

## MONKHOOD AND PRIESTHOOD IN NEWAR BUDDHISM

### I. INTRODUCTION : THE PROBLEM<sup>1</sup>

Can there be priests in Buddhism? It is clear that in Theravāda Buddhism there are none :

the *bhikkhu* [Theravāda monk] is most certainly not a priest... He is not an intermediary between man and the supernatural; he administers no sacraments; he does not minister to a congregation, whether as the celebrant of a divine service or as a pastor. Although when requested he performs rituals on behalf of laymen, this is not his essential function, which, so far as laymen are concerned, is to serve as a "field of merit," i.e., as a means by which (through the offerings they make to him) they can acquire merit (Spiro 1982 : 280).

The Theravāda Buddhist monk has another function not included in Spiro's summary : he preserves the Buddhist tradition and teaches it to laymen (Gombrich 1971 : 271). In fact some of the monks Spiro asked included teaching Buddhism or performing religious ritual as a function

(purpose) of a monk. However those who mentioned these functions thought them secondary; all agreed that "the main function of Buddhist monasticism is to promote the monk's spiritual welfare" (Spiro 1982 : 285). This is the origin of the Mahāyāna charge that the pre-Mahāyāna type of Buddhism is selfish, a charge repeated to me both by Buddhist priests and by Brahmans in Nepal. From the Theravāda point of view however, the monk's primary pursuit of his own salvation is precisely the point : it is this which makes him worthy of respect and generosity.<sup>2</sup>

Theravāda monks are then more learned than laymen and they are defined as monks by the fact that they keep more rules than laymen (Gombrich 1971 : 64-7), but they are not intermediaries. The reason for this is that in Theravāda Buddhist doctrine an individual can advance spiritually only by his or her own efforts.<sup>3</sup> What is extremely surprising in comparison with other religions or other forms of Buddhism is that even unsophisticated Theravāda Buddhists recognize a strict division between otherworldly religion (religion proper, Buddhism) and thisworldly activities which Westerners tend to think of as religion also. The latter include festivals and life-cycle rituals; the self-interested bribing of gods, godlings or other supernaturals; and apotropaic rituals. None of these count as religion (*dharma* or *sāsana*) in Theravāda Buddhism. Since Theravāda Buddhism always refrained from evolving thisworldly rituals or justifications for those few deviant monks who indulge in or encourage such activities, it necessarily always coexists with some system which provides for thisworldly needs :

The Buddha's teaching was limited to what he thought conducive to enlightenment. Most people have broader interests, so Buddhists are almost bound to have other beliefs besides those of Buddhist doctrine. To sum this up in a word, Buddhism in real life is *accretive* (Gombrich 1971 : 49; emphasis in original).

This explains the coexistence of Buddhism with Hindu gods in Sri Lanka and with spirit cults in Burma and Thailand.<sup>4</sup> It is in these other systems which co-exist with Theravāda Buddhism and provide for the thisworldly needs of Theravāda Buddhists, that priests are to be found. As ministers to lower ends they receive much less respect than monks.

The traditional Buddhism of the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, is not Theravāda,<sup>5</sup> but Mahāyāna ('the Great Way') Buddhism. There are important, and usually unappreciated, continuities between Theravāda, the last surviving representative of the pre-Mahāyāna schools of Buddhism, and Mahāyāna Buddhism; but of course there are also certain important differences. One of these is the philosophical doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) that underlies all Mahāyāna soteriology. I discuss the relevance of this to Newar Buddhists below. Another difference is the complex pantheon of divine beings evolved by Mahāyāna Buddhism : at the top are numerous Buddhas, below them saints called *bodhisattvas* who are so compassionate that they do not advance to ultimate enlightenment but turn over their vast merit to suffering beings, even to those who appeal to them for worldly goods; below the *bodhisattvas* come other protective gods. The *bodhisattva*



Three Vajrācāryas perform a Fire Sacrifice in front of the main deity of Ha Bāhā, Lalitpur, as part of the Monastic Initiation of a young boy into the monastery. On the right is the Rituals Officer (*betāju*) of Ha Bāhā who customarily fills the role of assistant-priest (*upādhyāya*) in monastery rituals. In the centre is the second most senior elder (*sthavir*, *āju*) of Ha Bāhā, filling the role of main officiant (*mūlācārya*) in the absence through illness of the seniormost elder. He wears the metal helmet of a Vajrācārya priest. To his right is the third most senior elder of Ha Bāhā who takes the second most senior's place as sponsor or patron (*jajmān*, *jajmā*) of the rite. He wears the skirt, jacket and headdress of a monastery elder : like the helmet of a Vajrācārya priest it displays the Five Buddhas, but unlike it, it does not have a *vajra* on the crown. Note that in Ha Bāhā the boy's family-priest (*purohit*) plays no role in the monastery (cf. Gellner 1988 : 66). Photo taken 19/1/83

represents the moral ideal of the Mahāyāna : all good Buddhists should strive to become *bodhisattvas*, that is, they should devote themselves to uplifting all sentient beings and bringing them to enlightenment.

One consequence of the *bodhisattva*-doctrine was to shift the emphasis away from the monastic ideal and away from a rigid interpretation of monastic vows.<sup>6</sup> The Buddha himself had been a *bodhisattva* dedicated to attaining enlightenment for the sake of all beings in many lives before his final rebirth, and in all of them he had lived as a layman, not as a monk.

