

# Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism

Volume II:  
Lives

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# Jñānapāda

Jñānapāda (autonym: Buddhajñāna, also referred to as Buddhaśrījñāna, \*Buddhajñānapāda, \*Śrījñānapāda; fl. c. 770–820 CE), was one of the most influential figures of mature Indian esoteric Buddhism. He is remembered first and foremost as the founder of the earlier of the two most important exegetical schools of the *Guhyasamājatantra* (→BEB I, *Guhyasamāja*), but he was also very likely a guru of some note in the Pāla court, the dominant power in East India at the time, and the first warden of the famous Vikramaśīla monastery. Jñānapāda was a fairly prolific but, at least in his later works, somewhat laconic and stylistically difficult author. Pioneering studies of his thought and influence can be found in earlier Japanese scholarship (e.g. Hadano, 1950; 1958; Kendai, 1973; Yoshimizu, 1985; Sakurai, 1996; Tanaka, 2010 [summarizing publications since 1987]; Yonezawa, 1998), but with newly discovered material in Sanskrit there is now an even stronger awareness of his impact on the literature written during the next half a millennium on the Indian Subcontinent and even beyond in the Tibetan tradition.

## Life

By early mediaeval Indic standards, we know quite a lot about Jñānapāda's life. Unusually, a great amount of prosopographic data can be gathered from his own writing, chiefly the opening and closing verses of his "Oral Teaching" (\**Mukhāgama*, \**Mukhāmnāya*, or \**Mukhākhyāna*), a work that survives only in Tibetan translation (D 1853/ P 2716). While the translation obscures much factual information such as proper names and toponyms, our understanding is aided by \*Vaidyapāda's commentary (D 1866/ P 2729). However, this person (also referred to as \*Vitapāda in secondary literature), although he is Jñānapāda's chief exegete, was perhaps only a very late disciple. Moreover, this text too survives only in Tibetan. (A ground breaking study of the opening passage and the commentary can be found in Davidson, 2002, 311–316; for some revisions, see Szántó, 2015a.)

Jñānapāda is silent about his parentage or place of birth. Instead, the account (D 1853, *rgyud*, *di*,

1b–2b/ P 2716, *rgyud 'grel*, *ti* 2a–b), a combination of travelogue, academic vita, and spiritual biography, opens with a list of his teachers.

First in line is one Bzang po seng ge who, in spite of the reversed elements of his name, must be the famous Prajñāpāramitā scholar →Haribhadra, an author who signed his *magnum opus* (Wogihara, 1932–1935, 994) at the still unidentified Trikaṭuka monastery, under the patronage of Dharmapāla (r. c. 770–810 CE). However, according to Jñānapāda, he studied with him in Taxila (Rdo 'jog, a common translation of Takṣaśīlā) in the country of Kha pir or Kha bir (possibly a corrupted phonetic rendering of Kaspīr, i.e. Kashmir; for Kashmiri domination over Taxila, see Beal, 1884, 136–137; Naudou, 1968, 72–74). From here he moved to Nālandā where he taught (presumably while continuing his studies), and where he reports having composed some juvenilia at the request of one \*Guṇamitra or, according to Vaidyapāda, \*Guṇamitrā, a nun of noble birth. These appear to have been his Prajñāpāramitā works, one of which mentions the same petitioner. He then moved to Oḍḍiyāna (the Swat Valley) to receive teachings from Vilāsavajra, a well-known commentator of the *Mañjuśrīnāmamaṅgīti*, who must have been very impressed with his student since he quotes him (Tribe, 2016, 30–31), and \*Guṇeru, an otherwise obscure figure, but a great *yoginī* according to Vaidyapāda. His next teacher was a girl aged 16 called Dzā thig dzā lā, whom he identifies as the goddess \*Mahālakṣmī, and who instructed him for eight months at a locality called Chab sgo to the north. If the text is more or less correct, this place was possibly somewhere in Gilgit or Baltistan, perhaps around the Darkot pass (as *chab sgo* = *dvāra*), or less likely the Wakhan Corridor (which at this time was under Tibetan occupation and was called Gog; see Mock, 2013), but even Badakhshan is not unlikely (hypometrical *bdag* was perhaps \**badaga* = Middle Persian *badaxš*). He then moved to Jālandhara, to a polity called Ko no dze (probably not the famous metropolis Kannauj, as in that time it was referred to as Kanyākubja), and a guru whose name can be reconstructed as \*Bālikapāda or \*Bālhikapāda (possibly "the Bactrian", see Szántó, 2015a, 542).

