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Buddhist Nuns

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THE FINANCES OF A TWENTIETH CENTURY
BUDDHIST MISSION:
Building Support for the Theravāda Nuns' Order of Nepal

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The giving and receiving of donations (*dāna*) is a reciprocal exchange between the lay and monastic communities by which both stand to profit. In return for their donations, by which they demonstrate and cultivate attitudes of non-attachment to material goods and interest in the welfare of others, Buddhist lay people look to generate spiritual merit to earn them health and prosperity in this life and a good rebirth. Since ancient times *dāna* has provided Buddhist monks and nuns with food, clothing, and shelter in return for which they have been charged with serving the world as exemplars of renunciation, practitioners of meditation, and performers of ritual¹. Nuns however, who, by virtue of their gender, are viewed by donors as a “lesser field of merit”, now, as in the past, are at a significant economic disadvantage relative to monks². This is especially the case for Theravāda Buddhist nuns in Nepal where the Theravāda tradition is rather recently established. Although there is inscriptional evidence for the existence of Buddhist nuns in Kathmandu and Patan from the fifth through the eleventh century, the likelihood is that they belonged to the Mūlasarvāstivādin school³. In any event, there is no record of the existence of Theravāda nuns in the Kathmandu Valley, “Nepal” of pre-modern times, before 1931. This paper looks at how, over seven decades (1931-2000), Nepalese nuns have struggled to create a viable economic base.

Introduction

Theravāda Buddhism in its “modernist” or “Protestant” form reached Nepal in the 1920s when a handful of Newar men brought the “good

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¹ T. Lewis, 2000: 8.

² See, T. Bartholomeusz, 1994: 191-194; M. L. Falk, 2000: 37-57; N. Falk, 1980: 207-224; H. Havnevik, 1989: 121-124; H. Kawanami, 1990, 1(1): 17-40; 2000: 159-171.

³ P. Skilling, 1993/94, 29-49.

news” back from India to the Kathmandu Valley⁴. Strongly critical of the traditional laicised form of Vajrayāna Buddhism which they perceived as elitest, esoteric, overly ritualistic, and largely irrelevant to the lives of ordinary Buddhists, these young people had gone in search of an alternative. The Valley had provided a conduit for the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet⁵ and many Nepalese painters and image makers had followed in the footsteps of the early missionary and translator monks to work on Tibetan monasteries⁶. Since the Second Conversion, Tibetan lamas had maintained a continuous presence at Valley stūpas and other sacred sites; meanwhile, by gradual increments Newar Buddhist merchants had come to dominate the trans-Himalayan trade and thus had had significant exposure to Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet itself as well as in the Valley⁷. Not surprisingly, a few of these young Newar “seekers”, after receiving teachings from Tibetan lamas at the great stūpa of Svayambhu, went north to Tibet, took ordination and spent time in monasteries in Lhasa and Shigatse⁸. But then, dissatisfied with the teaching and practices to which they were exposed there, they travelled south again to India where, at Kushinagar, Sarnath and Bodhi Gaya, they encountered Maha Bodhi Society missionaries⁹. They were convinced that their approach, with its egalitarian emphasis and focus on teaching, preaching, and textual study, was what they had been searching for and, together with others who had come directly to India from Nepal, they took Theravāda ordination and came home to reform Newar Buddhism¹⁰. What they had in mind was to cleanse it of certain features such as castism and blood sacrifice, absorbed over the centuries from Hinduism; to focus on the figure of the Buddha as Teacher in place of the complex Hindu-Buddhist pantheon; to re-introduce monasticism which had vanished from Newar

⁴ The concept of Buddhist “modernism” was first formulated by H. Bechert (1967), who described the ideological and organizational origins of the Buddhist revival movement in Sri Lanka. G. Obeyesekere (1970) coined the term “Protestant Buddhism” to describe the same movement.

⁵ See A. Chattopadhyay, 1967; E. Obermiller, 1931; D. Snellgrove, 1957.

⁶ A. W. Macdonald and A. V. Stahl, 1979: 35.

⁷ T. Lewis, 1989 (38)31-57.

⁸ Mahapragya, 1983.

⁹ H. Bechert and J.-U. Hartmann, 1988(8)1-28.

¹⁰ R. Kloppenborg, 1977(4)301-322.