A second important consequence was to provide a justification for a Buddhist priesthood. In the Nepalese context, the *bodhisattva*-doctrine is combined with the practices of Vajrayāna ('Diamond Way') Buddhism, also known as Tantric Buddhism. The Diamond Way is not an alternative to the Great Way, but a specialized, privileged and esoteric set of ritual and yogic practices within it. By making use of these practices, the priest is supposed to realize emptiness, which is inseparable from compassion in Buddhist doctrine. He makes use of this power therefore, in line with his *bodhisattva*-vow, to visualize the manifold divine beings of the Mahāyāna pantheon on behalf of others (his patrons or parishioners).

The Buddhism of the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley is indeed an ideal testing ground if one wishes to see how a Buddhist priesthood can exist within Mahāyāna Buddhism. Newar Buddhists are in effect the last surviving South Asian Mahāyāna Buddhists. They are the last Buddhists whose scriptural and ritual language is Sanskrit. This is why Sylvain Lévi came to Nepal and wrote its history as a first step in writing the history of the whole of South Asia. Newar Buddhism goes back in an unbroken line to the late Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism evolved in the great monastic universities of north India (Nālandā, Odantapuri and others), which were destroyed by Muslim incursions from the twelfth century onwards. The Kathmandu Valley is a small place and its medieval kings were always inclined to Hinduism not Buddhism. Consequently there were no great scholastic monasteries as had existed in India and grew up later in Tibet. Until the early fifteenth century Tibetans came to the Kathmandu Valley for instruction from Indian or Nepalese teachers. Thereafter scholarship declined and Newar Buddhists became convinced, as their myths show,<sup>7</sup> that Tibetan Buddhism preserved a level of understanding, practice and orthodoxy from which they had fallen away.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion, also expressed in these local myths, that this decline was connected to the disappearance of celibacy within the holy order of Newar Buddhism. It would be wrong however to follow the myths in representing this transformation of a celibate monastic order into a caste of married monks and Tantric preceptor-priests as a single cataclysmic event. It seems far more likely that married priests appeared (in the tenth or eleventh century?) along with the rise of Vajrayāna Buddhism, and co-existed with celibate monks until the latter dwindled, finally to disappear some time in the middle of the Malla period (1200-1768).

It is the task of this essay to explain how Vajrayāna Buddhism legitimates a Buddhist priesthood very similar to that of the Brahmans in Hinduism, while at the same time maintaining continuity with Mahāyāna and pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism. Looking at the priesthood in this way enables one to avoid the naive and/or moralizing approaches which, judging Vajrayāna Buddhism by the canons of the Theravāda, or by those of the modern West, ignore the views of Newar Buddhists themselves.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. ŚĀKYAS AND VAJRĀCĀRYAS : TYPES OF PRIEST

The holy order of Newar Buddhism is a caste : it is made up of two sub-sections or status groups, the Vajrācāryas ('Master of the Diamond [Way]', i.e. Tantric preceptor) and the Śākyas, formerly called Śākyabhikṣu ('Buddhist monk') or Śākyavaṃśa ('of the Śākya's, i.e. the Buddha's, lineage').<sup>9</sup> The majority of Śākyas and Vajrācāryas live in the old royal cities of the Kathmandu Valley : Kathmandu itself, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur. Others live in outlying towns and villages but most of them maintain an urban and high-caste style of life. Only Vajrācāryas may act as family-priests (*purohit*)<sup>10</sup> for Buddhists, just as Brahmans must be the family-priests of (clean-caste) Hindus. In Lalitpur and Kathmandu the majority of Newars have Vajrācārya and not Brahman family-priests. In Lalitpur priestly roles in most festivals and religious practices are filled by Vajrācāryas, and thus one can say that Lalitpur is predominantly Buddhist. At the same time one must remember that the rituals of the royal palace at the city's centre are in Brahman hands, and that the family-priests of the socially most prestigious families (the Chatharīya Śreṣṭhas) are in most cases Brahmans. Furthermore, the majority of the population — when faced with the census-question of either/or — declare themselves to be, or are declared, Hindus.<sup>11</sup>

Vajrācāryas are superior in status to Śākyas, because only they may act as family-priests for others. The traditional self-images of Vajrācāryas and Śākyas — as Tantric priests and married monks respectively — differ. This is why I call them separate status groups : the distinction is not one of caste (though outsiders, particularly Hindus, may see it as such) since they interdine freely and frequently intermarry. During the 1920s and '30s there was a long and bitter dispute between Vajrācāryas and Urāy in Kathmandu, which is still keenly remembered. The Urāy are a highly educated and often wealthy lay Buddhist caste (found only in Kathmandu) ranking just below the Śākyas and Vajrācāryas. The dispute arose over the claim of the majority of Vajrācāryas that they were superior in caste to the Urāy and ought not therefore to accept cooked rice from them; the Urāy themselves, and the minority of Vajrācāryas who sided with them, claimed that the superiority of the Vajrācāryas was not based on caste and that therefore they ought to continue to accept boiled rice in their patrons' homes (Rosser 1966). At no time did the Vajrācāryas claim that they could not eat rice cooked by Śākyas, even though most of the Śākyas ultimately sided with the Urāy. In

short, the Vajrācāryas never publicly claimed higher caste status than the Śākya. The Kathmandu Vajrācāryas did however begin to break off intermarriage with them (*ibid.* : 124-6).

