

## CHAPTER FIVE

# HIMALAYAN BUDDHISM

## Traditions among and other Tibeto-Burman peoples



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### INTRODUCTION

**F**ound across the periphery of both the North Indian and Tibetan cultural regions, Buddhist traditions across the Himalayas have been shaped by their distinct geographical locations. Peoples sharing a common language, kinship ties, and Buddhist cultural traditions have come to occupy their own ethnographic niches across this extraordinary mountainous region, with their subsistence a unique combination of fixed crop agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade. Nowhere in the Buddhist world is it more evident that celibate monastic Buddhism is a luxury for societies: in the Himalayan frontier zone, many communities adopted Buddhism, but in a more minimalist form, with small monastery-temples and a householder *Samgha* (Buddhist community).

Most Himalayan Buddhists speak dialects of central Tibetan or “Tibeto-Burman” languages, the latter a linguistic designation of limited utility; it indicates their being speakers of non-Indo-European languages whose native tongue is also unintelligible to central Tibetan speakers.

The known Buddhist groups to be discussed here – in Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh, as well as those in modern Nepal and Bhutan – share many common traits as well as exceptional differences. Much remains unknown, regarding both group origins and contemporary practices; scholarship has been scant and most of the studies completed in the past forty years have become, by 2015, outdated as many changes have altered the lives of individuals and entire communities.

Like the Himalayan environment across this 1,500-mile chain, where the landforms include a rich variety of ecological niches, so too have the various Himalayan peoples adopted Buddhism according to the logic of their own geographic and socio-cultural circumstances. One variable of profound significance is how each Buddhist community in the region was tied to the region’s political states. Today, being part of India, China, Pakistan, or Nepal causes each group to comply with different laws regarding land tenure and taxation and requires it to fit into these very different national cultures. Only one Himalayan state, Bhutan, has Buddhism as its state religion; in all the others, Himalayan Buddhists exist as minorities in their respective greater polities.

## ANCIENT HISTORY

Although the Himalayas could have been seen on a clear day from some places in the ancient region of Kapilavastu, the Buddha’s home for his first twenty-nine years, there is no evidence in the early canonical records of Śākyamuni Buddha visiting, or of an early Saṃgha being established, in the Himalayan middle hills or beyond. What is found in the popular stories of the early canons is an awareness of Mount Kailash and Lake Manosarowar as holy places, and of “snow mountains” or “Himavat” as forested regions for ascetic retreat, as well as venues where gods and other spirits dwell. This should not be surprising: since the broad alluvial Gangetic plain was still only dotted by early cities and villages, and since most ancient agricultural lands were surrounded by vast tracts of jungle, humans could find new lands to clear nearby and so had no compelling reason to settle in the mountains where the soils were less fertile, easily arable land was rare, and subsistence was much harder. (For this reason, isolated hunter-gatherer groups existed in the mid-montane Himalayas then and were still found in isolated regions there until the last decade.)

The earliest groups to affect the region by the turn of the Common Era were Indic peoples who pioneered trade and the expansion of the Gangetic states; this occurred first, in all likelihood, in relation to pilgrimage routes to sacred locations close to the Himalayan peaks, holy lakes, or river confluences (*tīrtha*). These incursions drew areas of the region under the influence of itinerant ascetics, both brahmans and heterodox holy men; by this time, it seems certain that individual Buddhists followed these expanding religious networks that began to link the plains to the mountains. Among the inscriptions set up by the great king Aśoka (ruled 273–232 BCE), there are several among the dozens of places mentioned where he sent “emissaries of Dharma” that were likely in the northwest Himalayas.

As the first large empires formed in the centuries after the Buddha, the Himalayas came to be identified as a border, or frontier zone (*pratyanta*). It is likely that the Buddhist Saṃgha had by then entered this region. One archeological discovery that suggests this was at the important *stūpa* complex at Sanchi. Found there was a relic container of a monk named Majjhima that on its outside had the following words inscribed: “relics of the great teacher of Himalayan people.” Exactly what place or places were meant by the “Himavat” in this record, however, remains undetermined.

The Pāli *Jātakas* (stories of the Buddha’s past births) that were codified by the turn of the common era often refer to the region; and then a few centuries later, in Sanskrit Buddhist literature there are accounts of saint-missionary figures such as Padmasambhava (ca. seventh–eighth centuries) going into the mountainous regions to spread the Dharma. This is a pattern of influences from the southern plains that would continue for the next 500 years, until the extinction of the tradition across the Gangetic plains after 1200 CE.

What is most certain historically is that early Buddhist monks and monasteries, following the missionary ethos of the Buddha, spread out initially across the trade routes. The great northern route, the *Uttarapatha*, linked the Gangetic plain westward to the Indus watershed and beyond. This route established the monastic migration corridors in antiquity; where the *Uttarapatha* met trade routes going northward toward Central Asia, they facilitated the faith’s spread to highland Gandhara and Kashmir, a process likely intensified under Aśoka that grew in significance after 100 BCE.

The introduction of Buddhism into other regions in the Himalayas likely followed the same pattern as in the Gangetic plain and Kashmir. Merchants and political figures built the first modest monasteries in emerging settlements and along trade routes, seeking legitimation,

ritual protections, and merit for themselves on earth and in the afterlife; as these towns grew, so did their Buddhist institutions.

