

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

Studies in the Nepalese Culture
of the Kathmandu Valley

edited by
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TORINO 1996

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CULTURAL CHANGE THROUGH SUBSTITUTION:
ORDINATION VERSUS
INITIATION IN NEWAR BUDDHISM

The Newar people are made up of two groups, a Buddhistic and a Hinduistic, each of which has a caste system, and each caste system is headed by the corresponding religious specialists: the Hindu Brahmins and the Buddhist Vajrācāryas. The Buddhism of the Newars belongs to the tradition of the Indian Vajrayāna or Tantrayāna Buddhism, but in the course of its history it has developed a few peculiarities which are not found in this form in any other Buddhistic tradition. There are, for example, no longer any monks. They have been replaced by a caste of priests who traditionally inhabit buildings which are called Vihāras and are thought to be former monasteries. The life of the individual as well as of the community is regulated by a multitude of complex rituals, many of which are known to and may only be performed by the priests as the ritual specialists¹. Not all of these rituals display exclusively Buddhistic features, and Hindu origins can easily be recognized in many of them. This is true of most of the so-called *samskāras*, the life-cycle rites, which mark in similar fashion the stages of Buddhist and Hindu Newar life.

In the first decades of this century a few Newars had an encounter in India with some monks of the Theravāda tradition and had themselves ordained as monks in this same tradition. They brought Theravāda Buddhism back to Nepal. Since then, and especially since the end of the Rana period, a steadily growing religious movement has emerged². The

1. For a description of traditional Newar Buddhism see the literature cited in note 1 of H. Bechert and J.-U. Hartmann, *Observations on the Reform of Buddhism in Nepal*, Journal of the Nepal Research Centre 8 (1988), pp. 1-30.

2. For the history of the Theravāda movement in Nepal see Bechert/Hartmann, *op. cit.*, and the literature cited in notes 7 to 20 and note 31 thereof; two additional biographical

Theravāda movement remains with few exceptions restricted to the Buddhist Newars, and thus its followers in the first place have been compelled to define their relationship to traditional Newar society and to traditional Newar Buddhism.

Now there are basically two ways in which a new religious movement can gain ground in a religiously related territory. One possibility is to blend teachings and ideas from both religious systems in order to arrive at a synthesis; the other is to replace the traditional with an innovation. The first possibility, a blending such as Heinz Bechert has observed among the Theravādins in Java and called an intra-Buddhistic syncretism³, is not to be found among the Theravādins in Nepal. Here, in contrast, the Theravāda movement is marked by a decidedly uncompromising rejection of traditional Buddhism, and its proponents emphasize the importance of recognizing the ideological differences.

This statement must, however, be qualified by the remark that such categorical thinking is to be found almost exclusively among the monastics, and whenever the Theravādins are mentioned here it is the monks and the nuns⁴ who are meant. The position of most lay followers is a good deal less clear cut, for they remain part of the caste system, and this social structure has an immediate religious context, namely the context of traditional Newar Buddhism. Social order determines religious order and *vice versa*, so that the higher one's caste, the more difficult it is to turn exclusively to this new form of Buddhism. In the case of lay followers this situation usually leads to a combining of the two forms: they continue to visit the traditional cult centres and fulfill their obligations by having the necessary rituals performed at the appropriate time. Aside from this they go, when they feel the need, to the monks and

reports have appeared more recently: Chavilāla Paudela, Eka [brāhmaṇa] bhikṣuko jīvanī, Kathmandu 1986 (Ānandaḥaṭṭi Vihāra Guṭhī, No. 49), and Śākyānanda, Mero jīvana yātrā, Kathmandu 1987 (Ānandaḥaṭṭi Vihāra Guṭhī, No. 54).

3. Heinz Bechert, *The Buddhayāna of Indonesia: A Syncretistic Form of Theravāda*, Journal of the Pali Text Society 9 (1981), pp. 14f.

