

The Survival of Mahayana Buddhism in Nepal

A Fresh Appraisal

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Vorwort

Als ich mich hinsetzte, um die Ausarbeitungen für meine beiden Vorträge über den Buddhismus in Nepal auszuformulieren, ist mir deutlich geworden, wie wenig ich dem Thema eigentlich gerecht geworden bin. Ich habe Ihnen zwar einen kleinen Einblick in die faszinierende Welt des Newar Buddhismus ermöglicht, aber ich fürchte, daß es mir nicht gelungen ist, diesen als eine in sich schlüssige und von daher auch intakte Tradition darzustellen. Ich habe mich daher bemüht, in diesem Ausatz dieses Versäumnis nachzuholen. Das bedeutet, daß ich mich erheblich von meinem ursprünglichen Vortragstext entfernt habe und dementsprechend auch einen neuen Titel angesetzt habe. Dafür bitte ich Sie um Verständnis.

Für einen anderen Sachverhalt muß ich Sie um Entschuldigung bitten. Mir fällt es aus Gewohnheit wesentlich leichter auf Englisch zu schreiben, auch wenn dieses alles andere als fehlerfrei und elegant ist. Leider ist mir die Zeit ausgegangen, diesen Aufsatz wie ursprünglich geplant für Sie ins Deutsch zu übertragen. Dafür bitte ich Sie um Nachsicht. Ich hoffe jedenfalls, daß mein Englisch "deutsch" genug ist, um für Sie leicht verständlich zu sein.

Until the conquest by the Gorkhas and the consecutive rise of the modern nation in the mid-18th century, "Nepal" referred to the Kathmandu Valley. The Valley is located on the southern flank of the Himalayas, north of the Gangetic plain, approximately at the same longitude as Patna, at an altitude of some 1350 metres. It is a circular bowl, roughly 35 by 25 kilometres large. A ring of mountains rising up to 2700 meters surround it on all sides. The Valley itself is relatively flat and with its fertile soil (as

popular myths tell and as geological findings confirm, in prehistoric times it was a lake) and with the moderate climate (temperatures hardly ever fall below zero degree Celsius in winter or climb much beyond 30 degrees in summer) ideally suited for intensive agriculture. Because of this, the Valley could support a much larger population than any other area in the mountains stretching between the Gangetic plain and the Tibetan plateau. The historic Nepal was also favoured by its location along and close to trade routes to Tibet which allowed it to control a significant share of the lucrative trade passing between the Gangetic plain and Tibet. Furthermore, the Valley with the circle of high mountains on all sides functioned as a natural fortress which was difficult to assail. This difficulty was compounded by the fact that, unlike the neighbouring regions, the Valley was relatively densely populated. Hence in medieval times most of the military conflicts did not involve outsiders, but took place between the three kingdoms of Bhaktapur, Kathmandu and Patan. These conflicts were generally on a minor scale and did not seriously disrupt public life. Because of all these factors, a comparatively prosperous civilization with a diversified urban culture could develop in a mountainous region which otherwise was sparsely populated and did not allow large numbers to make a living.

It seems that for at least 2000 years the Valley has been populated by Newars. As their Tibeto-Burmese language and as many of their ethnic features reveal, they are of Central Asian stock. Both by their language and by their culture they form a homogenous group with a pronounced consciousness of their distinct identity. However, over the course of history Nepal came to function to some degree as a regional melting point and people of different origins, many of them from the Gangetic plain, were assimilated into the fold of the Newars. Hence they are a mix of Central Asian, Himalayan and North Indian people.

Due to the relative proximity to the Gangetic plain, the Newars were presumably from earliest times onwards drawn into the fold of South Asian religion and culture. However, they resisted outright assimilation and adopted pan-Indian Sanskrit

traditions without abandoning their own heritage. Thus they amalgamated autochthonous deities, cults, beliefs and practices with pan-Indian traditions of the Indian subcontinent by complex processes of identifications and subordinations. Though this amalgamation of local and pan-Indian traditions is characteristic for much of the subcontinent, it is striking how alive autochthonous beliefs and practices remain among the Newars even to this day.

Several ranges of mountains separate the Valley from the Gangetic plain. They have isolated Nepal to some extent and protected it from lasting conquests by the forces of Muslim and British invaders. Hence the culture and civilisation of the Newars did not undergo the deep social, religious, political and cultural changes that went along with Muslim and British rule in Northern India. Moreover, Nepal was until the 1950s a closed country, sealed effectively from outside influence. As a consequence, forms of religious practice can be found in Nepal that have vanished in India since long. This includes tantric Mahāyāna Buddhism which has, in its original South Asian setting with Sanskrit as sacred language, only survived uninterruptedly in Nepal.

