Vajrabodhi Encyclopedia Article

Vajrabodhi

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Vajrabodhi

VAJRABODHI (671–741) was an Indian Buddhist monk and Zhenyan teacher in China. Vajrabodhi (Chin., Jingangzhi) was the second of three Vajrayana missionaries to eighth-century China. He was born of a South Indian brahman family, and his father was a priest for the royal house. Vajrabodhi probably converted to Buddhism at the age of sixteen, although some accounts place him at the Buddhist university of Nālandā at the age of ten. He studied all varieties of Buddhism and was said to have studied for a time under the famous Buddhist logician Dharmakīrti. Under Śāntijñāna, Vajrabodhi studied Vajrayāna teachings and was duly initiated into yoga, the "Three Mysteries," and *dhāraṇi*. Leaving India, Vajrabodhi traveled to Sri Lanka and Śrīvijaya (present-day Sumatra), where he apparently was taught a Vajrayāna tradition distinct from that taught at Nālandā. From Śrīvijaya he sailed to China and by 720 was ensconced in the Jianfu Temple at the Chinese capital, Changan. Accompanying him was his soon-to-be-famous disciple, Amoghavajra.

Like Śubhākarasiṃha, who preceded him by four years, Vajrabodhi spent most of his time in ritual activity, in translating texts, and in the production of Esoteric art. Particularly important was his partial translation of the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha* (T. D. no. 865) between the years 723 and 724. This Yoga Tantra—along with the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (T. D. no. 848), translated by Subhakarasimha the same year—provides the foundation of the Zhenyan school in China and the Shingon and Esoteric branch of the Tendai school (Taimitsu) in Japan. Like Śubhākarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi had ties to high court circles and enjoyed the patronage of imperial princesses; he also worked with the Chinese monk Yi Xing. Vajrabodhi died in 732 and was buried south of the Longmen caves. He was posthumously awarded the title Guoshi, "Teacher of the Realm."

Vajrabodhi's importance was twofold. Although the doctrines of the Yoga Tantras were known to Śubhāka-rasiṃha, Vajrabodhi was the first translator and systematic teacher in China of the *Sarvatathagatatattvasamgraha* and of Vajrayāna as practiced in South India and in Srivijaya. Second, Vajrabodhi reinforced the presence and visibility of the Vajrayana at the Chinese court, a presence that, under his disciple Amoghavajra, would become the dominant force in the court during the second half of the eighth century.

See Also

Mahāsiddhas; Zhenyan.

Bibliography

Zhou Yi Liang provides a copiously annotated translation of the standard biographies of Vajrabodhi, Subhakarasimha, and Amoghavajra in his "Tantrism in China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8 (March 1945): 241–332.