4. The designation "nun" is, strictly speaking, not appropriate, because they are no *bhikkhunis*, but simply so-called *dasasīla-upāsikās* (cf. Bechert/Hartmann, *op. cit.*, section 8). Since their self-interpretation — they call themselves "nuns" in English-language publications, cf. e.g. the self-portrait of the Dharmakīrti Vihāra: *Dharmakīrti in a Nutshell*, (Kathmandu) 1986 — and life-style can best be expressed in English by the word "nun", we employ this term.

nuns of the Theravāda movement. Hence it is quite common for lay women before or after a ceremony at the Dharmakīrti Vihāra, one of the Theravāda centres in Kathmandu, to honour the shrines of the Kāṭheśimbhū-Stūpa, which is just in front of the Vihāra. Monks and nuns are, however, scarcely to be seen revering it. Through their ordination the monastics have, at least theoretically, renounced the world and have thus freed themselves from all family ties. They alone can afford to ignore social obligations.

Since the Theravādins reject traditional Buddhism, there is no possibility of a synthesis and thus no possibility of a syncretism of whatever kind. The attitude of the Theravādins does, however, favour something else, namely an attempt at substitution. The Theravādins do not conceal the fact that they intend to propagate their form of Buddhism, which they regard as the only correct one; this more or less amounts to the tacit aim of pushing aside traditional Buddhism with its many phenomena which are foreign to Theravāda Buddhism and thus felt to be unbuddhistic. This seems, in view of the specific circumstances of Newar society, to be possible only if substitute forms are provided for at least some of the rituals of traditional Buddhism. Theravāda, which in comparison to other branches of Buddhism employs relatively few rituals, has at its disposal three forms of religious practice which are familiar in all Theravāda countries. This is an important point since monasteries in all three currently authoritative Theravāda countries, namely Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand, serve as training centres for members of the Nepalese Sangha. As a result the image of this Sangha is forced to do justice to the influences of all three countries.

The three kinds of ritual performed by the Theravādins in Nepal are the Buddhapūjā, the Paritta, and various forms of temporary ordination. Because the first two rituals deserve a more detailed description than is possible here, they will be mentioned only briefly. The Buddhapūjā normally takes place in the Theravāda temples and monasteries in the morning. It includes the recitation of a few basic prayers starting with taking refuge. Monastics and lay followers recite in unison in Pali, the holy language of Theravāda Buddhism. This represents an important deviation from traditional Buddhism, where prayers are recited by the priest alone. In some Vihāras also prayers in Newari are added⁵. The prayers

5. There are numerous textbooks, for example Lakṣmīherā Sthāpita (ed.), *Triratna vandānā va sutra pucaḥ*, Kathmandu N.S. 1100 (1980).

are followed by a sermon, another fundamental difference from traditional Buddhism. The *pūjā* is normally concluded by an offering ceremony (*dāna*), in which each monk and each nun is presented with at least a small bowl of uncooked rice and some money.

The lay follower comes to the temple for the Buddhapūjā; for the Paritta (Pali) or Paritrāṇa (Sanskrit) he usually invites the monastics to his home. There the monks or nuns recite the Paritta, a specific group of canonical texts, whose recitation is thought to effect particularly great blessings⁶. The reason for the invitation can be a family matter such as a birth, an illness, or a death, or it can be a purely secular matter such as the opening of a shop. In Nepal the religious responsibility for all these matters used to be borne exclusively by the Vajrācāryas, the priests of traditional Buddhism, and hence it is easy to understand why the spread of Theravāda unavoidably led to a contrast between the Theravāda monastics and the Vajrācāryas. That competition also exists on the economic plane becomes evident when one learns that the reasons for inviting the Theravādins instead of the Vajrācāryas are not always based on corresponding religious leanings; one even hears the argument that the Theravādins are simply cheaper.

I mentioned temporary ordination, i.e. the status of monastic for a limited period, as the third alternative ritual offered by the Theravādins. Being ordained as novice (*sāmaṇera*) or monk (*bhikkhu*) for a limited time, at the end of which the robe is put aside, is a common practice in all of the Theravāda countries except Sri Lanka⁷. The same procedure lies at the core of one of the rituals of traditional Buddhism, namely the *bare chuyegu* initiation of the Vajrācāryas and the Śākyas⁸. Every male member of the highest Buddhist caste must undergo this form of *cūḍākarma*

6. Meanwhile various Nepalese editions have become available, for example Buddhagoṣa (ed.), *Paritrāṇa (artha va nidāna sahita)*, Patan 1983, and Sudarśana (ed.), *Mahāparitrāṇa (Nepāla bhāṣāy artha sahita)*, Kathmandu 1982.

