BOOK REVIEW


Buddhism in Nepal has traditionally been of two forms: First, Tibetan Buddhism, mainly of the Nyingma tradition, found among the ethnically Tibetan peoples along the northern border plus the Tamangs and secondly, the Buddhism of the Newar people of the Kathmandu Valley. This is also Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism but with direct links to the ancient Indian tradition. In fact, it has been called, the “only surviving community of Indian Buddhism”.

This book recounts the story of a modern development in Nepal: the growth of a Theravada Movement in Twentieth century Nepal. This movement traces its origins back to the 1930s but has grown considerably since the overthrow of the Rana government in 1951. As Nepal has developed, education has spread and the people of Nepal have tried to find their place in the contemporary world, this movement has gained momentum and legitimacy. It is an unusual book in that it was written by two different people with different backgrounds: David Gellner, long recognised as an expert on the traditional Buddhism of the Newar community of the Valley and Sarah Levine, an Associate in Sanskrit and Indian Studies at Harvard University, whose main interest has been female asceticism. It has been truly a collaborative effort, not just some chapters written by one and others by the other. The authors say in the introduction that they feel the book is better for this collaboration. They are right.

Chapter One traces the origins of what has been called “Modernist Buddhism” which originated in Sri Lanka through the work of Dharmapala who in turn had been influenced by a lecture given in Colombo in 1880 by Colonel Olcott. Yet, there was a difference in their approaches: Olcott’s thrust was anti-Christian whereas Dharmapala’s thrust was anti-Hindu. It was an attempt to clearly mark Buddhism off as distinct from Hinduism. This was not the view of ancient India where Buddhism was always seen as a spiritual path that had its origins in the culture of India and which was one of many spiritual paths that grew up within the fold of the cultural phenomenon which was “Hinduism”. This was not the view of the people of the Newar community of the Valley who never made such a clear distinction but considered themselves as sharers of a common culture based on the Newari language and the round of festivals, Hindu and Buddhist, in which all took part. There were among them followers of the way of Shiva (saiva

Contributions to Nepalese Studies, Vol. 33, No. 1 (January 2006), 149-152
Copyright © 2006 CNAS/TU
eventual exile from Nepal. The chapter then recounts the difficulties that both the monks and nuns or “homeless ones”. This ordained by a truly charismatic Burmese monk called Chandramani who embraced the new Buddhism, taking the name of Dharmaditya Man Vaidya, a Sakya from Chikan Bahi in Lalitpur who was the first to encounter the new Buddhism. Chandramani was unable to ordain them as the Theravada tradition held that the order of nuns had never been established. When a new movement came to Kushinagara and requested ordination, Chandramani was able to ordain them as the Theravada tradition held that the order of nuns had become extinct. He did, however, give them the ten precepts and called them nuns. This was the origin of the so-called nuns. The chapter then recounts the difficulties that both the monks and nuns encountered as they tried to live as monks and nuns in a Buddhist society that was not used to such people during the strict Rana regime resulting in their eventual exile from Nepal.

Chapters Three through Eight are based on the detailed ethnographic material collected by LeVine over several years of research and detail the growth and development of this movement after the overthrow of the Ranas. This is where the book really comes alive with the stories of the men and women who have sponsored this movement and have faced numerous trials and difficulties. It is also the story of how this movement has fit into the traditional Newar Society and how it has appealed to the increasingly educated population of the Valley, providing them with the means to carry on their traditions in a way that makes sense to them in a modern context. The following chapters trace the creation of a tradition (Chapter Three), the development of the Nuns’ Order under the charismatic Dhummawati (Chapter Four), the changes among the Buddhist laity (Chapter Five), the question of educating the monks (Chapter Six), the status of the nuns and the controversy over Bhikkuni Ordination (Chapter Seven), and finally the changes brought about by increased interest in Buddhist Meditation and Social Activism (Chapter Eight).

Chapter Nine expands the scope of the book beyond the Newar community to look at other Buddhist Revival Movements among the so-called Tibetan Mahayana community and compares this to what has happened in the Newar community. This chapter ends with a note on the future of traditional Newar Buddhism. The authors note a comment by Todd Lewis in 2000 that the Newars could follow the example of the exiled Tibetans who have succeeded in making their local tradition a global tradition. This suggestion meets with a difficulty that I have often pointed out to those who want to revive the Mahayana-Vajrayana tradition of the Valley. This tradition cannot be revived without scholars of the Mahayana-Vajrayana tradition and men and women who actually and seriously practice the tantric yoga. Though Buddhism among the ordinary Tibetans may have been mostly ritual Buddhism of which the ordinary people understood little, there were always eminent scholars and true practitioners among the monks. If one wanted to learn he or she could find someone who could teach with authority. This is generally lacking in the Newar community today. The authors point out another difficulty. Lewis does not mention the place of women in the tradition. In the tradition women cannot be ritual specialists or teachers. From the modern female perspective this is a great hurdle. When one places this fact within the context of a larger problem, i.e. that all non-Vajracaryas are excluded from the highest teachings and from tantric initiation, one wonders what the future holds when more and more educated Vajracaryas take to other occupations and the community is left with the least educated to carry on the tradition and there are no openings for those of other groups who show the aptitude and interest in carrying on the tradition.

The final chapter is a conclusion which looks toward the future looking at the status of the monks, the nuns and the lay people and the difficulties that
they all face. This is an excellent chapter which does not lend itself to facile summaries. It should be studied and pondered, not just in the context of Newar Buddhism but in the larger context of what is happening to all religious and cultural communities in Nepal. In conclusion the book is an excellent investment for anyone who wants to understand what is going on in Nepal today and what the future might hold not only for the Newar community but for all the peoples of Nepal.

The book concludes with two appendices: one, short biographical notes on the prominent personalities in the Theravada Movement and the second a complete list of the Theravada Viharas in Nepal. There is also a glossary of technical terms.

- John K. Locke

Notes to Contributors

The hard copy as well as soft copy of manuscripts in Times New Roman font size of 12 should be submitted. The hard copy should be on A4 paper with a 4 cm margin on all four sides. The first page of the manuscript should have only, the title, authors’ name, the authors’ affiliation, and any necessary footnotes. Mailing and e-mail address should be included. The text should refer to notes numbered consecutively throughout the article, and bibliographical references should be cited in the text by the author’s last name, date of publication and page number, e.g., (Tiwari 2001: 108) or if the author’s name is mentioned in the text, by the date and page reference only, (1965:108). Entries in the references should be in alphabetical and chronological order of authors. They should include the details in the following order: Name of the author(s) - surname first, date, title, name of the periodical, volume number (Arabic numerals to be used throughout), pagination (for article in periodicals and books with several authors), place of publication (and name of the publisher for a book). Examples of reference format are as follows:


Spelling should follow that of the Oxford English Dictionary. Authors are responsible for consistency in spelling. Words in other languages other than English should be in italics.

Tables should be numbered with arabic numerals, have a brief title, and be referred to in the text. A copy of the journal should be consulted to see how tables are set up. Footnotes in tables should be designated by symbols or superscript small italic letters. Descriptive material not designated by a footnote may be placed under a table as a Note.

Each figure, drawing or photograph should fit into the area of 11 x 16 cm maximum. Captions should be in italics.