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OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
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Volume 9

1986

Number 2

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The Identification of dGa' rab rdo rje

by A.W. Hanson-Barber

dGa' rab rdo rje, who was the first human to teach the *ati-yoga* (T. *rDzogs pa chen po*) system,¹ and thus can be called the human founder of the system, has, up to now, been incorrectly identified and given a date that is far too early.

In order to resolve these problems, we must correctly re-Sanskritize the various names given dGa' rab rdo rje in his hagiography. Then, by comparing these names with lists of various lineages of transmission of the tantras, we should be able to locate him within these lists. Finally, by assigning dates to the *siddhas* that are well known, and then working backwards, we should be able to assign a probable date to him. Therefore, it is the intention of this paper to identify dGa' rab rdo rje correctly and assign a date to him.

The *ati-yoga* system constitutes the highest phase of tantric practice for the rNying ma school of Tibetan Buddhism. However, the system originated in India and is completely based upon Indian Buddhist *tantra*.² It has two different branches: *ati-yoga* in relation to the lower vehicles³ and the "Great Secret Explanation." This last is further broken into three classes: the Mind Section (T. *sems sde*), the Great Expanse Section (T. *glong sde*), and the Instruction Section (T. *man ngag gyi sde*).⁴ The two branches are not mutually exclusive; indeed, they have many points in common.

Both from a meditational aspect and a philosophical point of view, the *ati-yoga* bears considerable similarity to the *mahāmudrā*, although there are important differences.⁵ The ideal is to arrive at a state of pure awareness (T. *rig pa*), and, by refinement, never to depart from this state. This can be achieved by progressing through the three divisions mentioned

above. In essence, the experiences relating to these are as follows: the Mind Section relates to the experience of the mind in its nakedness; the Great Expanse Section relates to the experience of the openness of being or emptiness (*śūnyatā*); and the Instruction Section relates to the stabilizing of the experience. These three divisions are further sub-divided into many different levels, each with its own mental outlook and with a host of meditations to be practiced.

However, since this paper is historical and not philosophical, the above brief introduction should suffice.⁶

1. A Brief Hagiography

dGa' rab rdo rje was born in Uḍḍiyāna, near the Dhanakośa lake. His mother was Sudharma, who had become a nun. She was the second daughter of the king of Uḍḍiyāna. One evening she had an auspicious dream, and shortly thereafter gave birth to a son.⁷ However, because she was full of fear and shame, she placed the child on a dust heap; but even after three days the boy was still radiant and healthy. Because of this incident, he was given the name Ro lang s bde ba.

At the age of seven, he requested of his mother that he be allowed to enter the assembly and dispute with the *paṇḍitas*; she, thinking him too young, denied his request. He persisted and finally was granted permission. He entered upon a dispute with five hundred *paṇḍitas*, and was victorious. At this time, he was given the name dGa' rag rdo rje by his grandfather, the king, who was delighted with the child's performance.

Later, he wandered to the places frequented by ghosts in the mountains around Uḍḍiyāna. It was here that he had a secret realization of Vajrasattva, from whom he received the *ati-yoga* teachings.⁸ After his realization, he made the earth shake seven times. Because of this, a heretic accused him of injuring the Hindu faith, and the king and people of that area decided to kill him. When they arrived at his retreat, however, he ascended to the sky and inspired great faith in them.

With the help of *dākinīs*, he compiled an index of the entire *ati-yoga* system. Finally, with the daughter of Rāhula, he de-

parted for Magadha, and the Sītavāna cemetery, where he extensively taught the *ati-yoga*.⁹

II. The Sanskritization of "dGa' rab rdo rje"

According to this brief hagiography, primarily abstracted from a recent work by H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche, dGa' rab rdo rje had another name of importance to our study, Ro lang s bde ba.

In the Peking edition of the Tibetan canon, the Sanskrit name given for dGa' rab rdo rje is Surativajra.¹⁰ Professor Guenther gives as possibilities Surativajra and Pramuditavajra.¹¹ Each reconstruction suffers from its author's reliance on relatively late sources; in fact, the re-Sanskritization of dGa' rab rdo rje's name is quite problematic. Das's dictionary, for instance, lists seventeen different Sanskrit words that are translated into Tibetan as *dga' ba*,¹² and five different Sanskrit words that are translated as *rab*.¹³ This gives one eighty-five possible ways of re-Sanskritizing the Tibetan!