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The beginnings of Buddhism in Nepal are shrouded in dark. There are local traditions that already Śākyamuni visited Nepal,¹ but there is no evidence in the early Buddhist sources that would support such a claim. Another tradition has it that after the massacre of the Śākya, an event well attested in the Buddhist canon, the kinsmen of Ānanda fled to Nepal, presumably bringing with them Buddhism, if indeed it had not

¹ The Nepali recension of the Bhadrakalpāvadāna relates that Śākyamuni visited Svayambhū after teaching his father Śuddhodana and before retiring to Kapilavastu (see Sylvain Lévi: *Le Népal: étude historique d'un royaume hindou*. 3 vols. Paris: Leroux 1905 (reissued 1986, Kathmandu and Paris: Raj de Condappa, Le Toit du Monde and Editions Errance): vol. III, pp. 190f). According to the Svayambhūpurāṇa (see below) Śākyamuni came with his followers to Nepal because it is particularly suited for taking the Bodhisattva vow. See also David N. Gellner: "A Sketch of the History of Lalitpur (Patan) with Special Reference to Buddhism." In *CNAS* 23,1 (1996), pp. 125-157: 129f.

been established there before. This tradition is recorded in the Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivādins.² However, the *vinaya* was redacted centuries after these events supposedly took place and hence cannot be taken as a historical record. Similarly, there is the tradition that the emperor Aśoka, who reigned around 268-232 B.C., visited the Valley as a Buddhist devotee, commissioning stūpas and marrying off his daughter Cārumatī to a local noble man.³ Supporters of this tradition point as proof to the four monumental stūpas surrounding Patan, which are known as Aśoka stūpas, and to the Carumativihāra (new. Cābahil) supposedly founded by the aforementioned Cārumatī. However, while the archaic shape and other considerations leave little doubt about the great antiquity of these monuments, there is no evidence that would prove the alleged link between them and Aśoka and his daughter.⁴ The absence of conclusive evidence does of course not disprove this legend. Rather, the Australian anthropologist Michael Allen finds it "most plausible,"⁵ and Siegfried Lienhard, another authority on Newar Buddhism, supposes similarly that Buddhism was introduced to Nepal "either during or soon after the reign of Aśoka."⁶ All this, however, is guesswork for which there is no testimony.

There is, for all I known, no archaeological or textual evidence that would prove

² Cf. David Gellner: "Buddhist Monks or Kinsmen of the Buddha." In *Kailash* 15 (1989), 1-20: p. 8.

³ Cf. David N. Gellner, op. cit., pp. 129f. See also the tenth chapter of the longer recensions of the Svayambhū-Purāṇa which relates that Aśoka came on pilgrimage to Svayambhū.

⁴ By contrast, Aśoka's visit to the southern borderland of modern Nepal is well-attested, because he commemorated it on pillars set up in Lumbini at the birthplace of Śākyamuni and nearby in Nigriya at the stūpa of Koṅakamana (= Kankakamuni, a previous Buddha) which he had enlarged.

⁵ Allen, M.R. "Buddhism without monks: the Vajrayāna religion of the Newars of Kathmandu valley." In: *South Asia* 2 (1973), pp. 1-14: p. 3.

⁶ Siegfried Lienhard: "Nepal: the Survival of Indian Buddhism in a Himalayan Kingdom." In: *The World of Buddhism. Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Society and Culture*, ed. H. Bechert and R.F. Gombrich, London: Thames and Hudson, 1984, pp. 108-114: p. 108.

conclusively the presence of Buddhism in Nepal before the 5th century C.E. However, it seems reasonable to presume that Buddhism took roots in Nepal considerably earlier than that, at a time when it was thriving in Northern India. This is also suggested by the aforementioned Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivādins. Sylvain Lévi holds that it may have been redacted in Nepal itself,⁷ possibly in the third century C.E.⁸ This would prove that by then Nepal had been identified with Buddhism. However that may be, there is ample epigraphic evidence of Buddhism for the time from the middle of the first millennium onwards. Thus it does not come as a surprise that in the 7th century the Chinese monk-traveller Hsüan-fang reports, albeit on the basis of hearsay, that Nepal was a flourishing Buddhist centre with some 2000 monks of both Hinayāna and Mahāyāna persuasion.⁹ There is ample evidence to show that these monks belonged to the fold of Northern Indian Buddhism. Many of them studied and even taught at the great Buddhist universities of Northern India. In later centuries they came to play an important part in the transmission of Buddhism from India to Tibet, with Nepal serving as a major meeting place.

The weakening and final disappearance of Buddhism in India in the 14th century left Nepal very much out on its own. Tibetan Buddhism was thriving in close vicinity, but due to the differences of language and culture it was essentially alien to the Newars and could not fill the role of the Indian Buddhist mainland. Besides, historically Tibet had received Buddhism from India and also Nepal, and the reversal of these roles was in itself a difficult matter. This means that Buddhism in Nepal developed after the severance of ties with India with very little exposure to other Buddhist traditions.

⁷ This assumption gains additional weight from the fact that the rite of ordination (*pravrajyā*) as practised in Newar Buddhism (see below) is closely related to the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya and seems to be derived from it.

⁸ Cf. Sylvain Lévi: *Le Népal*, vol. iii, 184. The latest possible date is the 7th century, since the *vinaya* was translated into Chinese in 700 C.E. (*ibid.*, vol. ii, 64).

⁹ See Siegfried Lienhard, *op. cit.*, p. 109, and David Snellgrove: *Buddhist Himalaya. Travels and Studies in Quest of the Origins and Nature of Tibetan Religion*. Oxford: Cassirer, 1957, p. 101.

Instead, it was strongly influenced by Hindu traditions, mainly tantric Śaivism and Śāktism, that were (and still are) current alongside it among the Newars. Moreover, the aforementioned autochthonous forms of religious practices and beliefs continued to have a strong impact on Newar Buddhism.