## KASHMIR VALLEY

The great expanse of the fertile Kashmir Valley, and its location as a prosperous entrepot on a southern branch from the great trans-Eurasian silk/horse route, enabled this region to eventually become the second key center of early Indic Buddhism. It was so important that, according to a succession of accounts from Chinese pilgrims from the fifth to the seventh centuries, it was a land dotted with over a hundred impressive monasteries and home to some of the greatest Indian Buddhist monk-scholars and sages of subsequent centuries. Ideas and Buddhist institutions seem to have evolved creatively in this region. On the latter, we have the remarkable history of Kashmir by the writer Kalhana (ca. twelfth century). This work, called *River of Kings* (*Rājataranginī*), reports that in its later stages the Buddhist Saṃgha included both “celibate” and “married” members, a development of great interest in light of the Buddha’s injunctions that monks refrain from sex and entanglements with women, but the exact nature of which remains still unclear. What is certain is that it was Kashmiri Buddhists who were important in spreading Buddhist culture up into Central Asia, China, and the Tibetan plateau. Indeed, the Kashmir–Gandhara region is recalled by later Tibetan Buddhist historians as the place of origin for Mahāyāna and later Vajrayāna traditions (see the chapter by Lang in this volume).

Although Buddhism endured in the Vale of Kashmir until around 1300, it slowly declined in competition with Muslim missionaries and a succession of increasingly intolerant rulers. Today, very little of the tradition’s material culture survives to suggest its former magnificence or importance in the history of Indic Buddhism.

## KATHMANDU VALLEY

By contrast, the far smaller but also richly fertile Kathmandu Valley has remained an oasis of an indigenous Buddhist tradition until the present day, with connections to the Gangetic plain dating back almost 2,000 years. The earliest extant epigraphic records of this valley begin in the fifth century, and stray image finds suggest the Buddhist presence likely began there centuries earlier, given its proximity to Magadha and the Buddhist holy places. (Lumbini is 120 miles distant; Bodh Gaya, 200 miles.)

In 464 CE, the first dated Sanskrit inscriptions indicate donations by householders and kings of a ruling dynasty who referred to themselves by the name Licchavi. Indicating the same pattern of diversity found up until today, records of Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries are found there, a harmonious relationship that is confirmed by Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang’s 玄奘 (596–664) journal covering the period 629–45 CE.

The Licchavi inscriptions and the earliest known art reveal connections between the Nepal Valley and the traditions of monastic art that originated on the Gangetic plain from the early Buddhist centuries, as well as patronage by kings and merchants, and the existence of an order of nuns. Devotees of Śiva, Viṣṇu, and other Hindu gods are also well-represented, especially in royal circles.

The indigenous people of the Kathmandu Valley, the Tibeto-Burman language-speaking Newars, supported the work of resident Buddhist scholars, ritualists, and leaders in the Saṃgha who continued to receive, preserve, and adapt Indic Buddhist traditions to local

life. From 900 CE onward, Kathmandu Valley Buddhist pandits copied Sanskrit manuscripts, and Newar Buddhist artisans were in subsequent centuries called upon to build most of the major temples, monasteries, and *stūpas* (reliquary monuments) across Tibet. Throughout this era, Tibetan Buddhist saints and scholars also traveled to this Valley to build monasteries, erect and restore its great *stūpas*, give teachings, and collect Sanskrit texts, an exchange that, although still little studied, has shaped the development of both Newar and Tibetan Buddhist traditions up to the present day.

## HIMACHAL PRADESH

The existence of Buddhism now located primarily in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh (H.P.) dates back over 2,000 years, as numismatic evidence has established the presence of Buddhism at the turn of the Common Era in the lower hills of the upper Beas River watershed. In the highlands of H.P., Buddhist monasticism is attested at least 1,000 years ago, when monasteries associated with the southern Tibetan kingdom of Guge were built. Legends recount the presence of the “Second Buddha” Padmasambhava and other tantric adepts (*siddha*) in this region; historical sources assert that the translator-missionary Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po, 958–1055) built 108 monasteries in the Lahul, Kinnaur, and Spiti valleys, now in modern H.P. A few survive that were built in this era, including the most impressive, Tabo (Ta pho chos skor) and the Lalung Gumpa (Lha lung dgon pa).

No records exist regarding the premodern establishment of Buddhism outside of the two important valleys and aside from the few attested sites in the region between them. Undoubtedly, many other peoples in small settlements along the early trade and pilgrimage routes also converted to Buddhism as a result of the work of monks, saints, and local leaders. What is clear from its origins in the rural regions is that the first, or the “ancient,” school or Nyingmapa (rNying ma) became established then among the hill peoples, and it is still the most widespread tradition, found in small communities across the Himalayan region until today.

## HIMALAYAN BUDDHISM AFTER 1000

After the Second Introduction of Buddhism into Tibet (1000 CE onward), Indic saints and teachers definitively established and strengthened Buddhist traditions across the region. The continuous movement of figures such as Naropa (956–1041), Atiśa (982–1057), Marpa (Mar pa Chos kyi blo gros, 1012–96), and Dharmasvāmin (d. 1234) are documented by their biographers; these accounts depict their travel in small entourages across trails and passes, to visit the many settlements. One gets the impression of many other such travelers – from both the Indic plains and the Tibetan highlands – who underwent the hardships of establishing the Dharma across the Himalayan frontier. These hagiographic stories typically recount the recurring need to subdue local deities and convert local chieftains to the Buddhist path.

As Tibetan polities after 1150 CE were politically and religiously controlled by the new transregional monastic schools, and with the eventual triumph by 1650 of the Gelugpa (dGe lugs pa) led by the Dalai Lamas, many monasteries in central Tibet established additional regional and small branch centers on their own southern Himalayan frontier, in what is today highland India, and Nepal. The country of Bhutan was settled in this period

by members of the Drukpa ('Brug pa) school who sought refuge from Gelugpa persecution in central Tibet.

Long before the borders of modern nations were drawn, an extensive “web of Tibetan monasticism” existed that drew aspiring young monks from all the remote Himalayan regions to larger institutions, some as far as central Tibet, for education and religious training. In fact, the great monasteries there were divided into sub-institutions according to the linguistic areas of the monks’ origins. Movement across this expanding Tibetan Buddhist network was not one-way, however: the isolated locations far from the great centers of population at times drew saints seeking spiritual retreat amidst the fierce isolation among the beautiful mountainous terrain; and the missionary ethos of Buddhism, along with the lure of travel (that always existed among some monks from the faith’s beginnings) also gave many of these remote outposts, at times, rich infusions of doctrinal teaching and spiritual inspiration.