It must be remembered that, for the most part, these modern sources were working from material translated under the "new" system of translation started in Tibet at the time of Rin chen bzang po. Since dGa' rab rdo rje is important in the rNying ma pa tradition, and since one can already find his name mentioned in the earliest material translated into Tibetan, it would make sense that his Sanskrit name was translated into Tibetan using the old system of translation produced by Vairocana and his contemporaries. Therefore, in looking for the correct way to translate dGa' rab rdo rje back into Sanskrit, it seems much wiser to look at the *Mahāvvyutpatti*,¹⁴ a work composed during the same time period.¹⁵

There, the word *dga' ba* is synonymous with *dga' bo*, which equals the Sanskrit *Nanda*.¹⁶ *Rab*, according to the *Mahāvvyutpatti*, can be translated into the Sanskrit prefix "adhi."¹⁷ Das also infers that it can act as a prefix, giving the Sanskrit *su* as a possibility.¹⁸ However, here it seems that *rab* may be short for *rab tu*, in which case, according to Das, it should equal the Sanskrit prefix *pra*.¹⁹ This also seems to be the Sanskrit preferred

by the *Mahāvvyutpatti*.²⁰ In this sense, one must understand that *pra* has the meaning of “fully” or “greatly,” for it is to be added to *nanda* to form the adjective “joyful,” or perhaps “joyous.” However, *pra* does not seem to be a preferred prefix when used with *nanda* and, therefore, a different prefix with the same general meaning is needed. This, of course, can be found in the prefix *ā*, thus giving the Sanskrit word *ānanda*, a well known Buddhist name. The Tibetan word *rdo rje* is re-Sanskritized as *vajra*. All sources agree on this. Thus, the re-Sanskritized name of dGa’ rab rdo rje should be Ānandavajra.

The name Ro lang s bde ba consists of two parts: *ro lang s* and *bde ba*. The first is re-Sanskritized by Das and the *Mahāvvyutpatti* as *vetāla*.²¹ The *Mahāvvyutpatti* further lists *kṣema* for *bde ba*.²² Because of the reasons noted above, this latter would have been the preferred translation during the period of the early translations. Therefore, for Ro lang s bde ba, the Sanskrit is Vet-ākṣema.

III. The Dating of dGa’ rab rdo rje

Three authors who have put forth a date for dGa’ rab rdo rje all agree that it was approximately 55 A.D.²³ However, since each of these authors is associated with the others, it seems likely that they are simply following one another in this matter. None offers a reason for this date in the works surveyed, despite the difficulty of justifying so early a date for a “Tantric Master.” It may, therefore, be reasonable to arrive at a more acceptable date by working backwards from a known *siddha*’s date, following the various pertinent lineages.

In *The Life and Teachings of Vairocana*,²⁴ I have tentatively reconstructed the *Ati-Yoga* lineage as follows: Vairocana and Vimalamitra II, Śrī Siṃha, Mañjuśrīmitra II, Vimalamitra I, unknown, Mañjuśrīmitra I, and dGa’ rab rdo rje.²⁵ Further, if one uses the standard of thirty-five years between student and teacher,²⁶ the dates for the above can be assigned as follows: 760 A.D., 725, 690, 655, 620 and 585; thus, dGa’ rab rdo rje’s date would be 550 A.D.

In the *Jñānasiddhi* of Indrabhūti,²⁷ there is a lineage given for that line of teachings, and it is accepted in the *Blue Annals*.²⁸

The latter is most clearly identified with teachings that would, only a short while after its "publication," be called *mahāmudrā*. The *mahāmudrā* and *ati-yoga* have a great deal in common. This is, of course, well known to scholars of the *tantras*, and will not be discussed here. However, they also have a historic connection, not only after the time of Kumara rāja in Tibet,²⁹ but also at the time of their birth. This is brought out in another lineage given in the above-mentioned work. This lineage is as follows: Cittavajra, Sarvajagannātha (vajra), Siddhivajra, Brahmanvajra, Ānandavajra, etc. The first thing to note here is that each of these *siddhas'* names ends with the word *vajra* (T. *rdo rje*). This may indicate a particular line of transmission where, in imitation of the *vinaya* lineage, the student takes on part of the name of his ordination master. Be this as it may, because Ḍombhī Heruka was at least in part a student of Śrī Lakṣmī, who was the sister of Indrabhūti, the date of 730 A.D. can be assigned to her. This is further corroborated by the fact that Vimalamitra II, who helped transmit the *ati-yoga* teachings to Tibet, was invited from Indrabhūti's court to Tibet. Vimalamitra II, it is known, was active at the same time as Vairocana, and the above-given date is in accordance with this. Thus, for Cittavajra, the date would be 695 A.D.; for Sarvajagannātha (vajra), 660; for Siddhivajra, 625; for Brahmanvajra, 590; and for Ānandavajra, 555. Ānandavajra, as we have seen, is another name for dGa' rab rdo rje.

