

## BUDDHIST CULTURE OF THE KATHMANDU VALLEY

**Prof. Khadga Man Shrestha,** Registrar  
Lumbini Bauddha University, Nepal

Kathmandu Valley is endowed with rich Buddhist Culture. It is regarded as the centre of *Nepal Mandala* Illustration of legends and literally sources like *Nepal Mahatmya*, *Swayambhu Purana* and *Avadanas* testify the fact that *Nepal Mandala* had remained as the center of living culture and holiest of the holy places both for the Buddhists and the Hindus. The Buddhists and the Hindus have co-existence in the valley since time immemorial. Religious syncretism is the main feature of Nepalese culture. One visits the shrine of the other with great respect and veneration.

According to a legend, Ashoka erected five commemorative *stupas* in the city of Patan and sixth one at Kirtipur. Ashoka's daughter *Charumati* built *Charumati Vihara* in Chabahil, Kathmandu. The monolithic *Stupa* over there contained no icons of the Buddha. Up to the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. we find no Buddhist statues in the valley. Mention of non-Sanskrit name *Gun Vihara* in the inscriptions was there in the pre-Licchavi period that was a center of learning. Prof. Mukunda Raj Aryal, however, mentions that the mutilated image of *Hadigaon*, most probably of *Bohisattva*, can be dated to be of the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.

The big stone icon of *Bodhisattva (Devabatar)* of *Svayambhu Vahi*, the life size *Bodhisattva* of *Sankhamul*, Patan and *Caitya* Park located to the north of *Harati* Temple of *Svayambhu* are the best evidences of the tangible cultural heritage of the Buddhists of Nepal in the Licchavi period from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Art historians are of the opinion that the most surviving Nepal's cast-images date from 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. onwards. Copper casting of *Bodhisattva Maitreya* of the 6<sup>th</sup> century donated by a Shakya nun *Parisuddhamati* of Lalitpur is the artifact of the *Licchavi* period. *Itumbahal*, the courtyard of 5<sup>th</sup> century in the Kathmandu valley, is a seat of Mahayana Buddhism. Therefore, Mary Shepherd Slusser, the German Scholar in her book *Nepal Mandala* vol. 1, Chapter X remarks-"In the Kathmandu Valley Mahayana Buddhism has survived as a living tradition. The valley is not only an immense museum of Buddhist antiquities but it is a unique oasis of surviving Mahayana Buddhist doctrine."

### Stupa and Caitya

Innumerable monolithic *Caityas* with polished stone made niches of the *Licchavi* period testify the fact that the common people in the valley practiced Mahayana Buddhism. *Stupas* are the embodiments of *Dharmakaya* or Buddha mind. The Tibetans call it as *Chorten*. *Stupa* architecture consist of a spherical dome, a cubical steeple known as *hermika*, and generally a spire of 13<sup>th</sup> Discs or stepping blocks in diminishing size. The traditional *Newer Stupa* design consists of *Padma* the lotus, *Chhatra* a canopy, and *Usnisha Chudamani* a jewel at the top. Two eyes and one dot are painted on the cubical *hermika* (Steeple) in each direction. Scholars regard them as the door to the Buddhist philosophy.

### Dharmadhatu Mandala

The *Stupa* represents the mind aspect of the Buddhas and *Dharmadhatu Mandala* is placed to the east of the *Caitya*. It is made of stone or metal. *Dharmadhatu* is defined as the "realm of phenomena." It reveals suchness in which emptiness and dependent origination are inseparable. It is also the figurative expression of *Dharmakaya Buddha* and his circle of divinities. The Buddhist scholars point out that *Stupas* represent the elements or factors of Enlightenment (an insight on four noble truths). The plinth that consists of the three terraces represents the factors of Enlightenment (37 in *Bodhipaksya*). The *Vajra* symbolizes emptiness and compassion. The dome represents *Tathagata Garbha* or Buddha nature (potential to attain Buddhahood, from which all virtuous qualities develop. Generally statues of heavenly kings are placed in the four corners of the *Stupa*. Azima shrine is placed in every *Vihara* where the *Stupa* is erected.

### Om Mani Padmehun

The rotating prayer wheels usually consist of six letters in *Ranjana Script* of the Newars. It is the essence *Mantra* of *Avalokiteshvara*, Buddha of compassion. The rotating wheels remind us the practice of compassion. The followers of *Vajrayana Buddhists* in Nepal and Tibet have common practice of rotating prayer wheels. The devotees believe that the six letters are symbolic for six realms. The practitioners generate compassion for the sentient beings of six realms to eliminate six defilements, the causes of issuance of their suffering.