One early example of this important phenomenon from the late fifteenth century was Tsangnyön Heruka (gTsang smyon he ru ka, 1452–1507), a famous mendicant tantric yogin of the Kargyupa (bKa’ brgyud pa) order born in central Tibet. After gaining renown as a young meditation master, he became restless with the life of settled monasticism and periodically undertook long and arduous pilgrimages along the southern Himalayan periphery, visiting the Kathmandu Valley and then other more highland Tibetan Buddhist communities. A spiritual virtuoso renowned for his “holy madness,” the saint’s life was marked by long periods of solitary meditation, scholarly projects (his biography of Milarepa [Mi la ras pa, 1040/1052–1123/1135] is one of the classics of popular Tibetan literature), and long expeditions spent on pilgrimages to give teachings to those he met. One trip took him to Tingri, Guge, and then Mustang, where his biographer notes the following extraordinary encounter between Tsangnyön and ferocious men (in what is now a town on the north-central northern border of Nepal). They had just won a battle and displayed the mutilated corpses of their enemies when the saint arrived:

At that time, the people had attached the heads of many of the slain soldiers of Guge to the beams of the city gates. The Lord then took into his hands the brains, crawling with maggots and rotting, that had fallen to the ground and then ate the flesh and brains. Thereupon, he said to the many people gathered: ‘If you wish for miraculous realizations (*siddhi*), I shall give them to you.’

(Smith 1969: 14)

Tsangnyön is credited with founding many monasteries in remote places, presumably by more conventional methods, as was the case with other missionary lamas like him who crossed the region.

The premodern era was also a time during which groups migrated over the high passes into the valleys of the Himalayan periphery. Whether it was to seek better lands, follow kin, or the result of groups fleeing times of tumult from Mongol or other incursions across the Tibetan Plateau, legends suggest how people speaking similar languages came to populate the region. It is indeed likely that some nomadic groups on the Tibetan plateau decided to “settle down” and cross the high passes to reach less harsh conditions on ridges and valleys located at lower altitudes south of the great peaks. Scholars of the Sherpas of the Mount Everest region have surmised that this group migrated relatively recently from the eastern Tibetan Plateau; although most highland ethnic groups preserve legends of ancestors

migrating from that region, these cannot be more definitely confirmed or dated beyond what is implied by their group's linguistic affinities to points north.

### EARLY MODERN HIMALAYAN BUDDHISMS

By 1600, the Himalayas can be described as a dual religious frontier, the intersection of Tibetan Buddhist civilization from the north interspersed with Indic civilization from the south, ~~with the~~ Kathmandu Valley the last outpost of ancient and medieval Indic Buddhism. In many regions, peoples migrating from the Tibetan Plateau settled into preferred or available ecological niches, and there adapted their religious life centered on Buddhism to their own newfound circumstances. But the region was also by then being populated from the Gangetic plains as well, according to another pattern: Indic migrants, usually bearers of brahmanical or “Hindu” traditions, settled in the alluvial river valleys and introduced intensive rice cultivation and cow-centered subsistence. The intersection of migrants can still be seen in watershed peaks and valleys across the region today: where lower down there are rice cultivators speaking Nepali, an Indo-European language, in the highlands above and to their north are migrants speaking Tibeto-Burman languages, whose reliance on yaks (and yak–cow hybrids) along with high-altitude grains (barley, buckwheat) grown on irrigated fields define a totally different subsistence pattern.

In some regions, however, Tibetan migrants subdued the indigenous inhabitants, coercing them to convert to Buddhism. The Lepcha of Sikkim offer a case study of the ethos of spiritual conquest that prevailed among certain Tibetan elites. In their myths, this group (who refer to themselves as Rong-pa) retains a memory of missionary lamas destroying all evidence of their indigenous culture upon their subjugation and conversion:

Later the sons of *zo khe bu* and their [central Tibetan noble] families came down to Sikkim with their followers, invaded and conquered the country. At that time Lamaism had nearly reached its peak [there]; [the lamas] collected all the Lepcha manuscripts and books containing historical records, myths, legends, laws, literature and burned them. They took the ashes to the high hills and blew them into the air and built monasteries on the hills from which they scattered the ashes ... and forced Lepcha scribes to translate the scriptures and venerate them...

(Siiger 1967: 28)

Tibeto-Burman peoples were thus affected by both brahmanical and Tibetan migrants, some of whom sought to incorporate them into their larger polities through religious conversion. In the end, in most Himalayan regions, the rice-growing Indic populations typically came to dominate the political systems of the Himalayas, so that the imperative to “Sanskritize” and adopt brahmanical traditions was faced by the Buddhist ethnic groups in the regional and early modern states.

About this same time, two influences that came from outside Asia arrived to affect the entire Himalayan region: corn and the potato from the “new world.” The former staple, indigenous to North America, could be cultivated on dry, non-irrigated mountain terraces in the mid-hills; the potato, indigenous to highland South America and so adapted to thrive in high altitudes, could be grown up to 12,000 ft. Both increased the crop yield for Himalayan peoples and so enabled populations there to add nourishing additions to their diets. As

monasticism depends on a community's surplus wealth, these developments doubtless abetted the vitality of Himalayan Buddhism over the past 300 years.

Regardless of the historicity of their migration accounts, there is no doubt that until recently all Tibeto-Burman groups had contacts to their north, both within the corridors of trade and with centers of Tibetan Buddhist civilization. It was these ties that were instrumental in establishing and sustaining Buddhist culture and Himalayan Buddhist ethnic group identity, and it was these ties that had been unraveled, or reoriented, in the later twentieth century. After 1959, this Tibetan Buddhist influence came in the form of refugee spiritual leaders resettling and building new monastic centers outside Chinese-controlled territory.