Buddhist monasteries in the middle ages when monks had married and, following the Hindu model, metamorphosed into householder priests; and to bring *buddhadharma* to every man and woman in their community. Although they received ordination and some instruction from Maha Bodhi missionaries who would continue to advise them from a distance for decades, they brought their mission to Kathmandu with nothing but their robes, begging bowls and a few religious anthologies composed of selections from Pāli texts translated into the Newari language. Unlike the Vajrayāna priests with whom they would soon be competing for lay support, they had no temples, no endowment lands, and no tradition of *pañcadān* (alms of husked and unhusked grain) behind them¹¹. Economically, they were on their own.

Background to the Mission

Inscriptions indicate that Hindus and Buddhists have lived side-by-side in the Kathmandu Valley at least since the period of the Licchavi kings (400-900 CE.)¹². As late as the mid-nineteenth century more than half the Newar population, the dominant ethnic group of the Valley, identified themselves as Buddhists¹³. Although their kings almost always declared themselves *śivamārgis* or Hindus, they were also patrons of Buddhist institutions and festivals. Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Nepali-speaking Hindu king of the small hill state of Gorkha who conquered the Kathmandu Valley and drove out the last Newar king in 1769, continued in the role of patron, as did his immediate successors. But in 1846 Jung Bahadur, seized power and, he and his successors, known as the Rana family, keeping four successive monarchs under virtual house arrest, ruled Nepal as their private fiefdom for 105 years, a era which, for Newar Buddhist institutions, was one of precipitous decline. By the end of the Rana period the great majority of Newars identified themselves — if only for political and economic purposes — as Hindus. In the 1920s, when the

¹¹ The Vajrayāna monastic community — male members of the Vajrācārya and Śākya castes — may receive *dāna* four times a year from the laity. On these occasions, the main gift is a mixture of husked and unhusked rice. See, D. Gellner, 1992: 180-181.

¹² M. Slusser, 1982: 171-181.

¹³ D. Wright, ed. 1972.

first Theravāda missionaries appeared in Kathmandu, almost the only Newars who still called themselves Buddhists were those whose caste-affiliation gave them no alternative, notably members of the two priestly castes, Vajrācārya (household priest: Nep:*purohit*; New:*gubhāju*) and Śākya (temple priest: Nep:*pūjāri*; New: *bāphā*), and the nine Urāy mercantile and artisan subcastes¹⁴.

The Urāys included merchants (*sāhūjī*) who were active in the India-Tibetan trade which for centuries had passed from Patna on the Gangetic Plain through the Kathmandu Valley and thence by one of several routes to Shigatse and on to Lhasa. When, following the Younghusband expedition of 1904, trade was re-routed through Kalimpong and thence by a newly constructed road to Gangtok, over the Nathan La pass into Tibet and on, via Gyantse to Lhasa, Urāy merchants re-located their operations from Kathmandu to Kalimpong and Calcutta. It was a handful of these wealthy traders who financially supported the first Nepalese converts to Theravāda Buddhism both during their spiritual explorations in India and later, after receiving monastic ordination, on their return, as missionaries, in the Kathmandu Valley. Urāy interest in the Theravāda “message” was in part fueled by a conflict with their Vajrācārya household priests which flared in the early 1920s and continued for almost thirty years until it was finally resolved in the law courts¹⁵. By that time many in the Urāy community had become alienated from Vajrayāna Buddhism and, other than for traditional life-cycle rites whose significance was more social than religious, had turned to the Theravādins.

For the first twenty years the missionaries encountered strong opposition from the government. Fearful of any challenge to their control, the Ranas did their utmost to keep the country isolated from anything that might threaten the status quo, most particularly democratic and equalitarian ideas which, in the first decades of the twentieth century, were spurring on India’s march towards freedom¹⁶. The Theravādins, by their own account, were reformers not revolutionaries — their objective was to purify their tradition not to destroy it. Nevertheless the Ranas

¹⁴ This included nine inter-marrying subcastes: Tuladhar, Kamsakar, Tamrakar, Baniya, Rajkarnikar, Silpakar, Silrikar, Sindurakar and Sthapit. T. Lewis, 1995: 38-79.

¹⁵ C. Rosser, 1966: 68-139.