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If we survey the little we know about the history of Newar Buddhism, we cannot fail to notice that the greatest contributions have been made in the arts. The Newars dotted their valley with magnificent temples, monasteries and stūpas, dedicated to both Buddhist and Hindu deities. They also produced exquisite scroll paintings, expressive sculptures and delicate lost wax metal icons. Albeit being a small group, their fame spread far and wide, and as craftsmen and artists they were in great demand in Tibet and China. The celebrated Arniko even became head of the imperial manufacture at the Chinese court in Loyang in the 13th century. This artistic heritage has been well-studied, though generally from an art historical perspective, without taking the religious context into which these objects belong sufficiently into account. By contrast to the achievements in arts and architecture, there is a conspicuous absence of famed scholars and a marked scarcity of renowned practitioners. It indeed seems that Newar Buddhism made no significant contributions to Buddhist doctrine and learning. It did, however, produce a corpus of devotional Mahāyāna literature — much in the Newari language. This literature is generally based on Indian precursors. Most importantly, in the 15th century several Mahāyāna sūtras of Indian origin, such as the Kāraṇḍavyūha, were radically reworked so as to adjust them to a Nepalese setting and relocate the main action there. As part of this literary endeavour, the Svayambhūpurāna, a text to be treated below, was produced. Besides these Mahāyāna texts, Newar Buddhists have produced a sizeable ritual literature, which is largely devoted to practice, laying down in Newari how to perform the complex rituals of the tantric tradition inherited from India. The literary production outlined here reflects that Newar Buddhism is a tradition essentially concerned with the performance of rituals and devotional practices.

The Newari literary heritage has as yet hardly been studied.¹⁰ By contrast, emphasis has been on the sociological and cultural dimension of Newar Buddhism. Accordingly the most significant contributions to the study of Newar Buddhism have been made by social anthropologists (notably by David Gellner).¹¹ They have tended to focus in their research on the most conspicuous feature of Newar Buddhism, namely the paradoxical laicization of the monkhood (there is no tradition of nunneries) and its complete accommodation to the caste system. By "laicization of monkhood" I refer to the phenomenon of monastic communities — the term *saṃgha* is used by the Newars — of which one can only become member by patrilineal descent. That is to say, eligible are only the sons of those fathers who are themselves member of the monastic community in question. Needless to say, they are married rather than celibate monks. So as to be initiated into these communities the boys undergo the so-called *bare chuyegu* rite, an expression which means "becoming a *bare*", a word derived from *vandya* "venerable" and standing for "monk". In this rite (which I documented as part of my talk by video footage) the boys undergo the traditional *pravrajā* ordination ceremony, stay monks for three days, and then disrobe again in order to remain householder Buddhists for the rest of their life. In the process of this ritual the boys, who may be of any age but should not have yet reached puberty, become full-fledged members of the monastic community of their fathers. There are some 100 functioning communities of this kind left in the Kathmandu Valley, each with one or several monasteries (*viḥāra*) of their own. All male members are house-holders who have undergone the *bare chuyegu* initiation ritual, and who usually marry and beget sons who will subsequently also be initiated into the same community. Though assuming monkhood only ritually for a few days, they maintain their monastic identity even after

¹⁰ But see K.P. Malla: *Classical Newari Literature. A Sketch*. Kathmandu: Educational Enterprises, 1982.

¹¹ See his monograph *Monk, Householder and Tantric Priest. Newar Buddhism and its Hierarchy of Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See also the only monograph on Newar Buddhism in German language, authored by Siegfried Lienhard: *Diamantmeister und Hausväter. Buddhistisches Gemeindeleben in Nepal*. (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1999).

disrobing. Thus Newar Buddhism is not a “Buddhism without monks”, as Michael Allen and more recently Siegfried Lienhard have it, but a Buddhism with monks who have turned householders without really giving up their identity as monks. This is clearly borne out by the fact that some subgroups of the initiates are traditionally even called *bhikṣus* (*śākyabhikṣu*, *cailakabhikṣu*). There is justification for this identity as monks, insofar as the initiated boys become members of what is considered a monastic community with a living monastic cult which they maintain. What is more, on the occasion of major rituals requiring purity, they shave off their entire head hair without leaving a tuft. This accords with the renunciation of worldly existence performed as part of the ordination ceremony. Thus the complete tonsure serves to reassert their identity as Buddhist monks. Similarly, on certain occasions such as the annual *pañradāna* celebration, they function as traditional recipients of alms in accordance with their identity as monks.¹²

The boys undertaking the monastic initiation fall — again by the principle of patrilineal descent — into two groups, namely the Śākyas and the Vajrācāryas. The latter go on to become tantric masters and for this receive the *ācāryābhiṣeka* initiation and the matching *mantra*. This entitles them to the performance of the fire (*homa*) and other complex tantric rituals on behalf of others. They thus become priests (*purohita*) with a fixed clientele (*yajamāna*) for whom they perform very much the same rituals that a Hindu Brahmin performs for his *yajmānas*, notably the rites of passage, including funerary rites and *śraddhā* rites for the deceased ancestors. Despite their differentiation by access to the *ācāryābhiṣeka*, the Śākyas and Vajrācāryas form an endogamous caste group that interdines and intermarries freely. Without their sense of identity as

¹² The institution of a caste of householder monks is not as unique as one might suppose. In Nepal, for instance, there is in the Hindu fold a *saṃnyāsīn* caste. Its members, too, marry and follow common worldly professions, even though they pass through a ritual renouncing all ties with caste-based society. The case of the Newar *jogi* caste who are identified as descendants of Kāṅphata yogis seems to be similar. Thus the householder monks are not a singular Buddhist phenomenon. By contrast, they are typical for the paradoxical integration of hereditary renunciators into the fold of Indian society and the caste system.

