Awakening* documents a tradition that passed from Nāgārjuna through Āryadeva, Candrakīrti, Bhāviveka, and Śāntideva down to Bodhibhadra. This work also briefly describes his vision of Madhyamaka as Great Madhyamaka (*dbu ma chen po*) in its section on insight (*shes rab*). Atiśa's General Explanation claims that Great Madhyamaka represents the definitive understanding of Nāgārjuna's thought. Atiśa's epithet of Great Madhyamaka, in brief, signifies his understanding of Nāgārjuna's Middle Way as a realization free of any extremes or conceptual proliferations, a direct vision of the non-duality of appearances and emptiness. In his own writings, therefore, Atiśa did not distinguish between individual followers of Nāgārjuna, that is, Mādhyamikas (Apple 2019a, 59–60). Madhyamaka, for Atiśa, was what Ruegg (1981, 30, 57, 59) has labeled “pure” Madhyamaka, a designation that signifies a Middle Way tradition that is not differentiated based on features of individual doctrines upheld in the works of Indian Buddhist authors.



Figure 2. Atiśa teaching the *stages of the path* in Tibet. Source:

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Figure 3. Gold ink episode description. Source: <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/13721>. Personal, educational, and non-commercial use as defined by fair use in US copyright law.

Transliteration:

jo bo bod du phebs nas 'brom rin po che sogs slob ma mtha' yas pa la byang chub lam gyi rim pa rgya cher spel bar mdzad pa /

Translation:

"The Princely-Lord [Atiśa], having journeyed to Tibet, extensively taught the stages of the path to awakening to innumerable disciples such as the precious one Dromtön and so forth."

Stages of the Path

Atiśa's greatest contribution and legacy was his synthesis and reintegration of the teachings of sūtras and tantras into a coherent system of Buddhist practice. Atiśa's well-known *Lamp for the Path to Awakening* and his important but lesser-known *Stages for the Path to Awakening* (*Byang chub lam gyi rim pa* ≈ *Bodhipathakrama*; hereafter *Stages*; Apple, *forthcoming*) are long-standing testaments to his innovative and dynamic system. Atiśa began to formulate teachings that integrate sūtra and mantra in his early writings on the esoteric Buddhist deity Cakrasaṃvara. His *Analysis of Realization* (*Abhisamayavibhaṅga*) articulates the "stages of the path of the essential meaning." The stages of the path were initially formulated by Atiśa based on these advanced stages of esoteric Buddhist teachings.

Atiśa further developed his stages of the path system under the urging of Jangchup Ö while he was in West Tibet. Atiśa's *Lamp* was the result of Jangchup Ö's patronage and inquiries, and the treatise became a model for subsequent generations of Tibetan scholars in their understanding and practice of the Buddhist path. The *Lamp* was an imperially sanctioned public teaching (*tshogs chos*) that influenced Tibetan Buddhists for over nine centuries. The *Stages*, on the other hand, written at the behest of Dromtönpa, was a secret teaching (*lkog chos*) that was transmitted among early followers of Atiśa until the time of Pakmo Drupa (1110–1170).

Although the *Stages* has not been widely studied (or even recognized) by later traditional and modern scholars of Tibetan Buddhism, its impact was just as great as the *Lamp*: the *Stages* contains within it all the major topics found in later stages of the path literature that the *Lamp* does not mention. The *Stages* clearly outlines the practices and realizations of the individuals of small and middling capacity, including such topics as taking refuge, meditations on death and impermanence, the elimination of wrongdoing, and recollecting the sufferings of cyclic existence. Although Atiśa's *Stages* is primarily devoted to the ethics of karmic cause and effect, in the context of instruction on pointing out a nonconceptual direct vision of the emptiness of one's own mind, it also develops an account of the Middle Way between the extremes of nihilism and permanence:

All dharmas are the mind, the mind itself is free from all extremes. The multiple various causes and effects of virtue and wrongdoing is unceasing, definitely free from the extreme of nihilism. Since whatever appears of the cause and effect of the round of rebirth and *nirvāṇa* is the nature of one's own mind, which is not at all established, it is definitely free from the extreme of permanence. Emptiness indivisible with cause and effect is the nature of one's own mind, free from the proliferations of extremes, the Great Middle Way. (Apple 2019b)

These two stanzas situate Atiśa's Great Middle Way between the extremes of nihilism and permanence based on the nonduality of emptiness and cause and effect. They occur in the instructions on tranquility and insight and represent the type of instruction given to disciples of advanced spiritual capacity. Later Kagyüpa scholars such as Gampopa (sgom po pa bsod nams rin chen, 1079–1153) and Pakmo Drupa (phag mo gru pa rdo rje rgyal po, 1110–1170) described them as Mahāmudrā, or Great Seal, teachings (Apple 2019a, 52–53). The topics found in the *Stages* and the sequence in which they are presented impacted all subsequent stages of the path literature in Tibet.

Conclusion

Atiśa was an Indian Buddhist itinerant teacher whose instruction was influenced by historical conditions of time, place, and patronage. Atiśa brought with him to Tibet an active Madhyamaka lineage, teaching the works of Nāgārjuna based on those of Candrakīrti. This Madhyamaka lineage was contemplative in nature and based on faith, compassion, and resolutions to attain a miraculous form of buddhahood rather than on formal logical proof, linguistic semantics, or metaphysical speculation. Atiśa's Madhyamaka lineage was actively taught and followed for at least fifty years after he came to Tibet. His teachings were disseminated before the rise of the early Kadampa monastery of Sangphu and its debating traditions that, particularly beginning in the twelfth century, emphasized the merge of Madhyamaka with epistemology and came to shape all later forms of Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism.

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