¹⁶ See, M. Hoftun, W. Roper and J. Whelpton, 1999: 2-13.

were suspicious of them right away and, for twenty years from 1930 when the first newly-minted monks appeared in Kathmandu until the regime was overthrown and the monarchy restored in 1951, harassed, imprisoned and even exiled them. Orthodox Hindus, the Ranas were fiercely protective of the rigid caste system which, by the Mulukhi Ain (Law Code) of 1854, they had imposed upon the population of the entire country, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and tribals alike, and which they believed certain Theravādin activities undermined¹⁷. Most especially, they objected to the alms round because in their view begging for cooked food — rice cooked in water, the staple of the Nepalese diet — violated brahmanical rules of commensality. (*Pañcadān*, which Vajrācāryas and Śākyas received as alms four times each year from the lay community, was composed of uncooked grain and rice cooked in milk (*khīr*) which was purer and less likely to transmit pollution than rice cooked in water.) As noted above, initially Theravāda Buddhism appealed in large part to Śākyas and Urāys, and in the early years all recruits to the monks' order were from these upper castes¹⁸. Although according to Buddhist doctrine, monastics should accept *dāna* from everyone regardless of caste affiliation, according to the Nepalese Law Code, monastics who accepted alms from people of lower caste status than themselves, incurred pollution by which they lost caste (recovery required ritual cleansing); infringements were also regarded as criminal acts as those who broke the law could be heavily fined and even branded with a red-hot iron. Thus the monks faced a perilous situation: First, the laity were unfamiliar with giving cooked rice as alms and, when introduced to the

¹⁷ See, A. Hofer, 1979. The caste system imposed by the Mulukhi Ain was an amalgamation of three different systems: first, the Parbatiyas', which included only two "clean" castes, Brahmins (Bahuns) and Kshatriyas (Chetris) and a small number of untouchable occupational castes; second, the more elaborated system of the lowland Terai people on the Indian border, and third, the infinitely more complex Newar system. By the middle ages, after many centuries of contact with Indo-Aryan culture, the Newars had developed an elaborate caste system of their own which included both Hindus and Buddhists. In the late fourteenth century Jaya Sthiti Malla, a Maithil noble from an area now located within the modern Indian state of Bihar, married a Newar princess, became king of Nepal and, among many innovations and reforms, regulated caste relations within his kingdom. He is credited with distinguishing 36 castes and classifying them within the four varnas. See, D. Gellner et al., 1995: 1- 37.

¹⁸ The one exception, Mahapragya, was a Shrestha, and thus also upper caste.

practice, most refused to participate¹⁹. Second, by accepting alms from those few devotees who overcame their reluctance, the Theravādins themselves risked harsh disciplining by the police.

Nevertheless, between run-ins with government officials they preached in private homes and Kimdol Baha, an ancient Vajrayāna Buddhist monastery near the Svayambhu stūpa that some Kalimpong merchants had renovated for the use of Tibetan pilgrim lamas who permitted the Theravādins to live there too. Among their devotees were three Urāy widows who in 1931 took the road down to Kushinagar, seeking ordination²⁰. But, given that the Theravāda nuns' ordination lineage had died out in India almost one thousand years earlier and — according to traditional interpretation of the Vinaya — once dead could never be revived, Candramani, the Burmese abbot of the monastery at Kushinagar, could not ordain them as nuns (*bhikkhunī*) or even as novices (*sāmaṇerī*) since both rituals required the participation of fully ordained nuns of whom none existed in the Theravāda Buddhist world²¹. In Sri Lanka, women who left the householder life were known as *dasasilmātā*; they took ten precepts and after ordination lived celibate lives in a monastic setting or in meditation huts in the forest. In Thailand female renunciants took only eight precepts; known as *maechi* meaning “female ascetic”, most lived in temples where they performed domestic chores for the monks²². Candramani proposed giving the Nepalese women the rite with which he had been familiar in his Burmese homeland where female renunciants took eight or ten precepts; but whereas in Burma ordained lay women were known as *thilashin* “one who owns *sila* or virtue”²³, he called the Nepalese renunciants *anagārikā*, the feminized form of the designation which the Venerable Dharmapāla, the founder of the Maha Bodhi Society, had adopted and which means “homeless one” in Sanskrit.

¹⁹ A nun recalled that although her father, a Śākya, would permit monks to enter his house and he would give them alms, he believed that, because they accepted food from lower-caste people, they were vectors of pollution. Thus on their departure he would summon a Vajrācārya priest to ritually cleanse his house.

²⁰ Dhammapali, Sangapali and Ratnapali were all from Urāy merchant families.

²¹ There is no evidence that the Theravā *bhikkhunī* ordination lineage existed outside of India and Sri Lanka. See P. Skilling, 1993: 29-49.

²² M. L. Falk, 2000: 133-155.

²³ See I. Jorđt. 1988, 13 (1): 17-40.

