

# *Nalanda University*

*From the profound ethical teachings of the Buddha a great philosophic and theological system was created at the monastic universities, of which the greatest was at Nalanda.*

## *The Nalanda Tradition*

### *Nalanda Tradition of Buddhism in Asia*

*A collaborative event of  
Indira Gandhi National Centre  
for the Arts*

*Tibet House (Cultural Centre of His  
Holiness the Dalai Lama)*

*Convenor Benoy K Behl*

*The Nalanda University site, Bihar. Pic: Benoy K Behl*

# Inauguration, Seminar, Film Screenings and Exhibition opening :

*November 13 and 14, 2013*

*His Holiness the Dalai Lama has very kindly consented to inaugurate the event and to speak on the occasion.*

## **Exhibition to continue till November 30**

**November 13 : 10:15am - 11:15am Press Conference**

**11:15am -11:30pm Press Preview of Film**

**1:30pm -3:30pm Inauguration of the Event by H. H. the Dalai Lama; 3:40pm inauguration of exhibition by H. H. the Dalai Lama; 5pm Screening of 50-minute Film on the Nalanda Tradition**

**November 14 : 10am - 6:30 pm Seminar, Covering History of Nalanda; Philosophy of Nalanda and Saint-Scholars of Nalanda; Spread of the Nalanda Tradition; Physiology and Medicine; Preservation of the Tradition : Linguistics and Translators; Continuation of the Nalanda Tradition in Modern Times.**

**6:30pm – 7:30pm Monastic Cham Dance with Introductory Talks.**

**Premiere of Films at 2:10 pm and 5pm**

***The Nalanda Tradition Preserved by Tibet***

**Script, Camera and Direction by Benoy K Behl**

**10 minutes, 2:10 pm, 13/11/2013**

**co-sponsored by the  
Central University of Tibetan Studies, Sarnath**

**Nalanda Roots of Tibetan Buddhism**

**50 minutes, 5 pm, 13/11/2013**

**sponsored by Ministry of External Affairs  
Government of India**

The vast universities of Eastern India had hundreds of teachers and students who came from across India and from the many countries of Asia that had embraced Buddhist philosophy. The greatest of these was at Nalanda. Here there was a spirit of vibrant intellectual thought, a climate of discussion and debate.

The scholars of Nalanda made outstanding contributions to numerous fields of study. The many acharyas or great masters at Nalanda, authored hundreds of treatise in various fields; on philosophy, metaphysics, psychology, logic, medicine, astrology, arts, literature and other subjects.

**In the words of Dr. Jeffrey Durham :** “One of the most important universities in the world was developed not in the medieval west, but right here in India. And here I am referring to the university consortium of Nalanda, Vikramshila, Somapura, Odantpuri – all of these universities were instrumental in producing people who are capable of understanding and articulating what it means to have universal knowledge, knowledge that applicable, across cultures and in across times.”

**In the words of H. H. the Dalai Lama :** “I really respect and appreciate, admire Christianity, Islam, different Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Judaism and so on. All these traditions have really brought immense benefit and hope to millions of people, in the last few thousand years, and still today and in the future also.

**Now, you see the differences, in Buddhism, as also in Jainism, we have no concept of a creator. So one’s own salvation must be achieved through one’s own effort. Now the main obstacle in the path to salvation, is ignorance. There are many level of ignorance. So logically, the antidote of ignorance is knowledge, not prayer.”**

The study at Nalanda was of life itself and what is reality. It was based not upon faith but on unshakable logic and pursuit of the truth. The study was of our minds, are perceptions and what is knowledge itself? The intellectuals here analyzed the qualities which led to Enlightenment and sought to create a logical path which could lead us to Buddhahood. A path which would work for all.

According to some historians, there was no written script in Tibet till the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The acceptance of the Buddhist faith entailed the understanding of subtle philosophic concepts and profound commentaries. This transfer of knowledge would not have been possible without translating and writing it down. A very sophisticated language and a script capable of preserving this knowledge had to be formulated.