There is another list that is of interest to us here. This lineage is found in the *Blue Annals* and represents the early *anuyoga-tantra* line.³⁰ It begins with Vasudhara, the Napalese king,³¹ along with Dharmabodhi;³² then Sukhaprasanna, Sthiramati, Dhanarakṣita, Śākya Siṃha, Prahasti, Vajrahāsa, Vetālakṣema, Kukurāja, and Indrabodhi.³³ Their dates would be: 800 A.D., 765, 730, 695, 660, 625, 590, 555, 520 and 485, respectively.

What is to be noted in this lineage list is, of course, the name Vetālakṣema. As we have seen, this is the Sanskrit name for Ro lang s bde ba. However, the names Indrabodhi and Kukurāja are also important in the various lines of transmission of *tantras* for the rNying ma school.

Thus, applying the same standard to lineage lists of the *Ati-yoga*, the *Jñānasiddhi* and the *anuyoga-tantra*, one can place dGa' rab rdo rje in the mid-sixth century. This is a time much

more appropriate for a “Tantric Master” than that given by other authors. However, the basis for this date is that dGa’ rab rdo rje is, in fact, a Tantric author, a fact that is still to be determined.

IV. Works Associated with dGa’ rab rdo rje

There are several categories of works in which one finds dGa’ rab rdo rje’s name, primarily hagiographies, commentaries and meditational texts.

First, as was seen just above, there is at least a brief hagiography of dGa’ rab rdo rje found in some more recent sources. These, it is presumed, are based on much older versions. One also finds dGa’ rab rdo rje’s name playing a prominent role in the hagiographies of Mañjuśrimitra, Śrī Siṃha, and Vairocana. In the latter, not only does Vairocana have visions of dGa’ rab rdo rje, but his name is also associated with particular tantric cycles.³⁴

In the second category, one can find in the Peking edition of the Tibetan canon the following works listed: *’Phags pa ’jam dpal gyi mtshan yang dag par brjod pa’i don gsal bar byed pa*,³⁵ *bsgom pa rgya mtsho dang mnyam pa’i rgyud kyi dka’ ’grel*,³⁶ *’Bras bu rin po che dang mnyam pa’i rgyud kyi dka’ ’grel*,³⁷ *spyod pa nyi zla dang mnyam pa’i rgyud kyi dka’ ’grel*,³⁸ and *rTa ba nam mkha’ dang mnyam pa’i rgyud dka’ ’grel*.³⁹

In the final category, there are two divisions: texts that dGa’ rab rdo rje received, and texts that originated with him. Examples of the first are: *rDo rje sems dpa’ nam mkha che rtsa ba’i rgyud skyed ba me pa*⁴⁰ and *’Jam dpal ’dus pa’i rgyud las bsdus pa rdzogs so*.⁴¹ Examples of the latter are: *Byang chub sems bchos thabs mdor bsdus*,⁴² *gNod sbyin gyi rgyal po sgrul pa’i thabs*,⁴³ and the *Tshig gsum nad brdegs*.⁴⁴ The last-mentioned is perhaps his most famous work dealing with the *ati-yoga*, and has commentaries on it by Patrul Rinpoche and many others.

From reviewing the above list of works, there can be little doubt that dGa’ rab rdo rje/Ānandavajra’s name is well connected with the tantric tradition. There is not only secondary evidence, such as the information gained from the hagiographies of various individuals, but there is also one *sādhana*, a

text on the *rtsa lung thig le* practice, and numerous commentaries on both well-known and obscure tantric practices.

V. Conclusion

We have shown that previous attempts to re-Sanskritize the name dGa' rab rdo rje are incorrect. Instead of Surativajra or Pramuditavajra, the name should be Ānandavajra. Second, dGa' rab rdo rje's other name, Ro lang bde ba, should be re-Sanskritized as Vetālakṣema. Further, the method of re-Sanskritization in the preceding pages is based on the translation into Tibetan of Sanskrit words as found in the *Mahāvryupatti*. This is a work that dates from the time of the early propagation of the Dharma in Tibet. Thus, it is more reliable than re-Sanskritizations based on sources from the second spread of the Dharma, from which it would seem the incorrect re-Sanskritizations of these names were derived.

In arriving at a reasonable date for this Tantric author, we have presented evidence from three different lineage lists. By using the same standard of time between teacher and disciple, the date of Ānandavajra from the *ati-yoga* lineage was determined to be 550 A.D., the date of Ānandavajra from the *Jñānasiddhi* was determined to be 555 A.D., and the date of Vetālakṣema from the lineage of the early *anuyoga tantra* was determined to be 555 A.D.

Finally, that dGa' rab rdo rje/Ānandavajra was, in fact, a tantric author is well attested by information gained from hagiographies, commentaries on tantric practices and meditational texts authored by him.

