

BOOK REVIEW

LeVine, Sarah and David N. Gellner. 2005. *Rebuilding Buddhism: The Theravada Movement in Twentieth-Century Nepal*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University. xiii+377 pages. Price ? Hardcover. ISBN 0-674-0908-3

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

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

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

margi) and followers of the way of the Buddha (*bauddha margi*), but they never saw any sharp distinctions. Nor was this the view that the rulers of modern Nepal had attempted to enshrine in their vision of Nepal as a truly traditional Hindu society. However, things began to change in Nepal as outside influences began to affect the people of Nepal with a large number of Nepalis serving in the British Gurkhas in both World War I and World War II, with the growth of education (especially in Eastern Nepal) and with the growing independence movement in India where many disaffected Nepalis found refuge. These changes gained momentum in the days of the Pancayat regime which made good use of modern means of communication to spread a strictly Brahminical and Sanskrit Hinduism as the norm. This was not the tradition of the majority of the people of Nepal who were content to identify themselves as "Hindu" in a broad sense as long as this term accepted their cultural traditions as of equal value. This has resulted in a growing awakening among the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic peoples of the country giving rise to the *jan-jati* movements which have been a characteristic of the past fifteen years and many of which clearly state "We are not Hindu". This study fits into that context.

This first chapter also recounts the origin and development of female renouncers in the Buddhist traditions of South and South East Asia, a movement which had a profound affect on the development of the Theravada movement in Nepal. One cannot understand this movement without a study of the role played by women. They have been paramount and their stories are recounted in this study.

Chapter Two traces the origins of the movement in Nepal and gives an excellent account of the context, i.e. traditional Newar Society and the role of Buddhism in that society and its attempts to preserve its traditions under the strict Hindu regime of the Ranas. The tale begins with the story of Jagat Man Vaidya, a Sakya from Chikāñ Bahi in Lalitpur who was the first to embrace the new Buddhism, taking the name of Dharmaditya Dharmacharyya in 1923. The next trailblazer was Mahapragya who was ordained by a truly charismatic Burmese monk called Chandramani who resided at Kushinagara in India. By 1931 three Newar women had found their way to Kushinagara and requested ordination. Chandramani was unable to ordain them as the Theravada tradition held that the order of nuns had become extinct. He did, however, give them the ten precepts and called them *angārikā*, or "homeless ones". This was the origin of the so-called nuns. The chapter then recounts the difficulties that both the monks and nuns encountered as they tried to live as monks and nuns in a Buddhist society that was not used to such people during the strict Rana regime resulting in their eventual exile from Nepal.

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

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

The final chapter is a conclusion which looks toward the future looking at the status of the monks, the nuns and the lay people and the difficulties that

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

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

– John K. Locke

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- Tiwari, Sudarshan Raj. 2001. *The Ancient Settlements of the Kathmandu Valley*. Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University.
- Maharjan, Pancha Narayan. 2000. "The Maoist Insurgency and Crisis of Governability in Nepal." In Dhruba Kumar (ed.), *Domestic Conflict and Crisis of Governability in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, pp. 163-196.
- Khatri, Sridhar K. 2001. "Teaching of International Relations in Nepal." *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*. 28:2, pp 139-154.
- Shrestha, Bal Gopal. 2002. "The Ritual Composition of Sankhu: The Socio-Religious Anthropology of a Newar Town in Nepal." Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. Leiden University.

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