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Recommended Citation
Owens, Bruce. 2006. Rebuilding Buddhism: The Theravada Movement in Twentieth-Century Nepal by Sarah LeVine and David N. Gellner; reviewed by Bruce Owens. HIMALAYA 26(1). Available at: https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol26/iss1/19
REBUILDING BUDDHISM: THE THERAVADA MOVEMENT IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY NEPAL

SARAH LEVINE AND DAVID N. GELLNER

Reviewed by Bruce Owens

At the beginning and end of this volume, LeVine and Gellner compare their work on "rebuilding Buddhism," primarily among Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, to Sherry Ortner's 1989 volume on the development of celibate Sherpa monasteries in Solu Khumbu. Though both concern similar shifts in religious institutions, LeVine and Gellner contrast their approach to Ortner's, which they describe as including "only as much ethnography and history as is compatible with still making her theoretical case" to exemplify "the virtues of practice theory," stating that they "have no such theoretical ambitions" but "seek to provide as rich and as many-sided an ethnography and ethnographic history of this local form of Buddhist modernism as possible, in the belief that contributing to the ethnographic record is a good in itself, and because others may later wish to use our material and ask questions of it that we did not think to ask ourselves" (x-xi).

LeVine and Gellner's collaborative contribution to the ethnographic record extends beyond the Theravada movement that its title specifies, as it amounts to a valuable history and overview of the various sources of Buddhist traditions that have, in various ways, shaped the practices and beliefs of those who identify themselves as Buddhist in Nepal today. It also traces how discourses about being Buddhist have been generated both within and from without the various Buddhist communities as they have formed over time. Indeed, they make the important point that the popularity of one of the most influential institutions that the authors identify as Theravadin—Goenka's vipassana retreat at Dharmashringha—may well be due, in part, to its self-designation as non-religious.

This history does not take the traditional form of straightforward chronology, but engages a series of key issues, such as Bhikkuni Ordination, the tensions between secular and religious education for novices, and the role of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism in shaping Newar Vajrayana and Theravada traditions, each set in often overlapping time frames. In each instance, the authors juxtapose historical overview with life histories that flesh out how particular religious innovations, debates, and aspirations are engaged by individuals who are situated in specific socially, culturally, and politically defined spaces.

This gives vivid form to the dilemmas and paradoxes that confront those who seek to promote Theravada Buddhist institutions and practices and those who support them, particularly those who choose to become monks or nuns. One central issue that many of these chapters address is the relative status of male and female renunciants, and the particular obstacles and possibilities that Nepal has presented for women who take ordination and seek to build institutions. The increasing intensity and frequency of global flows of ideas, funds, and people, and their effects upon and deployment by local institutions and people is also startlingly portrayed here, if not explicitly problematized.

The overall impression that this material produced in this reader is of a few dedicated and deeply inspired individuals (several of whom we get to know in some detail) providing support and institutions that most individuals deploy for their own, often secular, self-serving ends. LeVine and Gellner tell us, for example, that all women who choose ordination as nuns "are motivated by the urgent desire to escape marriage and motherhood," and that, "[f]or
women, ordination is more an act of emancipation than of renunciation" (273). This act of renunciation on the part of boys, however, is also not as self-sacrificing as it might seem, as “many of the young monks joined the Sangha as novices in the first place primarily in order to gain an education” (272). Moreover, once they acquire that education, approximately fifty percent apparently disrobe (269), often on the basis of the understanding that they had upon “going into homelessness,” that they may break their vows with relative impunity. The authors also note that monks and nuns in Nepal often find that the roles that those outside the celibate communities envision for them are often at odds with their own aspirations. More and more laymen are requesting that the members of the monastic community perform ritual services that interfere with their contemplative life. Those trained in Thailand, in particular, find that the role of monk or nun that they knew in that country does not, for all intents and purposes, exist in the social imaginary of their society, even as their monastic status is increasingly valorized in Nepal.

Given the miniscule size of the Theravadin monastic community in Nepal, one of the authors’ more radical claims is that “Theravada Buddhists have succeeded in defining the terms and discourse in which most educated Buddhists in Nepal define themselves today” (16). After reading this book, one might concede their point, but I can do so only if one interprets “defining the terms and discourse” to mean that no one in Nepal can define one’s position vis-à-vis Buddhism without using coordinates that are located, at least in part, in Theravadin terms. To say that these terms must be included in the equation of identity, is not necessarily to concede that Theravadin identity is the only plausible one for a Newar Buddhist to adopt, however.

