

The Buddhist Heritage of Nepal



Souvenir

of

The 15th General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists

Kathmandu, Nepal

27 November - 2nd December 1986

-----1979. Archeological Remains of Kapilavastu Lumbini
Devadah. Kathmandu: Educational Enterprises Pvt. Ltd.

Archeological Remains of Kapilavastu Lumbini
Devadah. Kathmandu: Educational Enterprises Pvt. Ltd.

The Vajrayana Buddhism of the Kathmandu Valley

Introduction

On a little hillock north of the city of Kathmandu rises the stupa of Swayambhunath, the Self-existent One. This vast white stupa with its four pairs of eyes looking down on the Kathmandu Valley, the figures of the transcendent Buddhas and their consorts set into the circumambulatory passage at its base, is the principal shrine of the Buddhists of Nepal. Here the various Buddhist traditions of the country meet as their adherents take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Saṅgha. One can see Tibetan and Nepalese lamas chanting in Tibetan, tantric Buddhist priests of the Kathmandu Valley performing their elaborate rituals, and saffron-clad Theravada monks. Primarily, though, it is the shrine of the followers of the Vajrayana tradition of the Kathmandu Valley. This short article will outline the salient features of this unique tradition.

The Buddhism of the Valley of Nepal is tantric and therefore Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna. It is unique in many ways. However, it is not unique because it is tantric. It is basically the same kind of Buddhism that one finds in the Tibetan culture, whether within Tibet or among those of other countries who share the same culture, such as the Sherpas and other northern border people of Nepal. The rituals performed by the tantric Buddhist priests of Nepal are the same as the rituals performed by the Lamas and basically the same as the rituals performed by the priests of the Shingon sect of Japan. The tantric texts on which their teachings and ritual are based are the same. It is not unique because of the plethora of multi-armed and multi-headed tantric deities (Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, protective divinities). These are found wherever one finds Tantric Buddhism. All of these rituals and deities plus the tantras on which they are based can be traced to the great centres of late Indian Buddhism: Nalanda, Vikramasila, Odantapur, and Jagadalla.

It is not unique because it is "mixed up with Hinduism" as has so often been said. At the level of Buddhist Dharma, at the level of understanding the meaning of rituals and the meaning of the multifarious deities, the Buddhists of the Kathmandu Valley have very clear ideas. It is the casual observer from outside, used to seeing earlier and simpler forms of Buddhism which flourish today in a non-Hindu society, who is confused by a plethora of deities and rituals which he has probably encountered before only in a Hindu context.

The uniqueness of Newar Buddhism, however, is related to the fact that it is embedded in a dominant Hindu society confined within a very small geographical area. Buddhism in India flourished in a Hindu society, but within a vast area where it was possible for the monks to truly withdraw from Hindu society to establish their monasteries in relatively remote places where they were less affected by the customs and traditions of Hindu society. In the Kathmandu Valley Buddhism grew and developed within the confines of the three small, walled cities of Patan, Kathmandu and Bhaktapur where it was very much a part of its (Hindu) surroundings.

The Buddhists of the Kathmandu Valley, like Buddhists everywhere, take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha but in a Mahayana and Vajrayana context. The Buddha is, of course, the historical Śākya Muni Buddha (who was born in Nepal); but in Mahayana and tantric Buddhism the five transcendent Buddhas (Vairocana, Amitābha, Amoghasiddhi, Ratnasambhava and Akṣobhya) are more known and have a more important place in the ritual than the historical Buddha. In a tantric context these five are presided over by the Ādi-Buddha or Vajrasattva, the personification of Absolute Emptiness (sūnyatā). Much of the devotional life of the people centres round the worship of the bodhisattvas especially Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī; and the tantric rituals are centered on the ritual diagrams (maṇḍalas) of such deities as Herukacakraśamvara-Vajravārāhī and Hevajra-Nairātma. The Dharma is of course the Four Noble Truths and the Eight Fold Path but understood in a Mahāyāna context and practised according to the tantras. There are eight Mahāyāna sūtras and one tantric text which the Buddhists of the Kathmandu Valley consider to be their canon: Prajñāpāramitā, Gaṇḍavyūha, Dasabhūmi, Samādhirāja, Laṅkāvatāra, Saddharmapundarīka, Lalitavistara, Suvarṇaprabhāsa, and the Iathāgatagūhya (or Gūhyasamāja Tantra). These texts are

recognised as the official texts, some of them (especially the Prajñāpāramitā) are recited at various times, and the books are worshipped.

All of this is standard Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism; what is unique is the life style of the saṅgha and the vihāras in which they live.

The Vihāras

The term vihāra, of course, refers to the Buddhist monastery, the place where the bhikṣu-saṅgha live. In Newari, the language of the original community of the Kathmandu Valley, there are two terms for these buildings: bāhā and bahī. Bāhā is derived from the Sanskrit vihāra; the term bahī is perhaps derived from the Sanskrit bahirī ("outside"), and these institutions were so called because they were outside or at the edge of the old cities.

The traditional style of the vihāra seems to have been handed down from the earliest days of Buddhism and this can be traced if one looks at the well-preserved cave monasteries of Ajanta and Elora built in western India over two thousand years ago. There one sees the same pattern that can still be found off the streets and alleys of the cities of the Valley: a two-storied series of rooms built round an open courtyard with a special room opposite the entryway, which serves as the shrine of the monastery. Vihāras in Nepal were built of brick and wood, and because of both the climate and frequent earthquakes there are no existing vihāra buildings which pre-date the sixteenth century. Many institutions are much older than this; and some of the ornamentation--carved windows, roof struts, torṇas--were preserved from earlier buildings and may be as old as the twelfth century. However, even the oldest foundations have been continually rebuilt, often much more recently than one would suspect by looking at the buildings.

As a result of this continual rebuilding and of the scarcity of land in the centres of the three cities many vihāras today no longer conform to the proto-type. Today a large number consist of a courtyard with residential buildings, most of which have been constructed at different times and often in different styles, with a Buddhist shrine opposite the entrance. The shrine

has preserved certain distinctive features: a carved doorway and lattice-work door surmounted by a torana and flanked by two small, blind windows. Usually the entrance to the shrine is marked by two stone lions. The first storey of the shrine usually has a five-fold carved window and contains the meeting rooms for the members of the saṅgha. If there are more than these two stories to the shrine the upper stories, which usually have living quarters, may have over-hanging balconies, carved windows or even modern glass windows. The roof, which may be of tile or corrugated iron sheeting, is usually surmounted by one or more finials, often in the form of a caitya.

Especially in Patan, there are places where the shrine is much more elaborate, becoming in fact a modified, multi-roofed temple set into the complex of buildings round the courtyard. The facade of the shrine is often decorated with a profusion of Mahayana and tantric deities, some of stone or cast metal, others done in repousse brass or gilded copper. At Bhince Baha in Patan the shrine is actually a free-standing temple of three roofs.

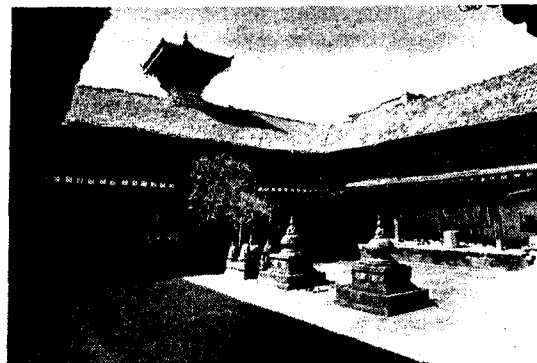
There are a few examples of another type which might be called an extended bāhā complex: a very large courtyard (almost as large as a football field and sometimes resembling a park) surrounded by residential buildings with a Buddhist shrine located along one side. The courtyard is usually filled with images and caityas. Perhaps the best example of this is Bu Baha in Patan.