7. Recently attempts have been made to introduce temporary ordination in Sri Lanka as well, cf. Richard Gombrich, *Temporary Ordination in Sri Lanka*, Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies 7.2 (1984), pp. 41-65; this article includes observations on the connection between temporary ordination and *rite de passage* in Burma (pp. 42f.).

8. Cf. John K. Locke, *Newar Buddhist Initiation Rites*, Contributions to Nepalese Studies 2.2 (1975), pp. 1-23, for a description of this ritual.

in order to be admitted to the Sangha of his Vihāra and thus obtain his caste status. In the course of this initiation a more or less symbolic four-day *pravrajyā* takes place, i.e. admission to the status of monastic for the duration of four days, at the end of which the candidates return the insignia of their monastic status and resume the status of laity.

Hence the news that the Nepalese Theravāda monks had performed several group temporary ordinations, one of them exclusively for Śākyas, seemed to indicate the beginning substitution of Theravāda ordination for the initiation of traditional Buddhism and to demonstrate the increasing Theravāda influence. This came about, not surprisingly, in the caste which regards itself as *the* Buddhistic caste and is so far the caste from which the largest number of Theravāda monastics comes.

Nonetheless I never managed to meet a Śākya who had received temporary ordination instead of the *bare chuyegu*, and recently a list was published of the participants in that group ordination which had been exclusively for Śākyas⁹. The names were ordered according to age, and it turned out that the youngest participants were twenty years old, so that they had very likely received the *bare chuyegu* initiation long ago. The *bare chuyegu* is sometimes performed for individuals and sometimes, most probably for financial reasons, every few years for groups whose youngest members can be one or two years old, whereas the eldest can be around eighteen¹⁰. Since confirmation of the caste status is one of the essential functions of this initiation, it is on closer examination highly improbable that *bare chuyegu* and temporary ordination, in spite of their common origin, might become interchangeable. If someone is unable to participate in the initiation, he and, even worse, his children lose their high caste status, for only the sons of the initiated may themselves be initiated.

In all of those cases in which it had at first seemed that temporary ordination had been performed instead of *bare chuyegu* closer questioning revealed that *bare chuyegu* had not been possible because the parents belonged to different castes, i.e. because only one of them was a Śākya. For the male offspring of the remaining castes and for those of mixed

9. The list appears in R.B. Bandya, *Samgha mahānayaka bhadanta Prajñānanda mahāsthavira yā jīvanī*, Patan 1986, pp. 436-41.

10. As observed at an initiation of Buddhācāryas at Svayambhunath in March, 1986.

marriages involving a Śākya or Vajrācārya and a member of some other caste the *kaytā pūjā*, i.e. the “loincloth *pūjā*”, is performed¹¹. This ceremony corresponds closely to the Hindu *vratibandha*; it is a one-day ritual which begins at home, includes a visit to the local Ganesh temple, and ends with a feast.

The Theravādins offer the alternative of ordaining a boy for seven days as a novice (*sāmaṇera*) in one of their Vihāras. Since the *kaytā pūjā* is not as important for the confirmation of caste status as is the *bare chuyegu*, so that doing without it does not have the same social consequences, it is not surprising that it has been replaced by temporary ordination in several cases. Nonetheless there can hardly have been more than two or three dozen of them so far although the frequency is increasing. The first cases I was told of happened about ten years ago, and it should be noted that several cases involved sons of mixed marriages who were excluded from the *bare chuyegu*.

The corresponding life-cycle rite for girls is a completely different matter: one often finds it replaced by temporary ordination these days. This is the *bārhāy tayegu* initiation¹², which only in Nepal has been elevated to a *saṃskāra* and corresponds to the *kaytā pūjā* or the *pravrajyā* for boys.