Gellner and LeVine nicely review the consequences of the controversy that Colin Rosser (1966) has described in detail, in which Vajracharyas took recourse to Rana rules regarding caste and commensality to shore up their own authority, which they viewed at the time as threatened by the popular Tibetan Nyingmapa, Kyangste Lama. Playing the hand of caste in deference to their Rana oppressors, the Vajracharya elite refused to take rice from their jajmans who had accepted prasad from this Tibetan interloper. This rupture of traditional commensality between purohit and jajman fed into the larger conjuncture d’histoire that included the arrival of the new options of Tibetan and Theravadin Buddhist practices, and began to undermine critically Vajracharya authority and the tradition of which they were exemplars and guaridians. Citing this assertion of caste exclusivity and hierarchy as a kind of beginning of the end, the authors claim that because the Vajrayana tradition in Nepal “is fully embedded in a traditional caste system, and because it lacks the full time, permanent, celibate option, and because, therefore, it provides no religious or priestly vocation either for women or for non-Vajracharyas, it cannot retain its hereditary adherents if they feel moved to renounce,” and, “it cannot retain the deepest allegiance of lay adherents when they acquire modern-style education and become reflexive about their own tradition” (262).

However, the recent massive public initiations presided over by Naresh Vajracharya, with the blessings of his guru, Badri Ratna Vajracharya (see Bangdel 2005), suggest that Vajracharya officiants are beginning the work of disembedding their tradition from the caste system, and opening up opportunities for participation for both women and men of many castes and ethnicities. Given the small size and fragility of the monastic Theravadin community in Nepal, it strikes this reader as odd that the celibate option need play such a vital role, particularly since one of the most influential institutions that the authors identify as part of what Lauren Leve has described as the “Theravada turn” (2007) are proponents of Vipassana meditation, in which monks and nuns play little part. Gellner has himself argued that traditional Vajrayana practitioners see no contradiction in occupying the roles of “Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest” (1992), suggesting a local version of temporary assumption of vows known elsewhere in Southeast Asia; hereditary adherents can “feel moved to renounce” and sustain those aspects of their tradition that are at odds with renunciation. With respect to the tensions between “modernity and tradition” cited here, the authors provide the important example of Min Bahadur Sakya (among others) as one who has benefited from “modern style education” (currently a Professor of Mathematics at an engineering college) and certainly who has “become reflexive about” his own tradition, yet who seeks to revitalize Vajrayana tradition, if not, necessarily, in the form presently practiced. Finally, it is not at all clear to me that “only some Newars identify strongly with a Newar identity as opposed to a more broadly based Nepali identity” (267), or that Newar Buddhism is unimportant to Newar identity, as the authors claim. This is all to say that the complex picture of Buddhism in Nepal that LeVine and Gellner portray may be even more complex than they suggest, and that others will find (as the authors expressly hope!) a great deal of rich material here with which to ask (and answer) questions as they explore this fertile field of Buddhist innovation and transformation in the land of the Buddha’s birth.

REFERENCES


With its concise yet broad-sweeping title, Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik's edited volume on Women in Tibet is positioned as a definitive contribution to the literature on women's experiences in the Tibetan cultural area. The composition of the volume reflects the diversity of contemporary Tibetan Studies, with chapters by historians, philologists, scholars of comparative religion, and anthropologists, who apply their diverse methodological approaches to a range of chronologically and geographically disparate subjects. This diversity makes for an uneven read: some chapters are in themselves lengthy mini-monographs that present important new ethnographic research (those by Diemberger, Henrion-Dourcy and Barnett); others are tightly argued pieces clearly situated within the author's own discipline (Schaeffer and Makley); while the remaining chapters are lists of notable women within certain domains of Tibetan life (Uebach; Martin and Tsering). Although Gyatso and Havnevik's well-crafted introduction works hard to provide a coherent framing structure by raising overarching theoretical questions about cultural relativism in gender studies, and the methodological challenges of accessing women's experiences, as a whole the book does not live up to its promising title as a comprehensive survey of Tibetan women. Instead, as Gyatso and Havnevik themselves admit, the volume "only provides fragments of the history and diversity of women in Tibet" (24).

Studies of the Tibetan world have generally overemphasized the religious sphere, and the available literature on Tibetan women is no exception. In particular, there is a plethora of books and articles by Western Buddhist women about the power of feminine deities in Tibetan Buddhism, but relatively little material about the lives of actual women in Tibetan contexts. This book is a healthy corrective, with chapters about women in medicine, the performing arts, and politics, in addition to the more predictable contributions on nuns, yoginis, and oracles. The volume also enters new territory by including several scholars conducting ground-breaking research within the contemporary Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC), rather than relying solely on historical sources and/or field research conducted in Himalayan areas outside of political Tibet.

After the introduction, the book is divided into two parts, with Part I focusing on "Women in Traditional Tibet." Helga Uebach looks at how noblewomen of the Tibetan empire from the seventh to ninth centuries are represented in textual materials. Of particular note are her analyses of their political roles and contributions to important monasteries like Samye. Moving ahead chronologically, Dan Martin's article begins by considering the methodological challenges of identifying religious women in the biographical literature of the eleventh to twelfth centuries. He then lists all those whom he has identified, placing...