The Nepalese took ten precepts at ordination but, given the realities of their lives, after three days they gave up the precept prohibiting the handling of money and in its place took a vow to send *mettā* to all sentient beings. With shaven heads and in pink and orange *thilashin* dresses, the three *anāgārikās* returned to Kathmandu where the local people took to addressing them as *gurumā*, meaning mother-teacher, the term by which Buddhist Newars addressed the wives of Vajrācārya priests. Lacking any alternative, the *gurumās* settled in Kimdol Baha. Living there also was an eclectic group of Theravāda monks and Tibetan lamas, together with a Vajrayāna tantric priest and his two shakti consorts.

Marginal as the monks' situation may have been, that of the nuns' was even more so. As women, they were regarded as socially and legally inferior to men, and as nuns, like their female renunciant contemporaries elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia, as spiritually inferior to monks and hence less worthy of *dāna*.

The Nepalese Nuns' Order: Out From Under

Over the next fourteen years these three *gurumās*, along with about a dozen other women, most of them widows or abandoned wives who, because religious "conversion" was prohibited, had had to take *pabbajjā* in India, continued to share their living quarters with monks. Leadership of the group was assumed by a nun named Dharmacari. Literate in several languages in an era when only two per cent of the Nepalese population — mostly upper-caste males — could read, Dharmacari had taken teachings from Tibetan pilgrim lamas who had preached in Kathmandu in the 1920s; in turn she had taught *buddhadharma* to a circle of her friends. A charismatic Urāy woman, Laxminani Tuladhar, as she was originally called, was converted to Theravāda Buddhism by a Urāy Tibet trader-turned monk named Dhammaloka, one of the first monks to arrive back in Kathmandu from India²⁴. In 1934, accompanied by five followers (*celī*), Laxminani went down to Kushinagar to request ordination from the abbot Candramani. When he refused to give her and her group the precepts as in his view they weren't yet ready for

²⁴ K. Lall, 2001: 49.

monastic life, they traveled on to Arakan in Burma where they lived in with *thilasin* in a nunnery for several months. They studied *buddhadharma*, went on the alms round — although they were still wearing lay dress — and acquainted themselves with the realities of the “homeless” life and, when finally pronounced “ready”, took the precepts and returned to Kathmandu.

Once she was established at Kimdol, Dharmacari, as Laxminani had become at ordination, was soon sought out by laypeople and by women in particular, a few of whom followed her “into homelessness”. On lunar days they would tell *Jātaka* stories by which they taught Buddhist ethics, teach devotees to chant sutras, and sing devotional songs that Dharmacari composed herself; in return they received *dāna* consisting of uncooked rice and a few *paisa* with which to buy vegetables. All the nuns, like the monks, were from upper caste backgrounds, and some of their families were well-to-do. Although few had resources of their own, at times they could call on relatives for food and clothing which they shared with their poorer companions. Nevertheless they led a hand-to-mouth existence²⁵. When the storeroom was bare their only option was to risk arrest and go for alms to houses where they thought might be well received. Outside the monastery Dharmacari and her group suffered periodic harassment from the police while within it they were pressed into service as cooks and laundresses by the monks who²⁶, perhaps jealous of Dharmacari’s popularity as a teacher, also tried to curtail their activities in the community. Technically, given that they were not fully ordained, the nuns were not subject to the Eight Chief Rules (*garudhamma*), subordinating all nuns to all monks, which the Buddha had imposed upon women when he admitted them to the order; indeed they were not even members of the Nepal Sangha. Nevertheless, at every juncture the *bhantes* asserted their right to control the *gurumās*.

In 1944, after the police apprehended a monk as he was giving the precepts to a woman (which was against the law), the Ranas expelled all the monks and novices who were living in Kathmandu; the following year they expelled the nuns from the city as well. But whereas the monks were

²⁵ S. M. Tuladhar, 1994.