**In the words of H. H. the Dalai Lama : “Tibetan script is very much a copy and very much similar to Sanskrit because it is based on one of the ancient Indian scripts.**

**Once Buddhism reached Tibet, translations started. There was no vocabulary in Tibetan to translate Buddhist knowledge and traditions. So new words were created. So therefore, eventually Sanskrit vocabulary or Sanskrit terminology and Tibetan terminology go exactly the same.”**

**In the words of Geshe Samten :** “The Tibetans scholars made a special effort to translate the Sanskrit works into Tibetan language by developing the Tibetan language in such a manner that it could retain the thematic meaning, as well as the literal meaning with the great precision.

The translations are done word by word and sentences by sentences. Therefore, the precision that is maintained in Tibetan is unparalleled.”

**In the words of Prof. Samdhong Rinpoche :** “Acharya Shantarakshit was the first person who established Buddhism in Tibet. He taught the Tibetan people to learn Buddhism not by faith but by reasoning, by logic and by analyzing the things for oneself. The Buddha had said that we should not believe that which he said, but to understand it oneself, through analysis and through the rational mind.”

Most of the major monasteries, of all the Tibetan traditions, were re-established in India. These monastic Institutions, where erudite masters teach, have attracted scholars from around the world, who have come to India to study here.

**In the words of Geshe Dorji Damdul :** “This knowledge is pure knowledge. It has nothing to do with dogma; it has nothing to do with religion as such. So therefore, I call it a legacy of India, the legacy of the world. So it must not disappear, it must remain for long.”

**In the words of H. H. the Dalai Lama :** “Therefore, when I meet an Indian, I always say you are traditionally our Guru. We are chela. You Indian our Guru. Then also I mention we Tibetans not only Indian Guru’s chela, but also quite reliable chela. That means, in Guru’s own land Buddha Dharma had lots of ups and downs. During these period, we your chela kept your

knowledge intact, through centuries. So we are quite reliable chela. So our relationship is something very unique, Guru and Chela.”

*The films are shot extensively in Tibet, Kalmykia in European Russia, Ladakh, Spiti, Arunachal Pradesh, Nalanda, Bodhgaya, Sarnath and Karnataka. Benoy K Behl, world-famous Buddhist scholar, art-historian, film-maker, photographer and author, is the director and the narrator of these films.*

*Inauguration at 3:40 pm on 13<sup>th</sup> November by  
HH the Dalai Lama*

**IGNCA, Tibet House and  
Benoy K Behl Films Present**

*The Greatest Journey of Ideas:  
The Spread of Buddhism*

**Exhibition of photographs of Buddhist heritage  
in 19 countries / regions by Benoy K Behl**

The exhibition consists of 100 photographs of Buddhist heritage in India, Tibet, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, China, Japan, Mongolia, Siberia, Uzbekistan, Kalmykia (in European Russia), Afghanistan, Nepal and Bhutan. It shows the birth and the development of different schools of Buddhism in India and their spread to the many countries of Asia.

The exhibition shows the deeply shared Buddhist traditions of the whole of Asia and the spread of the Nalanda tradition. It is a journey through Buddhist history and culture, from the time of the life of the Buddha, through the development of Vajrayana and other Buddhist deities in Eastern and Western India, to the spread of these traditions to distant lands.

**This is a unique exhibition, as even a fraction of this wide coverage of the Buddhist heritage of so many countries has never been attempted before.**

From the time of Ashoka onwards, Buddhism spread not only to all corners of India but also all over Asia. The religion and the art associated with it had a transforming effect on the countries which it reached and, till today, Buddhism flourishes all over the continent.

In the 1st century AD, the Kushana King Kanishka gave royal patronage to Mahayana Buddhism. Thereafter the Mahayana tradition, which later also developed into the Vajrayana tradition, became dominant in India. This form of Buddhism also travelled northwards from Kashmir to the trans-Himalayan regions in India and Tibet and also to China, Mongolia, Siberia, Korea, Indonesia and Japan.

**Seminar, 14<sup>th</sup> November 10am - 6:30 pm**

## *Nalanda Tradition of Buddhism in Asia*

### **Concept Note**

Ancient India saw the rise of many great philosophical traditions and centers of learning. A vibrant atmosphere of learning and debate flourished, which fostered some of the greatest minds and refined philosophies. One of the great centers of learning at the time was Nalanda University, where profound philosophical traditions of Mahayana Buddhism flourished owing to the open spirit of learning and enquiry. This resulted in the development of complex theories of logic, philosophy, metaphysics and psychology, as well as studies in astronomy, cosmology, linguistics, medicine and monastic order. At great universities such as Nalanda, the process of enquiry into reality was prized, as much as the knowledge arrived at through this process.