### MODERN BORDERS AND ANOMALOUS CULTURAL SURVIVALS

The survival of some regions where variants of Tibetan Buddhist culture exist up to the present day is largely due to the “accidents” of colonial rule: Ladakh and highland Buddhist areas of the modern states of Himachal Pradesh (Kulu, Manali, Kinnaur) ended up within modern India owing to the British ceding this territory to indigenous rulers; they successfully defended their princely states as part of the British Raj until Indian independence (1947). Sikkim and Bhutan were likewise allowed to remain independent kingdoms by the British only insofar as their foreign policies were consistent with colonial interests, a position continued by independent India after 1947 ~~up until the present day~~. (Sikkim, however, was annexed back into India within the state of West Bengal in 1975.) In the same way, highland Tibetanized communities in Arunachal Pradesh that were claimed by British India (Tawang and vicinity) also remain as Indian territory today, though these regions, like some of those cited above, are still contested by China.

### BUDDHISM IN THE HINDU STATE OF NEPAL

The modern country Nepal was created in 1769 when a hill king from Gurkha united many other rulers from small principalities into a single army that conquered the Kathmandu Valley, and then hill regions from Sikkim to Himachal Pradesh. The Shah dynasty sought to rule in the classical mold of a Hindu monarch, imposing laws based on the treatises on religious duties (*dharma-śāstra*) and supporting only the Nepali language as a national *lingua franca*. Two theological assertions were promulgated: that the king was an incarnation of Viṣṇu and that Śiva in the form of Paśupati (“Lord of Creatures”) ~~and~~ the nation's protector, with the primary temple in Kathmandu the object of lavish patronage. (The modern borders were reduced to their current dimensions after ~~skirmishes with the British~~.)

So difficult did life under Shah rule become in many hill communities that tens of thousands of Tibeto-Burman peoples and Newars migrated to the eastern “frontier” Himalayan regions, to British-held Sikkim, to Darjeeling and Arunachal Pradesh, to independent Bhutan, and even as far as Burma. Many of these migrants retained kin ties in Nepal. The influence of these displaced Buddhist groups, whose experiences outside Nepal were considerably more “modern” (exposed to British-mediated Protestant Christianity, science, government, law, etc.), was an important factor that influenced their Nepal Buddhist communities in subsequent decades.

Dominated by high-caste *kṣatriyas* and their *brahman* allies, the Ranas usurped power from the Shah kings in 1846, then sought to unify the dozens of ethnic groups autocratically, using Hinduism and Hindu law. Among the many groups that adhered to their own shamanic traditions or Tibetan Buddhism, such state policies were deeply resented, especially when they went hand-in-glove with government policies that allowed Hindu agents of the state to manipulate state laws to confiscate lands and exact new corvee labor from them. State practices fostered conversion to Hinduism and laws punished groups that refused to give up or radically curb their non-Hindu religious practices. (Eating yak meat, for example, was viewed as an act of “cow killing.”) Tamangs, the largest Tibeto-Burman group in Nepal, whose mid-montane settlements are closest to the Kathmandu Valley, suffered the most from Rana despotism in the form of losing land ownership and being compelled to do forced labor.

The history of the much smaller and more remote ethnic group, the Thakalis of the upper Kali Gandaki River, provides another case study of Tibeto-Burman Buddhist response. Since the north–south trade route in their territory garnered much wealth for them, they readily adapted to the Hindu state by almost completely suppressing their Buddhist identity: they had their literati compose new historical accounts of their ancient Hindu origins, celebrated Hindu festivals and dropped Buddhist ritualism, and adopted brahmanical life-cycle rituals (Fisher 2001). Other Tibeto-Burman groups did not go this far, but all conformed in some ways to the norms of the Shah-Rana rulers, trying to manage the group’s impression as being orthodox in key Hindu observances when under scrutiny by the Hindu state.

By 1900, Nepal existed as one of the most isolated nations on earth, ruled by the staunchly Hindu Rana family. Supported by the British colonial government to the south – who employed thousands of Nepali men as mercenaries and who wanted Nepal to remain as a buffer to Russian entry into Tibet – the Ranas complied by a strict policy of isolation, relying on the malarial foothills to the south, the high Himalayan massif to the north, and a prohibition against entry by foreigners.

In 1950, when the Ranas were expelled and the Shah kings reassumed power amidst a multi-party democracy, Nepal’s coercive Hindu identity and practices continued. Every government center in every district of Nepal established a small temple to Paśupati, and each also has a site for Durgā worship; officials performed rituals daily and during the fall Dasarā festival sacrificed animals to protect the nation.

After ten years of multiparty democracy, King Mahendra (1920–72) outlawed political parties and assumed direct rule in a new era of “Panchayat Raj” (1960–90). The same domestic policies regarding culture and religion continued, while the state acted out its identity as “the world’s only Hindu nation” in the eyes of Hindu partisans and nationalists. High-caste Hindus were favored in government jobs, the national language Nepali was the exclusive medium of education, and Hindu festivals were grandly celebrated as national holidays. All of these practices fostered resentments that eventually led to the revolution of 1991, an uprising that ended the Panchayat government and ushered in a new era of ethnic politics in which Tibeto-Burman groups across the nation rallied to oppose Hindu and brahman cultural hegemony. Eventually this movement added to the political forces that displaced Nepal’s ruling dynasty.

## MODERN TIBETAN MONASTICISM ACROSS NEPAL'S HIGHLANDS

Until 1959, Nepal's Tibetan or Tibeto-Burman connections to the Tibetan plateau Buddhist institutions were still vital, from Humla in far western Nepal, as well as (from west to east) in Dolpo, Lo-Mustang, Nyeshang, Nupri, Manang, Langtang, Helambu, Solu-Khumbu, and Walung. Local boys interested in training to become ~~senior~~ monks would do what their ancestors had done for centuries: travel to central Tibet and return to maintain local institutions that typically sheltered, at most, a few resident monks whose main occupation was local ritual service. Everything changed with the exodus of the Dalai Lama to India, and since 1960 the network has been partially realigned to refugee institutions in Dharamsala, Sikkim, and Kathmandu.

