

Chapter Three

Vajrayana School in Nepal

Vajrayana is special area of study within Buddhism. Vajrayana has special features in Buddhism in Centext of Nepal. There is a caste in Newar community called Bajracharya. This caste is like Brahamins of Hindu. Some of them are called Sakya too. In oher words, Sakya and Bajracharya are the priests of Buddhism community who are called Vikshu. It is interesting to note that boys froms Bajracharya and Sakya community take the oath of celibacy from early stage of their lives. They are trained to be vikshu and registered as members of ‘Vihar’¹ (Vihar: temple or prayer centre of Buddhas). Some of them may come in the worldly life and most of them remain bachelor throughout their lives.

In Nepal, in four places these Vihars are categoried-Kantipur, Lalitpur, Bhaktpur and Madhyapur Within the Kathmandu Valleys, these Vihars have similarities as well as differences. It is interesting to note that their is a democratic system in these Vihars for the selection of the top priest. In Vajrayana, it is called ‘chakreshwar’. It means to say that the leader of Buddhism is seniority. Chakreshwar is also called ‘Sanganayak’. It means to say that it is a leader of whole group. In Newari language, it is called ‘Thayata’² (Leader) Apart from this, there are regional Buddhist councils of Nepalese Vajrayana who keep on coordinating among these Vihars. There are eighteen prominent Vihars in Vajrayana in Nepal which have eighteen Chakreshwars, one head chakreshwar is selected on the basis of the some criteria of seniority. The most senior Chakreshawar is called in Newari language – “De Thyapa”. De means nation, thaya means leader.

This Vajrayani community has special contribution in the evolution of Buddhism in Nepal. For example, Vajrayana community has developed the various modes and methods of tantras and Yogas.

Tantric Buddhism is another aspect of Buddhism. Around 300 A.D., so many tantric works have come out from Buddhism. Vajrayana also is one of the tantric methods which describes in very comprehensive way to attain emancipation.

As Vajrayana is branch of Mahayana, it incorporates its basic philosophy *Permista Naya* (Parmita Path) and *Mantra Naya* (Mantra Path). These are two aspects of Mahayana way of Buddhism.

There is no historical proof to determine the exact date when Vajrayana was set up in Kathmandu. Some inscriptional evidences and refuges give hint of Vajrayana associated with Kathmandu valley. For example, the title 'bajracharya' which is of upper priest caste is found in Newar community. This title sounds some association with Vajrayana.

Buddhism is said to have been introduced into Nepal either by Gautam Buddha himself or by Emperor Ashoka and his daughter Charumati.¹ but the Tantric practice was also introduced in Nepal in its early phase as we find the concept of *Mandala*, *Manjushri*, *Malla*, and *Kalpa*. Similarly the erection of Swayombhu Chaitya also possesses the tantric concept. Moreover, also in the inscription of Licchavi period, the word Vajrayana is found.

Next, the arrival of great Buddhist philosopher Acharya Vasubandhu (4th century) is another evidence, that we can present, of the presence of tantric Buddhism or at least he can be considered as the propagator of tantric elements in Nepalese Buddhism.

As a fertile soil of faith and creed, Nepal seems to have attained real prominence as a strong supporter and propagator of the Buddhist faith (obviously tantric Buddhism) from the days of King Ansuvarma in the 7th century. He arranged his daughter (Bhrikuti's) marriage to the first powerful King of Tibet, Siron-btsam-sgam.² She took to Tibet the idol of Akshobhya along with her.³

The concept of Akshobhya Buddha is already found in the Guhya Samaja Tantras (2nd and 3rd century) as a central figure.⁴ This indicates that the cult of tantric Buddhism was prominent in the Nepalese Buddhist Society in those centuries. In the age of Sangharakshita (The tantric teacher of 8th and 9th century A.D.) strong ties of religious and cultural friendship appeared to have developed between these two (Nepal and Tibet) countries.⁵

India and Nepal have strong relation on behalf of Buddhist religion. There had always been an exchange of students and teachers as scholars between Nepal and the Buddhist universities of Bihar and Bengal. After the fall of the Pala and the Sena dynasty in Bengal and of the Karnataka dynasty of Tirhut to the successive waves of Muslim

invasion between the ninth and fourteenth centuries, tantric teachers of Buddhism other than Sangharakshita, Padmasambhava in eighth century and Atisa in the eleventh century came to Nepal and then went to Tibet.⁶ Buddhist teachings flourished in Nepal with their contribution.

Most religious doctrines came from the Indian scholars. From the eleventh to the fourteenth century, Nepal became a testing ground for different systems for a festival of religious thought and practices imported from India. The influence of Brahminical reformist movement, led by Sankaracharya of south India, penetrated into Nepal at about the same time as the esoteric practices of Tantricism based on the earlier Saiva and Sakta cults and on Buddhist Mahayana formalism. Nepal became not only a focal point where these divergent religious practices converged, but also a melting pot of different kinds of religious thoughts and rituals which were transformed into the Nepali version of Vajrayanas.⁷

Thus, as a whole can be said that right from 4th century till fourteenth century Buddhism in the form of Vajrayana flourished in the Valley.