Buddhist monks of kinds and without the cults and traditions they perpetuate, Newar Buddhism would have most likely been absorbed into the Hindu fold, as it happened in Northern India. For in the lay castes without a monastic connection Buddhism is not firmly anchored and institutionalized enough to guarantee a lasting sense of distinctness from the Hindu surrounding. The fact that the institution of monkhood and monasticism can even without vocational, celibate monks be of such pivotal importance as in Newar Buddhism shows how vital it is for the integrity and survival of Buddhist societies.

This is not to say, however, that Buddhism is not rooted at all among the "lay castes." By contrast, the Buddhist castes immediately below Vajrācāryas and Śākyas also have a distinct Buddhist identity. Despite their exclusion from the *bare chuyegu* ritual, they also have access to higher tantric initiations. More typically, however, they engage in the kind of practices characteristic for Mahāyāna devotionalism, as Todd Lewis has shown in his studies.¹³ It is only further down the caste hierarchy that religious practices tend to lose their distinct Buddhist identity. Accordingly, for these Newars the differentiation between Hinduism and Buddhism as two distinct traditions stops to make sense. Rather, we find the kind of convergence of practice that presumably was one of the key factors for the absorption of Buddhism into the fold of Hinduism.

In the study of Newar Buddhism some attention has also been paid to the cults of prominent deities. Besides the cult of Avalokiteśvara, particular attention has been paid to the Goddess Kumāri who is worshipped in the form of a girl consecrated for this purpose.¹⁴

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¹³ See Todd Lewis' *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal* (New York: SUNY, 2000) and the bibliography there for further literature.

¹⁴ See Michael Allen: *The Cult of Kumari: Virgin Worship in Nepal*. Kathmandu: CNAS, 1975.

Scholars and more casual observers have tended to view Newar Buddhism as a degenerate form of Buddhism, corrupted by the assimilation to Hinduism. In support they point to the laicization of monkhood, the restriction of access to initiations (and hence to "higher" Buddhist teachings) on the basis of caste, to the institution of hereditary priesthood and the related observance of rites of passage and *śraddhā* rituals that are taken over from the Hindu tradition, to the prevalent practice of animal sacrifice etc.¹⁵ This kind of reasoning is based on the presupposition that these phenomena developed after the severance of ties with Buddhist India, when Nepalese Buddhists were exposed without protection to the Hindu culture of the Valley.

Such a view is fraught with difficulties. For a start, until the Rāṇas assumed power in the mid-19th century,¹⁶ Buddhism was demographically the prevalent religion among the Newars, and also the kings, though always Hindus, extended their patronage to Buddhism. More importantly, the underlying presupposition of a pure Indian Buddhism that came to be corrupted in Nepal does not stand up to the close scrutiny of the available sources. Thus at least some of the phenomena regarded as Newar degenerations seem to have their roots already in Indian developments. Reference may,

¹⁵ Gérard Toffin in a recent monograph (*Entre hindouisme et bouddhisme: la religion nēwar, Népal*. Louvain-la-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain, Institute Orientaliste, 2000: p. 45) has cited also the practice of venerating shrines by circumambulating them clockwise (*pradakṣiṇā*) as an instance of the borrowing of Newar Buddhism from Hinduism. However, the practice of circumambulation is an ancient form of veneration that is an integral part of Indian culture and cannot be identified as the "property" of one religious tradition. Rather, the same practice is attested already as a matter of course in the early *sūtras* where the Buddha is routinely honoured by circumambulating him. This example shows the limitations of "Hinduism" as an analytical category when juxtaposing it to Buddhism, and demonstrates the need to differentiate between what belongs to the common substratum of Indic practices shared by many traditions, and what is the characteristic mark of a (or several) particular Hindu traditions which should be identified accordingly.

¹⁶ In the mid-nineteenth century Daniel Wright estimated that two-thirds of the Newar population practised Vajrayāna Buddhism. See his edition of the *History of Nepal*. Translated from Parbatiya by Munshi Shew Shunker Singh and Pandit Sri Guruānand, with an introductory sketch of the country and people of Nepal by the editor. (Cambridge, 1877).

for instance, be made to the accommodation of the *saṃgha* to the caste system in Sri Lanka or to the performance of Hindu-style rites of passage in the *Kriyāsaṃgraha*, a text which was compiled well before Buddhism vanished in India. Moreover, the institution of married householder “monks” was prevalent in Nepal when Buddhism was still flourishing in India. Thus the Tibetan monk Dharmasvāmin, who came to Nepal in 1226 and stayed there for eight years, records that there were monasteries “with and without monks,” specifying that only few monasteries had monks, that is presumably to say, had celibate monks who did not disrobe in order to become married householders.¹⁷ The coexistence of Vinaya keeping monks with householder “monks” is also attested for Kashmir. The *Rājatraṅgini* (3.11-12), a famous chronicle written by Kalhaṇa in the middle of the 12th century, records the endowment of a monastery which had one half set aside for practicing bhikṣus (*śikṣācāra*) and one for householder ones (*gārhaṣṭhya*) “together with their wives, children, cattle and property” (*sastrīputrapaśūśrī*). To be sure, the complete disappearance of celibate monkhood in Nepal is a local development that eventually occurred after Buddhism vanished in India.¹⁸ However, the decline of celibate monkhood in Newar Buddhism is not a unique case, but can be compared to similar developments in East Asian Mahāyāna countries.