Eventually he gave up his northern wanderings and moved to the south, to the Konkan coast, according to some to Kanheri near Bombay (Davidson, 2002, 312) or contemporary Kadri in Mangalore (Szántó, 2015a, 550–552). Here he found a small community led by a guru called Pālitapāda (Hadano, 1950; Sakurai, 1996, 26; Szántó, 2015a, 542, 546–550; incorrectly reconstructed by some scholars as \*Rakṣāpāda, Davidson, 2002, 312, or \*Rakṣitapāda, Roerich, 1949, 368). Despite having spent nine years with this master, with whom he studied the *Guhya-samājatantra* and its exegesis, he felt that he did not gain a satisfactory understanding, a sentiment echoed by Pālitapāda himself. Understandably disappointed, Jñānapāda again took to the road and ended up in the vicinity of Bodh Gaya, in a wilderness called the Ku ba rtsa or Ku ba rtswa grove (\*Kuvaca, perhaps the village Koch [Konch subdistrict, Gaya district], about 30 km northwest of Gaya), where he undertook six months of intensive practice. Here he met a somewhat strange monk, who turned out to be an emanation of Mañjuśrī. He thus received a vision of the deity and teachings, which form the substance of the *Mukhāgama*. He doubtless saw this as the defining event of his life.

In the epilogue of the work (D 16a–b/ P 18b), Jñānapāda says that shortly thereafter he relocated to a cave hermitage 50 *krośas* from Bodh Gaya (*parba ta yi phug*, possibly Parbati, Kashi Chak subdistrict, Nawada district), where he put his visionary experience into writing, composed other works, and taught. In his comments to the passage, Vaidyapāda (D 1866, *rgyud*, di 134b–135b/ P 2729, *rgyud 'grel*, ti 162a–163b) clarifies that this place was 6.25 *yojanas* due northeast (i.e. around or slightly beyond the Rajgir hills) and that it was called Ma ta hra ni tra (D) or Ma ta hri ndra (P), also given in translation as the “Shoot of teaching(s)” (Chos kyi myu gu = \*Matāṅkurita?), a place he describes as “a site of great practitioners of former times.” Jñānapāda then mentions his retinue, and notes that Jambhala, the deity of wealth, provided all of their necessities. He specifically mentions offerings, food, clothing, and funds at a daily value of 700 *kāṣāpaṇas*, probably not a meager sum if it was worth mentioning. Vaidyapāda adds that there were 18 individuals of note among Jñānapāda’s disciples, and he singles out Dīpaṃkarabhadra, \*Prašāntamitra, Rāhulabhadra, and \*Vajramahāsukha as four who achieved *nirvāṇa* in this very life. Jñānapāda then describes a journey to visit Pālitapāda (on

the Konkan coast), on whose request he wrote a *sādhana* (most likely the *Samantabhadra*). After having entertained his former master and his erstwhile fellow students, he returned to the mountain hermitage and continued writing and teaching as before. He finishes the account using the word *gtam rgyud* (\*ākhyāna), by which he probably meant the above story. Vaidyapāda, however, expands the meaning to include other scenes from the master’s life, singling out “The taming at Nālandā,” “The worship of Vajrāsana,” and “The consecration,” but not giving any details, suggesting that by his time these stories were already well known. We note these stories, with significantly more detail, transmitted in the Tibetan tradition (Grünwedel, 1914, 92–94; Templeman, 1983, 58–60).