Another type of bāhā is what one might call a "modern bāhā". This consists of a courtyard surrounded by residential buildings with a small Buddha shrine somewhere in the courtyard but not a separate section of the buildings. Sometimes the shrine is entirely free-standing, either set to one side or in the centre of the courtyard. Sometimes it is a small plastered shrine set against one wall of a courtyard building. These are "modern" in the sense that all the examples one encounters were founded or built within the past one hundred to one hundred fifty years and seem to reflect the deteriorating economic status of the bāhā communities. There are no complete bāhā complexes of the traditional style, which have been constructed within the past hundred and fifty years. Even renovations of old shrines after earthquakes or the ravages of time tend to be simplified



Uku Baha, Patan

Sivadeva Samskarita Sri Rudravarna Mahavihara



Na Baha, Patan

Gangadeva Samskarita Lokakirti Mahavihara

structures or "modern" bāhās.

Whatever the present style of the vihāra it has three essential elements: the shrine of the Buddha, a caitya and a tantric shrine.

The shrine of the Buddha is the centre of the non-tantric worship of the community of the vihāra and his shrine is the one shrine which is open to the public. In most vihāras the image in this shrine is one of the Buddha sitting in the lotus posture and showing the earth-touching gesture. Though this is usually taken to represent the historical Śākya Muni Buddha, it is also the iconographic form of the transcendent Buddha Akṣobhya. The next most popular image is a standing Buddha figure showing the boon-granting gesture with the right hand and with the left hand raised to the shoulder level and gathering up the ends of the robe in an elegant sweep. This is a popular form of the Buddha in Nepal, very ancient and certainly pre-tantric. Nepalese scholars identify this as the gesture of prophecy or prediction, and popular devotion identifies the image as Maitreya, the Buddha to come in the next age. Some shrines have an image of one of the other transcendent Buddhas or one of the principal bodhisattvas especially Padmapāṇi Lokeśvara or Maitreya. All of the images in these ground floor shrines are non-tantric deities except for one image in Bhaktapur of Mahāvairocana. The shrines face north, east or west. The favored direction is north and the shrine never faces south as this is considered inauspicious--south is the direction of Yamarāj the lord of death and the underworld.

In the courtyard of every vihāra is a caitya or stūpa, the specific symbol of a Buddhist institution. Many of these are small, stone monuments only about three feet high, and most of them are not over six feet. A few vihāras, however, such as Sigā Bāhā, Yatakā Bāhā and Mahābū Bāhā in Kathmandu, have been built round large stūpas. In addition to the official caitya, one often finds an array of other votive caityas, i.e., caityas erected by members of the saṅgha or by lay people, in memory of the deceased. In nearly every vihāra courtyard in Patan, and in many in Kathmandu and Bhaktapur, one also finds a maṅḍala, either entirely of stone or of repousse brass (or copper) mounted on a stone base. The maṅḍala in question is the Dharmadhātu Vagīśvara

Mandala. This is one of the largest of the tantric maṅḍalas and the central figure is Mañjuḥṣa, a form of Mañjuśrī considered in this maṅḍala to be of the family of Vajrasattva.

The third essential feature of the vihāra is the tantric shrine where the initiated members of the saṅgha gather to worship the secret tantric deities of the saṅgha. The deities in question are most frequently Herukcakraśaṃvara-Vajravārāhī but occasionally Hevajra-Nairātma or one of the other tantric pairs.

Another feature of most of the vihāra shrines is the toraṇa or tympanum over the doorway. In ancient India the toraṇa was a decorated arch or arched doorway leading into a shrine. In Nepal this has become a semi-circular decorated panel over the doorway of a shrine (whether Hindu or Buddhist) whose main figure usually depicts the deity in the shrine. However, in the case of the vihāras, the figure is often another form of the Buddha, a tantric figure or a representation of an aspect of the Dharma.

The outer circle of the toraṇa is identical in almost all cases. In each of the lower corners is a sea monster facing out. Above these rise swirls of vapour often personified as two serpents with human heads. The coils of the serpents are held fast by a figure above. The figure above is either a garuḍa grasping the serpents in his talons or a cepu, a sort of fierce mask with hands on either side of the face, which grasp the serpents. Above the rising vapour are usually found figures of the sun and the moon.

In the centre of the toraṇa are found one or more Buddhist figures. One of the commonest motifs found on the toraṇas of the vihāras is the five transcendent Buddhas: Vairocana, Akṣobhya, Ratnaśaṃbhava, Amitābha, Amoghasiddhi. Vairocana is usually in the central position but occasionally Akṣobhya may change places with him. Another common motif is a symbolic representation of the Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha. The Buddha is usually Akṣobhya. The Dharma is a four-armed figure of Prajñāpāramitā with two hands joined before her breast in the teaching gesture and the other right and left hands holding a garland of beads and a book, the text of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra. The Saṅgha is represented by a form of Lokeśvara. This is usually Śaḍakṣari Lokeśvara, a four-handed, seated form of Lokeśvara with the two main hands joined in the gesture of greeting and the other right and left

holding a garland of beads and a lotus respectively. This is the Lokeshvara who is a personification of the six-syllabled prayer (ṣaḍakṣarimantra)--"Om Maṇi Padme Hūm". Occasionally the figure is a seated, two handed Avalokiteśvara holding the lotus in his left hand and showing the boon granting gesture with his right. In several places, mainly in Kathmandu, the Buddha is represented by Dharmadhātu Vāgīśvara, a figure with four faces (though often only three are shown) and eight arms. The two main arms show the teaching gesture. The remaining right hands hold a sword, arrow and the vajra; and the left hands hold a book (the Prajñāpāramitā), a bow and a bell. Another form of this same deity known as Mahārāga-mahamañjusrī is also occasionally found. This form also has four faces and eight hands. The four left hands hold the arrow, noose, book (Prajñāpāramitā) and a bell. The right hands hold a bow, an elephant goad, a sword and a vajra.

Another popular motif, especially in Kathmandu, is the figure known as Nāmasaṅgīti, the personification of a text often recited in the vihāras of Kathmandu. This is a single-faced figure with six pairs of hands. The first pair at the heart show the gesture of fearlessness, the second pair above the crown show the gesture of supplication, the third pair usually each hold a staff, one with the double, crossed vajra surmounted by a sword and the other a khajvāṅga. The fourth pair exhibit the gesture of homage to the departed (the specific gesture of the Nāmasaṅgīti), the fifth pair the gesture of sprinkling nectar, and the sixth pair rest on the lap in the gesture of meditation with the begging bowl resting on them. The figure sits in the lotus posture and wears five ornaments each representing one of the transcendent Buddhas: the wheel--Akṣobhya, ear rings--Amitābha, a necklace--Ratnasambhava, bracelets--Vairocana, and a cincture--Amoghasiddhi. This deity seems to be a peculiarly Nepalese creation; it is not found in Indian texts nor in Tibet.