Also affected was the “second tier” of connection between central Tibet and the Tibeto-Burman peoples (whose main settlements are typically lower than 10,000 ft.): Magars, Gurungs, Thakalis, Manangis, Tamangs, Sherpas, and Lepchas. Most of the Buddhist ritualists among them follow the Nyingmapa school and the people rely on householder *lamas* to perform their rituals. To train for this service, young Tibeto-Burman men typically live for several years as apprentices with elder householder lamas or in the regional highland monasteries. (Before 1959, some of these might have trained in Tibet.) Most return to their villages to marry and maintain shrines established as their family's own property. Thus, most “Buddhist monasteries” among Tibeto-Burman peoples today are family shrine-residences and sons usually continue to follow their fathers as the local Buddhist ritualists. In recent years, the strength of Buddhist identity held together by these institutions among the Nepalese Tibeto-Burman groups was the basis of post-1990 ethnic nationalism, or *janjati* activism, directed against the high castes that dominated in the failed Hindu state. In 2007–8, a popular uprising deposed the Hindu king and reconstituted Nepal as a secular republic.

The growing presence of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and teachers in the Kathmandu Valley also altered the religious landscape of the Tibeto-Burman groups. With the first *gompas* (*dgon pa*, monasteries) founded in the later Malla era (post-1600), Tibetan monks became an integral if small part of the Kathmandu Valley landscape, with most centered on the great *stūpas* of Bauddha and Svayambhū. Throughout the twentieth century, each of the main Tibetan sects also established branch monasteries with major resident scholars and spiritual teachers in Nepal.

Abetting this centralizing Tibetan trend in the Valley after 1990 was the Maoist uprising in Nepal (1995–2006). Growing rural violence and intimidation drove many of the affluent Tibeto-Burman Buddhists from across the mid-hills to leave their towns to resettle in Kathmandu. This influx has fueled a spate of new residential building as well as monastery construction, representing this elite's tradition of investment in grand merit-making. Many immense Tibetan monasteries have been built across the breadth of the Valley that now attract refugee monks and nuns from the Tibetan Plateau, the refugee diaspora, as well as a growing number of aspiring monastics from the Tibeto-Burman peoples. To be ordained and study with great Tibetan lamas today, one need not walk overland to central Tibet, but take a one- or two-day bus trip to the nation's capital.

The Kathmandu Valley is now one of the most important centers of Tibetan Buddhism in the world for several reasons. First, in addition to the Tibeto-Burman influx, one of the largest concentrations of Tibetan refugees in the world has settled there. Given the wealth generated by carpet-weaving enterprises, the tourist industry, and foreign remittances, some

of this surplus has been dedicated to providing patronage to dozens of new monasteries. Second, as Tibetan Buddhism has become increasingly attractive to Westerners, a number of prominent Tibetan lamas oriented to them – and funded by their donations – have established “Dharma centers” at Bauddha and other places that in most ways resemble traditional monasteries. Here one can find textual study and meditation being pursued by both ethnic Tibetans and westerners clad in red robes.

### EXAMPLES OF HIGHLAND BUDDHISMS IN NEPAL AND INDIA

Among Himalayan peoples, the most familiar term used for a Buddhist ritualist is *lama* (*bla ma*), a Tibetan word usually meaning “guru,” but one that has also become a family surname of individuals with a history of serving as Buddhist ritualists. The term can designate a celibate monk as well as a married priest.

The material culture of Buddhism marks the Himalayan landscape with meritorious devotional items and sacred objects imparting protection. *Stūpas* are found in and around the villages; settlements are decorated with prayer-walls at village entranceways (most inscribed with the Avalokiteśvara mantra “*Om Maṇi Padme Hūm*”) and fluttering prayer-flags with this or protective mantras fly above the houses.

Most villages have one or two temple-shrines. Usually small, these typically contain images or paintings of Guru Rimpoche (Padmasambhava), the founding saint of the prevalent Nyingmapa school; the Buddha Śākyamuni; and Chenrizi (sPyan ras gzigs), celestial bodhisattva known in Sanskrit as Avalokiteśvara. Each temple usually houses texts, ritual paraphernalia, and a variety of icons or paintings; the yearly festival that commemorates the monastery’s founding is typically one of the major events of the village ritual year.

The Buddhist Saṃgha in these communities is almost never a celibate elite, but is composed of householders, usually related, as this vocation is often inherited from one’s own father or patrilineage. The Tamang of the central Himalayas are representative in the composition of a Tibeto-Burman Saṃgha. In David Holmberg’s summary,

Tamang lamas are married householders who farm like their kinsfolk, although they avoid plowing. During ritual, they don red robes, chant texts, display scroll paintings, and employ ritual implements. At these times villagers address them by the honorific *sangkye*, the word for “Buddha”.

(1984: 697)

The most common Tibeto-Burman Buddhist rituals (*ghyawa*) are those concerned with merit-making and death, in which the lamas chant and meritorious gifts are made to insure a positive future birth. The essential Buddhist death rite among the Tamang is called *ghyewa* or *gral* (lit. “rescue”), which includes the last rites and a memorial death feast afterwards. When someone dies, lamas are invited to sit with the body to chant texts with drum and cymbal accompaniment or else the *bla* or life force will not be pacified. They also supervise the last rites, usually cremation, to send off the dead successfully to a favorable rebirth.

A traditional spiritual practice for householders that has grown in popularity across Himalayan Buddhist societies is that of *nyungne*, a fasting and Mahāyāna meditation rite dedicated to celestial bodhisattva Chenrezi. It consists of two days of practice. On the first

day, each participant takes vows to observe the rules and abide by the eight moral precepts; each can eat only one vegetarian meal, with water the only drink. The second day entails a complete fast with no meals or liquids at all; each participant must also remain silent until the end. The purpose of the rite is to become more aware of suffering and to deepen the individual's spiritual connection to this bodhisattva, the most popular in Tibetan (and Asian) Mahāyāna traditions.