I would interpret this withdrawal of marriage relations by Kathmandu Vajrācāryas as an accentuation, possibly prompted by caste feelings on the part of some, of a tendency of Vajrācāryas everywhere to be reluctant to accept Śākya wives, while willing to give their daughters to Śākya husbands. This is illustrated in table I.

		Women	
		Vajrācārya	Śākya
Men	Vajrācārya	17.9 %	4.4 %
		(76)	(19)
	Śākya	16.7 %	61.0 %
		(72)	(263)

TABLE I : Breakdown of 430 marriages of and between Vajrācāryas and Śākya recorded in ward 15, Lalitpur, 1984.

There are about twice as many Śākya as Vajrācāryas. Thus table I shows that in Lalitpur Vajrācārya men have a very marked preference for Vajrācārya wives. This bears out what informants say, that for ritual reasons Vajrācāryas do not like to accept Śākya brides : parishioners (*jajmān, jaymā*) prefer to have a Vajrācārya woman as the priest's wife (*gurumā*) who must (unlike a Brahman's wife) always accompany her husband to important rituals, and to whom half her husband's ritual payment (*dakṣiṇā*) is due; on the practical level a Śākya girl is less likely to be well acquainted with rituals; and if a Vajrācārya is ever to give Tantric Initiation his wife must be a Vajrācārya.

As far as their monastic identity is concerned there is no difference between Śākya and Vajrācāryas. Śākya and Vajrācārya males are distinguished from all other Newar men by the fact that instead of the puberty/caste-initiation ceremony of *kaytā pujā* or *vratibandha* they undergo a four-day Monastic Initiation (*cūḍākarma* or *bare chuyegu*).<sup>12</sup> By this rite they become members of their father's monastery, *bāhā* or *bahī*,<sup>13</sup> with all the rights and duties which that entails. For this reason the son of a Vajrācārya or Śākya by a lower-caste wife is not allowed to go through Monastic Initiation in his father's monastery, but must do it outside at a *caitya*, which confers no membership of a monastic community (*saṃgha, saṃ*).

The principal duty of monastery members is to take turns to be the guardian (*dyahpāhlā*) of the monastery's main nōn-Tantric deity (*kwābāju, kwāhpāhdyah*). The guardian is responsible for performing the daily rituals and for the security of the images and ornaments in the shrine. During his tenure (which varies from monastery to monastery : it may be one or two weeks, a month or even, in some cases, a year) he receives the offerings of devotees and keeps them for himself. He is therefore a temple-priest of a sort, though in many small monasteries he performs the ritual on his own, and the offerings are negligible. Kwā Bāhā in Lalitpur is the largest and most

impressive monastic temple complex of this kind and until recently the volume of offerings there ensured that the chance to be guardian (which comes only once a lifetime because the Monastic Association of Kwā Bāhā is so large) was a jealously guarded privilege.<sup>14</sup>

In some monasteries there are only Śākya, in others only Vajrācāryas and in yet others there are both. As members of the same monastery Vajrācāryas have no advantage over Śākya : rights, duties and positions of authority are determined by simple seniority. The only exception to this is that the seniormost Vajrācārya is called the Cakreśvara and is responsible for the regular worship of the monastery's principal Tantric deity. He also has an assistant, called a Betāju, who must also be a Vajrācārya and not yet an elder of the monastery, chosen for his knowledge of ritual, who oversees the whole round of ritual in the monastery.

All Vajrācāryas and Śākya undergo Monastic Initiation and thereby gain membership of a monastery. Vajrācāryas differ from Śākya in that only they may subsequently undergo the rite of Consecration as a Master (i.e. of the Diamond Way) (*ācāryābhīṣeka, ācāh luyegu*) (Locke 1975; 1980 : 47-50). The Consecration rite gives Vajrācāryas, on top of the monastic identity conferred by Monastic Initiation, the status of priests and preceptors for all Newar Buddhists. Most Vajrācāryas perform the rite immediately or shortly after Monastic Initiation, although there is another pattern, followed in Bu Bāhā, whereby it is performed only after marriage. Space does not permit an analysis of the rite itself. As Locke (1980 : 53-4) points out, it is in fact an abbreviated version of Tantric Initiation (*dīkṣā*), followed by the neophyte performing his first fire sacrifice (*homa, yajña* or — most colloquially — *jog*). In Kathmandu Śākya and Urāy are also entitled to Tantric Initiation; in Lalitpur, Śākya, Śreṣṭhas and also, in a less elaborate form, Tāmraḱārs, Rājkarṇikārs, Bārāhi and Sthāpits. Logically, then, in terms of the textual tradition, these castes — or at least those who receive the same initiation as Vajrācāryas — ought also to be able to take up the priesthood. It is here that the practice of Newar Buddhism is most in conflict with its own canon : not in abandoning celibacy (which is justified in the Tantras) but in making the highest spiritual role, that of the Vajrācārya, the exclusive monopoly of a hereditary status group. For this there is no scriptural justification, only the legitimating power (which is still for the most part accepted) of tradition.

The practical significance of the different religiously defined identities of Śākya and Vajrācārya can be clearly seen when we consider the forms of priesthood encountered by Newar Buddhists. As a matter of empirical observation they interact regularly with ritual specialists of the following four broad types<sup>15</sup> :

- (i) family-priests (*purohit*);
- (ii) temple-priests (*dyahpāhlā*);
- (iii) initiation-priests (*dīkṣāguru*);
- (iv) various types of healer (*vaidya* and *dyah waipim*).

