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Hodgson's Blind Alley? On the So-Called Schools of Nepalese Buddhism

by David N. Gellner

The way in which textbooks come to be written perhaps deserves more attention than it generally receives in the history of ideas. This short article explores one persistent mistake which has appeared in numerous textbooks on Buddhism down to the present day.¹ In these textbooks it is written that there are four schools of Nepalese Buddhism, each named after the doctrine it espouses.² The authority cited for this is Brian Houghton Hodgson. In fact this is a mistake twice over: no such schools exist or ever have existed; the idea that Hodgson asserted their existence is based on a misunderstanding of what he wrote.

Nepalese Buddhism, that is, the Buddhism of the Newar people of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, ought to have an important place in Buddhist studies. The Newars are the last surviving South Asians who practise Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, whose sacred and liturgical language is Sanskrit, and whose rituals are directly descended from those evolved in North India during the heyday of Indian Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism. Brian Hodgson spent more than twenty years in the Kathmandu Valley between 1821 and 1843, and for most of that time he was the British Resident (representative of the East India Company to the court of Nepal).³

Nearly all the Sanskrit manuscripts of Buddhist texts come from Nepal; as is well known, it was the manuscripts that Hodgson sent to Paris which enabled Burnouf to undertake the first modern study of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Hodgson was not a Sanskrit scholar and did not study these texts himself. Through his friend and *paṇḍit* Amṛtānanda he did however carry out much that would today count as fieldwork, though under very

restrictive circumstances. (As British Resident his movements were limited and closely watched by the Nepalese authorities.) Hodgson's writings on Buddhism were initially considered as an authoritative source on Buddhism as such.⁴ Later, once Buddhist scholarship was established in Europe, Hodgson's work came to be regarded merely as a guide to *Nepalese* Buddhism. Furthermore, this form of Buddhism came to be seen as an unimportant oddity.

Some more historically-minded scholars did realize that Nepalese Buddhism was representative of late Indian Buddhism. It was for this reason that Sylvain Lévi came to the Kathmandu Valley in 1898 and wrote his history of Nepal, originally published in 1905 and recently re-issued, as a prelude to writing the history of the whole of South Asia. Nepal or the Kathmandu Valley (the two terms were, until recently, synonymous) was, Lévi wrote, "India in the making" (1905 I: 28). One could observe "as in a laboratory" the relationship of late Buddhism to Hinduism and Hindu kingship, a dynamic process which in India eventually resulted in the absorption of Buddhism by Hinduism.⁵ Because of the difficulty of gaining access to Nepal before 1951, and subsequently because of the complexity of Newar culture, scholars have been slow to follow Lévi's lead. Since the 1970s, however, an increasing amount of work has been done.⁶

This work seems not to have made much impact on the general world of Buddhist studies. Consequently, one still finds repeated the old idea, for which Hodgson is wrongly cited as authority, that there are different schools of Nepalese Buddhism. The present article is intended therefore to alert buddhologists to the fact that no such schools exist, or ever have existed. The idea that they do arose from a misreading of Hodgson's original intention, which was to describe *Buddhist* schools of thought, *not* schools of Nepalese Buddhism. The mistaken idea that there are schools of Nepalese Buddhism has been repeated, parrot-like, in one textbook after another. Even where this particular mistake is not made, Nepalese Buddhism is frequently and quite misleadingly treated as an adjunct of Tibetan Buddhism.⁷

Buddhist studies owe a great debt to Hodgson for the manuscripts he sent back to Europe. At that time very little was known

about Buddhism in the West. Not surprisingly, therefore, he wished to establish what the principal Buddhist doctrines were. After working with his Buddhist *paṇḍit*, Amṛtānanda, Hodgson thought he had found the answer. He wrote:

Speculative Buddhism embraces four very distinct systems of opinion respecting the origin of the world, the nature of a first cause, and the nature and destiny of the soul. These systems are denominated, from the diagnostic tenet of each, Svābhāvika, Aiswarika, Yātnika, and Kārmika . . . (Hodgson 1972 [1874] I: 23).