²⁶ This is still a common practice in Thailand. See M. L. Falk, 2000a: 61-71.

exiled to India, the nuns were only sent to Trisuli, one day's journey away from the capital. The year they spent away from Kathmandu gave them a taste of freedom however, and when, after the intervention of the eminent Sri Lankan monk Nārada Mahāthera of Vajirārāma temple, Colombo, the government permitted the monastics to return to Kathmandu, Dharmacari was determined to establish separate living quarters. With personal funds, she purchased a plot of land a hundred meters from Kimdol Baha and started to raise funds with which to construct a nunnery. She received donations not only from her female devotees and some of their husbands, but from King Tribhuvan himself who, perhaps in reaction to the orthodoxy of his Rana "keepers", had developed a strong interest in Buddhism. In 1952, just one year after the ousting of the Rana government, the new nunnery, whose puja hall housed a great statue of the Buddha at his *parinirvāṇa*, a source of wonder throughout the Valley, was consecrated. Kimdol Vihara, as Dharmacari called it²⁷, became a focal point for lay women. Confined to a marginal role in traditional Buddhism which even excluded them from instruction in the meaning and significance of the mantras that, as wives, they received in tantric initiations, upper-caste women came in large numbers to attend the abbess's teachings which she continued to give until she was well into old age²⁸.

The Road to Financial Security

Owing to King Tribhuvan's interest in Buddhism and his close friendship with Amritananda Bhikkhu, who was founder and secretary of the Dharmodaya Sabha, the all-Nepal Buddhist Society²⁹, president of the Bhikkhu Mahāsaṅgha, and for four decades until his death in 1990, the most prominent monk in Nepal, the Theravādins were hopeful that they would receive royal patronage just as their Vajrayāna ancestors had done in pre-Rana times. And indeed, for a few years following the restoration of the monarchy this was the case³⁰. But King Mahendra, who ascended

²⁷ A Vajrayāna Buddhist monastery is known as a *bāhā* and a Theravāda monastery as a *vihāra*.

²⁸ Dharmacari died in 1978 at age 80.

²⁹ Candramani was the first president; he was succeeded at his death in 1972 by Amritananda.

³⁰ Dr. Bhikkhu Amritananda, 1986.

the throne on the death of his father in 1955, had little interest in Buddhism and state support, however briefly it had been offered, soon dwindled away. The Theravāda monks, almost all of whom had studied in India, Burma and Sri Lanka in the 1930s and 40s, turned to cultivating their foreign networks. Their objectives were first, to secure places for their novices in Buddhist training institutions abroad; and second, to attract funds from foreign donors for the construction of monastic facilities. Over time their efforts were rewarded: Nepalese novices continued to be accepted for training in Sri Lanka and, the political situation permitting, in Burma; in the 1970s young monks started studying in Thailand, and by the late 1980s a few were going to Japan, Taiwan and even Britain and the US. The Nepalese Sangha received occasional visits from eminent foreign monks and often donations from devotees in their home countries would follow. In the early years these were used to extend already existing viharas; in recent decades however the monks have received much more substantial sums with which they have built elaborate new facilities³¹.

By contrast, the nuns had no foreign networks to cultivate. In the 1940s they too had been exiled from Kathmandu but unlike the monks, who had spent more than two years in India strengthening ties with Maha Bodhi Society monks, they had been dispatched to a provincial Nepalese town. Aside from Dharmacari and her group who had spent a few months in Burma, the only foreign exposure the first generation of nuns had had was on brief pilgrimages to the sacred Buddhist sites of north India. In the late 1940s, two Nepalese missionary monks, Pragyananda and Buddhaghosa, recently returned from training in Burma, began to hold dharma classes for women, a few of whom brought daughters and nieces, students in the first girls' schools to open in Kathmandu and Patan, along to the temple. Fast approaching marriageable age but determined not to marry, they jumped at their gurus' suggestion that they study further and, after many adventures, managed to reach nunneries in Burma³².

³¹ Monasteries built with foreign funds include: in the 1980s, Buddha Vihara, Kathmandu, built with Japanese funds and Srikirti Vihara, Kirtipur, built with Thai funds. In the 1990s, Sakyasinha Vihara, Lalitpur was rebuilt with Thai funds; the construction costs of Visvasanti Vihara, Kathmandu, inaugurated in October, 1997, were reported to be \$200,000 which were donated by Chinese Malaysians.

³² After the military takeover by Ne Win in 1962 the government ceased to give visas to foreign dharma students and did not issue them again until the 1980s.