The third and fourth categories need not detain us long. The initiation-priest for Buddhist Tantric Initiation must be a learned Vajrācārya whose wife is still living. Whoever organizes the initiation and therefore fills the role of principal sponsor and senior initiand (*dhaḥmū thakāli*) chooses the priest and he does not have to choose his own family-priest. The many others who come to receive the initiation at the same time (it is expensive and therefore occurs infrequently) effectively have their initiation-priest chosen for them.

The fourth category of specialist is very heterogeneous. It includes Ayurvedic doctors, healers who use mantras, blowing and brushing (*jhār-phuke vaidya*), and midwives (*didī aji*).<sup>16</sup> There are also Vajrācārya healers who combine various methods eclectically: they may describe the cause of an ailment in terms of the Ayurvedic system of humours, astrological conjunctures, divine anger or witchcraft.<sup>17</sup> Vajrācāryas of this sort often take a special Tantric Initiation of the deity Caṇḍamahāroṣana (*acaladīkṣā*). This is appropriate because the final section of the Caṇḍamahāroṣana Tantra, unlike most other Buddhist Tantras, contains much information on medical matters.<sup>18</sup> All of these healers so far described are called *vaidya*, a category which also includes those such as apothecaries (*baniyā*) and Ayurvedic doctors who make no use of religious symbols and cannot be considered ritual specialists at all.

Also in the fourth category of ritual specialist are the numerous 'faith-healers' or mediums, literally 'those to whom a god or gods come(s)' (*dyaḥ waiḥpīm*). Informants claim that, although the phenomenon of deity-possession may have been frequent in the past, it was more often temporary: the pattern whereby every area of the big cities has at least one and often many more such healers is relatively new. One might add to this category those who dance as deities (sometimes known as *dhāmi* as, for instance, in Naradevī, Kathmandu); also the shamans, *jhākri*, of other ethnic groups, whom Newars know about but do not normally use. Although the 'faith-healers' are most often possessed by Hārītī (usually written 'Hārītī' by Newars), the Buddhist goddess of smallpox, they are not part of organized Buddhism. The healer may be a Buddhist, but need not be. So this kind of religion is not specifically Buddhist but belongs rather to the ambiguous 'folk' religion which is neither Buddhist nor Hindu, but can be articulated in the idiom and using the symbols of either religion.

Thus the whole fourth category of ritual specialist belongs exclusively to the sphere of purely 'practical' religion. Practitioners of this category are chosen primarily by their own volition. Traditionally their roles were often inherited, but they need not be. Although Newar Buddhism has evolved many practices to help in thisworldly affliction, yet it has retained its primary orientation to salvation. By contrast the activities of healers are very obviously worldly, of advantage to the practitioners themselves and to their self-interested clients. Consequently people are often sceptical about these freelance healers, whereas they are never sceptical about the activities of other types of priests or doubt the existence of the gods they worship. (The

complaint *there* is that their rituals are expensive and burdensome.) The fact that most of the 'faith-healers' are women no doubt also tells against them.

The first three types of specialist are associated with the sphere of religion which is soteriological and/or symbolic in aim and is often expressive of social relations. By contrast, the fourth type belongs to that aspect of religion which is thisworldly, instrumental and practical. There is the same conceptual distinction between this- and otherworldly practices as in Theravāda Buddhism, but the boundary between the two is no longer sharp. Priests now have the highest religious status and teach the path to salvation; their rites include magical elements to an extent quite foreign to the sober spirit of Theravāda Buddhism.

In talking of priesthood in Newar Buddhism, rather than of ritual specialists in Newar society as such, we must mean priests of the first three types. Of these it is the first two which are really important. They correspond to the two halves of Max Weber's definition:

The crucial feature of priesthood [is] the specialization of a particular group of persons in the continuous operation of a cultic enterprise, permanently associated with particular norms, places and times, and related to specific social groups.<sup>19</sup>

Weber (1968 II : 424-5) wanted to set up an ideal type of priest to distinguish them from magicians. He rejected definitions of 'priest' as a ritual specialist employed by an organization rather than self-employed, as a ritual specialist legitimated by doctrine and vocational qualifications rather than by miracles or as a specialist practising worship rather than magic. In assessing these putative definitions Weber illustrated their shortcomings with the case of Catholic priests: some are not office-holders, some are not at all learned, and, most significantly for our present discussion, "the concept of the priest includes... a magical qualification" (*ibid.*). What Weber says of Catholic priests and of priests as such applies fully to Vajrācārya priests. Vajrācārya priests are not, and are not regarded as, magicians, even though they are often believed to be able to perform magical acts, and the more spiritually advanced they are, the more capable. In the Newar, as in the Weberian view, some of them may perform magic, and their regular rites may have magical aspects, but this is not their prime function, which is to carry on a permanent cult associated with given norms and social groups. Furthermore, in the Nepalese context they are defined as priests rather than magicians because the doctrine they are associated with is a soteriology (*mārga*). (Weber avoided this in his definition because of the priesthoods, e.g. the Shintoist, which lack a doctrine of salvation.)

Newar Buddhism presents the observer with an analytical distinction between two main types of priest, and, as indicated, these correspond, roughly, to the two halves of the Weberian definition. The second kind of specialist listed above, the god-guardian, serves the continuous cult of the public Buddhist deities. Family-priesthood by contrast is associated with the sacralization of life stages (a type of religion in which Weber, unlike

Durkheim, was not particularly interested) : that is, the perpetuation of ritual ties and norms of given social groups (those with Buddhist priests). Vajrācāryas have the right to carry on both types of priesthood, whereas Śākyas may carry on only the former. Thus B. R. and R. K. Vajracharya (1963 : 9) define a Vajrācārya as

a monk who has received the consecration of *vajra* [ritual implement symbolizing the absolute] and bell [= the Consecration of a Master], which are the entitlement (*sarvādhikāra*) to perform the fire sacrifice and so on.