### **BUDDHISM, SHAMANISM, AND THE HIMALAYAN “RELIGIOUS FIELD”**

While adhering to Buddhism in their own way, Himalayan Buddhists all follow other traditions as well: it is important to think of a larger “religious field” that includes ceremonies performed by other ritual specialists that are directed to local and clan deities. These often mesh with local Buddhist traditions, but at times they can clash with Buddhist norms. On the village level, every ethnic group across the region venerates its lineage ancestors as living gods, whose wrath or protection can affect the living. Accordingly, they should be worshiped at regular intervals, and especially during times of trouble.

The Himalayan landscape also contains a welter of spirits inhabiting local mountains, springs, rocks, caves, trees, and rivers. Some deities when pleased bring local blessings like the seasonal rains and the land's fertility; others in the local pantheon can cause illness through taking possession of humans. In both cases – for venerating its ancestors and worshiping local deities – Himalayan Buddhists call on shamans or spirit mediums. Across the Himalayan region, these specialists perform dramatic all-night séances to contact the gods. By drumming and singing, they enter trance; in this state, they converse with and hear the divinities express their wishes, and then work to satisfy their demands (with songs, sacrifices, mantras) so they can cure the sick and insure community well-being.

Himalayan shaman traditions vary across the region (and even within the same group); crossing over from watershed to watershed moving west to east, the religious life of the people shifts as regularly as changes in dialect. The Tamang of central Nepal are typical in their reliance on several different religious specialists: they have a tradition of *lambu* exorcists who limit their service to exorcising evil spirits; and their *bonbo* or shamans intervene in a variety of ways to contact the gods for protection, healing, or to secure more general blessings.

In most times and places, this coexistence of lamas and spirit mediums represents an amiable division of labor; but at other times and places, this is not always the case. Stan Mumford's study (1989) of Buddhists in Manang, in west-central Nepal, explored a conflict that divided Buddhists in one village when newly arrived Tibetan Buddhist lamas were opposed to the annual deer sacrifice. For centuries, this had been done to appease the local mountain deity. The shamanic loyalists argued that without this deity's blessing, their tenuous farming life would be endangered; the lamas insisted that blood sacrifice inevitably involved generating bad karma for individuals and locality and that this sacrifice was what endangered the community. They performed a “sacrifice” of a dough deer effigy; but the loyalists find this inadequate, so life has gone on with both traditions continuing.

The populations in the Lo-Mantang region proximate to the Dhaulagiri Himalaya have also fostered this coexistence of blood sacrifice traditions with Buddhism. In his study of the village of Te, Charles Ramble (2007) has shown that while the people are nominally Buddhist, and support Buddhist tantric priests to perform a variety of rituals, they are also

devotees of a local religion that involves blood sacrifices to wild, unassimilated local gods and goddesses. Here, both Buddhism and the cults of local gods have been subordinated to the pragmatic demands of village community survival.

Regarding this Himalayan confluence of Buddhism and shamanism, some scholars have argued that it is the region's strong shamanic traditions that led to Tibetan Buddhism's adapting itself to them, and so becoming unique in the Buddhist world. Geoffrey Samuel (1993) has seen this juxtaposition as the basis of understanding Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhism as best characterized as "civilized shamanism."

Among many Tibeto-Burman groups, this multi-specialist religious life is seen in the death rituals that involve all of the different practitioners, not just Buddhist lamas. Among the Gurungs of Nepal (and like the Tamangs, above) there are exorcists (*pucu*) who conduct rituals to drive off demons, shamans (*khilbri*) who reassure the now-disembodied soul, and then lamas who garner merit and guide the deceased to a favorable next rebirth. It is the same among the Lepchas of Sikkim, where the central religious roles in householder life are occupied by the *bóngthing*, who presides at recurring religious ceremonies and may be called upon to heal acute illness; and the *mun*, a healer who exorcises demons.

Overall, it is Buddhist doctrine and worldview that is nonetheless acknowledged as the dominant ideology across the Himalayan frontier (Clarke 1983; 1990). Just as the buddhas and bodhisattvas reign supreme over lesser gods and local spirits, karma provides the central moral principle that functions as natural law. Yet living in the high Himalayas requires vigilance and community action, as illustrated by the Sherpa understanding of the human-divine nexus:

The world is full of negative forces taking the form of demons and other nasty creatures. The gods are protective of people, but this protection does not come automatically; it must be petitioned and renewed through ritual. Thus the essential act of ritual practice is to make offerings to the gods, to flatter them to some extent, and to request that they continue their protection of humanity against the evil forces of the world.

(Ortner 1989: 43)

### **“BUDDHISM UPGRADED”: SHERPAS AND GURUNGS**

The most studied highland Buddhist group in the Himalayas is the Sherpas, who early in the modern era achieved unparalleled prosperity by the eighteenth century through their involvement in Indo-Tibetan trade; their wealthy families began to invest in Buddhist traditional learning and practices. In 1850 they funded several Sherpa village priests to travel to Tibet. This group came to study with the well-known lama scholar Choki Wangchuk (Chos kyi dbang phyug, 1775–1837), who instructed them in ritual and meditation cycles, some of which are still popular throughout the villages of Solu-Khumbu, the Sherpa homeland in proximity to Mt. Everest. As Matthew Kapstein (2012) has noted, “The liturgies for these rites are often profound and beautiful, as their titles suggest, e.g., ‘The Union of All that is Precious,’ ‘The Spontaneous Freedom of an Enlightened Intention,’ ‘The Celestial Doctrine of the Land of Bliss.’”