The depreciative view of Newar Buddhism expressed by several scholars is also unbalanced because it ignores that this tradition has preserved a highly complex ritual tradition and forms of esoteric tantric practices that seem to have been lost elsewhere

¹⁷ See Regmi, D.R. **Medieval Nepal. Part 1: Early Medieval Period 750-1530 A.D.* Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1965, p. 561.

¹⁸ I am not aware that the disappearance of celibate monks could be tied to specific events or persons (though it is in the mind of many Newars who blame the king Jayasthiti Malla and his alleged introduction of the caste system), nor that it could be precisely located in time. Siegfried Lienhard (In *The World of Buddhism* cited above, p. 110) relates — regrettably, without citing his source — that in the 17th century (well after Jayasthiti Malla who lived in the 14th century) there were still some 25 monasteries in Patan with celibate monks.

in the Buddhist world. It would seem that these achievements in the ritual and tantric sphere are readily disregarded, because scholars have tended to adopt a Protestant-fainted stance, judging Buddhist traditions in the light of the teachings found in the oldest strata of the canon and arguably going back to the historical Buddha himself. Besides, the ritual and tantric traditions of Newar Buddhism have been very little studied and hence are little known and thus easily ignored. It may be added that scholars have also tended to overlook the rich literary heritage of Newar Buddhism. In addition to the aforementioned indigenous works this also includes the vast corpus of Mahāyāna scriptures of Indian origin which were copied out in Nepal again and again and thus faithfully preserved in the original Sanskrit. Incidentally, it is this corpus which of all Buddhist scriptures first reached the West (in the 19th century), and to which we hence owe our first substantial knowledge of Buddhism, decades before the discovery of the Pali sources.

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Previous studies of Newar Buddhism are not only flawed by a lack of knowledge, but, more fundamentally, by viewing the tradition exclusively in terms of Indian Buddhism, or, more precisely, of what Indian Buddhism is commonly thought to be like. In order to arrive at a better understanding of Newar Buddhism it is helpful to study the tradition not only in the light of preconceived notions of what Buddhism essentially is, but also to adopt the perspective of the tradition itself. In order to do so, I want to return to the Svayambhūpurāṇa and its mythological account of the origins of Nepal because it shapes the self-awareness of the Newars like no other text. There are various recensions of different length, both in Sanskrit and Newari language, of this text which, despite its title, is technically a Mahāyānasūtra.¹⁹ I will concentrate here on the central

¹⁹ On the different version of the Svayambhūpurāṇa see Horst Brinkhaus: "The Textual History of the Different Versions of the Svayambhūpurāṇa." In *Nepal: Past and Present*, edited by G. Toffin, 63-71. Delhi: Sterling Publishers.

myth common to all versions.²⁰ It relates that in prehistoric times the Kathmandu Valley was a lake (which, as mentioned, is confirmed by geological findings), attracting many great saints. Upon its waters a divine lotus flower came to blossom, and upon this blossom miraculously a crystalline *stūpa* (referred to as “Dharmadhātu”), radiating in the colours of the five cosmic Buddhas, manifested itself spontaneously, which is the meaning of the term *svayambhū* and gave the name to the *stūpa*. This self-arisen *stūpa* is qualified as the home of the Jinas (*jinālaya*), as the ontological basis of the five Tathāgatas (*pañcatathāgatāśraya*), as holding the qualities of enlightenment (*sambodhi-śrīguṇādhāraḥ*), as adorned with all the marks (of Buddhahood?) (*sarvalakṣaṇa-maṇḍitaḥ*), as bearing all beautiful objects (*sarvasubhārtabhṛt*), as bearing the jewels of the right doctrine (*saddharmaratabhṛt*). These qualifications are in accordance with the general conception of *stūpas* in Vajrayāna Buddhism.

At a later age Mañjuśrī, attracted by the rays which he had seen in meditation at his abode in China, came to Nepal to behold this sight (*darśana*) and pay homage. Enchanted by this wonderful manifestation of buddhahood, he decided to make Svayambhū accessible for worship, and to this end drained the lake by cutting with his sword gorges in the ring of mountains enclosing it. At a much later age, when the *kaliyuga* was dawning and people were accordingly prone to become wicked, a certain Praçaṇḍadeva abdicated his throne as king of Gauḍa, an eastern state of the Indian subcontinent, in order to devote the remainder of his life to the pursuit of religion. He came to Kathmandu and, having become a Buddhist tantric master with the name Śāntīśrī, encased the radiating crystalline *stūpa* in a solid structure, the forerunner of the present *stūpa*, in order to protect it from any wrongdoing. Around this structure he set up five shrines dedicated to the elements which are in a revealing way linking the

²⁰ See Alexander v. Rospatt, *The Periodic Renovations of the Thrice-Blessed Svayambhūcaitya of Kathmandu* (Habilitationsschrift, Universität Hamburg, 2000), pp. 5-7 and 254f.

tantric tradition to the autochthonous layer of Newar religion.