Thus, doctrinally Vajrācāryas are defined as a kind of Śākya (i.e. monk), who have, in addition, the right to be a priest. Interestingly, the uninformed popular view, in which Vajrācāryas are more prominent, reverses this, and sees Śākyas as a kind of Vajrācārya who lack the right to serve as family-priests. (I have heard this expressed jocularly as their not being allowed to ring the priest's bell.)

Family-priesthood is, then, the monopoly of the Vajrācāryas. Under this heading we might also wish to include other religious specialists who inherit their patrons (*jajmān*), viz. Barbers and Kāpālīs (death specialists).<sup>20</sup> The right to serve given families is inherited, leased out and (traditionally) sold, in the same way that Brahmans and other Hindu specialists treat *jajmān*-rights. Vajrācāryas do not merely have a monopoly on performing life-cycle rites for families : only they may perform the fire sacrifice, and in practice only they may direct complex, occasional rituals (e.g. *vrata*), since only they are sufficiently knowledgeable.

The other type of priesthood, god-guardianship, is much more widely distributed in Newar society. Almost every caste has at least some members who take turns as guardians of certain gods. The shrines of Gaṇeśa are usually tended by Maharjans. Mother-goddess shrines outside the city gates are tended by Untouchables (hence their honorific caste name 'Dyaḥlā' from *dyahpāhlā*). The guardians of Bhīmsen shrines are usually Kāpālī. However purely Buddhist divinities, that is, the main Śākyamuni images of monasteries, Tārā shrines and Avalokiteśvara cults such as the famous Matsyendra-nāths, must have Śākyas and/or Vajrācāryas as their god-guardians. This kind of Buddhist priesthood is justified in terms of Śākyas' and Vajrācāryas' common status as monks, as 'sons' of the Buddha. Only they go through the Monastic Initiation rite, and while performing the rites for the god, the guardian must keep monastic rules : celibacy, food restrictions and purity taboos.<sup>21</sup>

The god-guardian type of priesthood does in fact have considerable antiquity within Buddhism. Here it is necessary to qualify an impression given at the outset. In general, Theravāda Buddhism lacks priests. But Theravāda monks may, as a secondary feature, take on priestly activities in a limited way. In particular, they may act in effect as a kind of god-guardian of the monasteries in which they live. Only rarely however, at large monasteries, often with royal connections, does this role seem to acquire any

importance (Evers 1972 : ch. 4). The monastic god-guardian role of Śākyas and Vajrācāryas is directly descended from the elaborate Buddha-worship conducted in such monasteries. Here however, due to changes legitimated by the Vajrayāna, as discussed below, the food and other offerings made are considered to be imbued with the deity's blessing (*prasād*) and are returned to devotees. From the Theravāda point of view this is the Hindu, not the Buddhist, view of offerings.<sup>22</sup>

The cult of the esoteric (Tantric) Buddhist deities differs from that of exoteric deities : usually only Vajrācāryas may carry on their cult. Thus, as mentioned, the seniormost Vajrācārya of a monastery in which there are both Śākyas and Vajrācāryas performs the daily ritual of the monastery's principal Tantric deity.<sup>23</sup> Vajrasattva is a Tantric deity of a more exoteric sort (his image may be displayed in public) and his cult is also in the hands of Vajrācāryas alone : in Kwā Bāhā there is a separate shrine to him in which the Vajrācārya members of the monastery take fortnightly turns as guardian.

The legitimation of the Vajrācāryas' monopoly of the family-priesthood and of their pre-eminence in the cult of Tantric deities is rather a complex matter in contrast to the monastic practices and symbols which legitimate the god-guardianship that they share with Śākyas. To this legitimation we must now turn.

### 3. THE HIERARCHY OF THE THREE WAYS (YĀNA) IN NEWAR BUDDHISM

Two other anthropologists, Stephen Greenwold and Michael Allen, have addressed the question of how the Vajrācārya priesthood is legitimated, and it makes a useful starting point to recapitulate their findings. The main points of Greenwold's article (1974a) 'Buddhist Brahmans' (a description of Vajrācāryas going back to Lévi 1905 I : 226) can be listed as follows<sup>24</sup> :

- (i) The ideal Vajrācārya is a Realized One (*siddha*) who lives in the world, not a monk who renounces caste and family.<sup>25</sup>
- (ii) The ritual of Monastic Initiation is used to maintain control of monasteries and exclude outsiders : "the very basis of the Newar priesthood is prior ordination as a monk" (*op. cit.* : 110).
- (iii) Since only Vajrācāryas may perform the fire sacrifice for Buddhists, only they may act as family-priests for parishioners.
- (iv) Only 28 % of Greenwold's sample of working Vajrācāryas in Kathmandu served as priests and only 11.9 % had no other job but the priesthood.<sup>26</sup> It is the ritual status of priest, not the actual practice of priesthood, which is essential to being a Vajrācārya.
- (v) There is a close parallel with the position of Brahmans, whose high status in a hierarchy of purity, and whose ability to act as priests for others, depend on their incarnating ascetic values.