## Offering Butter Lamps

By offering butter lamps to the *Stupas*, The devotees believe that they will attain wisdom of Buddha of three realms.

### Theravada

Originally there were no divinities in Buddhism. So there were no objects of worship and using Hinayani phase the symbolic *Stupa*, Footprints, empty throne, *Bodhi* tree and *Dharma Chakra* filled the void and at length the image of Buddha. It has been pointed out that the Mathura Art School is creditable for image cult in India probably in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. its impact is also visible in Nepal.

It has also been pointed out that a Vajrayan Buddhism superseded Mahayana School as time passed on. Mahayana School was also regarded as orthodox School where as Vajrayana is taken as based on humanity and represents liberal *Tantric* aspect. It is said to have appeared in India in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

In the religio-culture scene of Nepal Mahayana Buddhism was fused with *Vajrayan* and *Tantrayana* in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the scholars attribute the *Bhakti Cult* in Nepal as responsible in the evolution of the cult of *Adi Buddha* or *Svayambhu*.

By the 10<sup>th</sup> century *Nepal's* Mahayana Buddhism had developed its own mythology revolving round the five Buddhas, *Tathagatas*. Later on Vajrayana Buddhism developed the theory of Vajradhara, Samantabhadra, Vajradhara or Samantabhadra is supposed to the originator of five Buddhas. It is remarked that Nepal's free communication with her neighbors India and had contributed in developing the original cult in Nepal. In Tibet Vajrayana Buddhism accepted the native Bon-Shamanism. As a result of it, a powerful humanism developed. Nepalese Vajrayana also witnessed the effect of humanism to some extent. In Nepal Vajrayana is said to have been influenced by local *Shaivite* with the rituals performed by *Tantric Buddhist* priests of Nepal and *Shingon* sect of Japan is based on same *tantric* texts.

### Unbroken Living Tradition

Some scholars have begun to explore the rich storehouse of Vajrayana Buddhism with a view that is an independent and unique tradition of Buddhism, which deserve to be studied on its own merit. Mahayana and Vajrayana have unbroken living tradition in the Kathmandu *Valley*. According to some scholars, those are the forms propagated in India whereas some other scholars say that they are similar to Tibet. The truth lies in the mid way. Buddhism as practiced in Nepal is of its own original form. It has the essence of Vajrayana Buddhism of India and Tibet. It is not a mere copy of any one of the forms, either of north or south. It is an integrated form of Theravada and Mahayana.

The Newars of the Kathmandu Valley follow Theravada and Mahayana in an integrated way in the form of Vajrayana Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism includes recorded teachings of the Buddha whereas Mahayana Buddhism is practiced according to Mahayana *Sutra*. Theravada is known as the learners' vehicle. It has been compared with a small boat. Mahayana Buddhism is non-linear and multidimensional multileveled, interdependent and interlaced. Theravada is more linear. We find the difference between Hinayana and Mahayana. According to Hinayana Buddhism the sentient beings are actually the pronoun of passions. The followers of this school are anxious to attain *Nirvana*. They think that "to get rid of the future existence" is liberation.

However, Mahayana believes that "sentient beings are not something to be afraid of" Dr. Henry Hsing Cachou Yo is of the opinion that pure land is the ultimate ideal of Mahayana Buddhism.

Vajrayana Buddhism is the integrated practice of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. It follows the *Sutras* as of Theravada (Hinayana) or *non-Tantric* method and *Tantra* of Mahayana. The Newar Buddhists regard all Buddhas or *Bodhisattvas* as *Lokeshvara*. This concept is based on *Sukhavati Sutra*. The Newer performs rituals for *Upasatha Vrata* or *Astamivrata*, the worship of *Mandalas of Buddha*, *Dharma Sangha* and *Amoghpa Lokeshvara*. De Silva Padmshri in his book *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology* mentions that the Buddhist psychology deals with concepts of mind, consciousness and behavior, motivation, emotions and personality. The fundamental ideas of *Mahayana* are expanded in "*Prajnaparamita*" group of *Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* and those of *Theravada* tradition are found in Pali Canon.

The *Tripitaka*, Skt. (Three baskets) contains the three sections of the Buddhists scriptures of *Dharma*. They are the *Sutras* or Buddha's teachings and *Abhidharmas* are

commentaries and essays on Buddhism, doctrines and precepts.

