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Book review of 'Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal: Narratives and Rituals of Newar Buddhism' by Todd T. Lewis

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its technical terminology, and nuances, but also of the flavor and literary style of the philosophical literature, from which she quotes extensively. The view is one of rigorous non-duality, not entirely dissimilar from the some interpretations of Advaita-Vedānta in this regard and certainly very similar to the Nying-ma school's presentation. One's own Ultimate nature is in reality no different from the perfect enlightened state of the unchanging Great Perfection according to Bonpo sources. The goal or fruit is this natural state. Descriptions of the non-dual nature of the Great Perfection explain that, "it cannot be identified with the state transcending suffering (*nya ngan las 'das pa*) enjoyed by enlightened beings, nor with the state of transmigration (*'khor ba*), since it encompasses and at the same time transcends both" (Rossi, 44). The claim of its lack of inherent existence (*rang bzhin med pa*) resonates with the fundamental tenets of the Madhyamaka school, yet, "it is endowed with a dynamic potential (*rtsal*) whereby it can manifest itself in all sorts of ways" (Rossi, 50) much as is the case in the Nying-ma school's descriptions of the Great Perfection. Rossi sums this up when she writes, "the Pure-and-Perfect-Mind is represented by the state of inseparability or non-duality of unborn emptiness, which is primordially pure, and the unobstructed appearance of phenomena, which is spontaneously accomplished. This principle of non-duality of primordial purity and spontaneous accomplishment is a distinctive feature characterizing the View of the Great Perfection" (Rossi, 56). While I have attempted to give a sense of the view here, it is not possible to do justice to such an important and subtle philosophical position as this in the space of a book review. Rossi's study however is an excellent place to start.

The final two thirds of the book are comprised of translations and critical editions of two important texts to this tradition, *rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud las rgyud bu chung bcu gnyis bzhugs so: rdzogs pa chen po byang chub sems kyi gnad byang* (*The Twelve Little Tantras, from the Zhang Zhung Aural Transmission of the Great Perfection: The Great Perfection, The Focal Point of the Pure-and-Perfect-Mind*) and *lTa ba seng ge sgra bsgrags bzhugs so* (*The View Which Is Like The Lion's Roar*). Both are annotated with useful notes and are organized in manner that facilitates ease in use. The translations that lay on the opposite pages of the critical Tibetan editions are both clear and graceful. Rossi remains close to the original Tibetan in her translations with a minimum amount of sacrifice in terms of elegance to the verses she is translating. This is often no simple task as is evident in the many awkward and cumbersome translations from Tibetan which are available these days. Rossi's work here is quite commendable.

The Philosophical View of the Great Perfection in the Tibetan Bon Religion illuminates important dark corners in modern research on Tibetan Religion. Hopefully this volume will pave the way for more work in this important area of the history of religions and the history of ideas, and become one of many such studies documenting the ideas and practices of the Tibetan Bon religion.

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Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal: Narratives and Rituals of Newar Buddhism

By Todd T. Lewis. Translations in Collaboration with Subarna Man Tuladhar and Labh Ratna Tuladhar. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. Pp. xviii + 236, 26 plates, 4 tables.

This book is a work of definite value, since it can be of interest not only to anthropologists who delight themselves in the study of Himalayan cultures, but also, if not more importantly, to those who make the research, study [and nowadays even practice] of Buddhism their major occupation.

The reason is spelled out by Todd T. Lewis in the Preface (p. xiv), where he offers an "at a glance" historical survey of Buddhist scholarship, and affirms that "[s]cholarship on Buddhism has been dominated either by philological-textual studies that usually have left texts unrelated to their community context(s) or by ethnographic studies that have often neglected local literati and their domesticated vernacular literatures."

Scholarly study of Buddhism in the West has certainly shown an initial preference for philological investigation. However, this is quite understandable, because the conditions for pursuing field work and having access to knowledgeable informants were not so widely available a few decades ago as they may be nowadays, and textual sources have been, and in some cases still are, the only tools available to pursue research; I think as a way of phenomenological comparison to the numerous Tibetan Bonpo texts containing narratives and rituals that still remain virtually unknown and unedited. On the other hand, I agree that if the crucial aspect of textual domestication—which constitutes a primary concern in Lewis' research—is overlooked, the result can be a

restricted anthropological representation of Buddhism with respect to the Asian countries where it has been practiced and socially accepted as a live component of the fabric of society. In this respect, the research carried out in this book is dedicated to case studies on the incorporation and domestication of five vernacular texts by the Buddhist Newar community of Nepal. Lewis demonstrates how that community finds and perpetrates its religious and historical identity—in an ever changing and not always supportive socio-cultural environment—and how the role played by modern translators and publicizers of popular narratives keeps alive a centuries-old tradition, a tradition that implies not only the coalescence and continuity of the oral and written Word, but also ritualism.