To these five points made by Greenwold, three others may be added, taken from M. Allen's article (1973) 'Buddhism without monks' :



(vi) The Three Ways (or Vehicles) of Buddhism represent a hierarchy through which the Buddhist neophyte ascends, thereby recapitulating the history of Buddhism itself.  
 (vii) The highest, Tantric Way is based on inversions of the first, monastic one : "sex in place of celibacy, long hair instead of shaven pates, indulgence instead of abstinence, drunkenness instead of sobriety" (*op. cit.* : 13).  
 (viii) A crucial factor in the preservation of the income and identity of Buddhist priests has been the development of popular cults, such as that of Matsyendranāth, which appeal equally to all Newars.

Material amplifying these points has since been published by others, notably by Locke.<sup>27</sup>

Greenwood ignored the sixth point above, the ideological framework used by Newar Buddhists themselves, and was led therefore (particularly in 1974b) to see the ideal of the priest as straightforwardly opposed to that of the monk.<sup>28</sup> By following La Vallée Poussin and translating *siddha* as 'magician' rather than as 'accomplished' or 'realized person', he perpetuated an oversimple, and partial, opposition between otherworldly monks and thisworldly Vajrācāryas. Furthermore, strictly speaking, in contrasting the *siddha* with the monk he was not comparing like with like : the former is a soteriological ideal and the latter a socio-religious role (see below, table IV).

These confusions can be sorted out if we distinguish, as Newar Buddhists do themselves, between three levels in their religion : the Śrāvākayāna (Way of the Disciples), the Mahāyāna (Great Way) and the Vajrayāna (Diamond Way).<sup>29</sup> In the texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism the term 'Śrāvākayāna' is used to refer to the pre-Mahāyāna schools in order to contrast their limited and selfish goal with the more noble and altruistic aim of the hero of the Great Way, the *bodhisattva*. This usage continues among Newar Buddhists today : the newly introduced Theravāda Buddhism is referred to, especially by the older generation, as Śrāvākayāna. At the same time the monastic practices *within* traditional Newar Buddhism are also referred to by the same term, in particular the keeping of the Eight Precepts in the context of Observances (*vrata*) (of which Monastic Initiation is one).<sup>30</sup>

The cardinal virtue of the Great Way is the altruism of the *bodhisattva*, intent on the spiritual good of all beings, not just his own enlightenment. For Newar Buddhists this means carrying out all the religious duties of a Buddhist householder as they have been handed down to them. Vajrayāna, the Diamond Way, is closely associated with Vajrācāryas, so that for most Newars 'Vajrayāna' tends to mean "what Vajrācāryas do". It also has the popular connotation of the practice of supernatural and magical powers gained by advanced spiritual states and (to this end) frequenting frightening places such as cremation grounds. At the same time the Diamond Way includes the practice of rites and daily exercises to which one has access only through Tantric Initiation.

These three levels are arranged in a hierarchy with the Disciples' Way as the lowest and the Diamond Way as the highest level. They are not practised sequentially however : attainment of the highest level through Tantric Initiation does not mean that the practices of the other levels are abandoned.

Higher levels contain the lower within themselves.<sup>31</sup> Nor is the relationship of the levels, each to the other, symmetrical. The Great Way has displaced the Disciples' Way as the proper Buddhist path in Newar Buddhism, while continuing its rites and practices within prescribed contexts. The Diamond Way, on the other hand, represents a means *within* the Great Way whereby its aims can be attained with greater efficiency within this life.<sup>32</sup> In order to convey what this means in practice, I present in table II a summary of the different kinds of religious practice that tend to be associated with the different levels of Newar Buddhism.

The Way of the Disciples : ( <i>śrāvākayāna</i> )	monachism, worship of the Buddha, ascetic rule-observance.
The Great Way : ( <i>mahāyāna</i> )	worship of all the gods, fulfilment of hereditary householder duties including festivals and life-cycle rituals, acquiring merit through donations, cultivation of moral perfections in accordance with the ideal of the <i>bodhisattva</i> .
The Diamond Way : ( <i>vajrayāna</i> )	worship of Tantric deities, taking Tantric Initiation ( <i>dikṣā</i> ), acquiring magical powers and advanced spiritual states by strict rule-bound devotion to powerful secret deities or their exoteric manifestations.

TABLE II : Summary of the different religious practices falling under the head of the Three Ways (*vāna*) in Newar Buddhism.

The different deities of Newar Buddhism can be assigned to different Ways : the Buddha Śakyamuni belongs to the Śrāvākayāna, the *bodhisattvas* to the Great Way and 'Great Buddha' Vajrasattva and the esoteric deities to the Diamond Way. Similarly the architecture of the Buddhist monastery was several times explained to me as reflecting this same hierarchy (Gellner 1987 : 18). The Three Ways also provide a model of Buddhist history : as a matter of historical fact the types of Buddhism represented by the Three Ways did arise in that order, and the texts of the later forms reveal an awareness of this. However, these later texts claim that they were taught by the Buddha himself, but were hidden by him, since the Disciples at that time were not ready for their teachings. The majority of Newar Buddhists do not have a first-hand acquaintance with their texts ; all the same, some of them do see the Great Way and Diamond Way as a later adaptation of the Way of the Disciples, that is, they understand the conceptual levels as a chronological development. This may be due to the influence of the Theravāda monks and nuns now active in Nepal, or it may be due to the fact that this structure is built into the rite of Monastic Initiation in which the neophyte passes from being a monk to becoming a householder (cf. Locke's remarks, 1975 : 18).