Every vihāra has two names, a Newari name and an official Sanskrit name. The Newari name is often a place name (Dhūākā Bāhā--"the bāhā near the [city] gate"), a direction (Wag Bāhā--the "Eastern Bāhā") or a nickname (Cikaṅ Bahī--"Mustard Oil Bahī"). Especially in Patan the official Sanskrit name often commemorates the founder or chief donor of the foundation: Śrī Laksmikalyāṇa Varma Ṣaṃskārīta Ratnākara Mahāvihāra (Ratnākara Mahāvihāra founded by Śrī Laksmikalyāṇa Varma). The term mahāvihāra was used in India for a cluster of vihāras, or a large

vihāra that had many branches, such as existed at Nalanda. In Nepal the term mahāvihāra is used of almost any vihāra without distinction.

The Bhikṣu Saṅgha

The most unique feature of Newar Buddhism is the bhikṣu saṅgha which constitutes a sort of priestly class in Newar society. Four features characterise this saṅgha: (1) All of the bhikṣus are married. (2) Entrance into the bhikṣu saṅgha is limited to the sons of initiated bhikṣus. (3) Some of the initiated bhikṣus belong to a higher sub-class of tantric priests. (4) The bhikṣus do not live by alms but have a secular occupation to support themselves and their families.

The general Newari term for the bhikṣu is bare, derived from vandya, a term of respect for the Buddhist monk. In inscriptions and other documents from the medieval period they are called Śākyabhikṣu or Śākyavaṃsa (implying descent from the clan of the Śākyas), and in Patan those who were members of a bahī as opposed to a bāhā were often called Brahmacharya Bhikṣu (though in fact they were married). Today most of the ordinary Bare use the surname Śākya, while those who are tantric priests use the surname Vajrācārya. Traditionally the Śākyas were goldsmiths and image casters, and the Vajrācāryas were professional priests and often medical practitioners, though some of them were also goldsmiths. Today both Śākyas and Vajrācāryas engage in a wide range of occupations.

The saṅgha of most monasteries claim descent from a common ancestor or one of several brothers who are considered to be the founders of the vihāra. Few vihāras can document their history and origins, but the tradition of descent from a common ancestor is preserved in legends and underlined by the worship of a common lineage deity. Every Nepali lineage has such a deity which is worshipped once a year by the lineage members as a group. Every family of Śākyas or Vajrācāryas has a lineage deity; and, in all but a few cases, all of the members of the saṅgha of a vihāra share a common lineage deity. Frequently the deity is a caitya, or one of the transcendent Buddhas, but very often it is identified as a tantric deity such as Cakraṣaṃvara, Yogāmbara or Vajrayoginī. The common descent is also underlined by the fact that marriages within a saṅgha are usually

forbidden on grounds of consanguinity, though they are sometimes permitted after seven generations.

From the viewpoint of Buddhism the bhikṣus initiated in a given vihāra constitute the saṅgha. However, in terms of the traditional society of the people of the Valley this has further ramifications. The Valley has always been ruled by Hindu Kings and is basically a caste society. The bhikṣus are in fact a caste, the highest caste among the Buddhist Newars, with the tantric priests considered to be slightly higher than the Śākyas. Their position is the same as that of the Brahmins among the Hindu community.

From the viewpoint of social custom and social interaction the members of a vihāra saṅgha constitute a gūṭhī. A gūṭhī is an organization based on caste or kinship, or occasionally on geographical propinquity, which ensures the continued observance of the social and religious customs and ceremonies of the community. Gūṭhīs in general are social institutions which determine the rights and obligations of a Newar towards his community. Every Newar is a member of several such gūṭhīs, and membership in religious and functional gūṭhīs (such as the funeral gūṭhī which makes arrangements for the cremation of deceased members) is compulsory and inherited. Such membership defines a person's place in society, and to lose membership in such a gūṭhī is to lose one's place in society. Each gūṭhī originally had an endowment, some agricultural land, from which the members obtained an annual income to finance the activities of the gūṭhī. Whatever money was left over from the specific activities of the gūṭhī was used for an annual feast.

Each gūṭhī is well-organised and has strict rules and conditions for membership and the performance of prescribed functions. The senior-most member of the gūṭhī acts as the chairman of the gūṭhī and of the board of elders who oversee its functioning. Their main function is to maintain the discipline of the members. The gūṭhī passes judgment in cases of dispute among members and takes action against those who violate its rules. A majority vote can levy punishments for infractions or even expel a member. Infractions would include bad manners, irregularity in attendance, failure to fulfil one's assigned role in the gūṭhī, breach of caste regulations. Every gūṭhī has an annual meeting when business is conducted and a feast is held.

In the case of the vihāras the structure of the gūṭhī has been grafted onto the structure of a Buddhist monastic community. The members of the gūṭhī are the initiated bhikṣus, the elders are the sthavira and the senior-most elder the mahā-sthavira. The functions which they oversee are the daily, monthly and annual Buddhist observances in the vihāra, initiations into the bhikṣu saṅgha and the discipline of the saṅgha, which in this case consists in seeing that prescribed rituals are performed in turn by the members and that social or caste regulations are observed.

Rituals and Feasts

Every Buddhist monastic community in India had some common religious exercises each day--brief and simple in Theravada monasteries, much more elaborate in Mahāyāna and tantric foundations. One of the main features of this worship (known as the nitya puṣā) was, and still is, the worship of the image of the Buddha enshrined in the monastery. The vihāras of the Valley also have a daily puṣā which is at least a worship of the main image enshrined in the vihāra. Originally the vihāras had a full schedule of rituals throughout the day. This is no longer true except at a very few places like Jana Bāhā in Kathmandu and Kwā Bāhā in Patan. All have a ceremony in the morning (shortly after sunrise, the time depending on the time of the year). This is the official, prescribed worship and consists primarily in the offering of flowers, incense, light, scent and food as well as the recitation of hymns or selections from the sūtras. Most also have an evening service, the main part of which is the offering of a light to the Buddha.

The daily rituals are performed by the initiated members of the saṅgha in turn. Service in the shrine of the monastery is one of the main rights and duties which is conferred on the members of the saṅgha by their initiation, and it is a privilege indeed as no one but the initiated members of the saṅgha may actually enter the shrine. Until very recent times every member of the saṅgha faithfully took his turn. Today many find this inconvenient and get another member of the saṅgha who has the time to take their turn. In some vihāras failure to take one's turn reduces one to the status of a sort of fringe member and disqualifies one from serving as an elder of the saṅgha. In other places it makes no difference. Originally the attendant

had to spend the entire period of his service in the shrine at the vihāra and to follow the monastic rules of a monk during his period of service. This is seldom the case today. In most vihāras the attendant comes in the morning and evening, opens the shrine, performs the prescribed rituals and returns immediately to his home or his quarters in the vihāra. In a few of the principal institutions he remains on duty throughout the day, and members of the saṅgha, as well as lay people, come for the prescribed rituals or to perform their own private devotions.

Certain days of the month are sacred to the Buddhists, especially the full moon day and the eighth day of the bright half of the month which is sacred to Avalokiteśvara. At many of the vihāras one can see large groups of people (mostly women) who come to perform a fast and ritual in honour of Amoghapāśa Lokēśvara (known as the aṣṭamī vrata) on this day.

Theoretically every vihāra (as also every caitya and every other shrine, Buddhist or Hindu) has an annual festival which commemorates the founding of the vihāra and is called "the birthday". Traditionally this has been the one day in the year when the entire saṅgha of a vihāra gathered for religious exercises and a feast. From the viewpoint of the structure of Newar society, this is the annual meeting and feast of the vihāra gūthī. In Patan the custom is almost universally observed; in Kathmandu as families have moved away from their old homes and as income from the endowments has diminished, the custom has begun to die out.