The *bārhāy tayegu* ritual can be summarized as follows: after the *ihī*

11. For a description of this initiation cf. G. Toffin, *Société et Religion chez les Néwar du Népal*, Paris 1984, pp. 134-140.

12. Descriptions of this ritual can be found in Michael Allen, *Girls' Pre-Puberty Rites Amongst the Newars of Kathmandu Valley*, Women in India and Nepal, ed. by M. Allen and S.N. Mukherjee, Canberra 1982 (Monographs on South Asia No. 8), pp. 192-195, G. Toffin, *op. cit.*, pp. 140f. and Siegfried Lienhard, *Dreimal Unreinheit: Riten und Gebräuche der Newars bei Geburt, Menstruation und Tod*, Nepalica 2, ed. by Bernhard Kölver and S. Lienhard, Sankt Augustin 1986, pp. 137-143. Lienhard prefers the spelling *bārhāy*, since he connects the word with Nepālī *bāhra*, Hindi *bārhā*, “twelve”, and takes it to mean “(ein Mädchen) in die 12 (Tage dauernde Pudertätsquarantäne) setzen” (p. 138). David N. Gellner, in contrast, uses the spelling *bārhā* and, taking the word to be derived from *bādhā*, he translates it as “placing a barrier” (*Language, Caste, Religion and Territory. Newar Identity Ancient and Modern*, European Journal of Sociology 27 (1986), p. 136). Usually the terminology of Newar rituals is based on Sanskrit words; hence this is also to be expected in the present case. On the other hand it is difficult to find a linguistic connection between *bārhā* and *vādhā*, since in Nevārī *d* can be replaced by *r* or *ṛ*, whereas *dh* cannot be replaced by *rh* (cf. Lienhard, *op. cit.*, p. 138). The form *vādhā* is however to be found in indigenous texts, cf. Ratnakāṣī Bajrācārya, *Yeṃ deyā bauddhā pūjā kriyā yā halamjvalaṃ*, Kathmandu 1980, p. 19 (this was brought to my attention in a letter from David Gellner).

ritual, i.e. after the symbolic marriage with the Bel fruit¹³, each girl (usually between the ages of five and twelve years or at the menarche at the latest) must undergo the *bārhāy tayegu* initiation. Often several girls participate, and the initiation is held at the home of one of them. The girls must spend twelve days in a darkened room, and it is essential to the success of the ritual that they are seen neither by a man nor by the sun during this period. For the first three days, which are regarded as critical, the girls are not allowed to wash themselves. On the morning of the twelfth day a ceremonial purification takes place, and the girls are then led outdoors. In a prescribed manner they are first exposed to the view of the sun, upon which they honour the sun god with a *pūjā* which contains elements of a marriage ceremony. The usual feast concludes the ritual.

As an alternative to this the Theravādins offer the *ṛṣiṇī-pravrajyā*, a temporary ordination for women whose name means “going forth into the homeless state as ascetic”. This ordination has, of course, no foundation in the Vinaya, but the attempt is made to legitimize it by involving post-canonical sources. In this context the work *Anāgatavaṃsa* was mentioned which, however, contains no reference whatsoever to the *ṛṣiṇī-pravrajyā*. This form of ordination has evolved in comparatively recent times in Burma, where it seems to be particularly popular among women who participate in meditation courses.

The Newar nun Dhammavati, surely one of the best known and most influential female Theravādins in Nepal, brought this tradition to Kathmandu from Burma, where she had been trained in a convent near Moulmein. Twenty-one years ago the first two Nepalese women were ordained according to this rite. Apparently it had from the very beginning been intended to replace the *bārhāy tayegu* rite. Hence the *ṛṣiṇī-pravrajyā* was also planned to last the twelve days that a girl spends in the confinement of *bārhāy tayegu*. This time interval is, of course, not present in the Burmese model.