NOTES

1. The rNying ma count nine vehicles: *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, *bodhisattva*, *kriyā tantra*, *caryā tantra*, *yoga tantra*, *mahāyoga tantra*, *anuyoga tantra*, and *ati-yoga*. Because the *ati-yoga* does not form a separate school I have called it a system.

2. A.W. Hanson-Barber, *The Life and Teachings of Vairocana*. Unpublished dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1984.

3. See *Rdo rje sems dpa' nam kha' che rtse ba'i rgyud skye ba med pa*, chapter 1, in *Vairo rgyud 'bum*, vol. 1; *Grub mtha 'mdzod* by kLong Chen pa, Dodrupchen Rinpoche pub., Sikkim National Press, p. 325–336; and Hanson-Barber, *op. cit.*, p. 102 ff. & p. 135 ff.
4. kLong Chen pa, *ibid.*, and Hanson-Barber, p. 135 ff.
5. A comparative study of *ati-yoga* and *Mahāmudrā* is still wanting.
6. For the philosophy of the *ati-yoga*, see H.V. Guenther, *Matrix of Mystery* (Boulder, 1984) and *Kindly Bent to Ease Us* (Emeryville, CA, 1975). Also see Hanson-Barber, throughout.
7. *Crystal Mirror* vol. V, pp. 182-3, reports this happened in a vision while she was meditating; it also gives the year for this as wood-female-ox.
8. Dudjom Rinpoche told me in a conversation that dGa' rab rdo rje had known the *ati-yoga* from birth.
9. Dudjom Rinpoche, *Bod snga rabs pa gsang chen rnying ma'i chos a'byung* (1977), p. 119 ff.
10. *Tibetan Tripiṭaka, Peking Edition*: see for example #4554, vol. 81.
11. *Crystal Mirror*, vol. III, p. 86. However, he gives no reason for these re-Sanskritizations.
12. Sarat Chandra Das, *A Tibetan English Dictionary*, p. 167.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 1167–8.
14. *Mahāvvyutpatti*, Tokyo, 1915.
15. Specifically, before the time of Ral pa can.
16. *Mahāvvyutpatti*, p. 228.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
18. Das, p. 1167.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 1167–8.
20. Cf., e.g., pp. 493, 886, 1536.
21. *Ibid.*, e.g., pp. 39, 41, 69, 74, and 251.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 413, 414.
23. Guenther *Crystal Mirror*, vol. III, p. 86; Eva Dargyay, *The Rise of Esoteric Buddhism in Tibet*, p. 245. (This author seems to follow the dating in the *Chos 'byung* by Karmapa dPa' bog tsung lag, but this is not specifically stated) and Tarthang Tulku, *Crystal Mirror*, vol. V, p. 182.
24. *Op. cit.*, p. 35 ff.
25. The reconstruction is based on the following argument: There is sufficient evidence to suggest that there were two Mañjuśrimitras. (Dargyay, p. 245 & 20ff.) Also, since Vimalamitra is said to have lived for 200 years, there were probably two individuals with this name (not to be confused with Vimala, the elder, mentioned in the *Blue Annals* p. 191–2). Since there is no mention of any Vimalamitra studying with a teacher other than Śrī Siṃha, I have postulated an “unknown” for Vimala I's teacher.
26. Although thirty-five years is somewhat arbitrary, there are approximately thirty-three years' difference between the ages of Śrī Siṃha and Vairocana at their meeting.
27. *Jñānasiddhi*, in *Two Vajrayana Works*, ed. Benoytosh Bhattacharyya (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1929).
28. George N. Roerich, *The Blue Annals* (Delhi, 1979), p. 552.

29. The third Karmapa and Kumara rāja worked at bringing together the *mahāmudrā* and *ati-yoga* teachings. Kumara rāja was also the teacher of kLong Chen pa. Cf. Guenther, *Kindly Bent to Ease Us*, vol. 1, p. 245; and Karma Thinley, *The History of the Sixteen Karmapas of Tibet*, p. 57.

30. *Op. cit.*, p. 159 ff.

31. This king is known only from Tibetan sources. He is not mentioned in Nepali sources.

32. Not to be confused with Bodhiharma.

33. This would be Indrabodhi I. See Wayman, *The Yoga of the Guhyasamāja*. (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1977), pp. 89–91, 96.

34. Hanson-Barber, p. 65.

35. #2942, vol. 67.

36. #5037, vol. 87.

37. #5039, vol. 87.

38. #5038, vol. 87.

39. #5036, vol. 87.

40. *The Bairo rGyud 'Bum*, vol. I.

41. *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*, vol. 7.

42. *Op. cit.*, vol. V.

43. *Tibetan Tripiṭaka, Peking Edition #4554*, vol. 81.

44. Author's collection (no bibliographic information).