Another annual observance of the entire Buddhist community is what is known as Guṇḍā Dharma. Guṇḍā is the name of one of the Newar months, (occurring from mid-July to mid-August), and the whole month is sacred to the Buddhists. This custom is perhaps an echo of the ancient monastic custom of the "rainy season retreat". Throughout the month there are special observances at the vihāras, at certain shrines like Swayambhunath and at the homes of the Buddhists. Each day is supposed to begin with fasting; streams of people can be seen each morning going to Swayambhunath; and women and girls fashion countless numbers of clay caityas which are thrown into the river at the end of the month or saved and embedded in the dome of stupa. At the vihāras, it was the custom to recite texts during this month, especially the text of the Prajñāpāramitā, but this custom has

largely died out. Following are three customs which are still rather generally observed during this month.

First is the pañcadāna, the giving of five offerings. Originally this was the offering of gifts of food to the monks, and the present custom is an adaptation of this. On the appointed day, which differs in each of the three cities, the Buddhist lay people prepare a sort of altar at their home adorned with Buddhist images. In front of the altar they place baskets with four kinds of grain and salt. Throughout the day the Śākya and Vajrācāryas of the city come and collect their share of offerings. Many of the wealthier Śākya and Vajrācāryas no longer make the rounds, but there is still a continuous procession throughout the day. In Bhaktapur the ceremony is enhanced by a procession of the five main images of Dīpaṅkara Buddha. These proceed to a central place where the faithful from the area place their offerings and the Śākya and Vajrācāryas of that neighbourhood come to receive them. After some time the procession moves on to the next neighbourhood and so on throughout the day. The whole custom is intimately connected with Dīpaṅkara; and in each of the three cities the main image put out on this day is that of Dīpaṅkara. In Patan people say that the custom originated when Dīpaṅkara Buddha himself came to Patan to seek alms and took the alms offered by a poor, old woman of Guita Tole in preference to the rich offerings of the king. A statue of this woman is put out each year on the day of Pañcadāna. Dīpaṅkara is one of the earlier Buddhas said to have come before Śākya Muni and to have predicted his coming. His cult attained a great popularity in medieval Nepal, and there are images of him at almost every vihāra. The images are donated by individuals who have the image consecrated and then usually install it in one of the vihāras. All of these images are brought out in procession at the time of the samyak ceremony which is held every five years at Nāg Bahā in Patan and every twelve years at Bhuikhel below Swayambhunath in Kathmandu. The ceremony is a general pañcadāna to which are invited the saṅghas of all the vihāras in the city. In medieval times it was the custom for wealthy traders to sponsor such a samyak ceremony when they returned prosperous from a long trading expedition to Tibet.

The second observance is what is known as the "Showing of the Deities in the Bahis." Traditionally this lasted for ten

days, and on the first day the members of each vihāra and the lay people used to bring whatever images, Buddhist relics, paintings or books they had to put on display for ten days. Now the custom is fast dying out. Most vihāras no longer put anything out for display and those which do, have a rather meagre display for only a day or two. Many reasons are given for this, the most common being fear of theft; but the fact is that a very large number of these ancient relics have already "disappeared".

The third observance is peculiar to the city of Patan and is known as the "Festival of Lights". This occurs on the second day of the dark half of the month of Guṇḍā; and on this day the people of Patan, carrying lighted tapers, candles or torches, go in groups to visit all of the caityas and vihāras of the city of Patan. This occurs on the day after Gai Jātra, a Hindu festival commemorating those who have died within the past year; and the "Festival of Lights" is considered to be the Buddhist equivalent. This festival is not observed in either Kathmandu or Bhaktapur. There is, however, a similar observance known simply as Bāhā Pūjā which can be performed at any time of the year and is not a commemoration of the dead. It consists in a visit to each of the bāhās in the city, and substantial offerings are made by the participants at each site. The ritual is an expensive one and seldom performed any more.

Harkening back to the monastic practice of having a head of the monastic saṅgha (the māhā-sthavira) and the custom that ordinations cannot be performed without the presence of the monastic community, each vihāra has a number of elders who theoretically oversee the life of the saṅgha and whose presence is required for valid ordinations. In the days when the life of the saṅgha was more vigorous and touched on the daily life of the people more closely, the governing committee was busy and had clearly defined duties. At present their duties are limited to making arrangements for daily services in the shrine, making arrangements for the annual religious observances and feasts, seeing to a few routine business matters like making repairs to the vihāra shrine and settling alleged violations of vihāra customs and caste regulations. In many vihāras today the elders are no more than honorary seniors who have no clearly defined functions other than to be present at ordinations and to sit in the place of honour at feasts. Ordinarily the elders hold office on the basis of strict seniority of initiation, and, in a



Kesha Chandra in the Form of Dipankara Buddha
Bhaskaradeva Samskarita Sri Keshava Chandra Krita Paravata
Mahavihara, Kathmandu

Photo by Chiniya Tamrakar
Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, H.M.G.



Temple of Mahabuddha, Patan
Built in 1665 by Abhayaraja Shakya

Photo by Purna Shakya

vihāra saṅgha that is made up of both Śākya and Vajrācāryas, irrespective of whether one is a Śākya or Vajrācārya, with one exception. The tantric priest, who performs rituals in the secret tantric shrine, must be a Vajrācārya if there are Vajrācāryas in the saṅgha, and he is automatically one of the elders; so there must be at least one Vajrācārya elder.

Vihāra Initiations

As noted above membership in the vihāra saṅgha is limited to the sons of the initiated members of a given vihāra. The sons must be born of a mother of equal caste; if the mother is of a lower caste, the son is ineligible. The saṅgha of a vihāra is then in effect a patrilineal descent group. Birth confers eligibility, but actual membership in the saṅgha follows upon initiation. The initiation is known as the bare chuyegu (the "making of a Bare") and is essentially the pravrajya or first initiation of a Buddhist monk.

The age for initiation is about ten years, in any case, before puberty. However, this may vary considerably. Initiation ceremonies are lengthy and expensive; hence, especially in the smaller institutions, initiations are held at irregular intervals whenever there are enough candidates to share the expenses. About a week before the actual initiation the candidates come to the vihāra, and, after presenting five ritual gifts to the senior-most member of the saṅgha, they formally request the pravrajya ordination from him. On the day before the initiation itself the candidates came again to their vihāra, and are taught to perform the guru maṅḍala rite, a basic rite in honour of Vajrasattva that is performed before every Vajrayāna ritual and which they will have to perform on the next day. At the conclusion of the ceremony the head of the saṅgha ties a tuft of hair at the crown of each candidate's head with a piece of cloth containing a particle of gold, or with a gold ring. This is in preparation for the shaving of the head on the following day.

The following day is the day of the pravrajya. First the candidates perform the guru maṅḍala rite as on the previous day. The rubrics then specify that a short explanation be given to the candidates of the meaning of the pravrajya rite, after which they take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha. Then, the five rules of discipline are read to the candidates. At the conclu-

sion of this the candidates again request initiation, this time from the officiating Vajrācārya priest. Next the candidates, who sit in a line according to age, are led away from the area of the rituals to a barber seated at the edge of the vihāra courtyard for the ritual shaving of their head. The barber shaves the head of each boy leaving a top knot as is done by caste Hindus. Then the boy is presented with a loin cloth. The shaving of the head except for the top knot and the giving of the loin cloth constitutes the initiation rite for all of the Newar castes exclusive of the Śākya and Vajrācāryas. Thus the boys are first initiated as Buddhist laymen. The point is underlined in the ritual texts themselves, for at this point the priest or his assistant is told to address the candidates: "As a result of the rites which have been performed you are now householders. It is not too late to change your mind. Do you really want to be bhikṣus, and why?" The candidates respond that indeed they do want to be bhikṣus and again request the ordination.