The growth of civilisation is marked by a rise in knowledge. At its peak, Nalanda was one of the most celebrated centers of philosophical learning. Together with celebrated centers of learning such as Vikramashila and Odantapuri, Nalanda marks the peak in the advancement of knowledge in India. It is apt to say that it is one of the greatest treasures, and indeed the pride of India. Nalanda was a *Mahavihara* – a grand grouping of monasteries, comparable to modern day universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, having many colleges under them, each with its own identity.

These were centers where students from many Asian countries studied, including Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, Sumatra, Java and Sri Lanka. Many students carried the knowledge they had gained back to their homelands and the philosophies that were born at these great viharas spread throughout Asia.

The spread of the various philosophical traditions that flourished in Nalanda resulted in the translation of texts from Sanskrit into other languages, such as Tibetan and Chinese. Acharya Shantarakshita encouraged the extensive translation of texts into Tibetan, resulting in the translation of 110 volumes of the *Kangyur* (teachings of the Buddha) and 230 volumes of the *Tengyur* (commentaries by Indian masters) from Indian languages, primarily Sanskrit, into Tibetan. In this way the Nalanda tradition was preserved and kept alive in Tibet.

However, it is definite that there would have been thousands of texts at Nalanda from descriptions of the great libraries of Nalanda which were contained in the three temples of Nalanda with the nine-storeyed grand temple called Ratnodadhi. Thousands of manuscripts were burnt in the fire that destroyed the University of Nalanda.

However, remnants of the scholarly tradition of Nalanda have survived through the ages and been preserved in Asian countries such as Bhutan, Nepal, China, Japan, Mongolia, Siberia, Kalmykia and Tibet. It is high time that the real legacy of Nalanda be identified and preserved and the lamp of the wisdom of these traditions be lit once again, for people of India and all across the world. It is not sufficient to merely be awestruck with the wonders of the past, as we see the massive ruins and read descriptions of the grandeur and scale of Nalanda Mahavihara. We need to revive the real legacy of Nalanda, so that people can see the value of this tradition and how it enriches the tapestry of global knowledge. What is more, the comparative study of the Nalanda tradition, and modern science and arts can definitely uplift modern civilisation.

Through this seminar we aim to bring together experts in various fields related with the Nalanda tradition, to shed more light on certain key areas, which are:

1. History of Nalanda
2. Philosophy of Nalanda and prominent saint-scholars of Nalanda
3. Spread of the Nalanda tradition
4. Psychology and Medicine
5. Preservation of the Tradition : Linguistics and Translators
6. Continuation of Nalanda tradition in modern times

## *Nalanda*

The best known Buddhist universities, Nalanda, Vikramasila and Odantpuri, were in Eastern India, in the region of present-day Bihar. In fact, Bihar derives its name from the many Viharas which flourished here. The greatest of these monastic centres was at Nalanda. It was a hub of learning where pilgrims and scholars came from all corners of Asia.

Nalanda was visited by the Buddha himself. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, Emperor Ashoka is believed to have made offerings to the *chaitya* of Sariputra and erected a temple here. However, the origins of the university itself are obscured in the mists of time. The medieval Tibetan historian Taranatha mentions that the great Buddhist philosopher **Nagarjuna** who was born in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD taught here.

Excavations at the Nalanda site have revealed numerous *stupas*, monasteries, hostels, staircases, meditation halls and other structures. These speak of the splendour of the university which was also famed for its three magnificent libraries.

The Chinese pilgrim **Xuanzang** of the **7<sup>th</sup> century** writes that, of the myriad Buddhist establishments of India, Nalanda “is the most remarkable for its grandeur.” The priests and other residents “always reach to the number of ten thousand.”

Xuanzang writes of Nalanda, “The richly adorned towers and the fairy-like turrets, like pointed hilltops, are congregated together. The observatories seem to be lost in the vapours (of the morning) and the upper rooms tower above the clouds... the deep, translucent ponds, bear in their surface blue lotuses...and at intervals the Amra groves spread their shade...The roofs are covered with tiles that reflect the light in a thousand shades.”