Jñānapāda is silent about his further career. Tibetan historiographers compiled most of the above and other, now unavailable or untraced, sources into more or less coherent narratives (see Roerich, 1949, 367–373 for Gzhon nu dpal of the ’Gos, and Chimpa & Chattopadhyaya, 1970, 278–279, as well as Grünwedel, 1914, 88–94 and Templeman, 1983, 71–82, for Tāranātha). According to the latter, Jñānapāda consecrated the Vikramaśīla monastery and was appointed there in a leading office. He oversaw grand rituals, some of them for the benefit of the state and the royal line of Dharmapāla. \*Adhiśa (or \*Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna, erroneously →Atiśa/Atiśa) reports that Jñānapāda bestowed tantric initiation on Devapāla (r. c. 810–850 CE) and his queen, receiving a large amount of gold as payment (Szántó, 2015a, 538–540). His activity may have therefore continued well into the 9th century. The earliest known complete biography of the master and his lineage (*Gsang ’dus Ye shes zhabs kyi rnam thar dang brgyud pa’i rim pa*) was compiled by Chos rgyal ’Phags pa (1235–1280 CE) in 1258 at the court of Qubilai. This is a classic hagiographical account, which, however, refers to multiple versions of several events. Its presence in the Yuan court, at this time administering the largest contiguous land empire in history and where ’Phags pa was a figure of paramount importance (Petech, 1990, 14–24), may be significant.

## Works

The Tibetan Canon contains 15 or so texts ascribed to Jñānapāda (or any variant of the name), but in some of these cases the attribution is questionable.



There are three non-tantric works, which were written in his early career. The *\*Saṃcayagāthāpañjikā* (D 3798/ P 5196), a long commentary on the famous summary of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, was written for one Guṇamitra/Guṇamitrā, the person also mentioned in the *Mukhāgama*. There is a strong possibility that it was translated into Tibetan at a very early date, before 824 CE (Tomabechi, 2008, 175). The *Mahāyānalakṣaṇasamuccaya* (D 3905/ P 5301; also translated into Chinese by Shihu [施護], T. 1637) deals with definitions, some in highly original wording, of key concepts of exoteric Buddhism. One of Jñānapāda's early masters, Vilāsavajra, quotes the initial verse of this work. A fragment of the original Sanskrit has been published (Yonezawa, 1998) and much more can be recovered from the long recension of the *Sāramañjarī* (Szántó, 2015a, 545). His commentary on the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, the *Prajñāpradīpāvalī*, has an unusual transmission history. The latter part of this work (the commentary to the eighth chapter and the two final verses) was found in Tibet and edited in a rare publication (Kendai, 1973). A significant portion of the text copies Haribhadra's *Ālokā* word for word; it may have therefore been written during Jñānapāda's studentship with that author. The Tibetan canon preserves a translation (D 3800/ P 5198) of a work also called the *Prajñāpradīpāvalī*, but that translation does not match the Sanskrit fragment, and is attributed in its colophon to the Kashmiri Buddhāśrījñāna, an 11th-century author, who is also mentioned as one of its translators (on this Buddhāśrījñāna, see Namesakes below).

At the conclusion of Jñānapāda's vision, Mañjuśrī, whose direct first person speech is recorded and reported by the master in the *Mukhāgama*, commanded him to write a set of new texts (D 15b/ P 18a) – ritual manuals and exegesis connected to the “generation stage” (*utpattikrama*) practices of the *Guhyasamājatantra*. Combined with the “perfected stage” (*utpannakrama*) practices that had been given directly by Mañjuśrī in the vision, these texts would constitute a comprehensive collection to set up a new cult. Vaidyapāda (D 133b–134a/ P 161a–b) here lists 14 works (also see Roerich, 1949, 370–371), only some of which can be identified.