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The Svayambhūpurāṇa draws on mythological themes and also on historical events that had some currency in the Himalayan region and accordingly can be found in various forms and guises in different places. For the Newars, however, the myth sketched above, which in one version or another is known to practically everybody, relates authentic events. They find this corroborated by the rays which the pious also now see occasionally emitted miraculously from the core of the *stūpa*. Thus even for most learned Buddhists with Western education there is little scope for doubting the primordial antiquity of the *stūpa* and its identity as the shrine where the principle of buddhahood, personified as the Ādibuddha, manifested itself of its own accord long before Śākyamuni, and where it continues to manifest itself as the rays seen nowadays confirm. In this way the *stūpa* becomes not only the cultic centre of Newar Buddhism, but the ontological centre of Buddhism at large. Accordingly, the famous historical and mythical figures of the history of Buddhism, including Śākyamuni and Aśoka, feature in the *Svayambhūpurāṇa* not so much as figures in their own rights, but as pilgrims who — long after its origination — come to Svayambhū for its veneration, and who thereby affirm its centrality. In this way the *Svayambhūpurāṇa* serves to relocate the centre of Buddhism away from its homeland in India right into the heart of the Kathmandu Valley.²¹ This relocation of Buddhism was facilitated by the way in which

²¹ This process of relocating the centre is not to be confused with the establishment of "copies" of holy places and shrines, a custom which is also widespread among Newars and which helps to recreate the holy landscape of India in the Kathmandu Valley. Strictly speaking, such shrines are more than mere copies, namely further instances of the same type of shrine that is exemplified by the "original." But as its referent, there is always this exemplifying "original" outside Nepal. In the case of Svayambhū, by contrast, there is no such original to which it would refer. Svayambhū is not a "copy," but itself *the* "original," "copies" of which are scattered all over the Valley and beyond.

Mahāyāna sūtras had come to be divorced from the setting within which the historical Śākyamuni had operated. Also the minor role attributed to Śākyamuni in the Svayambhūpurāṇa is in keeping with the loss of importance of the historical Buddha in Mahāyāna literature.

How much the relocation of the center of Buddhism shapes the Newars sense of Buddhist history and their place in it was brought vividly home to me when I cooperated in the writing of the script for a Newar documentary on tantric dance. While I wanted to place the Newar tradition in a historical context in the way I have done this above, the Newar producer (who of course prevailed) thought that the central myth related in the Svayambhūpurāṇa was a much more adequate way of introducing his tradition. This was not a conscious decision against an "Orientalist" perspective imposed upon him by me. Rather, he felt that his tradition originated with the miraculous manifestation of Svayambhū many eons before the historical Śākyamuni lived, and hence was not rooted in the Indian Buddhist tradition that I wanted to allude to.

That the Newar producer was anything but exceptional in talking the Svayambhūpurāṇa's account at face value became clear to me when in February 2000 I delivered a lecture on the Svayambhūpurāṇa at the Tribhuvan University of Kathmandu. After listening politely to my analysis of this text, the students and academics engaged in a lively debate as to whether the events related in the Svayambhūpurāṇa, notably the draining of the Valley by Mañjuśrī, really took place or not. While I traded a careful line, evading to answer this question by "yes" or "no", the audience got more and more impatient with me. Finally, the head of the institute, a Buddhist scholar holding a PhD from the J.N. University in Delhi, felt compelled to dispel the doubt that had arisen and explained to his students and colleagues that these were certainly historical events. Of course, not all were convinced, but it dawned

on me that I was pretty much alone in understanding the Svayambhūpurāṇa as a mythical, rather than historical account. In a sense they were right, too. For many of the legends related in the Purāṇa have a historical basis. Most importantly, though the Svayambhūstūpa may not enclose a self-arisen crystalline stūpa, it does indeed enclose a naturally formed and presumably sacred rock. Moreover, the Valley was indeed a lake that came to be drained by gorges, though these were — so geologists say — formed by earthquakes rather than by Mañjuśrī's sword as the Purāṇa has it.

After relating the mythical origins of Svayambhū, the Svayambhūpurāṇa goes on to relate the origins of other sacred sites in the Valley. In this way it does not only create a sacred landscape, but also propagates the cult and worship of these sites in the Valley. This accords with a very prominent feature of Newar Buddhism, namely the devotional worship of Buddhist deities. The Purāṇa also gives due weight to the tantric dimension, namely when it classifies the drained valley as an *upacchandoha*, that is a particular place for tantric practices, and links it with the *maṇḍala* of Cakrasaṃvara. Moreover, it relates how Śāntiśrī, the aforementioned king-turned-monk, became a tantric master who built the Svayambhūstūpa. The text, furthermore, devotes the eighth chapter to the exploits of the tantric master Śāntikarācārya who subdued the serpent deities, the Nāgas, thereby causing the release of the rains. Mention may also be made of the sixth chapter which deals with the Nāmasaṅgīti, an early tantric text of great importance, and its link to the Dharmadhātuvāgīśvara-maṇḍala and Svayambhū.

While the exoteric devotionalism and tantric practices depicted in the Svayambhūpurāṇa are characteristic for the later stages of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the text is particular in its perspective which does not envisage Buddhism as a soteriology. Instead of the celibate monk, the Svayambhūpurāṇa maintains the ideal of the Bodhisattva, albeit without dwelling on his soteriological role as a saviour. Also the mentioned tantric practitioners do not feature in a soteriological context, but as figure whose powers are important because they can be harnessed to such worldly ends as the assurance of rain. To be sure, the stress on the compassionate, reincarnating

Bodhisattva and the doctrinal relativization and partial overcoming of the *samsāra-nirvāṇa* dichotomy in Mahāyāna Buddhism can account for this to some degree. However, only to some degree, for, ultimately, Mahāyāna Buddhism, too, is a soteriology directed at the emancipation from suffering. The Svayambhūpurāṇa, by contrast, leaves with its depiction of Nepal in paradisaical terms hardly any scope for such a perspective. Rather, the spontaneous manifestation of the archetypal Buddha principle related in the Svayambhūpurāṇa transforms Nepal into a Buddha field (*buddhakṣetra*), and as the description of the texts clearly implies, into a pure one at that. Thus in the Svayambhūpurāṇa Nepal becomes a kind of *sukhāvati* (in some versions it is even explicitly identified as such),²² that is, a paradisaical realm where a particular Buddha manifests himself to the Bodhisattvas reborn there, and where these Bodhisattvas practice and realize the Buddha's teachings without encountering any obstacles and hardship.