4. THE STRUCTURE OF NEWAR BUDDHISM  
DETERMINED BY RITUAL RATHER THAN DOCTRINE

It would be wrong to interpret this conceptual structure of the Three Ways as a rigid framework into which every aspect of Newar Buddhism can or should be fitted. Newar Buddhists may define themselves by caste (Śākya, Vajrācāryas and others), by priest (all those with Vajrācārya family-priests) or by personal devotion (to the Buddha and Buddhist deities); they would never think to define Buddhists as those who believe a specific doctrine.<sup>33</sup> There is no organization whose role or duty it is to propound doctrine. Consequently well-known doctrines or concepts, such as the hierarchy of the Three Ways, can be and are applied to particular cases in different ways. Newar Buddhists, especially elderly men, often discuss these issues, but the discussion, although lively, is carried on in a tolerant spirit: all readily admit that their understanding is deficient and they readily defer to others considered more learned; no one would accuse another of heretical opinions.<sup>34</sup> The only organization even remotely resembling a church is the Ācārya Guthi (Association of Vajrācāryas) in Kathmandu.<sup>35</sup> In Lalitpur there is no association of all the Vajrācāryas of the city, but in Kwā Bāhā and other large monasteries all the Vajrācāryas of the monastery have their own association. These associations are less important nowadays, but in the past they were supposed to ensure uniformity of rituals among their members.

As far as doctrine is concerned, there are a few informal groups meeting to study under the guidance of a more learned *guru*.<sup>36</sup> But for the vast mass of Newar Buddhists the only teaching they receive is contained — often only implicitly — in the stories of the previous lives of the Buddha or other saints occasionally recounted in public by learned Vajrācāryas. One of the reasons for the popularity of the new Theravāda movement is the fact that preaching by monks occupies the central place that ritual holds in traditional Newar Buddhism. Thus there is an enormous variation in doctrinal knowledge between the learned *paṇḍit* and the illiterate farmer who is his hereditary parishioner, and there are innumerable degrees of knowledge between the two. And it is an essential part of the religion that there *should* be such hierarchy — of two levels at least — since it is forbidden for the teachings given at Tantric Initiation to be mentioned to the uninitiated.

Traditional Newar religion — whether Buddhist or Hindu — consists for the most part of ritual and ritualized devotion. However the simple act of making an offering is in itself ambiguous: nothing has been said about what the devotee thinks is happening, and most Newars are happy to leave it that way. Even complex sets of ritual determined by tradition can be interpreted in different ways. For instance, Śākya and Vajrācāryas claim that the Maharjans are Buddhist since their priests are Vajrācāryas and their rites are, therefore, mostly directed at Buddhist deities and use Buddhist mantras. Maharjans themselves often say they are Hindus. The life-cycle rituals of the Maharjans are indeed Hindu in origin, but they have been adapted for

Buddhist householders. Within both religions most worshippers believe that it is in the power of the gods to grant protection and success. Others, a sophisticated minority, sometimes denounce this self-interested orientation; they nonetheless continue to worship, but reinterpret it as custom, disinterested piety or a kind of psychological therapy.

The rites of the Vajrācāryas can be divided into exoteric and esoteric forms. The differences between them may be summarized as follows:

Rites of the Śrāvakayāna (Disciples Way) and Mahāyāna (Great Way)	Vajrayāna (Diamond Way) rites
Worship using only pure substances	Worship must include impure substances, in particular meat and alcohol
Dance and song forbidden	Dance and song essential parts of worship
Celibacy required	Sexual imagery central
Calmness required; hostility to possession	Controlled possession by deity required of women, permitted of men
Observance ( <i>vrata</i> )	Yogic visualization ( <i>sādhana</i> )
Aim: merit and blessing of deity	Aim: power, liberation through identification with the deity
Access open to all clean castes	Access only to the initiated

TABLE III: Differences between Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna rites on the one hand and Vajrayāna rites on the other.

These differences are very clear to Newars who have taken Tantric Initiation. Even those who have not are aware that substances required in one context are forbidden in another. Contrary to what M. Allen implied (1973: 13), rites of the Diamond Way do not require drunkenness or orgies: alcohol, meat and sexual symbolism are used in a highly ritualized way as a controlled infraction of exoteric taboos. Newar Buddhists are as hostile to licentiousness as other Buddhists.

There are inevitably certain overlaps and exceptions to the distinctions outlined in table III. The opposition between Observances (*vrata*) and yogic visualization is not absolute: for instance the monthly ritual for the main Tantric deity of a monastery performed by its elders is in practice like an Observance but makes use of Tantric substances. The dividing line between the esoteric and the exoteric may be laid down differently in different contexts and interpreted slightly differently by different groups. In spite of these qualifications, however, the opposition between the exoteric (*bāhya*) and esoteric (*guhya*) is fundamental in Newar religion, as others have already observed (M. Allen 1975: 56; Vergati 1979: 127).

This opposition between exoteric and esoteric corresponds to that between the Great Way and the Diamond Way, since the Great Way, when not itself opposed to the Disciples' Way, can be understood also to include it. All Newars, even those who have never heard of the doctrine of Three Ways, understand the distinction between esoteric and exoteric rites. In the simplest terms it is expressed as an opposition between rites one may see (*swayē jyū*) and those one may not (*swayē mā jyū*). Even those castes which



may not receive Tantric Initiation, either Buddhist or Hindu, hold fast to this distinction.<sup>37</sup>

Theravāda Buddhism by contrast is not a system of ritual. There are a very few, extremely simple, Theravāda rituals, but they can hardly be said to form a system. This is tacitly recognized in Newar Buddhism, in which 'Śrāvakayāna' connotes practices of restraint, particularly celibacy in a monk-like idiom.