New Leadership

In the autumn of 1963, one of Buddhagosa's students, a young nun named Dhammavati, returned from Burma. Born Ganesh Kumari Śākya in Patan, at age fifteen she had run away from home and made her way to Burma. After receiving the precepts in Rangoon, she studied for 12 years in Khemārāma Nunnery, Moulmein and attained the Dharmācārya, the highest educational qualification in the Burmese monastic system. She was the first Nepalese monastic, as well as the first Nepalese nun, to do so. Her abbess invited her to remain in Burma where she was already earning a reputation as a scholar and preacher and where accomplished nuns, albeit as "eight precept lay women", were highly respected by monks and laity alike; but she decided to return to her native land in order to spread the dharma and raise the status of women generally and of nuns in particular. She invited her friend, a Burmese nun named Daw Gunavati, who also had received the Dharmācārya, to go with her³³. Once home however, she was immediately confronted by her "opposition": As she put it years later, "Nepalese monks suffered very badly from the 'Asian disease'", by which she meant that they looked down on women, whatever their age and accomplishments³⁴. But she was determined to evade the restrictions that the senior monks, none of whom were as formally well-prepared as she, tried to impose on her. The most outrageous of these, in her view, was that they banned her from preaching in their temples.

The first step, she decided, towards winning the autonomy and respect that her Burmese mentors had enjoyed was to live as independently as possible not only of the monks but of the "old guard" in the nuns' order. In Burma there were two categories of nuns: *ngebyu* ("one who is young and pure" i.e., unmarried) who focused on scholarship, and *tawdwet* ("one who left for the forest") who had previously been married and whose focus was meditation³⁵. She herself had spent her time in Burma with scholarly *ngebyu* nuns and now, following the Burmese model, she decided against living in Kimdol Vihara, where the nuns, like their abbess

³³ Daw Gunavati remained in Nepal for thirty years. She returned to Burma to head her own nunnery in Rangoon in 1995.

³⁴ S. Le Vine, 2000: 13-29.

³⁵ H. Kawanami, 2000: 159-171.

Dharmacari, had all been married at one time and had little if any formal education. Rather, she would build her own temple for “those who are young and pure” and invite a handful of Burma-trained nuns to live there with her. The bhantes might bar her from preaching in their temples but they couldn’t stop her from preaching in her own!

Like Dharmacari, she was able to draw on personal resources. Her goldsmith father had recently died and even though, under Nepalese law, she had no right to his property, her brothers, who were among her greatest admirers, allowed her a share which they agreed to exchange for cash³⁶. With this she bought a small plot of land bordering the courtyard of Srigha, an ancient stūpa in the heart of Kathmandu, in which some Theravāda monks were occupying a renovated *bāhā*. She had known Aswaghos, the abbot of Srigha Vihara, since childhood as their mothers were close friends; indeed, from her return from Burma until today Aswaghos has been one of very few monks in the community to support her efforts and those of her colleagues to improve the status of nuns.

Already, within a year of her return to Nepal, Dhammavati was becoming known as a dynamic teacher and attracting devotees from among a circle of women whose merchant husbands supported the monks. It was to these women that she turned for funds with which to build her nunnery. But unsure of their spouses’ response should they ask for money on behalf of such a young and untried woman, they secretly sold some of their gold jewelry and gave the proceeds to Dhammavati³⁷. The new nunnery, which Dhammavati called “Dharmakīrti Vihara”, meaning “a place built for the propagation of the dharma”, was consecrated in May 1965. Instructed by Amritananda to register it in the name of the Nepal Sangha, Dhammavati refused to do so on the grounds that since she was an *anāgārikā* not a *bhikkhunī*, she was not a member of the Sangha and thus

³⁶ See, K. Gilbert, 1992: 1975 legislation which provides that if a woman remains unmarried beyond age 35 she has a right to a share — equal to that of her brothers — of her father’s property, is rarely complied with.

³⁷ Newar brides receive saris, household utensils and furnishings, and gold jewelry from their natal families, after which they have no legal claim on the paternal property. Although in principle their wedding jewelry, which in the case of brides from merchant families, and may be worth a great deal of money, is capital and theirs to do what they want with, they are expected to keep it for their children; to sell it and use the proceeds for some extra-familial project, is strongly discouraged.

not subject to its regulations. To the disgust of the senior monks she registered Dharmakīrti Vihāra in her own name.

Paying Their Way

To accomodate their ambitious program of teaching, publishing, and social service that Dhammavati and her companions started putting in place, as well as to house new recruits, Dharmakīrti's original single-storied structure, measuring only 42 by 21 feet, was gradually expanded over time. It acquired a second story, bathrooms and storerooms; a puja hall was constructed in what had once been the garden; a sliver of land was donated on which a kitchen and library were built. Each new addition had a sponsor or a group of sponsors whose contribution was acknowledged in nunnery publications and whose names, following ancient tradition, were engraved on *śīlāpatras* and installed above the door of the rooms built with their donations³⁸. Dhammavati's mother, Hera Thanku, financed the construction of several rooms on the second floor³⁹.

