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.

17th century painting of Nagarjuna, one of the greatest Indian philosophers. He was born in the 2nd century AD in South India. The medieval Tibetan historian Taranatha, writes about him as one of the luminaries who taught at the Nalanda University. His work is a cornerstone of Buddhist philosophy and he is deeply revered in the Buddhist world till today. Pic: Benoy K Behl
The Nalanda tradition of Buddhism spread across many countries in ancient and early medieval times. It was warmly received even as far as the River Volga in Russia.

Here we see two Russians posing proudly in front of the statue of the great Arya Nagarjuna from the Nalanda University, in Kalmykia.

Pic: Benoy K Behl
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

Gandan Monastery, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Pic: Benoy K Behl
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.

The Nalanda tradition of debate is carried forward in the Tibetan Monasteries established in South India. Owing to the efforts and vision of H.H. the Dalai Lama, nuns, as we see above, have been given the same opportunities as the monks, to pursue the highest Buddhist academic studies.

Pic: Benoy K Behl
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

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, speaking to the film-maker
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 7th 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 Shantarakshita 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 came 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.
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.

*Through the gateway, we leave Kala, or Time, behind us, as we proceed towards the understanding of the final truth.*

*Borobudur Stupa, Java, Indonesia.*

_Pic: Benoy K Behl_
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.

Kizil Caves, Kucha, China. Kucha was one of the greatest Buddhist centers in Central Asia in the first half of the First Millennium. There are 236 caves at the site of Kizil, with paintings that date from the 3rd to the 9th centuries. Stylistically, they are a blend of Indian, Iranian and Chinese influences. These are among the best early paintings which survive in present-day China.

Pic: Benoy K Behl

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.

Golden Abode of Shakiyamuni Temple, Kalmykia, Russia. This recently-made temple has become a great symbol of the Buddhist traditions of the people of Kalmykia.

Pic: Benoy K Behl
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

Sailing Ship, Relief, Borobudur Stupa, Indonesia, 8th – 9th century. This relief brings alive the transmission of ideas between India and the countries of South-East Asia. Pic: Benoy K Behl
Participants in the Seminar include
(in alphabetical order):

Prof. S. S. Bahulkar
Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Pune

Prof. Lokesh Chandra
Director, International Academy of Indian Culture, New Delhi

Benoy K Behl
Chair, Buddhist Heritage Institute of Indology, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan New Delhi

Dr. Bijoy Kumar Choudhary K.P.
Jayaswal Research Institute, Patna

Prof. S. R. Bhatt
Philosopher and Sanskritist Delhi

Geshe Dorji Damdul
Director, Tibet House Cultural Center of H. H. The Dalai Lama New Delhi
Dr. Pema Dorjee
Visiting Professor
Central University of Tibetan Studies
Varanasi

Prof. Geshe Ngawang Samten
Vice Chancellor
Central University of Tibetan Studies
Sarnath

Dr. B.R. Mani
Addl. Director General
Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi.

Prof. Dr. Shashibala
Scholar and Researcher
New Delhi

Bhikku Tenzin Namdak
Registered Teacher
Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition

Dr. Vijay Shankar Shukla,
Coordinator Area Studies Programmes, IGNCA, New Delhi

Dr. Ravindra Panth
Director, Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, Nalanda

Geshe Jangchup Choeden
Abbot, Gaden Shartse Monastery

Ambassador Pavan Varma
Cultural Advisor to Hon. Chief Minister Govt. of Bihar
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 University, Bihar
The university of Nalanda was one of the greatest centres of learning that the world has seen from the 4th to the 12th centuries.

Pic: Benoy K Behl

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 2nd 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 7th 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 7th 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 2nd 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 5th 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 7th 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.

Dinnaga, 17th century painting. Dinnaga was born in one of the greatest centres of religion in India, Kanchipuram. He made profound contributions to the systematic development of Mahayana Buddhism. Pic: Benoy K Behl

Atisa, of the 11th century, was a student of the Nalanda University and then a teacher at the Vikramshila University, also in Bihar. He was invited to Tibet to teach Buddhism and he is one of the most important founders of the Nalanda tradition of Buddhism in Tibet. Pic: Benoy K Behl
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 7th 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.

The great tradition of debate of Nalanda has been kept alive and continues till today in the Tibetan monastic universities, which are now in South India. These are the centres where the legacy of Nalanda is preserved intact.

Eleven-headed Avaloketiswara, Mural, Dungkar Caves, Western Tibet. Pic: Benoy K Behl
Tsaparang Monastery and Guge castle remains, Western Tibet. The castle ruins in the barren landscape of Western Tibet bring alive the romance of the time when Guge was at the heart of a flourishing kingdom. It was the centre from where the Second Great Diffusion of Buddhism spread across Western Tibet and the Indian territories of Ladakh, Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur. Pic: Benoy K Behl

Preservation of the tradition. Tibetan manuscript in gold. Translations from Sanskrit were given great importance by Tibetans. This is in Tawang Monastery. It was founded by Merak Lama Lodre Gyamtso in the year 1860-61 AD. Pic: Benoy K Behl