This is followed by the pravrajya proper. The candidates are led by turn to a spot directly in front of the shrine of the vihāra. There the senior-most member of the saṅgha cuts off the top knot and the loin cloth. Then the five eldest members of the saṅgha and the officiating priest pour sacred water over the candidate's head. The cutting of the top knot and shedding of the loin cloth symbolize the renunciation of the status of householder and the rejection of caste status by the bhikṣu.

Following the pravrajya proper, the candidates are invested with the robe of a bhikṣu, a red or yellow robe, to which is added two silver bracelets, a pair of ear-rings, and a silver necklace. The candidates are then presented with the begging bowl, a staff and a ritual umbrella. The presiding priest gives each of them a new name saying "You are now a bhikṣu; you must not hanker after the life of a householder, a home, or such things. You must lay aside your household name. I will give you a new name, the name of a bhikṣu." Then the candidates worship the mandalas of the three jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Saṅgha. Following this they listen to the reading of the ten rules of discipline of the bhikṣu. The ritual texts then give a prayer to be recited at the conclusion of the investiture: "May all those who have undergone this rite of pravrajya in the presence of the Buddha, ever be victorious by the favour of the gods and the power of fire, water, sky and the vital spirit, as

long as Mt. Meru stands, as long as the Ganga flows, as long as the earth, the sun and the moon remain constant."

At the conclusion of the investiture each of the candidates in turn is handed a golden water pot and is led carrying it into the shrine of the vihāra. As an initiated member of the saṅgha he has the right to enter this shrine and the duty to serve as an attendant of the Buddha.

The bhikṣu must beg his food daily and the next rite is a ceremonial offering of alms to the new bhikṣus. A low basket is placed in front of each of the bhikṣus and a procession of people comes along to offer uncooked rice and coins to them. The first to offer alms to each must be the boy's mother's brother, who offers him not only rice but also a tray containing a new set of clothes which he will don four days later. Finally the new bhikṣus are taken out of the vihāra in procession round the neighbourhood.

The boys are now bhikṣus, and for four days they must live the life of Buddhist monks, though they continue to live at home whether the family has quarters inside of the vihāra or outside. They have to observe the regulations of diet of the monk (only one meatless meal a day, taken before noon), avoid contact with anything unclean, and keep the ten rules of discipline. They have to go out each morning to beg their food, and for this they must go to the houses of their mother's brothers and their father's sisters. Beyond this they ordinarily go to the houses of any other relatives who call them, usually three or four houses a day.

Four days after the pravrajya rites the young bhikṣus return to the vihāra for the ceremony of "Laying Aside the Monk's Robe", also called "Release from the Vows". For this ceremony the boys are taken up into the secret tantric shrine of the vihāra where they make the following petition to the officiating priest, "O Teacher, we find that it is too difficult to spend our whole life like this as celibate monks." The priest responds, "If you find it too difficult to live as celibate monks then live as householders. If you want heaven (svarga) you can obtain it by being a householder, but do not indulge in violence, do not tell lies, do not covet another's wife. If you avoid these things you will obtain heaven." They then lay aside their monk's robes and put

on the new set of clothes given them by their mother's brother on the day of the pravrajya. Finally they are given a mantra of Herukacakraṣaṃvara.

According to the tradition of the Buddhists of the Valley the boys do not cease to be bhikṣus by the above rite but pass from the state of celibate bhikṣus to that of householder bhikṣus, a fact underlined by the name bhikṣu or śākyabhikṣu used to refer to them down the ages. In some places the official ceremonies in the vihāra are followed by a ceremony at home conducted by the family Vajrācārya priest in which the priest addresses the boy in these terms: "You have gone through Śrāvākāyāna and now come to Mahāyāna, the greatest of the Buddhist yānas. You have participated in some Vajrayāna rituals and after going through some higher ordinations you will know what Cakrasaṃbar is." From the viewpoint of Vajrayāna Buddhism, the initiated passes through successively higher forms of Buddhism. Starting as a totally uninitiated boy, he is first initiated as a Buddhist householder (upāsaka). Then he becomes a Śrāvākāyāna monk through the pravrajya. With the "Laying Aside of the Robes" he embraces the Mahāyāna stage, and, if he is a Vajrācārya, he will be further initiated into the mysteries of the Vajrayāna, i.e., the adamant way, the highest and most powerful of the Buddhist ways of attaining enlightenment.

Vajrācārya Initiations

Entrance into the ranks of the Vajrācāryas is also limited by birth; only the sons of Vajrācāryas may be initiated. The Vajrācārya initiation, which is conferred sometime after the "Laying Aside of the Robes", consists of five tantric consecrations: the "Water Flask Consecration", the "Crown Consecration", the "Diamond Consecration", the "Bell Consecration", and the "Secret Consecration." The water flask, ritual crown, bell and ritual sceptre (vajra = diamond) are the implements which the Vajrācārya uses for his performance of ritual. The secret consecration was originally the consecration of the tantric Yogi and his consort and symbolizes the union of Wisdom and Means, the female and male principles of Vajrayana philosophy. Following these consecrations the candidates are given a mantra of Herukacakraṣaṃvara. They are then enjoined to secrecy about the details of these initiation rites. In practice the secrecy is taken to refer to the mantra itself; this is always passed from

teacher to disciple and never divulged or written down even in the ritual texts.

Having taken these consecrations the Vajrācārya is empowered to perform the fire sacrifice, an essential part of all major rituals, and to confer consecrations. He is further empowered to perform the secret tantric rites in the tantric shrine of the vihāra or in his own home if he has such a shrine. He is entitled to have client families for whom he acts as priest for the performance of rites of passage and votive rituals, and from whom he receives a stipend for his services. In each vihāra where there are Vajrācāryas there is an Association of Vajrācāryas (Acārya Gūṭhī) composed of all the Vajrācārya members of the saṅgha. In Kathmandu there is an overall organization of all the Vajrācāryas of the city known simply as the Acārya Gūṭhī. This Acārya Gūṭhī was responsible for standardizing ritual and providing ritual texts for its members. For this reason there is greater uniformity in the performance of ritual in Kathmandu than in Patan or Bhaktapur; and the Vajrācāryas of Kathmandu are recognized by their confreres in Patan and Bhaktapur as experts in the performance of the ritual.

From a religious and social point of view the most vital service provided to the Buddhist community by the members of the vihāras is the priestly service of the Vajrācāryas. They are needed for caste initiations, marriages, worship of the lineage deity, rites for the dead and all principal rituals whether performed in the home or at a vihāra. Hence the dominant place of the Vajrācāryas and of the Acārya Gūṭhī in Kathmandu whose eighteen vihāras are still recognised as the principal vihāras of Kathmandu.

Types of Viharas

There are today some 363 Buddhist vihāras still extant in the Valley, but they are not all of equal status. As mentioned above there are two types of institutions, bāhā and bahī. Among the bāhās there are two broad categories called "main vihāras" and "branch vihāras". A main vihāra is one in which pravrajya initiations are regularly performed. The branch vihāras are branches of the main institutions founded when the space in the original vihāra would no longer accommodate the ever-expanding saṅgha, or when a lay donor was moved to found a vihāra and

donate it to one lineage of an existing viḥāra saṅgha. Members of a branch are still considered to be members of the main monastery and must receive their initiation there, take their turn in the shrine and serve as elders of the saṅgha. At the same time they have similar obligations toward their branch monastery.