According to Hodgson, the Svābhāvika system explains everything by the power “inherent in matter” (ibid.), i.e., *svabhāva*; Buddhahood is achieved by understanding the nature of the universal law. Hodgson identified as a sub-system of Svābhāvika the Prājñika school: those who conceived of the ultimate as *prajñā* or wisdom. Both of these systems denied “a single, immaterial, self-conscious being, who gave existence and order to matter by volition” (ibid.). By contrast

the Aiswarikas admit of immaterial essence, and of a supreme, infinite and self-existent Deity (Adi Buddha) whom some of them consider as the sole deity and cause of all things, while others associate with him a coequal and eternal material principle; believing that all things proceeded from the joint operation of these two principles (op. cit.: 25).

The final two schools, the Kārmika and the Yātnika, Hodgson believed to be more recent than the others, and he argued that they must have arisen

to rectify that extravagant quietism, which, in the other schools, stripped the powers above, (whether considered as of material or immaterial nature,) of all personality, providence and dominion; and man of all his active energies and duties. Assuming as just, the more general principles of their predecessors, they seem to have directed their chief attention to the phaenomena of human nature, to have been struck with its free will, and the distinction between its cogitative and sensitive powers, and to have sought to prove, notwithstanding the necessary moral law

of their first teachers, that the felicity of man must be secured, either by the proper culture of his moral sense, which was the sentiment of the Kármikas, or, by the just conduct of his understanding, a conclusion which the Yátnikas preferred (op.cit.: 26).

In one textbook after another scholars have followed Hodgson without applying thought or analysis to what he wrote. One after another they have repeated that there are four schools of Buddhism in Nepal. For a long time I was puzzled by these statements, for they have no connection whatever with the actual state of affairs in Nepal.

A careful reading of Hodgson's text makes it clear what the status of these "schools" really was. Hodgson writes in a note, when he first introduces the schools:

My Baudda pandit assigned these titles [of the schools] to the Extract made from his Sástras, and always used them in his discussions with me. Hence I erroneously presumed them to be derived from the Sástras, and preferable to Mádyámika, &c., which he did not use, and which, though the scriptural denominations, were postponed to those here used on his authority as being less diagnostic. In making these extracts we ought to reach the leading doctrines, and therein I think we succeeded (op. cit.: 23).

This makes it quite clear that the schools were invented by Hodgson's *pandit*, Amṛtánanda. Furthermore, I think it is possible to understand why he invented them. The Kathmandu Valley has never had sufficient resources to support large monasteries of celibate monks pursuing a curriculum of philosophical study, as had existed in India and grew up in Tibet. Consequently, although Amṛtánanda was very learned, he had no knowledge of the different philosophical systems of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Hodgson, his employer, plied him with questions, such as "What is matter, and what is spirit?," "Is matter an independent existence, or derived from God?" and "What is the cause of good and evil?"⁸ Amṛtánanda evidently fell in with his employer's way of thinking and readily systematized the different elements of Buddhist doctrine he knew into separate "schools."

The first two "schools" (the Svābhāvika and Aiśvarika) he

derived by a misunderstanding of the *Buddhacarita*. These two doctrines are mentioned in a passage where the minister of the young Buddha-to-be's father is trying to persuade him to return from the forest and, if he must pursue his religious vocation, to do so as king. The religious positions the minister is describing are in fact non-Buddhist doctrines which Sarvārthasiddha (the future Buddha) rejects as inadequate.

Having wrongly accepted that these two positions were Buddhist, Hodgson supposed that the other schools—which he and Amṛtānanda derived from genuinely Buddhist doctrines—arose subsequently and in reaction to them (as quoted above). Thus, of the other “schools” the Prājñika or wisdom school represents the Buddhist view that wisdom is the ultimate, equivalent to *nirvāṇa* or liberation; the Kārmika school represents the Buddhist axiom that within this world everything is determined by one's *karma*; and the Yātnika school represents the Buddhist belief that *karma* is determined by the individual's intentions, which it is always open to beings to improve upon. These three, far from being alternatives, are integral parts of the most basic and universal Buddhist teachings.

