

VANARATNA - THE LAST
OF THE GREAT PANDITAS.

It is generally assumed that with the gradual disappearance of Buddhism from Northern India and the spread of the Muslim power, Indian pandits ceased to frequent the countries beyond the Himalayas. A closer study of Tibetan historical chronicles reveals however that the ancient cultural links had survived the changes, and that Buddhist scholars from India and Nepal continued to visit Tibet. One of the best known among them was the scholar Vanaratna (Nags-kyi rin-chen) who as many of his predecessors came from East Bengal. His name is intimately connected with the spread of the Kālacakra system in Tibet. He was born in 1384 A.D. as the son of a local rāja in the town of Sadnagara in the Chittagong district of East Bengal. At the age of 8, he was ordained in the presence of the upādhyāya Buddhaghosa and the ācārya Sujataratna at the vihāra of Mahācaitya, and for several years continued his studies under the guidance of the two above mentioned ācāryas. At the age of 20, he received the final monastic ordination and proceeded to Ceylon to continue his studies of the Buddhist Doctrine. It is noteworthy that in those days many of the Indian Buddhists used to go for their studies to South India and Ceylon. In Ceylon, Vanaratna studied under the famous ācārya Dharmakīrti the Vinaya and practised meditation. After finishing his studies in Ceylon, Vanaratna, we are told proceeded to Kalinga where a great scholar Narāditya befriended him and even composed a stotra in his honour preserved in a Tibetan translation,

" Great Sthavira Vanaratna,

Who has realized the freedom from wordly attachment,

Having cleansed the turbid defilement produced in the World,

O beings! Follow on him with devotion in order to pacify the Samsāra."

From Kalinga Vanaratna journeyed to the famous Buddhist site of Srī Dhānya-kataka mahā-caitya and stayed for some time at the hermitage of the great Nāgabodhi. Here, we are told, he had a meeting with the siddha

The life-story of Vanaratna is told in the Tibetan Blue Annals (Pt.2, Calcutta, 1953). There exist also a life-story of Vanaratna which contains interesting information on Ceylon in the XV century.

Sabari. From Dhānya-kataka he journeyed northward to Magadha and spent some time with the scholar Harihara who explained to him the text of the Kalāpasūtra, a version seven times larger than the one preserved in Tibet. Vanaratna retired to a forest hermitage and practised the Sadāṅga-yoga (n. of a yoga method advocated in the Kālacakra system which consists in the observance of certain periods in meditation - three years, three half-months and three days; during these periods the physical organism of the sādḥaka is believed to undergo a complete change). In a vihāra called Uruvāsā a stone image of Ārya Avalokitesvara uttered a prophecy and instructed Vanaratna to proceed to Tibet and preach the Doctrine. In accordance with the prophecy, Vanaratna proceeded to Nepal and there met the great pandita Śīlasāgara who bestowed on him the Bodhicittotpāda rite according to the method of the Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra. In 1426 A.D. Vanaratna arrived in Tibet and proceeded to Lha-sa as well as to the valley of the Yar-klūns in the South-East of the country. From a veiled reference in the account of his Life it appears that his first trip to Tibet was not very successful and that " only a few people came to ask him about the Doctrine". He therefore returned again to Nepal and took up residence at the Śāntapuri vihāra situated near the Svayambhū-caitya. While residing at the vihāra he was visited by his former ācārya Buddhaghosa and the siddha Sabari. They initiated him into the Cycle of Samvara and bestowed on him the uttara-abhiṣeka of the Kālacakra. During his residence at the Śāntapuri vihāra, he received an invitation from Si-tu Rab-btsan-pa to revisit Tibet. He accepted the invitation and journeyed to Gyangtse. We are told that he had a meeting with the great Tibetan scholar Rong-ston who accompanied Vanaratna to Lha-sa. They took up residence on the Srin-po-ri and the news of Vanaratna's arrival spread far and wide. He received an invitation to visit Tse-thang from the king Grags-pa rgyal-mtshan and spent some time there at the local monastery. From there Vanaratna accompanied the king to Gong-dkar, and then returned to Srin-po-ri where he bestowed an initiation on the king. Then the great pandita and his disciples proceeded to Pa-ro (sPa-gro in Western Bhutan) and spent some time there.

It is said that he had a vision of the guru Padmasambhava while residing at Pa-ro. In 1436 Vanaratna proceeded to sNe-gdong and then returned again to Tse-thang and bestowed numerous initiations on the king and his followers. From Tibet, Vanaratna returned to Nepal via sayi-rong escorted by troops sent by the king. It was his intention to proceed to Vajrāsana, but the roads were rendered unsafe by brigands who, according to the Tibetan annalist, had heard that Vanaratna had become the spiritual teacher of the Tibetan king, and were anticipating a rich booty. Vanaratna had to postpone his journey and instead of himself sent a messenger with offerings to the Vajrāsana. In Nepal he erected an image of Vajradhara and practised meditation. In the year 1453 Vanaratna again journeyed to Tibet and revisited Yarkluñs where he bestowed numerous initiations according to the Kālacakra. He also made a round of important Tibetan monasteries, and preached the Doctrine to the monastic congregations at Tse-thang, Sang-phu, Gung-thang and Den-sa Thel. The Tibetan annalist underlines the popularity of Vanaratna and adds that " in th exposition of the sublime meaning (nīta-
artha) of the Vajrayāna, his grace was like the restoration of the life-string."

On his return to Nepal, numerous Tibetan scholars continued to visit him. Besides preaching and bestowing initiations, Vanaratna laboured both as author and translator of Buddhist texts. The last years of his earthly life Vanaratna spent at the hermitage of Govicandra where he preached extensively. He passed away at the ripe age of 85 in the eighth month of the year 1468 with the words, " I shall now hold the feast of going to the Tuṣita Heaven," and was cremated at the Ramdoli burial ground near the S vayambhū-caitya. In the words of the Tibetan annalist " he became our highest and only refuge."

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