Buddhism in Nepal, especially in *Newar* society, is living through tantric Buddhist rituals. The spiritual leaders and the followers are both engaged in religious Buddhist observances. The seeds of rites and rituals sown by Mahasanghika monks were further nourished by tantric Buddhists. When Hiuen-Tsang visited Amaravati in 639 A.D., the place had developed from Mahasanghika community to a flourishing Mahayana centre and ritualistic worship had become part and parcel of monastic life.⁸ Fahian's account of chariot festival in Pataliputra and Itsing's reference of Monastic rituals in Nalanda (67-695 A.D.) such as worship of Buddha images are the sufficient evidences of Mahasanghika monastic activities based on rituals.

A series of Buddha and Bodhisattvas were introduced in early Mahayanic period. In this connection in the wave of Vajrayana, five Buddhas and their consorts and more subordinate deities were introduced in Vajrayanic scriptures. In course of time, Yogic practices along with Mantras and Dharm were incorporated by Buddhist monks and followers according to their calibre and resources. Furthermore, the assurance of liberation in even one life through Yogic practice attracted more and more followers. Teachers and disciple tradition of Vajrayana made the practice of the philosophy of Buddhism easier for

laity to grasp and follow it. The laymen could not observe the secret and profound yogic practices. Thus, ritualism of those Yogic processes was introduced which took them gradually towards emancipation. John Locke (the contemporary specialist of Newar Buddhism) presents this idea regarding rituals on the basis of Giuseppe Tucci's. As the theory and practice of the Mandala, though it is possible to perform the Sadhana in a bare cave with little or no rituals, people differ and some are more inclined to ritual as a means of overcoming their ignorance and the Karmic-effects on their sins. For such people, the master developed a special class of Tantras- the Kriya Tantras, which are devoted to a much more complicated liturgy. Even in Kathmandu though the ritual played a subordinate role, it was a tool or psychological instrument which was used to help them for the realisation and enlightenment they were seeking.⁹

In the beginning of the each life cycle rituals and almost all monastic rituals, *Guru Mandala* rite is performed. The minute speculation of '*Guru Mandala*' confirms to some extent that the process of this particular ritual presents the thoughts and essence of Buddhism from very beginning to the latest development of tantric elements. Predominance of Mahayana Buddhism during the ritual can be speculated so far.

The performance of '*Guru*' Mandala rite begins with solemn promises. These promises are based on confession of sins which are followed by purification of body, speech and mind. Here not only Mahayanic thought but the primary ethics of Buddhism which were promulgated by the Buddha himself are revised and presented to make the people understand the primary steps towards perfect transcendental enlightenment. In this connection, the desirer who is trying to proceed in the way of enlightenment. He must try to help first entire being to gain liberation, only then he can attain enlightenment. The attempt of making entire being free from misery is undoubtedly based on early and later Mahayanic Scripture¹⁰ which is full of compassionate feelings, when the Bodhisattva wishes to help all creatures to obtain liberation.

The six perfections of Bodhisattva are defined through ritualistic acts. The simple acts such as purifying and sweeping the place, removing tiny ants, arranging rites, concentrating on rites and drawing clear lines correspond six perfections. Though these are simple acts preformed during rituals but make the performer understand the essence of those perfections gradually.

Similarly repetition of universal compassion shows the seed of Mahayana in the heart of performer. Further introduction of Eight-fold path and observation of *Uposadha* are a way of teaching to the followers.

Five *Dhyani Buddhas* are the manifestations of Lord Buddha. The Lord, having seated in different *Samadhis* and having recited the different mantras, transformed himself in the forms of Tathagatas and placed them as his replicas in the different parts of the Mandala or magic circle.¹¹ In other Buddhist Tantric Scriptures the five *Dhyani Buddhas* represent the five 'Skandha'. or elements of which the creation is composed. The entire world is composed of five Skandhas according to Buddha's philosophy. So the basic concept to the world is also brought through the performances of the rites. Along with doctrinal aspects of Buddhism, the moral precepts such as importance of '*Uposadha*' and confessions of sins are also reformed during the '*Guru Mandala*' rites.

Mandala represents the worship of deities. The diagram of '*Guru Mandala*' consists the entire world symbolized by 'Mt. Meru' and the continents plus all the wealth and glory of entire beings of Universe. The performance offers the *Mandala* to the deity. The offering of entire world to the deity may be interpreted in two ways. Primarily it presents the notion of non-attachment, which is the basic requirement of acquiring Nirvan and another one is the compassionate attitude, which makes the offer to give up entire belonging including himself for the welfare of worldly beings. *Mandala* is not only the symbolic representation of the world but at the tantric-yogic levels it represents the human body.¹²

During the 'Pancho-Pachara Puja' (Five-fold offering), the lamp is offered to the deity as a form of knowledge which destroys the net of illusions. As it is found in the doctrinal aspects of 'Vijananavada', all Dharmas are made up of the substances of consciousness and the absolute negation of perceiver and the perceived Ultimate reality.