The form of the ordination is very simple. Usually the girl comes to the Vihāra on the evening of the first day and asks to be ordained. First she is given a sort of robe which consists of three pieces, a skirt-like garment (*luṅgi*), a blouse (*blāuja*, an English loan-word), and a kind of

13. A description is to be found in M. Allen, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-192, and in G. Toffin, *op. cit.*, pp. 401-405.

scarf (*gā*). These names are by no means specific, and the only difference between these garments and ordinary clothing is their uniform dark red colour. The girl dons the robe and recites to the ordaining nun the *aṣṭa śīla*, i.e. the eight vows, which bind her for the twelve days. These *aṣṭa śīla* include the five vows usual for lay followers and three additional vows¹⁴ which, however, can also be made on various other occasions and are thus not specific to the *ṛṣiṇī* ordination. Then the girl receives an ordination name, and the ceremony is already over. In contrast to all canonical forms of ordination, this one does not require cutting off the girl's hair. Instead the hair is bound up in the familiar knot of the ascetic, as the name of this kind of ordination already implies. The fact that the girl's appearance is unchanged when she returns to normal life also seems to have contributed to the acceptance of this form of ordination.

For eleven days following the ordination the girl remains at the Vihāra and follows a daily schedule which consists chiefly of participation in religious activities of the Vihāra community and the performance of certain tasks, e.g. the cleaning of the shrine room. The girl receives moreover a sort of religious instruction in the course of which she tries, according to age and ability, to commit to memory as much as possible of an introductory textbook¹⁵. One of the nuns is assigned the duties of teacher and explains the text verbally. An important rule of the *bārhāy tayegu*, the rule that forbids to be seen by a man, does not apply to the *ṛṣiṇī* ordination at all. The only common features seem to be the twelve days' duration and the element of confinement since the *ṛṣiṇī* is confined to the Vihāra within which the girls may, however, move about freely. In recent times, however, another development seems to be emerging. It happens increasingly often that the girls spend only seven days at the Vihāra, probably in analogy to the temporary ordination of the boys, and thus the element of the twelve days' impurity vanishes. On the last day, usually in the evening, the mother brings her daughter's ordinary clothing to the Vihāra. The girl changes her clothes and makes the

14. (1) Not to kill, (2) not to steal, (3) not to commit adultery, (4) not to lie, (5) not to use intoxicants, (6) not to eat after midday, (7) not to indulge in dancing, music or other amusements as well as not to use perfume, cosmetics, jewelry and the like, (8) not to sleep in high and luxurious beds.

15. For example Dhammavati Anāgārikā, *Triratna-guṇa smarāṇa*, ed. by Dharmakīrti Baudhdha Adhyayana Goṣṭhī, Kathmandu B.S. 2516 (1971).

pañcaśīla, i.e. the five vows of the lay follower, to the nun who served as teacher; this concludes the time as *ṛṣiṇī*.

Many girls have received this ordination. At first practised only in the strongly Burma-oriented Dharmakīrti Vihāra, it is now an established part of the religious life in other Theravāda Vihāras as well. The *ṛṣiṇī-pravrajyā*, like the *bārhāy tayegu*, is usually performed during the winter months. In the Dharmakīrti Vihāra alone this ordination has meanwhile been performed over five hundred times. On an absolute scale this figure is not particularly large, but compared to the relatively limited number of Theravāda lay followers and in view of the resistance offered by the priests of traditional Buddhism it is not inconsiderable.

The *ṛṣiṇī* ordination was conceived with the aim of replacing a ritual of traditional Buddhism, thus smoothing its followers' path to the Theravādins. By offering this life-cycle rite just as by reciting the Paritta, which was briefly mentioned above, the Theravāda monks and nuns take on a function which was heretofore reserved exclusively for the priests of traditional Buddhism. This has evoked hefty criticism, particularly among the Vajrācāryas, who saw their material interests jeopardized and recognized the threat which, in a sense, was growing up within their own ranks. This criticism made it necessary for the Theravādins in turn to justify their innovations as convincingly as possible, and the rationalistic argumentation employed is typical for "modernistic" Buddhist movements such as Theravāda Buddhism of Nepal¹⁶. The argumentation which justifies the replacement of the *bārhāy tayegu* may serve as an example:

1. During the twelve days of the *bārhāy tayegu* the girls live in unpleasant circumstances. Since the room is darkened, the ventilation is bad; because they are not permitted to be seen by men, the girls receive no medical treatment in case of illness; even the toilet must be in the same room. These arguments represent, so to speak, the social or humanitarian aspect.
2. During the *bārhāy tayegu* a ritual marriage to a Hindu deity takes place, namely to Sūrya¹⁷, which cannot be reconciled with the Buddhist religion. This is the religious aspect.
3. At the end of the *bārhāy tayegu* the girl's parents must hold a large feast; this is unavoidable and represents in many cases a great financial burden. This is the material aspect, a regular part of the Theravāda critique of the Buddhism of the Vajrācāryas.