Another Chinese traveller **I-Tsing** travelled in India at the end of the **7<sup>th</sup> century**. He reported that in these monasteries Buddhist sutras were taught as well as Sanskrit grammar, Indian Logic and Metaphysics, fine arts and medicine.

There was a rigorous oral entry examination and only the best students were given admission. It was a residential university where the staff and students had free board and lodging. No tuition fees were charged. Xuanzang records that there were students here from **Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, Sumatra, Java** and **Sri Lanka**.

The highest intellectual atmosphere of debate and scholarship was maintained at these institutions. The open and liberal concepts of the philosophy were preserved and there was great freedom of interpretation and expression.

This was the thriving intellectual environment of Nalanda which produced the most notable Buddhist thinkers who brought about significant developments in Buddhist philosophy and practice.

The most revered name in Mahayana Buddhist philosophy is that of **Nagarjuna** who was born in the middle of the **2<sup>nd</sup> century AD**, in South India.

He was a luminary of the Nalanda University and he formalised the concept of **Sunyata** or ‘Emptiness’. The Madhyamika School of Buddhism, or ‘The Middle Path’, was created on the teachings of Nagarjuna.

The school of Buddhism based upon Nagarjuna’s writing spread northwards to China, Korea and Japan. He is also credited with developing the philosophy of the **Prajnaparamita** or the Perfection of Wisdom at the University of Nalanda. This is one of the most revered texts of the Mahayana Buddhists and is personified as a deity.

**Dinnaga** of the Nalanda University was born at Kanchipuram in South India. He lived in the **5<sup>th</sup> century** and is known as the founder of the system of Buddhist Logic. He authored over a hundred treatises on the subject, most of which are still preserved in Chinese and Tibetan translations.

When Xuanzang visited Nalanda, he studied under the famed guru **Dharmapala**. The teacher was also known for having spread the knowledge of Buddhism in Indonesia.

One of the noted students of Dharmapala was the brilliant logician **Dharmakirti**. He lived in the **7<sup>th</sup> century** and was born at Tirumalai in South India. Dharmakirti’s writings mark one of the highest points reached in speculative philosophy.

The learned **Santaraksita** of the Nalanda University founded the first monastic order in Tibet. He also modelled Samye, the first monastery of **Tibet**, on the Odantpuri Mahavihara in Eastern India. At his suggestion, the Tibetan king also invited **Guru Padmasambhava**, who was then teaching in the region of the Swat Valley or in Kashmir at that time. Padmasambhava, who was also of the Nalanda University, went on to become the most revered person in the entire Himalayan and trans-Himalayan region. The Guru swept across the mountains, establishing Buddhism in Ladakh, Lahaul-Spiti, Kinnaur, Tibet, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh.

**Guru Padmasambhava** was a famed master of Tantric Buddhism. He was called to **Tibet** when it was found that the people of that land were not easily taking to Buddhism. They remained fearful of the evil spirits and demons which they believed controlled nature and their destinies. The Guru brought with him his greater magic to tame the demons and made them defenders of the Buddhist faith. He swept into the trans-Himalayas with the *Cham*, or sacred masked dance, with which he purified the land and made it ready for Buddhism. Till today the *Cham* is performed across the entire mountainous region to keep the land pure for the Buddhism to prosper.

The time of Guru Padmasambhava is known as the First Great Diffusion of Buddhism in the trans-Himalayas. The Guru continues to be deeply revered as a deity from Ladakh to Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh and is known as **the Second Buddha**.

## *Tibet and the Preservation of the Traditions of Nalanda*

All traditions of Tibetan Buddhism are based upon the teachings of Indian masters who came from the Nalanda tradition in India. In fact, literally **hundreds of Indian teachers** were invited to Tibet, where they established the various sects of Buddhism, which continue till today. The great **Tibetan monastic institutions of South India** are the inheritors of the ancient Indian traditions, which come from Nalanda.

**The Tibetan script** was created out of the **Sanskrit script** in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. As stated by **His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the film** which will be screened, the script and the grammar of the Tibetan language was created so as to be very close to the original Sanskrit. The aim was to preserve the knowledge of the Nalanda tradition as perfectly as possible. **The preservation of the traditions of Nalanda by Tibet is an achievement of epic proportions.**

In the film, His Holiness will also speak about the **17 great acharyas of Nalanda**, to whom he has composed special *stutis*.