Even though the Svayambhūpurāṇa refers back to a golden age before the present dark age, the *kaliyuga*, the paradisaical character of the Svayambhūpurāṇa's account shapes the awareness of the Newars. Even now they view Nepal as a blessed country, a *punya bhūmi*, particularly favourable for the practice of Buddhism. This view is reinforced by the Svayambhūpurāṇa's aforementioned account of the many sacred sites spread over Nepal, because they exist also today and hence link the present landscape to the paradisaical one in the past. In a less serious vein, one could also argue that the Newars derive their sense of the Valley's blessedness from its sheer beauty, its moderate climate, the plentiful agricultural output which it easily yields, the aforementioned marvellous temples, shrines, monasteries and palaces embellishing the towns and countryside and from the ample opportunity for direct communion with the deities which their many shrines and cults afford. In this context it may be recalled which impression Nepal and its inhabitants made upon Marpa (1012-1097), the great

²² So in the *Svayambhūdharmadhānusamutpattinidānakathā* (NGMPP reel no. A 923/3), fol. 21a.

tantric master and celebrated author of Milarepa's biography, when he reached there: "... cependant la fatigue vaut le prix: j'ai vu le Népal, pays d'ascendance divine. On ne se lasse jamais de regarder ces biens terrestres; je me suis demandé si ses hommes sont des petits dieux du monde du désir."²³

It is in accordance with this perspective projected by the Svayambhūpurāṇa that also in Newar Buddhism the soteriological dimension has faded largely into the background. Hence the perception that existence within *samsāra* is intrinsically unsatisfactory is essentially alien to the Newars, and accordingly there is little, scope for the ideal of final emancipation from *samsāra*. It thus comes as no surprise that such cardinal teachings of Buddhism as the Four Noble Truths play no role, and indeed are hardly known. In this light it also makes sense that renunciatory monkhood gave way to the institution of hereditary monks who disrobe only three days after their ordination in order to become ordinary, married householders for the rest of their life.

I don't want to suggest that the Svayambhūpurāṇa's portrayal of Nepal has eradicated any awareness of the unsatisfactory nature of existence, convincing the Newars that they are already in Sukhāvātī. Rather, a soteriological orientation is at odds with the strong sense of cohesion in Newar society and with their ethnocentricity which is so strikingly expressed by the relocation of the origins of Buddhism in Nepal. They leave little scope for individualism and the aspiration to transcend society and pursue an existence outside its framework. Accordingly, the concept of voluntarily leaving society, though familiar from contacts with India, remains something alien to the Newars, and renunciation is hardly practised. Rather than linking spiritual progress to

²³ This exclamation (which may be rendered in English thus: "... and yet, the exhaustion to get there is fully rewarded: I have seen Nepal, a heavenly country. One cannot stop marvelling at all the earthly goods; I asked myself whether these people are little gods of the realm of desire.") has been reported by the 4th Kham-sprul Rinpoche. The French translation has been quoted from A. Macdonald and Dvags-po Rin-po-che's "Un guide peu lu des Lieux-saints du Népal," p.241 (published in the festschrift for Rolf Stein, ed. M. Strickmann, 1981, pp. 237-273).

the emancipation from society, the practice of Buddhism is like most other activities pursued collectively within the framework of society. Hence, it was but natural — so my contention — to integrate the institution of monkhood into society,²⁴ for if there can be liberation in Newar Buddhism it can, in a sense, only be within, not outside society.²⁵ This character of Newar society renders it basically unsuited for an

²⁴ The integration of monkhood into society is clearly demonstrated in the performance of the aforementioned *bare chuyegu* ritual, and the direct and indirect involvement of the boy's family and relatives. The paternal aunt has the most important function, taking the boy through the entire ritual from the first to the last day. She is also charged with taking care of the boy's hair catching it on a platter when it is cut, and discarding it in a river a few days later after the boy has disrobed. In the case of Vajrācārya boys, her presence is also required when the *ācāryābhiṣeka* is imparted as a sequel to the *bare chuyegu* rite, and when the boys perform as part of this their first fire ritual. Besides the paternal aunt, the maternal uncle's participation is imperative. Most importantly, he has to present the boy with the new clothes to be put on when disrobing. In addition to paternal aunt and maternal uncle, the parents and other relatives get involved. They are present on the day of ordination and offer alms to the boy just afterwards. On the two intervening days before the disrobing, the boy is taken around paternal and maternal relatives where he again receives presents that are ritualized as alms. Moreover, a banquet may be organized for the boy where close and far relatives as well as friends are invited. This is in addition to the traditional feast that is served on the main day of the ritual for all participants. Thus, the *bare chuyegu* ritual serves as an important occasion for family bonding.

Part of the *bare chuyegu* in Kathmandu is a procession by all the new monks from the monastery where they have been ordained through the town to the palace where they deposit pan leaves and betel nuts on the royal throne in order to give notice of their new status. The procession is led by the priests and Newar musicians. With the honorific umbrellas, the red and yellow robes, the aunts, uncles and parents in their best outfit this is also a public demonstration and affirmation of their religious and caste identity, a point underlined by the many pictures nowadays taken on this occasion.