The nuns of Dharmakīrti had a place of their own and a considerable degree of independence⁴⁰; but for years securing funds — even, at times, their daily needs — remained a struggle. In Burma, they had been accustomed to going on the alms round twice a month. Following the restoration of the monarchy, the old Nepal Law Code was repealed in 1959 and the commensality rules abolished. Thus, without risk of police harassment, they tried going for alms in Kathmandu. But the change in the law had not changed people's attitudes towards almsgiving. Encountering apathy and suspicion and sometimes overt hostility, they soon abandoned it. ("People would shout at us, 'Why are strong young women like you *begging*?'") On lunar days they conducted Buddha Puja in the *vihāra* and afterwards received *dāna*; from time to time they were invited to chant *paritta* and take their midday meal in homes of the laity after which they would be given small sums of money; but they took most of their meals

³⁸ See, N. J. Barnes, 2000: 17-36.

³⁹ S. R. Tuladhar and R. Tuladhar eds. 1999.

⁴⁰ Originally there were only five nuns: Dhammavati, Gunavati, Ratnamanjeri, Kamala and Dhammadina. By 2000 there were 20 resident nuns and about one dozen more who were being trained abroad but returned periodically.

in the nunnery from supplies donated by devotees or relatives. Although by the 1990s the five *paisa* coins they received as *dāna* in the 1960s had risen to one or even two rupees, these sums, with inflation, were still inconsequential (monks, however recent their ordination, routinely received five times as much as even the most senior nun), and were consumed by personal expenditures — bus fares, and toiletries, pens, notebooks, and the like, as well as, on occasion, food.

The Sāhūjīs

Dhammavati's objective on her return to Nepal had been to spread the True Dharma in her native land, and to reach women in particular and in Dharmakīrti, just as in other Buddhist temples, whether Theravāda or Vajrayāna, the majority of worshippers were women. As noted above, in traditional Newar Buddhism women play marginal roles. A Vajrācārya or Śākya man must be married in order to perform daily worship (*nitya-pūjā*) in his ancestral *bāhā*; he must also be married in order to take tantric initiation enabling him to participate in esoteric rites and meditation practices, and to become a temple elder in due course. Likewise, a Urāy man must be married in order to take the tantric initiation which brings with it a substantial increment in social status. But although wives also take initiation, thereby committing themselves to the performance of certain rituals every morning for the rest of their lives, and the wives of Vajrācārya priests are responsible for preparing ritual requisites when their husbands perform rites in their *jajmans'* homes, they themselves are peripheral to these ritual events. Regardless of caste, the religious life of Newar women takes place in the domestic sphere. It consists of making daily offerings at household, *bāhā* and neighborhood shrines, performing special rituals on lunar days, undertaking vows and fasts to propitiate the gods on their families' and their own behalf, and seeing that their children go through the various life-cycle rituals up to marriage.

From the first, rejecting traditional attitudes and practice, Dhammavati encouraged women to take positions of responsibility in Dharmakīrti Vihara, and many did so. At the same time she was obliged to seek male participation. The upper-caste men whose support she solicited were accustomed to taking leadership roles in the religious as in the economic

sphere and they expected to occupy important positions in Dharmakīrti too. As she pointed out many years later, “Nepal isn’t like Burma where I studied. There, a man often goes to his wife’s house at marriage. A Burmese woman can run her own household and at the same time go out and have her own business. But Newar men want their wives to stay at home. They want to keep all the power and all the money for themselves....” Her female devotees might sell their gold bangles and donate the proceeds for a specific purpose but few had substantial personal resources; for long-term financial support she realized she had to look to men. In sum, her freedom and the freedom of her colleagues to make their own decisions and to act as agents promoting social as well as spiritual transformation depended on their success in earning the respect and attracting donations from a group of businessmen many of whom were the sons and grandsons of those Calcutta and Kalimpong *sāhūjīs* who had supported the earliest Theravādin missionaries.