Not only that the voidness of all phenomena is also taught to the Buddhist followers. So it can be perceived that the entire '*Guru Manadala* rite' is a hand book of Buddhist philosophy. It is concerned with peculiarities of rites and slowly it takes the observer onwards to the knowledge of Buddhism.

Charya in the form of state observances

The practice of Buddhist philosophy in day to day life is charya. The word 'Charya' is derived from the root 'car' which denotes course proceeding behaviour and conduct. The arduous vows and observances which were promulgated by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are exercised by Buddhist practitioner in the Kathmandu valley (Kathmandu). The definition of charya is presented as with the permission of teacher (Buddhas). To perform arduous vows, Buddhist normal precepts are observed through various observances.¹³

'Charya' has been defined as the performance of some arduous vows with the permission of the teacher, viz. the Buddhas. Here the Buddhist moral precepts are followed through a number of observances. These are detailed below.

Astramivrata- Newar Buddhist observes the eighth day of each lunar fortnight under the name of Astanuvranta. The devotion is offered to Amoghapasa Lokeswara. Amoghapasa Lokeswara is the Multi armed form of Avalokitesvara. This particular form was introduced in the valley in late middle ages. The name of the deity itself reveals the meaning, that is, the Lokeswara with the unerring of unailing noose.

It is further explained in the Japanese literature as a Lokeswara who leads the sentient beings to enlightenment with the help of the unfallible noose.¹⁴

Though the Buddhist Newar observes these days (obtamivrata) for worldly purpose, i.e. to wade off evil and for release from prison and great distress, the observation of eight precepts is exercised by them. Thus the practice of Buddhist philosophy is exercised by practitioners and upasaka equally.

Vasudharavrata- This observation is performed on the third day of dark fortnight of the month of Aswin. Vasundhara is supposed to be the wealth Goddess in Buddhism.

Laksa, Chaitya vrata-Making of Hundred thousand chaityas

In Newari language it is known as dyahthyegu, making Gods, for the whole month of *Sravana*, the devotees make small clay Chaityas every day. On the final two days they fast and worship them, and finally take the Chaityas to the nearby river and throw them into the river.

Taravrata- Sattvapuja (Saptvidha nottara Puja) is done for Tara

All the above observations are done for particular world by purposes, by keeping of precepts, observing purity rules and sometimes even keeping fast. It is very near to the meaning of *Charya*. The Buddhist philosophy is exercised through these observances.

One should abandon one's possessions along with ego and merit for the welfare of whole beings, and for that one should protect, purify and enhance those belongings.

The elaborate performances, devotional practices and observances aimed to fulfil the worldly desire at first were seen against the philosophy of Buddhist but the minute observation of those practices reveals the actual essence of Buddhist philosophy. This way the term '*Charya*' followed by the Buddhist Newar has real meaning.

Yoga – The practice of *Yoga* is also prevalent in Newar Buddhist society, but it is very hard to find out who actually are engaged in tantra yoga. *Yoga* the word is derived from the root *Yuj*, which means to unite. Thus, the etymological meaning of the word will be uniting. In *Yoga Dharshana* it is Chittbriti.

Cessation of all mental fluctuation-Nirodh

In Buddhism a *prajana* (Knowledge) and *upaya* (means) are united. In the *yoga Tantra*, *Mandala Circle* (of deities) is taken as means, with ecstasy due to, binding, of female and male deities. This shows *devatayoga* (*Yoga of the deities and produces divine pride free from ordinary pride*) which is the quick path of Buddhahood, that is to say, to acquire the three kinds of formal body *rupakaya*, the *samboga-kaya* and *dharmakaya*.¹⁵

At the level of tantric yoga, the *Mandala* represents the human body, the continents situate the person who is offering himself and the seven Jewels correspond the seven limbs of enlightenment.

According to the information there still exists the practice of *Nariyoga*, *Vayuyoga* and *Chandaliyoga* among the Newar Buddhists.

Anuttara Yoga

It is a diamond lit meditation (Samadhi) where body speech and mind are united. In Kathmandu, the higher initiations are given in three disciplines to the Vajracharya, Sakya and Udas too.

These disciplines are Chakra Samvara, Vajravarahi, and Achala. According to my the information kalchakra initiation was also in prevalence thirty to fifty years before.

The Buddhist Newars are seen more conscious to their religion. So the Vajradhatu initiation is popular in Newar community. These above mentioned initiations are formal and open to laity also.

Prevalence of higher initiation among Newar communities is the sign of living Vajrayana in Nepal.

This is the changed social atmosphere where conversion is on the high speed in Nepal under the cover of NGO, INGO and different charity missions. Newar community also finds threatened by this wave. Still the root of Vajrayana community is so strong that it has maintained its status quite state in Nepal. One of the reason is that it emphasis on detachment quite contrast to worldly life. It may not be wrong to say that the people in the modern age are crazy, restless and tense. Therefore, the teachings of Buddhism can only make us free from these very threatening problems of life.

Notes and References:

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