Perhaps the most important, and certainly the most charismatic and curious, text in the oeuvre is the *\*Mukhāgama* itself. Since the main part is

said to derive from a vision of the deity, the text occupies a gray area between scriptural revelation and human authorship. Choosing this format was perhaps a conscious strategy on the author's part, as in this work he introduces teachings previously not attested in Buddhist scripture, for example the yogic practice of directed egress from the body at the time of death (Skt. *utkrānti*; Tib. *gong du 'pho ba*) and liturgical elements for the two initiations requiring sexual union. The former was enshrined in scripture later in the 9th century in the *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* (Szántó, 2012, vol. I, 455–468; vol. II, 214–223), while the latter elements crop up in several initiation manuals (Sakurai, 1996) and even scripture (e.g. in the *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇatantra*, chapter 3, for which see George, 1974, 22–23; 56–57). In the epilogue Jñānapāda states that he compiled the *Mukhāgama*, which also includes subsequent scenes from his life, while residing with his disciples and teaching at his hermitage. The sheer amount of personal information revealed, and the careful crafting of his own persona, make this an outstanding and unique work. The Tibetan Canon preserves another *Mukhāgama* (D 1854/ P 2717), placed immediately after, but while the content of the text is clearly based on Jñānapāda's *Samantabhadrasādhana*, the colophon of this work states that it was compiled by one Śākyamitra, a student, possibly the same as the seminal author of the Ārya school (Hadano, 1950; Tomabechi, 2008, 174).

Among his practical manuals, the 164-verse *Samantabhadra*, a *sādhana* text for the deity Mañjuvajra and his retinue, that is to say the pantheon of the *Guhyasamājatantra* configured according to Jñānapāda's interpretation, is by far the most important. Jñānapāda alludes to the fact that he wrote it for Pālitapāda, his former master from the Konkan, during his second trip there. Some of his commentators state this explicitly (see Szántó, 2015a, 543–552). The text, also known as the *Caturaṅgasādhana*, survives in the original, but it is only partially available (see Kawasaki, 2004, for a description of the manuscript; and Kanō, 2014, for an edition of the available portion). It is distinguished by its good style and clear structure. The most commonly used meter is the *āryā*. Almost the entire text was recast in the more straightforward *anuṣṭubh* meter in Dīpaṃkarabhadra's initiation manual (see below). A block of verses has gained liturgical function in Nepal and China (Tanaka, 1996, 180–187; revisions

in Szántó, 2015a, 543–544). There are two Tibetan translations (D 1855 & 1856/ P 2718 & 2719; also see Kikuya, 2012) and we know of at least five commentaries (D 1867/ P 2730 by \*Śrīphalavajra; D 1868/ P 2731 by \*Thagana; D 1869/ P 2732 by Samantabhadra; D 1872/ P 2735 by Vaidyapāda; and an unidentified commentary in Sanskrit listed in Kawasaki, 2004). The *Sāramañjarī* of Samantabhadra is available (sometimes only partially) in at least three recensions, the longest of which quotes in the original large sections of the *Mahāyānalakṣaṇasamuccaya* and the *Ātmasādhanaṅvātāra* (Szántó, 2015a, 544–546).

Although several of his other works contain important doctrinal statements, the *Ātmasādhanaṅvātāra* (D 1860/ P 2723; Szántó, 2015b, 756) seems to be Jñānapāda's chief tantric treatise. The text, besides the testimonia, survives in full, but it is not available for study (Kawasaki, 2004, 51). Here he seems to argue for the somewhat unusual standpoint that full awakening is possible only through the tantric method (i.e. deity yoga) and not conventional Mahāyāna practice, a statement also made at several points in his *Mukhāgama*.

While the *Samantabhadra* is thought of as describing the “stage of generation,” another work, the *\*Muktitilaka* or *\*Muktibindu* (D 1859/ P 2722), is said to describe the “perfected stage.” In fact, the description of the perfected stage practices given in the *\*Muktitilaka* is simply an abbreviated form of the same instructions given by Mañjuśrī in the *\*Mukhāgama*. This text too was commented on by *\*Vaidyapāda* (D 1870/ P 2733).