Evidently, on its initial appearance in 1828, Hodgson's description of Nepalese Buddhist schools excited some scepticism,⁹ because eight years later he published “proofs” in the shape of “quotations from original Sanskrit authorities” (Hodgson 1972 I: 73f.). Among the quotations illustrating the Svābhāvika system are the three verses of the *Buddhacarita* (ix.61–3 in Johnston 1972) already referred to. There are also two quotations whose force depends on a misunderstanding of the phrase *svabhāvaśuddha*, free of essence, and an inversion of its meaning as ‘governed by’ or ‘regulated by’ *svabhāva* (op. cit.: 73, 75). Similarly, the verses given in support of the Aiśvarika doctrine include a mistranslation of a famous Buddhist verse so that the Attained One (*tathāgata*) instead of explaining the cause of all things, is the cause of all things.¹⁰

The other quotations Hodgson gives do all seem to represent genuine Buddhist doctrines, although their source is not always correctly identified and their translation is unreliable. There is no need to see them as representing separate “schools.” In his quotations Hodgson gives separate space to the doctrines of Ādi-Buddha, Ādi-Dharma and Ādi-Saṃgha, that is, the first

or ultimate Buddha, Dharma and Saṃgha. Most of the verses on the Ādi-Buddha come from the *Nāmasaṃgīti*,¹¹ on the Ādi-Dharma from the *Prajñāpāramitā*¹² and the few on the Ādi-Saṃgha from the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha*. Hodgson was right to see the first and last of these as late, theistic developments.

Even within Newar Buddhism, however, the doctrine of the Ādi-Buddha does not have the importance that many have, on Hodgson's authority, assumed. (The terms 'Ādi-Dharma' and 'Ādi-Saṃgha,' evidently Hodgson's and Amṛtānanda's inventions, have, quite rightly, been forgotten.) One can see how books get written by comparing the following passages describing Newar Buddhism. Oldfield was the British Residency surgeon from 1850 to 1863. His *Sketches of Nepal* summarizes Hodgson's schools of Buddhism and, true to Hodgson's intentions though without his caution, calls them "various systems of speculative Buddhism" "propounded by the early Buddhist teachers" (Oldfield 1981 [1880] II: 86). Oldfield describes the history of Buddhism with a certainty and forthrightness uninhibited by any knowledge of his subject; he concludes:

The system of Theology taught in the Buddhist scriptures of Nipal [sic] is essentially monotheistic, and is based upon a belief in the Divine Supremacy of Adi Buddha, as the sole and self-existent spirit pervading the universe (op.cit.: 111).

Writing fifty years later, Landon defines Newar Buddhist belief in the same way:

According to the later and now dominant school there are five greater manifestations (Dhyani Buddhas) of the one Essential Buddha (Adi Buddha) . . . (Landon 1976 [1928] II: 219).

Finally, in the 1960s, the anthropologist Gopal Singh Nepali writes:

At its higher level, Newar Buddhism is essentially monotheistic and is based on the belief in one supreme God, that is Adi Buddha . . . (Nepali 1965: 289).

The case of the four schools discussed above is simple: they

do not exist. The question of the Ādi-Buddha is more complex. The term is indeed used by Newar Buddhists, usually as an epithet of Svayambhū, the holiest *stūpa* of the Valley. According to the local religious histories derived from the *Svayambhū Purāna*, the Svayambhū *stūpa* was the first thing to appear out of the lake which the Valley used to be. More rarely, the term "Ādi-Buddha" is used as an epithet of the Buddha Dīpaṅkara. In both these cases the prefix "Ādi-" is often understood in temporal terms. It is true that in some contexts and in certain moods Newar Buddhists are inclined to a position which sees all divine beings as one; but they do not call this one-ness Ādi-Buddha. I doubt very much whether this should be called monotheism; pantheism is probably a better description. It is also true that some of the texts of the Newar Buddhists, notably the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha*, describe the creation myth onto which these three writers cited have fastened. This myth coexists with other alternative accounts.¹³ In any case, no Newar Buddhist would think of introducing his or her religion by saying that they believe in a supreme deity called Ādi-Buddha who created the world in such-and-such a way. In general they have a proper Buddhist indifference to the question of the creation of the world.