Sherpas also were also first to enter the trekking industry in Nepal, and this plus support from foreign donors counteracted the loss of their trading enterprises north into Tibet after the border was closed in 1959. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, those prospering from

trekking and mountaineering were not as interested in Buddhist patronage and instead oriented themselves toward Western culture. Many settled in the Kathmandu Valley and the Buddhist material culture of the highland Sherpa settlements was neglected. Since 1990, however, Sherpa patrons have resumed their interest in maintaining their homeland Buddhist institutions, and they now support celibate monastics both there and in new monasteries in the Kathmandu Valley.

There are now two types of Sherpa monastery. Private monasteries, the property of a senior member of a clan, are located in homes and under the control of lineage priests, *gyudpi*; all relatives gather in these precincts when rituals are performed. The public monasteries, notably Chiwong and Tengboche, were built beginning in 1930 and are for everyone in the community. They preserve a large collection of texts copied in Tibet and woodblocks for printing many manuscripts, these the work of artisans who learned to carve woodblocks for printing that are said to rival those produced elsewhere in Tibet. Supported by wealthy Sherpa patrons, some Sherpa lamas have entered the world of global Tibetan Buddhist monasticism and attained an international following.

The Gurungs of central Nepal (pop. 534,000), though less well known than Sherpas (pop. 150,000), have also benefited from new connections in the modern era. Their employment in British and Indian “Gurkha” military regiments, the development of tourism in their home region, and international migration have led to new wealth and innovations in their practice of Buddhism. Southern Gurungs have invested in having their own indigenous scholars recover from oral recensions a history text called the *Tamu Pye*. Drawing on sections extracted from recent Nepali histories, it documents the uniqueness of their group’s history. This text asserts the great antiquity of their adherence to Buddhism, dating its origins back to the age of previous buddhas, who in fact were also Gurung ancestors (Bechert 2003: 10). As with other Tibeto-Burman groups, their new compositions claim that their group once possessed its own calendar as well as Gurung works of literature in their own language, written in their own script; and there are stories in the *Tamu Pye* that maintain that these landmarks of high culture were destroyed by Newar king Jaya Sthiti Malla (r. 1382–95) “at the instigation of the Hindu sage Shankara” (Bechert 2003: 11). While accounts of this sort contain few events that can be authenticated historically, they indicate how eagerly their leaders and community wish to assert the validity of their traditions and their pride in their own unique Buddhist identity.

The thousands of Gurungs who migrated out of Nepal to the eastern Himalayas and abroad have also sought to revive the vitality of Gurung Buddhism. Like Sherpas, many Gurung families encourage a son or a daughter to get initiated into the monastery community as a monk or a nun.

## MODERN NEWAR BUDDHISM

By 1500, the Newar *Samgha* developed a highly ritualized Buddhist culture among the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley. Newars followed exoteric Indic Mahāyāna Buddhism; it was Vajrayāna Buddhism and tantric initiation that assumed the highest position in local understanding, though only a few actually practiced the esoteric traditions. Newar monastic architecture still reflects this development: in the large courtyards that define the monastic space, the shrines facing the entrance have on the ground floor an image of Śākyamuni or Avalokiteśvara; but on the first floor above is the *āgama*, a shrine with a Vajrayāna deity, with access limited to those with a tantric initiation.

As Hindu shrines and law were in the ascendancy from the late Malla period right through the twentieth century, Newar Buddhism adapted. Although the when and why of this development remain unknown, there was a literal domestication of Saṃgha as former celibate Newar monks became married householders. These Newar “householder monks” called themselves *Bare* (from the Sanskrit term *vande* or *vandanā*, an ancient Indic term of respect for monks), adopted the names *śākyabhikṣu* and *vajrācārya*, and began to function as endogamous castes. This meant that one had to be born into this Saṃgha and, with a few exceptions, everyone else was denied ordination. (This left only the Tibetan Saṃghas in the Kathmandu Valley where ordination into celibate monastic Mahāyāna life was possible for Newars wishing to become monks.)

The masters in the Newar Saṃgha adapted their local ritual traditions to conform to the state’s caste laws and thereby preserve the social and legal standing of the Buddhist community, including its once-extensive monastic land holdings. Many Newar monasteries today, especially in Patan, still bear the name of their founding patrons, some dating back to the early Malla period. Local Buddhist monks, like Hindu pandits, were especially active in manuscript copying; Buddhist monastic libraries in the Kathmandu Valley in the modern era became known worldwide as the greatest repository of the Sanskrit texts written for and utilized in medieval Hinduism and Buddhism.

Unlike the monastic institutions of Tibet that fostered in-depth philosophical inquiry and vast commentarial writings, Newar monks have produced few original contributions to Buddhist scholarship. The Newar Saṃgha’s special focus is the performance of rituals drawing upon deities and powers of the Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition. Like married Tibetan monks of the Nyingmapa order, the *vajrācārya* priests serve the community’s ritual needs, with some specializing in textual study, medicine, astrology, and meditation. The married monks’ ritual services are vast, including Buddhist versions of Hindu life-cycle rites (*saṃskāra*), fire rites (*homa*), daily temple rituals (*nitya pūjā*), mantra chanting protection rites, merit-producing donation rites, *stūpa* rituals, image processions and “chariot festivals” (*ratha jātra*), and tantric initiations (*abhiṣekha*). Many very ancient practices continue up until today. To cite one example: in Kathmandu’s Itum Bāhā, one can still see the ritual of marking time by a monk rapping on a wooden gong, a monastic custom begun over 2,000 years ago in ancient India. To cite another, “the cult of the Mahāyāna book” also endures at yearly rites when devotees make offerings to special Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*) texts. And processions of Buddha images like those mentioned by the Chinese pilgrims in the fifth–seventh centuries are still found on the streets of the major cities.