The Introduction (pp. 1-20) elaborates upon “Buddhism as a Pragmatic Religious Tradition”; “Popular Narratives and their ‘Domestication’ in Buddhist Communities”; “Development of Buddhist Ritualism”; “Ritual Innovations of Mahayana Buddhism”; “Nepal and Newar Buddhism”; and the “Context and Paradoxes of Modernity.” Chapter 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 are focused on the five texts chosen and commented upon by the author. The chapters include a “Background” discussion, the “Translation” of the tale or ritual, an analysis of “The Domestication of the Text”, and final “Observations on the History of Practical Buddhism.” The tales, renown across Asia, instruct and admonish on a wide range of social issues. By suggesting a spiritual treatment, as it were, for those issues, the narratives fulfill the purpose of unifying the lay community. The rituals, also renown across Asia, help with the resolution of life issues while deepening the bond between the lay community and the monastic one.

Chapter 2 is entitled “Stupas and Spouses: The Shrngabheri Avadana” (pp. 21-48). It is focused on the Buffalo Horn-blowing Tale. This tale deals with the importance of venerating stupas and all the benefits that derive from this devotional practice; how liberation can be attained through stupa worship performed by way of playing musical instruments such as the buffalo horn; and also how a faithful wife becomes instrumental in determining a better rebirth for her husband, thanks to her conjugal devotion and meritorious actions. The text describing the vicissitudes of the caravan leader Simhala in Chapter 3, “Merchants, Demonesses, and Missionary Faith: The Simhalasarthabahu Avadana” (pp. 49-88), contains an “unmistakable message for a Newar merchant of the Kathmandu valley” inasmuch as it “impart[s] the danger of breaking the circle of Newar ethnicity and kinship” (p. 85) when trading abroad. Chapter 4, “Devotions to a Celestial Bodhisattva: The Tara Vrata” (pp. 89-108), describes the ritual for worshipping the much beloved Bodhisattva Tara, which “should be performed at least once early in one’s lifetime since this can avert premature death” (p. 107). The invocation of Mahakala contained in Chapter 5, “Invoking the Powers of the Buddhist “Dark Lord”: The Caturdashi Vrata of Mahakala” (pp. 109-118), shows how invoking this great conqueror of enemies may lead to many supernatural powers such as being invisible to enemies, being able to materialize whatever is desired and so on (pp. 112-113). Chapter 6 deals with “The Refuge and Mantra Recitation: The Pancaraksa” (pp. 119-164). The Pancaraksa as a text became widely popular in Central and Far East Asia, with translations being undertaken during several centuries in various languages. Taking refuge in the five female deities by chanting the dharanis, reciting the mantras, and also wearing amulets containing the dharanis and mantras can bring all sorts of blessings, from general welfare and happiness to immunity from epidemics.

Chapter 7, “Summary and Conclusions: The Domestication of Indic Buddhism and Its Construction in Modern Scholarship” (pp. 165-180), is divided into several sections. In the first one, entitled *The Intellectual Construction of Buddhism*, the author contends, *inter alia*, that due to the “legacy of colonial orientalism . . . there has been very slow progress in understanding how and why Buddhist institutions and cultures evolved across Asia” (p. 167). The section *Toward a Buddhist Sociological Imagination* points for example to “the fact that economic resources and political alliances have been as crucial to the tradition’s successful global domestication as ideas were” (p. 168). He then maintains the validity of *Story Narratives as the Central Texts in Buddhist Societies*, and suggests that “[to] understand the sources of doctrinal definition, moral guidance, or popular rituals in the history of Buddhism in any locality . . . one must look to the popular narratives, not to the “classics” of the intellectual elite” (p. 171). In the section concerning *The Preeminent Buddhist Ideology: Merit-Making*, we are reminded, as far as householders are concerned, that “[i]n Nepalese texts . . . Buddhism fosters family ties, encourages an “energetic striving” after economic success, promotes the worship of hungry ghosts and local gods, justifies the rightful seeking after worldly happiness and security, applauds the religious virtues of faith and heaven-seeking, and underlines the necessity of being a donor and a patron” (pp. 175-176). Finally Lewis challenges scholars with the question *Mahayana: A Religion of Philosophical Analysis or Ritual Power?* by arguing that “[i]ntellectuals are prone to forget that in pre-modern times when literacy was rare, only a very few could read texts to learn the *dharma*; most had to learn through oral accounts and through the experience of rituals” (p. 178); and also that “[l]ofty moral values and blissful fruits of meditation certainly must have im-

pressed and converted some: but the *dharma*'s control over the powers that insure health, wealth, progeny, and peace—even overcoming bad *karman*—certainly would have had the widest appeal in securing the faith's success in contexts as different as nomadic pasturelands, urban enclaves, or subsistence farming villages" (p. 179).

In conclusion, I concur with Todd T. Lewis that there is a need for harmonizing the study of Buddhism in a more integrated and balanced way that would favor, whenever possible, a more interdisciplinary and soundly comparative approach, and I think that his work contributes to the fulfillment of this need in a challenging and inspiring way. I consider it as a good reference source, especially for the study of the Newars, who as a distinct cultural and social group, represent the last cradle of Mahayana Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

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