Thus in Patan there are eighteen main bāhās and over 130 bāhās which are branches of these main monasteries. In Kathmandu there are eighteen main bāhās belonging to the Acārya Gūṭhī, all of which have Vajrācārya members and several have only Vajrācāryas. To this day they are considered to be the most important bāhās of Kathmandu despite the fact that there are ten other main bāhās of Śākyas where pravrajya initiations are performed. Both the main bāhās of the Acārya Gūṭhī and the ten Śākya bāhās have branches. In Bhaktapur there are only nine main bāhās, some Śākya and some mixed.

The bāhās form a separate class of monastery. Where the original buildings have been preserved, certain architectural differences between the two institutions can be pointed out: The bāhī is usually a simpler structure with much less ornamentation and few multi-headed or multi-armed figures. The entire ground floor is one continuous open hall suitable for gatherings of people or exhibitions. The shrine is a small, windowless room situated directly opposite the main entrance and offset from the rest of the building so that it is possible for devotees to circumambulate it. The upper storey usually has a projecting balcony which enlarges the space, but like the lower floor it is usually undivided and a continuous open hall except for a single blind room directly above the shrine. This room houses the secret tantric deities of the monastery. The roof is wide and overhanging, and the space under the roof is unused. Above the roof over the shrine is a small temple-like structure, a sort of hanging lantern or cupola. These are rather superficial differences. It seems that at one time the bāhī communities practiced an earlier, simpler and more monastic type of Buddhism, but today in fact there is little difference between the two institutions in terms of the type of Buddhism practised and the social structure of the community. Further research is needed to discern exactly the original differences between these two types of institutions.

The Buddhist Laity

The position of the Sakyas and Vajracaryas in the society of the Kathmandu Valley is clear. They constitute the bhikṣu saṅgha, and the Vajrācāryas among them are the priests of the entire Buddhist community. Their religious traditions, their rituals are all clearly tantric Buddhist, and if asked they will identify themselves as Buddhists. The question of the lay Buddhists--who they are and what percentage of the population they constitute--is a question less easy to answer. The Newar trading class of Kathmandu, and three or four other communities of people, are clearly and consciously Buddhist. Beyond this there are few clear distinctions. The agricultural class constitute about forty-five percent of the population of the Kathmandu Valley. Nearly all of these families use Vajrācārya priests for their rites of passage and call them to preside over the annual festivals in their villages. One also finds caityas and occasionally Buddhist shrines in their villages. Yet the deities which they worship in their villages are mainly Hindu tantric deities. If one analyses their current practices what appears is a substratum of religious rites and customs that were originally purely animistic but which have been influenced by outside forces of higher traditions--tantric Hinduism which has resulted in Hindu names for the deities, stories from the Pūrāṇas to explain their background, and modes of worship that are tantric and Hindu. Tantric Buddhism contributed the family priests; and this probably came about because of the availability of the Vajrācāryas. In medieval times there were far more Vajrācāryas than Brahmans in the Valley, especially in Patan and Kathmandu. The villagers readily accepted and respected the Vajrācāryas above all because they possessed power--the power to ward off evil, to subdue malevolent deities, to coerce supernatural forces and bend them to the use of the villagers.

History and Development

Buddhist stories and legends give a hoary antiquity to Buddhism in the Valley tracing human habitation to a visit of Manjusri who drained the lake that once filled the Valley. Other stories speak of visits to the Valley by the legendary Buddhas who preceeded the historical Buddha: Kasyapa Buddha, Krakuchanda, Kaṇakamuni, Dīpaṅkara Buddha. Some of the viḥāras are said to have been founded by these early Buddhas. Legend speaks

of a visit to the Valley by the Emperor Aśoka. The four stūpas at the cardinal points of the city of Patan are attributed to him, many ancient caityas in Kathmandu are attributed to him, and he is said to have arranged the marriage of a daughter to a nobleman of Nepal.

Given the proximity of the Kathmandu Valley to Lumbini and Kapilavastu and to the areas of North Bihar and U.P. where Buddhism spread rapidly even during the time of the Buddha, it is quite possible that the Dharma found its way to the Valley during the lifetime of the Buddha himself. It is not a priori impossible that the Emperor Aśoka visited the Valley, but there is no contemporary evidence of such a visit either from Nepal or from Buddhist sources in India. Unlike India, where the ancient Buddhist sites are abandoned ruins, the ancient sites in Nepal are still active shrines. Hence archeological investigation of sites such as the four stūpas of Patan is impossible without offending the religious sensibilities of our people.

Sectarian rivalry between professional Hindus and Buddhists was not unknown in the ancient and medieval period. Yet those who followed the way of the Buddha and those who followed the way of Shiva, as the two traditions were known then, were members of one unified society and this unity was the over-riding factor. This close association has a long history. The first contemporary evidence of the presence of Buddhism in the Valley comes from the corpus of Licchavi inscriptions ranging from A.D.464 to the middle of the 8th century and comprising nearly 200 inscriptions, some of them mere fragments. The Licchavis probably ruled Nepal from about the beginning of the Christian era and were a dynasty with a strong Sanskrit tradition whose kings ruled "by the favour of Paśupati" (Shiva). Yet we know from inscriptions that several of these kings built and endowed Buddhist monasteries. Vṛsadeva, a king of the Licchavi period who preceeds the time of the earliest inscription, is said by the inscriptions and by the chronicles to have been a Buddhist and to have founded a monastery at Swayambhunath. The inscriptions mention 14 viḥāras and the earliest and most reliable of the Nepalese chronicles, mentions six viḥāras from this period.

From the inscriptions themselves we know nothing about the internal operation of the viḥāra, the makeup of the sahgha, or the life style of the bhikṣus. We know nothing about the sect or



Licchavi Plaque showing the Wheel of the Dharma, a Parasol, and a Vajra
Konti Bahi, Patan

From inscriptions to rule



Gathering of the Dipankara Buddhas at Hanuman Dhoka
Samyek Festival, 1968

Photo by Purna Shakya

sects the bhikṣus of a given vihāra belonged to except for a fragmentary reference at Sankhu to the (mahā)sāṅghikā bhikṣu saṅgha. There are a number of references to the bhikṣu or bhikṣuni saṅgha and one reference to a sākyabhikṣu. From a number of references in inscriptions to Avalokiteśvara and images of him from the period which have survived we know that Mahāyāna Buddhism flourished. The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang noted that there were both Hindus and Buddhists in Nepal. The temples of the gods and the monasteries existed side by side and there were a total of about 2000 monks who studied both the Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna. It seems that Vajrayāna Buddhism was known, but certainly had not attained the dominance it latter enjoyed.

The following early medieval period (ca. A.D. 700-1200) was certainly a time of the flowering of Buddhism in the Valley. Collections of manuscripts in the National Archives and outside of Nepal give ample testimony to a great deal of literary activity. Among the most popular texts which have come down to us are the Aṣṭasahasrika-Prajñāpāramitā, Kāraṇāvhyūha, collections of Buddhist stories, plus a large number of tantras and tantric ritual texts, the most popular of which was the Pañcarakṣa. All of the manuscripts are in Sanskrit; there is not a single Pali text from this period. Vihāras multiplied and it is clear from the Buddhist tradition of Patan that the monasteries which have survived from the medieval period were nearly all founded, renovated and endowed by members of the ruling aristocracy. Even today the descendants of this class have ritual roles to play in many of the principal Buddhist festivals. Today these people would identify themselves as Hindu; in an earlier age they would have found such a distinction meaningless. In this period the residents of the vihāras continue to be called Sākyabhikṣu or simply Bhikṣu, though some are identified as Vajrācārya. Many documents concerning land transactions have come down to us from this period and what strikes one immediately in these documents is the large number of Sākyabhikṣus and Bhikṣus who are buying and selling land in their own name. There are only a few instances of transactions in the name of a saṅgha or a vihāra. Some of the Sākyas are referred to as "goldmakers". All of this would seem to indicate a high degree of secularization.