Still, the Buddhist traditions that developed in these unusual ways over 500 years ago have faced a host of challenges since 1800. Shah discrimination against Buddhists and changes in land tenure laws under their rule have undermined the land tenancy system and many of the endowments that had grown to materially underwrite the Newar Buddhist tradition. Today, of the 300 monasteries still extant, roughly 10 percent of these have all but disappeared and more than 60 percent are in perilous structural condition. Newar monasteries are still controlled by the senior-most male members of their individual Saṃghas, a fact that has made significant reforms or innovations within the local Saṃgha difficult. Despite the decline of the monasteries as buildings and institutions, much of Buddhist material culture is still preserved in the elaborate monastic architecture, thousands of archived texts, and the wealth of cultural observances. A small circle of tantric Buddhist practitioners still exists as well.

Newar Buddhism also had a regional diaspora. One of the most important changes that Shah rule brought to the middle hill regions of the country was an expansion of trade, and this was largely in the hands of Newars who migrated to the new trade towns. The thousands who left the Valley to seek these new opportunities also took their culture, prominently Buddhism. Thus, in towns such as (from east to west) Daran, Dhankuta, Chainpur, Bhojpur, Dolakha, Trisuli, Bandipur, Pokhara, Tansen, Ridi, and Baglung, Newar Buddhists built monasteries as branch institutions of those in their home cities; in most places, these continue to be active today.

Despite the control of the Newar Saṃgha by caste and age seniority systems, there have been revitalization institutions that have arisen in recent years. Across the Kathmandu Valley, Buddhist householders have established *Jñānamalla Bhajans* to sing newly written and composed Buddhist songs performed in the style of Hindu *bhakti* (devotional) groups: the leader plays the harmonium, with accompaniment by a tabla, cymbals, and chorus. These groups have also undertaken service projects for their local traditions, including Buddhist festival participation.

In Kathmandu, teachers Badri Bajracarya and Naresh Bajracarya have started to ordain Newar males wishing to enter the Saṃgha, regardless of caste, offering in addition training in Sanskrit, literature, philosophy, and ritual practice. In Patan, the Lotus Research Center led by Min Bahadur Shakya has tried to bring together Newar and Tibetan traditions, and it also publishes in modern Newari the great works of Sanskrit Mahāyāna Buddhism. Both have been supported by international Buddhist organizations from Taiwan, South Korea, or Japan.

## MODERN THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM IN THE HIMALAYAS

Since the 1920s, Newars disenchanted with their ritually rich, but explanation-poor, Mahāyāna tradition have supported the establishment of Theravāda Buddhist reform institutions in the Kathmandu Valley. Inspired by teachers from Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and India, Newars “entered the robes,” and some founded institutions in the large cities that are dedicated to the revival of Buddhism based upon Theravāda doctrine, popular preaching, and lay meditation.

Beginning with the Anandakuti monastery at Svayambhū for monks and the Dharmakirti monastery for “nuns” in central Kathmandu, Newars have been ordained and renounced the householder life to live in these institutions. (Technically, the ancient order of nuns, the *Bhikkhunī* Saṃgha, has died out in the Theravāda countries; the term “*anāgārikā*” is used locally, although the women conform to most Monastic Discipline (*Vinaya*) rules, including vows of celibacy.)

The Theravādin institutions have been instrumental in promoting the modernist “Protestant Buddhism” originating in colonial Sri Lanka: they have subtly critiqued Newar and Tibetan Mahāyāna beliefs and practices, while seeking to revive the faith by promoting textual study and translations of Pāli texts into Newari. In the last twenty years, prominent monks have acquired foreign Theravāda patrons who have funded new monasteries being built in the Valley in the Burmese or Thai styles. The Theravādins have laid the foundations for branches of *vipassanā* (insight) meditation centers affiliated with Satya Narayan Goenka (1924–2013), a lay teacher from India. Since the early 1980s, these have gained considerable popularity, but primarily only among middle-class Newars.

## RECENT TRENDS IN HIMALAYAN BUDDHISMS

Despite decades of funding by international donors, there has been a total failure to control the rising population in the region. As a result, there is not enough arable land to produce the food needed to feed everyone. Responding to this reality, many young people now engage in a form of circular migration, staying away most of the year to pursue cash income jobs in Kathmandu, India, the Gulf states, or in the West. Many villages today across the Buddhist mid-hills and highlands are populated for most of the year only by new mothers, elders, and their grandchildren. This is changing the nature of rural life across the region, but has also opened new possibilities for the Tibeto-Burmese people, who now can earn more money abroad than their ancestors could imagine. Indeed, a formidable new influence is the remittances being sent home from Himalayan Buddhists working abroad; some of this wealth is being used to fund rituals and for the patronage of temples back in the home region.

Since 1959, the Nepalese government, responding to considerable developmental aid from the Chinese government, has refused to admit the exiled Dalai Lama. In recent years, subject to additional pressure, it has turned back refugees at the border and restricted granting asylum to refugees who make it to the capital. The entire region's status quo of Tibetan refugee haven, and diaspora, may soon be overturned.

Today, Buddhists from the Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman groups originating across the Himalayan region are now found existing among Newar and Theravāda adherents amidst the Kathmandu Valley's remarkable religious pluralism. This valley is also famous as a major center for Hinduism in the modern world, with its medieval temples as well as centers devoted to global gurus such as Sai Baba (1926–2011) and Rajneesh (Chandra Mohan Jain, 1931–1990), who enjoy considerable support. There are also neo-Hindu groups such as the Brahma Kumaris who have centers in the capital. Christian missionaries are now free to proselytize, and churches have spread from the valley to hundreds of small villages. In addition, there are Sikh temples and Muslim mosques built by their resident trader communities; if one ~~pays attention~~, one can find centers for the Baha'i, and a half-dozen Japanese "new religions." Indeed, Nepal's capital today is one of the most diverse religious locations in the world.

Himalayan Buddhists have absorbed a diversity of outside influences from their earliest history; in the future, Buddhism's adherents will doubtless continue to shape their own lives with reference to both the venerable traditions of their ancestors and new ideas that will make their way into their mountain vistas.

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