Thus, the Buddhist rite of ordination with the renouncing of the family and society as the central element has been transformed into ritual that effects the precise opposite, namely the strengthening of family ties and the assertion of one's status within society. In other words, it serves the integration in rather than the emancipation from society's web. This case demonstrates how in Newar Buddhism the forces of social cohesion have prevailed over a soteriology based on withdrawal from society.

²⁵ To be sure, the character of Newar society alluded to here does not suffice as an explanation for the disappearance of celibate monkhood. Rather, there must have been various, interlocking factors that led to this development. Research so far has shed little light on these factors and on the precise circumstances and mechanisms of the laicization of monkhood in Newar Buddhism. Among the avenues of enquiry to be pursued is the

essentially individualistic soteriology that is to be pursued after having renounced all ties with society. Or, to put the same point differently, practice in Newar Buddhism only assumes a soteriological orientation to the extent that this is compatible with the demands of society and its instincts of self-perpetuation.

On the other hand, the great sense of satisfaction and joy derived by the Newars from their collective practice of Buddhism accounts for the outstanding vitality that Newar Buddhism has preserved to this day. This does not only hold good for the many annual festivals dedicated to the cults of particular deities which are celebrated with great fervour and gaiety in the streets and at home, but also for burdensome vows which are collectively observed and even for such essentially individual exercises as the newly introduced *vipassana* meditation. It is pursued in the form of ten days courses and one day seminars, and is — despite the solitary character of the meditation — greatly appreciated as a practice that is suffered and mastered in a group rather than in seclusion. Accordingly — as borne out not only by the observation of contemporary practice, but also by the analysis of historical sources — Newar Buddhist activities (feasts, rituals, processions, renovations etc.) tend to be organized in such a way that as many people as possible assume a function and get actively involved. Even foreign students of Newar Buddhism are generally accepted in the same spirit. They become part of the event which they study, turning the role of the academic observer into yet another way in which one may participate in the event in question.

To repeat, the concept of emancipation is not entirely absent in Newar Buddhism. Most people practice the *dharma* with some vague idea of positive karmic retribution that may have a soteriological dimension, such as the idea to progress on the path that

comparison with the erosion of celibate monkhood in other Mahāyāna cultures. For instance, the figure of the married tantric practitioner (*nag pa*) in the rNying ma pa and other Tibetan traditions may be of help in assessing the impact that esoteric forms of tantric practices with their emphasis on a female partner had on celibate monkhood in Newar Buddhism. Similarly, the example of other Buddhist societies may shed light on the role played by monks' private ownership of monasteries and the principle of passing it on within one's family.

eventually will lead to rebirth in a paradisaal realm such as Sukhāvati.²⁶ Moreover, the esoteric forms of higher tantric practice are soteriological in nature, though the practitioners may only be vaguely aware of this. The point remains, however, that Newar Buddhism is practised within society, and very much as part of it, and that as a consequence there is only as much scope for Buddhism's soteriological dimension as this very close-knit society allows for. Let it be added that similar observations can surely be made for other Buddhist societies, particularly in the Mahāyāna orb.

Of course it can be argued that — whatever the explanations — the resulting Buddhism is corrupt and has little, if anything, to do with what the historical Śākyamuni preached. May be, but the point is that Newar Buddhism does not see itself in the light of these teachings. Rather, it views itself in the light of the Mahāyāna, and more particularly of the Svayambhūpurāṇa and related indigenous literature, a literature which after all is taken to render the words of the Buddha. If we assume this emic perspective rather than clinging to the original words of the founder figure, things start to fall into place and Newar Buddhism emerges as an intact tradition, and as an example bearing out how adaptable a religion Buddhism proved to be over the vast expanse that it covered in space and time.

* * *

In the last fifty years Newar Buddhism has become challenged by a new development, namely the introduction of monastic Theravāda Buddhism. Though this movement has been initiated from outside Nepal, its propagators are all Newar Buddhist themselves. The movement is diametrically opposed to most of what characterizes Newar Buddhism. It stands for a *saṅgha* that is not based upon caste, but composed of

²⁶ Cf. Todd T Lewis: "Sukhāvati Traditions in Newar Buddhism," in *South Asia Research* 16,1 (1996), 1-30.

celibate monks who are drawn in by religious vocation. It also regards rituals disparagingly and hence rejects tantric Buddhism as Hindu in all but name. Of course, it stresses the role of the historical Buddha as the founder of Buddhism and rejects the myriads of Mahāyāna Buddhist deities so popular in Newar Buddhism. The underlying view of Newar Buddhism operating here is not only very similar to the etic perspective of Western scholars, but is even related to it. For the Nepalese Theravāda movement has its root in Buddhist modernism in India, which in turn has been shaped by the picture of Buddhism projected by early Western scholarship on this subject.

The Theravāda movement with its modernist understanding of Buddhism is obviously at complete odds with the perspective of the Svayambhūpurāṇa. It erodes the world view underlying the Purāṇa and seriously undermines the trust and confidence of Newar Buddhists in the validity of their tradition. Over time the world of the Svayambhūpurāṇa is bound to crumble and the Newar tradition will have to reinvent itself in order to fend off the modernists' challenge. This does not, however, vitiate the point I tried to make in this paper, namely that the Svayambhūpurāṇa can serve as a key for a more adequate understanding of Newar Buddhism, correcting many of the misconceptions that have flawed our understanding of this tradition.