5. THE VĀJRĀCĀRYA AS *SIDDHA* AND *BODHISATTVA*

With this background understood we can now see in what sense Vajrācāryas are *siddhas* and how they are also monks, although this latter status is incorporated and transcended in the role of Vajra-master. This is summarized in table IV.

Religious Level	Soteriological Ideal	Social Role
Disciples' Way (Śrāvakayāna)	<i>arhat</i> (noble one)	monk (i.e. during Monastic Initiation, Samek etc.)
Great Way (Mahāyāna)	<i>bodhisattva</i> (wisdom-being)	Practising Mahāyāna Buddhist; Vajrācāryas in their purely exoteric aspect
Diamond Way (Vajrayāna)	<i>siddha</i> (Realized One)	Vajrācārya priest

TABLE IV : Soteriological ideals and social roles of the Three Ways.

Newars sometimes assert that these three Ways differ only in means, that the end result is the same; at other times they emphasize the differences between the Ways. Both ways of speaking have scriptural precedent. Vajrācāryas have to combine all three Ways, while being most clearly identified with the third, the Vajrayāna.<sup>38</sup>

Vajrācāryas put monastic ideals into practice at various times : during the Monastic Initiation ritual, whenever they act as god-guardian, and, in a sense, whenever they perform a ritual. Until a ritual is completed the priest, as well as the sponsor (*ajmān*) and other participants (e.g. *dhalaṃ dāmpīn*<sup>39</sup> in an Observance), must maintain a state of ritual purity : this includes bathing, fasting and avoiding contact with impure substances. When the ritual lasts more than one day it also includes celibacy. One can see however that the practice of restraint characteristic of the Disciples' Way is interpreted primarily in ritual terms. The members of Kwā Bāhā, Lalitpur, refer proudly to the fact that more rules, i.e. more rules designed to maintain purity, are kept there than in any other monastery. It is no accident that this is the monastery in Lalitpur most frequented by high-caste Hindus.

All Newars who participate in Buddhist rituals take a vow to become a

Buddha for the good of all beings, that is, the *bodhisattva*-vow, as part of the *guru maṇḍala* rite (Locke 1980 : 87). The vast majority are not aware that they are doing this. Unlike the Eight or Ten Precepts in an Observance (*vrata*) which are read out in a singsong and archaic — but comprehensible<sup>40</sup> — Newari, the *bodhisattva*-vow is read in Sanskrit and in such a way as to be wholly incomprehensible. Knowledge of the *bodhisattva*-vow is confined therefore to the pious, mostly men, and mostly Vajrācāryas and Śākyas. Most Newar Buddhists are equally unaware that the great compassionate deity Karuṇāmaya (Matsyendranāth) is a *bodhisattva* : to the unlearned he is simply 'Buṃgadyah' (god of the village Buṃga), 'Karuṇāmaya' or 'Matsyendranāth'. For most Newar Buddhists *bodhisattva* refers only to the Buddha in his previous lives and to one other divine being, Maitrī (= Maitreya) Bodhisattva, the future Buddha.<sup>41</sup> A few knowledgeable Buddhists assert that Vajrācārya priests are supposed to be *bodhisattvas*, wise beings who help others : this is usually followed by the assertion that no such exist today. Paradoxically those who are sophisticated enough to be acquainted with the *bodhisattva*-concept are also sophisticated enough to despise actual practising Vajrācāryas, whereas those who genuinely respect their Vajrācārya priest and believe in his powers are almost invariably peasants of the older generation who regard him simply as 'their Gubhāju'.

Compared to the *bodhisattva* the ideal of the *siddha* is much more widely known. Vajrācārya Realized Ones are the heroes of many popular folktales in which they put out a fire at their home in Kathmandu by pouring tea on the floor in Lhasa, walk across rivers by singing Tantric songs, defeat Indian jugglers or Tibetan lamas and turn into animals at will.<sup>42</sup> Very few non-Vajrācāryas identify Vajrācāryas as *bodhisattvas*; all know stories about powerful Vajrācāryas who attained success/powers (*siddhi*).

The popular stories focus on the magical powers of the Realized One, but most Newars are also aware that these depend on an advanced spiritual state expressed and obtained through the strict observance of purity rules and devotion to the gods : a loss of singlemindedness, for instance deception by a woman, can lead to the holy man's downfall. Although these ideal Vajrācāryas are capable of impressive magical feats, it would be a mistake to see them purely as magicians. This applies a fortiori to ordinary practising Vajrācāryas, whose main *raison d'être* as far as laypeople are concerned is as ritual technician and religious expert. That they also may have a reputation for magical knowledge is due in part to the theory underlying the rituals they perform for their parishioners, a theory which we must now briefly examine.

6. VĀJRĀCĀRYA PRACTICE : CONTROL OF DEITIES, SELF-DIVINIZATION OR THE REALIZATION OF EMPTINESS?

Vergati (1975 : 315) criticized Greenwold for ignoring "the social consequences of the [Mahāyāna Buddhist] belief in non-duality. If everything is empty there is no difference between good and evil. There is therefore