In the passage of time and contact with different cultures Vajrayana Buddhism as practiced in the valley embraced philosophy, moral standards, religious practices, mystical experiences (religious feeling and devotion) involving rituals magical and semantic (symbolic languages) aspects of other forms of animistic and *Brahmanistic* beliefs and native traditions etc.

### Symbolic Features

One of the most innovative features of Buddhist Culture in the valley is the painting of two eyes in the *hermika* of the *Stupa and Torana*, above it. The eyes symbolized *Prajna and Upaya*, compassion and amity and the dot above it is the indication of the link to the heaven or prudence. The eyes in *Svayambhu Stupa* according to the art historian were painted in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The Vajrayana Buddhism is not limited to *Tantra* alone. Some of the names of *Vajrayana* are *Upayayana, Guhyayana, and Mantrayana*. *Upayayana* means skillful means. All the forms of the *Buddhist Tantras* believe that the essence of all deities is one's own mind. In Buddhism *Devas*, manifestations of mind and *Guru* are one. *Vajrayana* has discovered easier ways of purification and *Smatha* (absorption) through visualizing metaphorical forms of enlightened mind of Sakyamuni Buddha.

According to Sridhar Rana (Choky Dorje) the forms of *Vipassana* (Self observation) most common in Vajrayana is through Chittanusmriti i.e. mindfulness of mind visualizing various Mandala like forms and spontaneous appearance of *Devas* in meditation of this kind. The concept of *Devas* used for meditation in Vajrayana is *Guru, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Yidam (Istadevatas), Dakinis* (prophetesses) and *Dharmapalas*. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas come under the heading *Guru*. The *Pancha Buddhas* called, as *Tathagatas* are *Vairochana, Akshobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha* and *Amoghasiddhi*. The *Bodhisattvas* emanated by the five *Tathagatas* are *Samantabhadra, Vajrapani, Ratanapani, Avalokiteshvara, Visvapani* (all goodness manifestation of *Pancha Tathagatas*) other *Bodhisattvas* are *Manjushree- Bodhisattva* of earth.

### Vajayana

*Vajrayana* is derived from the word *Vajra* or thunderbolt or diamond. The Tibetans call Vajrayana as the most proper or adamant way. Vajrayana is evolved from *Tantric Buddhism*. *Theravada* is a learner's vehicle.

Theravada takes Lord Buddha as a teacher who taught truth, and the followers are *Shravakas* (listeners). In Mahayana, the Buddha is considered as transient being out of many such beings. He has three of embodiments *Vikaye*, i.e.

1. *Dharma Kaya* (Religious Body)
2. *The Sambhoga Kaya* (Union Body), and
3. *Nirmankaya* (Construction Body)

A form, which the Buddha takes to do activities on earth. According to *Mahayana, Adi*, Primitive or 1<sup>st</sup> Buddha is the highest and ultimate impersonal absolute. The concept of *Adi Buddha* is said to be of later origin. The concept of Mahayana doctrine is said to be of the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. by a saint named *Nagarjuna*. Mahayana recognizes faith and worship, as alternative path to salvation and worship is equivalent to mental discipline. A perfect Buddha is *Nirvana* represents Theravada School.

The Mahayana school also included several Hindu Gods by giving new names. Mahayana prescribed several sites, which are adapted to regional or local situation or population.

### Mantrayana

The Tantric practices of Vajrayana are known as Mantrayana. It has been revealed that through *Mantras* relationship can be established between the practitioners and universal energies. From the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards we have ample evidence of the influential Tantric Buddhism, flourishing in the Kathmandu Valley. Lord Buddha had the path of *Mantra*. Later it was termed as *Vajrayana* to his disciples having exceptional power as a shorter path to achieve enlightenment in a single life span.

### Conclusion

To conclude Buddhists in Nepal practice Vajrayana Buddhism in Bahals and Bahils of Nepal. There are more *Bahals and Bahils* in the Kathmandu valley. The sentient beings in order to overcome the passions and to be free from *Kleshas* (defilements) and attain primordial purity, pay homage to *Pancha Buddhas* or *Pancha Tathagatas* inscribed in Bahals and Bahils of Nepal. The *Panch Tathagatas* represent the essence (which is primordially pure) of the five passions such as *Akshobhya, victor*

of *Krodha* (aggression) *vairochana* of *Moha* (stupidly, narrow mindedness), *Amitabha*, *Kama* (Passions, desire), *Amoghasiddhi* for *Paisunya* (jealous) and *Ratnasambhava*, Passion or desire. If these passions are not primordially pure, one can never be free from *Kleshas* (defilements) and get *Nirvana* in one's own life.

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