Once again a scholarly tradition has been created by Hodgson's reliance on Western categories. Once again, Hodgson's text has been used as a source but his intentions have been misunderstood. In fact Hodgson nowhere asserts that belief in the Ādi-Buddha is the most fundamental of Newar Buddhism's tenets; nor does he say that the Aśvarika school is dominant in Nepal. The three authors cited on Nepal have failed to appreciate that Hodgson was attempting to reconstruct "dogmatic" schools of the past on the basis of (mainly liturgical) texts in use at his time. Hodgson would have agreed that certain texts, such as the *Nāmasaṅgīti*, the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha* and the *Svayambhū Purāna*, presuppose the Aśvarika doctrine; but he would never have made the crude and misleading assertions of our three experts on Nepal.

One scholar who comes well out of this is E.J. Thomas. He alone looked closely at Hodgson's text. He wrote:

[Hodgson] set a questionnaire, arranged according to his own

ideas of theology, often with leading questions. . . . It was no wonder that the answers he obtained seemed to him "a sad jumble of cloudy metaphysics," and that Burnouf was surprised that he could not discover in his manuscripts anything like the "Bauddha system" as described by Hodgson. Yet scholars continue to use his terms, some of which, like *dhyāni-buddha*, have never been found outside his writings (Thomas 1933: 247–8).

Thomas was closer to the mark than he knew with the term *dhyāni-buddha*. Not only has it no justification in Buddhist scripture, it has no justification in Newari usage either. It has gained wide currency solely through the combination of Hodgson's influence and the inertia of textbook tradition. The questionnaire Thomas refers to (see Hodgson 1972 I: 41–53) does indeed contain leading questions. For all that, if used with care, it does contain material of value.

Hodgson was ahead of his time in understanding that *sūnyatā* does not mean "nothingness" (op. cit.: 26). Unfortunately his many correct interpretations on matters of detail are overshadowed by his having followed his *paṇḍit* Amṛtānanda in hypostasizing two non-Buddhist schools and three perfectly compatible Buddhist doctrines into five separate, non-existent "schools" of Buddhist doctrine.

Those who followed and made use of Hodgson's writings were, if anything, guilty of a worse error. They assumed, although evidence to the contrary was there before them, that Hodgson was describing schools of *Nepalese* Buddhism he had observed in operation. In fact he was trying to reconstruct schools of Buddhist philosophy on the basis of manuscripts which were not philosophical but devotional in intention. Probably the writers of the textbooks on Buddhism mentioned above simply followed one another. Since none of them had ever been to Nepal and few made use of Lévi's work (which tactfully ignores Hodgson's schools), they had no reason to doubt what they saw in previous textbooks. Since Hodgson's schools bore no relation to what had by then been discovered to be the true state of affairs where Buddhist doctrinal disputes were concerned, it was naturally assumed that Hodgson must have been describing Nepalese schools of Buddhism, a pseudo-fact which was taken as further evidence of the supposed degeneracy of Nepalese Buddhism.

Hodgson says that the titles of these “schools” were his *pandit's* invention. But did Hodgson perhaps suggest to Amṛtānanda the concepts he got back from him, by his insistent questions on doctrine? The answer, if it can be found so long after the event, lies buried in Hodgson's voluminous papers in the India Office library. For those interested in Nepalese Buddhism, there is undoubtedly much else to be discovered there as well.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank R.F. Gombrich and D.P. Martinez for comments on an earlier draft of this article. My own research in Nepal, 1982–4, could not have been undertaken without the support of a Leverhulme Study Abroad Studentship.