This was also the time when the Dharma was being revived in Tibet and many Tibetans came to Nepal to study and receive initiations. Records such as the Blue Annals attest to the presence

in the Valley of a number of teachers and tantric adepts under whom the Tibetans studied. Some of these were Indian but many were definitely Nepalese. Among the famous Indian scholars and yogic adepts were Vagīśvarakīrti, Vibhūticandra, Milarepa, Bud-dhaśrī, Ratnarakṣita, Śāntarakṣita, Vasubandhu. Atiśa, or Dīpankara Śrījñāna as he was known in India, spent a year in Nepal in A.D. 1041-42 and built a temple or shrine at Tam Vihāra (the present Tam Bahī in Kathmandu). He noted that the discipline and the manner of conducting the study of the Doctrine at this vihāra was excellent. Among the Nepalese scholars mentioned are Anutapāgupta and Vairocana (disciples of Atiśa), Nayaśrī, Bandepā, Phamtīm-pā and his four brothers.

The year A.D. 1200 saw the rise of a new dynasty in the Valley, the Mallas. Various branches of this family ruled until 1769 when the last of the three cities fell to Prithvīnarayan Shah, the first king of the present dynasty. By 1200 the great centres of Indian Buddhism had vanished, and the Buddhist community of Nepal lost contact with what had been an important source of renewal and replenishment. But unlike what happened in the plains of India, Buddhism did not disappear in Nepal. The monasteries flourished and Buddhism remained an essential element in the fabric of the society. The developments of the previous period continued, and the tantric Buddhism of the Vajracāryas became the dominant form eclipsing all earlier forms. The monks continued to be referred to as bhikṣu, śākyabhikṣu or śākyavaṃsa implying descent from the clan of Śākya, a claim still made by some of the Śākyas. A manuscript of A.D. 1440-41 gives rules for the conduct of the initiation of the monks in a Patan monastery--Uam Baha, one of the extant main bāhās. It lists the various donations that are to be made at the time of initiations and specifically states that if any member of the saṅgha has a son who is of a lower caste than himself (i.e., if he is the son of a woman of lower caste), the boy is not to be initiated. This is a clear statement of three facts: the members of the saṅgha are married and have sons, membership in the saṅgha is limited to sons of members, and pure caste status is a prerequisite for initiation.

The term "celibate monk" (brahmacārya bhikṣu) appears in this period for the members of the bahīs in Patan. In religious practice it seems that these institutions kept to the customs of an earlier and simpler type of Buddhism. Yet an inscription of

A.D. 1514 speaks of a "celibate monk", his wife and his children, and after this time there are several such references, so they too were married men. It seems that by the 16th century, celibacy as a monastic institution had disappeared, though there may have been occasional, individual celibate monks. One can cite concrete examples of celibate Nepalese monks in the Valley within the past two hundred years, but they were clearly exceptions to the rule and individual, isolated occurrences. They seem to have been men who had spent some time in Tibet, received ordination there as Mahāyāna bhikṣus and continued their practice when they returned home. Most of them seem to have been of the trading class, i.e., men who by caste were excluded from the rank of monk (Bare) in Nepal. Furthermore, the bahīs as institutions preserving earlier traditions began to decline. The more tantric traditions of the bāhās had become the norm. People who were members of bahī communities were considered of a slightly lower status and gradually they began to drift away to the bāhās. By the time of King Siddhinara Simha Malla (A.D. 1618-61) of Patan, many of these institutions were abandoned and he assigned the establishments to others. From that time to the present the bahī communities have continued to diminish so that today they form only five percent of the total Śākyas and Vajracāryas in the Valley.

It has often been said that the bāhās and bahīs are all former monasteries. This statement is erroneous on two counts. First, in the accepted tradition of the Valley they are still monasteries, i.e., abodes or shrines of an initiated saṅgha of householder bhikṣus and tantric priests, the Vajracāryas. If the statement means to say that the bāhās and bahīs were formerly the residences of celibate monks, it is also inaccurate. The bahīs may well have housed celibate monks at one time. The branch bāhās, which make up the bulk of the number, were clearly founded for a lineage of a householder bāhā. It is entirely possible that the main bāhās have always been what they are today, i.e., vihāras for a married saṅgha. We have no evidence that they were ever anything different, and how else explain the consistent tradition of a common descent for all members of the saṅgha and a common lineage deity? They may well have been founded by individuals who had once been celibate monks, but the individual then left his former monastery and founded a householder vihāra which has been passed on by heredity from one generation of his descendants to the next.

Outsiders coming to Nepal to study the Buddhist tradition of the Kathmandu Valley have often been puzzled by what they have found and critical of the tradition. One has the impression that many writers criticize the tradition because it is tantric. This is a biased judgement, and ultimately the tradition must be judged against the yardstick of the Mahāyāna-Tantric tradition. A common impression is that it is mixed-up with Hinduism. Again, this often seems to be a judgment on tantric Buddhism with its multiplicity of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, protective deities and demons plus the tantric ritual. The iconography of many such deities has indeed been "borrowed" from the Hindus, or better, from the general treasury of Indian iconographic tradition. Thus many forms of Avalokiteśvara (e.g., Nīlakaṇṭha Lokeśvara) show heavy Saivite borrowings and the very name Lokeśvara is ambiguous to the outsider. But Avalokiteśvara is not Siva and no Buddhist would confuse the two. The rituals performed by the Vajrācāryas and the rituals performed by the Hindu tantric priests may seem identical to the casual observer, but the meaning and purpose of the rituals is totally different.

The most puzzling aspect to the outsider is caste--the bhikṣus have become a caste and the saṅgha is a closed society. This is indeed at variance with the stated Buddhist tradition that the saṅgha is open to men and women of any caste. Yet the phenomenon is not peculiar to Nepal. In other Buddhist countries also the monastic saṅgha is in fact closed to persons of certain castes or racial backgrounds. Furthermore, throughout its history in India Buddhism existed in a caste society. The monk could withdraw from that society to his vihāra, but the lay Buddhist remained very much a part of Hindu society and lived according to its traditions making use of the Brahmans to perform the usual rituals and initiate his sons into their caste. By becoming a Buddhist a man chose a different way of salvation, he did not opt out of (Hindu) society; only the monk opted out of society. A study of the Buddhist tradition of the Kathmandu Valley provides then some inkling of the way Buddhism functioned in India as a part of the Indian (Hindu) scene. It is indeed, as one writer has called it, "the survival of Indian Buddhism." Finally, because of the very closed and confined nature of the society of the Valley its position within a Hindu society was pushed to its logical conclusion--the monks became a caste. Yet this development which is often criticised by modern Nepalis themselves is probably the most important factor in the survival

of Buddhism in the Valley. It survived because the monks became a caste thereby insuring that their sons would of necessity be ordained bhikṣus in order to maintain their place in society. This created a permanent Buddhist community and prevented its complete absorption by the dominant tradition as happened in India. In some ways the Nepal tradition became more explicitly Buddhist, for with the rise of tantric Buddhism and the importance of the Vajrācārya priest, the lay folk no longer depended on the Brahman priest. All rites of passage and home rituals were henceforth performed by the tantric Buddhist priest.