Jñānapāda's minor works include a short *sādhana* of Heruka (D 1857/ P 2720), most of which survives in the original (Bhattacharyya, 1928, 472–473). In the Tibetan Canon this is followed by a short commentary, which may or may not be his work (D 1858/ P 2721). He also wrote three *sādhana*s of the deity of wealth, Jambhala (D 1861–1863/ P 2724–2726; for the Sanskrit of the third, see Bhattacharyya, 1928, 562–563). The Tibetan Canon also preserves a short work of Jñānapāda's on choreography and postures (D 1864/ P 2727), a manual somewhat similar to the *Parikramapadopāyikā* of Śrīkīrti, possibly a fellow student of his from the Konkan and the commentator Samantabhadra's teacher (Szántó, 2015a, 552–554).

Vaidyapāda reports that, following Mañjuśrī's command to compose specific ritual texts, the master wrote three versions of the *Samantabhadra*, a pair of manuals for burnt offerings, one

for food offerings, a manual for the communal feast, a “Summary” (*bsdus pa*), and other works. He also says that the “Long Commentary” (*rnam bshad*) was never written, in spite of the fact that slightly later he does mention a (presumably different) commentary, whereas the “Initiation Manual in 250 Verses” was “known to have been taken to Kashmir,” but Vaidyapāda had not read it. Indeed, the main surviving initiation manual of the school is the enormously influential *Maṇḍalavidhi* (D 1865/ P 2728) of Dīpaṃkarabhadra, probably a direct student. An almost complete Sanskrit manuscript of this work was found in Tibet; it resurfaced in Göttingen, and has been published (see *Dhīḥ* 42, 2006; Bahulkar, 2010; for a new manuscript and the missing final verses, see Szántó, 2015a, 556). This text may have some of Jñānapāda's manual in a rephrased form, given that Dīpaṃkarabhadra also reformulated a significant portion of the *Samantabhadra* in this work. There are two commentaries on this manual, one again by Vaidyapāda (D 1873/ P 2736), and one by the famous 11th-century scholar, →Ratnākaraśānti (D 1871/ P 2734). For initiation in the Jñānapāda tradition in general, see Sakurai (1996).

Jñānapāda's style is terse and elegant. His rhetorical skill was eulogized and emulated with varying degrees of success by his spiritual descendants, but may have been discreetly criticized as abstruse by a prominent author of the rival Ārya school (Tomabechi, 2008, 172–173). Jñānapāda's oeuvre clearly deserves much more attention and any conclusions about it are for the time being tentative. While there is no doubt that his writings are Buddhist, Jñānapāda's use of terminology from, and references to, non-Buddhist traditions suggest that he was living and writing in an eclectic milieu. One of his overarching projects seems to have been demonstrating that while exoteric Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially Yogācāra underpinned by epistemological reasoning, and the first wave of antinomian tantric scriptures, especially the *Guhyasamājatantra* and the *Sarvabuddhasamāyogaḍākinījālaśaṃvara*, are perfectly compatible and even complementary in many ways, the tantric method is clearly superior. Moreover, Jñānapāda makes repeated references to the instantaneous transference of wisdom directly from master to disciple. While there are signs that he favored the classics of Yogācāra over those of the Madhyamaka, his precise standpoint on these matters requires further study (Hadano, 1950; Yoshimizu, 1985).

## Namesakes

There were at least two more individuals with the same name, and with whom Jñānapāda should not be confused (Hadano, 1950). One is the author behind the Tibetan translation of the *Prajñāpradīpavālī*, a Kashmiri (or Nepali) who worked with the translator of Khro phu, also known as Byams pa'i dpal of the Gnubs (1173–1236), in the early 13th century (Naudou, 1968, 200–201). The other (Juejixiangzhi [覺吉祥智]) is recorded to have reached the Song capital together with the Kashmiri translator Dharmapāla before about 1004 (*Dazhongxiangfu fabao lu* [大中祥符法寶錄], vol. CX, ch. 15, 20–21).

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