16. Cf. Bechert/Hartmann (note 1), section 7.

17. Cf. M. Allen (note 12), p. 194.

The Theravādins emphasize their low-cost policy: there is a nominal fee of only ten Rupees a day for room and board during the time a girl spends as *ṛṣiṇī* at the Dharmakīrti Vihāra. The parents also supply the *ṛṣiṇī* robe, and at the end of the twelve days they can make a donation to the Vihāra in an amount determined by their own judgement.

The polemics of the Vajrācāryas includes the criticism of the system of donations on which the Theravādins ultimately depend. After the meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists (W.F.B.) in Kathmandu, in the winter of 1986-7 a group of Vajrācāryas circulated a leaflet in response to an open letter from the Theravāda monk Aśvaghoṣa. In his letter Aśvaghoṣa had discussed the outcome of the W.F.B. conference and implied that the foreign delegates had asserted that the Vajrācāryas were still superstitious¹⁸. In the leaflet the Theravādins are first of all accused of dedicating conspicuous Buddha statues in their Vihāras in order to encourage donations even though they are otherwise opposed to the revering of cult images. Then comes the assertion that monks like Aśvaghoṣa are seven times as superstitious as the Vajrācāryas; this is why the *daśakarma* rituals, i.e. the life-cycle rites, which really ought to be performed by the Vajrācāryas, are carried out by the monks in their Vihāras these days.

This reproach is formulated so generally that it cannot apply to the current situation, for the only *saṃskāras* to which it applies are the *bārhāy tayegu* ritual and, to a far lesser degree, the *kaytā pūjā*. The reproach is, nonetheless, motivated by a justified fear. It has to be reckoned with that the Theravādins will try to increase their following by offering advantageous alternatives to the rituals of traditional Buddhism. They have, for example, already compiled their own lists of *saṃskāras*¹⁹, and lay followers have recently suggested to the nun Dhammavati that the wedding ceremony (*vivāha*) might be replaced by a Theravāda rite patterned after the successful *ṛṣiṇī* ordination. This would make it possible to reduce the high costs of the celebration.

Precisely the reverse seems to be happening in connection with one of the so far successfully substituted forms. The *kaytā pūjā* ends with an

obligatory feast (*bhavya* from Skt. *bhojana*), and these days one observes the tendency to keep the feast even when the *kaytā pūjā* is replaced by temporary ordination, chiefly in order to reconcile the relatives with the innovation. This, however, eliminates one of the principal arguments, namely expense, which the Theravādins usually employ successfully against the rituals of traditional Buddhism.

Attempts at replacing the initiations of traditional Buddhism have so far proved favourable to the growth of the Theravāda movement, and one cannot even exclude the possibility that a canonically correct ordination of monks may once again replace the symbolic ordination which is part of the *bare chuyegu*. If the great popularity of the Paritta recitation is also taken into account, it is not surprising that even among the followers voices can already be heard — some jeering, some concerned — calling the monks and nuns of the Theravāda movement the “new Vajrācāryas”. The tactics which evoke such comments are one of the reasons for the current success and, of course, simultaneously a potential danger; their effect on the further development of the Nepalese Theravāda Buddhism cannot yet be predicted.

18. *andhaviśvāsī*; see *Ināpa*, vol. 4, No. 46 (10.12.1986), p. 4.

19. Aśvaghoṣa, *Bauddha saṃskāra*, Banepā 1979, lists nine *saṃskāras*; Cunda, *Bauddha paddhati*, Butval B.S. 2523 (1979), lists ten, and it is surely no coincidence that he tries to achieve the traditional number ten.