The Present Scene

After the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley kingdoms by the King of Gorkha in A.D. 1769 and the subsequent unification of modern Nepal, the Buddhists of the Kathmandu Valley continued their traditional practices with little change until the middle of this century. From 1846 to 1951 Nepal was ruled by a family of hereditary prime ministers who kept the country closed to all outside influences. Since 1951, when King Trubhuvan took rule into his own hands and opened the country to the outside world, Nepal has been subject to the rapid change that characterises all modern societies.

These changes have affected the Buddhist community also and many deplore the changes. People will point to the deteriorating state of the vihāras, especially in Kathmandu where soaring cement boxes replace sections of the bāhā complex, so that all that is left of the original architecture is the shrine of the Buddha. Except at a few places like Jana Bāhā in Kathmandu and some of the main bāhās in Patan rituals are performed perfunctorily with few people in attendance. Fewer people attend many of the festivals each year and there is more and more of a carnival atmosphere. Many people call the Vajrācārya for only the most essential rituals and even at these one often finds that the family leaves the priest to perform the rituals alone. They are present at the beginning or only when their presence is required. Vajracaryas are poorly paid for their services. People are paying them the same stipends they were years ago before inflation, and it is impossible for a man to make a decent living functioning only as a priest. One has the impression that they are providing a service that the people still feel obliged to make use of but one which they find increasingly irksome or

irrelevant. Many young Sakyas and Vajracaryas know of their bāhā only as the place where they received their caste initiation.

These changes are a part of the general socio-economic changes which are affecting all sectors of society in Nepal. The most important factor in these changes which affect all sectors of Newar society, not just the viḥāras or the Buddhists, is the undercutting of the economic basis of Newar cultural institutions. All of Newar cultural institutions are regulated by gūṭhīs and financed by revenue from gūṭhī lands. Several factors have cut into this revenue. The most obvious is the increase of population. The population of the viḥāras is ever increasing. The members of the farmer families who farm the land of the viḥāras are also increasing. Land is not increasing. A given piece of land must now support more farmers and provide revenue for larger communities in the viḥāras. Even if all the endowments had remained intact the whole system would be under strain. But they have not. Over the past two hundred years much of this land has been appropriated by the government or sold off by the viḥāra members themselves. Land Reform limited the amount tenant farmers have to pay to their land owners (private individuals or corporate bodies such as the viḥāra gūṭhīs); and with the increasing press on the land many farmers have simply stopped making their usual payments.

Along with this undercutting of the economic basis is a growing change in the life style of the Śākyas and Vajracāryas, especially in Kathmandu. Many of these people are in businesses which have prospered or in government service. When a family has the means they usually sell off their cramped quarters in the viḥāra and build a house on the outskirts of the city. Others find that there is simply not room enough in the viḥāra for their growing family and either buy or rent quarters wherever available in the city. This migration is breaking up the old communities. Whereas in former times all members of the saṅgha lived in the viḥāra and thus shared in the daily round of ritual, the monthly and yearly observances and the local festivals, they now return to their viḥāra only for the annual festival or the worship of the lineage deity. In some cases they return only for the all important initiation of their sons. The round of ritual and the stories told during the rituals served as the catechesis of the young--the vehicle by which the traditions of the community, its

values and obligations were passed on to the young. This has been lost. Even for the young who still live in the viḥāra there are more alluring attractions than watching rituals--Hindi films, video, or a stroll with their friends down New Road.

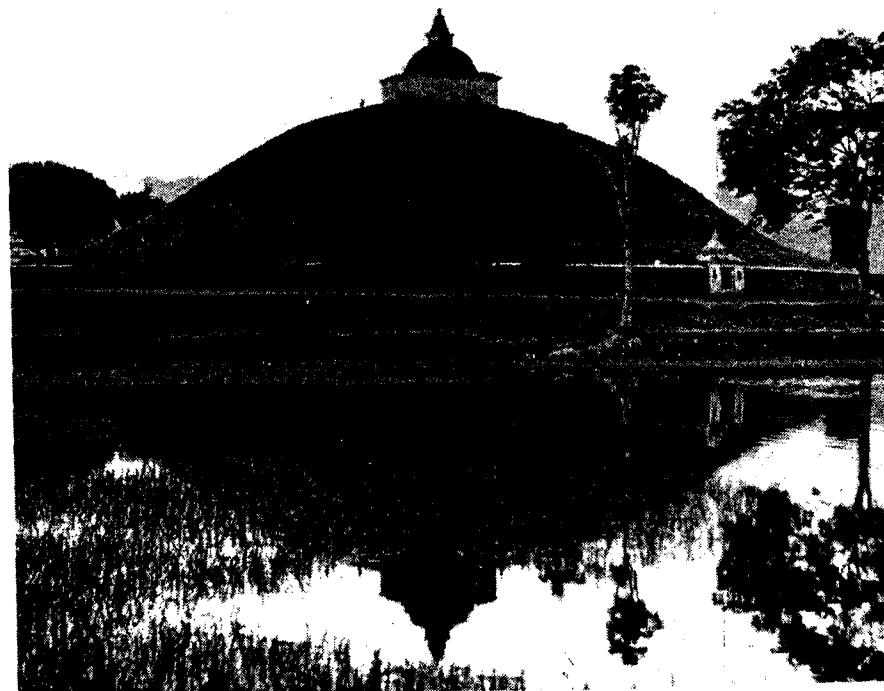
It is also the Śākyas and Vajracāryas, and more so the wealthy trading class among the Buddhists of Kathmandu, who have taken the greatest advantage of the availability of modern education. This has had two effects. Vajracāryas who have the education go into the professions or into government service with the result that the young Vajracāryas who are left to carry on the tradition are the least educated members of the community. The better educated Buddhists who want to preserve their Buddhist traditions then have no one within their own tradition to turn to for an exposition of Buddhism commensurate with their own education.

Change there is indeed; but not necessarily deterioration. The Dharma is alive and well. Many Buddhists within the community are acutely aware of the crisis these changes have provoked. Groups have been formed and efforts are being made to spread the Dharma through books, seminars, singing groups, etc. This has already borne considerable fruit as young people learn more and more about their Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna traditions and grapple with the problem of adapting them to a modern setting. The growing Theravada movement has had a profound influence on the renewal of Buddhism. Though people seem reluctant to invest money in the restoration of old institutions, they have been extremely generous in providing money for the foundation of Theravada viḥāras over the past twenty years and, more recently, for the foundation of Vipassana meditation centres which not only serve the traditional community but are attracting considerable interest among the population at large. The Theravada monks themselves have adapted their traditional practices to the needs and customs of the people; and the people have responded.

One finds in the Kathmandu Valley then what is probably the oldest unbroken tradition of the practice of the Dharma--a tradition which has undergone many changes as a result of the social, cultural, economic and political influences the community has experienced over the last 2500 years. Like the traditional Nepali masked dancers, Buddhism in the Valley has worn many faces over the ages and danced to different rhythms. Today a new face

is emerging and life has a new rhythm. Yet the tune is the same, that of the Four Noble Truths. There is little doubt that the Dharma will continue to be the life force of the community as it has been for twenty-five centuries.

John K. Locke, S.J.
Sanepa-Ring Road
Lalitpur



One of the Four Stupas of Patan Attributed to Ashoka
Lagankhel, Patan

Photo by Purna Shakya