2. See Monier-Williams (1890: 204), Kern (1896: 134), La Vallée Poussin (1908: 93), Keith (1923: 301), Getty (1928: 2–3), Glasenapp (1936: 110), Dasgupta (1962: 340–1; 1974: 97–8), Bareau (1966: 210), Pal (1974: 13) and Snelling (1987: 218). Surprisingly, Hodgson's schools are even recorded by the Nepalese historian D.R. Regmi (1965 I: 569) who, while he does not endorse their existence, expresses no overt skepticism about them either.

3. On Hodgson's life see Hunter (1896) and Philip Denwood's introduction to Hodgson (1972). Hodgson was assistant Resident from 1825 to 1833 and Resident from 1833 to 1843.

4. Hunter (1896: 276) describes how “Hodgson's first essays [on Buddhism] produced an extraordinary sensation in Europe.”

5. In the colourful language of Vincent Smith (1924: 382): “the chief interest which [Nepal] offers to some students is the opportunity presented by it for watching the manner in which the octopus of Hinduism is slowly strangling its Buddhist victim.” Fortunately, the frequent announcements of the death of Newar Buddhism have been premature.

6. The single most important source is Locke (1980). His other works (1975, 1985, 1987) should also be consulted. The best introduction to the cultural history of the Valley, although disappointing on Buddhism, is Slusser (1982). Anthropological work has been done by M. Allen (1973, 1975, 1983), Greenwold (1974a, 1974b) and recently by Lienhard (1978, 1984, 1985, 1986) and myself (Gellner 1986, 1987b, 1988a, 1988b, 1989c). Greater detail can be found in unpublished Ph.D.s by Riley-Smith (1982), Lewis (1984) and Gellner (1987a). An important historical source is Kölver and Śākya (1985). Riccardi (1980) summarizes what is known from inscriptions about the early history of Buddhism in Nepal.

7. Thus Robinson and Johnson (1977: 186) write that “Buddhism finally became syncretized with Tantric Hinduism and today no longer exists as a separate religion in Nepal, except for small minorities who still consider themselves Buddhists. Its vestiges (prayer wheels and flags, *stūpas*) are found

today in the country's popular religion." This is quite untrue. Buddhism among the Newars has a separate organizational existence. It is not correct to describe it as merely popular. Prayer wheels and prayer flags, far from being "vestiges," are recent borrowings on the Newars' part, usually erected by those who have spent time in Tibet.

8. See Hodgson (1972 I: 41–52), for Hodgson's questions and Amṛtānanda's answers. The sketch of Buddhism contained therein is, as Hodgson thought, valuable, but the persistent focus on doctrine enabled Hodgson to project his imaginary schools onto the answers.

9. Cf. Hunter (1896: 279–80) for mention of two controversies Hodgson became involved in.

10. *Ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetuṃ teṣāṃ tathāgato/ hy avadat teṣāṃ ca yo nirodha evaṃvādī mahāśramaḥ.* Hodgson (op. cit.: 111f.) was aware of the other, correct translation. Apparently it was Amṛtānanda who insisted, in certain moods, on the theistic interpretation.

11. Thus Hodgson's quotations, 6, 7, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 documenting the Ādi-Buddha doctrine correspond to verses 46, 47, 43-4, 44-5, 59, 60 and 61 respectively of the *Nāmasaṃgīti* (see Davidson 1981).

12. On the Ādi-Dharma Hodgson's quotations 4 through 11 correspond to verses 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 13, 17 and 19 respectively of Rāhulabhadra's *Prajñāpāramitā-stotra* (Conze 1959: 169-71). Hodgson gives the *Aṣṭasāhasrika-prajñāpāramitā* as the source; the verses are indeed usually cited before the beginning of that work. (See Vaidya ed. 1960: 1-2, where they are ascribed to Nāgārjuna).

13. See Hodgson (1971 I: 43-4) for some of them.

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