The long list of male donors who regularly attended their sermons and *buddhadharma* classes and who went on the pilgrimages they led to sacred places abroad testifies to the nuns’ success in this regard. Admiration for Dhammavati in particular was aroused by her talents as a preacher and teacher, her scholarship, her achievements as a community leader and her personal accessibility. In discussing the revival of the nuns’ order in Sri Lanka, Elizabeth Nissan has noted the importance of the social status of its leader: the fact that Catharine de Alwis in particular was highly educated and came from a prominent Sinhala family was crucial to her fundraising success, and to the survival of her movement⁴¹. Again, Gustav Houtman has observed that in turn-of-the-century Burma the “nunnery” movement was initiated by young, educated women from well-to-do families who, with family and community support, began to establish separate living quarters and to insist on being given access to Buddhist learning which hitherto female renunciators had been denied⁴². Similarly, as the highly-educated — albeit in a nunnery rather than a western-style institution — daughter and sister of upper-caste parents and brothers, Dhammavati won the confidence of some of the most influential

⁴¹ E. Nissan, 1984, 4, (1): 32-49.

⁴² G. Houtman, 1984, 4, (1): 51-76.

members of the Buddhist community. In the early years, the most generous among them was Maniharsha Jyoti Kansakar whose own father, Bajju Ratna Jyoti Kansakar, had been known as “*Dān Bīr*”, meaning “hero of generosity”, to the Theravādins. Maniharsa, who was treasurer of the All-Nepal Buddhist Association, became involved with Dharmakīrti through his wife and sister, both of whom were devotees of Dhammavati. Men competed for positions on temple committees; they contributed to temple construction projects in Kathmandu and later, in Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, in the Terai, they underwrote the publication of dozens of canonical translations and commentaries that Dhammavati and her colleagues produced, to the educational expenses of the younger nuns, and to an endowment fund to provide for routine nunnery expenses⁴³.

The Current Situation

Both the monks’ and the nuns’ orders have continued to attract recruits; however over the past thirty years, the monks’ order has become progressively less appealing to young men from upper-caste families who, as the society modernizes, have taken up more attractive options⁴⁴. Today’s novice monks are drawn exclusively from farming and occupational caste families who look to the Sangha to provide their sons with the education they cannot afford to provide themselves. By contrast, a number of recruits from poor rural backgrounds notwithstanding, the nuns’ order continues to attract urban women from relatively affluent families, most of whom are college-educated. Although their well-to-do parents would actively discourage their sons from “going into homelessness”, in contrast with parents thirty or forty years ago, they are likely to “offer” their daughters with enthusiasm since, given the esteem in which the nuns’ order is held today, a *gurumā* earns her parents social prestige as well as spiritual merit. Some of these women head nunneries that their families have built for them and into which they have brought

⁴³ A distinction is made between funds donated to the nunnery as an institution and to individual nuns. For the first, receipts are supposed to be provided, and nunnery accounts are audited annually; but no receipts are required for personal donations and *upāsakas* are much more likely to give to an individual than to an institution.

⁴⁴ For figures on caste-composition of the monks’ order for 1978-1989, see D. Gellner, 1992: 322.

younger nuns whose expenses they absorb. Kimdol Vihara, which under its founder Dharmacari was for decades the most important center for Theravāda Buddhist women in Nepal, is one of the few nunneries which still houses widows and divorced women who, in the eyes of the laity, appear less worthy of donations than never-married nuns. They are protected from real want however by the fact that Kimdol has been divided in two for administrative purposes. Thus some of the nuns are affiliated with a monastery, Ānandakuṭi Vihara, and the rest look to Dharmakīrti for support.

Although some nuns undoubtedly “go into homelessness” in order to have more time to meditate and to study *buddhadharma*, all are motivated by the urgent desire to escape marriage and motherhood, which, despite the fact that women are entering the professions in considerable numbers, is still regarded as the only legitimate adult female role. Once a woman has “shaved her head”, she rarely disrobes. By contrast, the monks’ order has great difficulty in retaining recruits. The majority of young monks find celibacy intolerable and once they have acquired credentials — most attend university either in Kathmandu or abroad — they return to their homes and get married. While the nuns’ order has many fewer recruits, given a much lower drop-out rate, nuns still outnumber monks five to four. Almost twice as many novices as young nuns are studying in foreign countries⁴⁵ where their expenses are covered by local sponsors and the monasteries in which they are housed. Again, the thirty-odd novices who are being trained in Nepal in Visvasanti Vihara, the seminary in Kathmandu, are supported by their abbot’s Chinese-Malaysian devotees. Thus, nuns who need financial backing outnumber monks two-to-one. As the scope of their work has widened, securing the resources needed to support a multi-faceted community program in addition to paying the day-to-day expenses of about one hundred nuns, has become increasingly time-consuming. One upāsikā who remembers that when she was a child in the 1970s, the Dharmakīrti nuns would come to chant in her home whenever a member of her large family celebrated a birthday,

⁴⁵ Although the nuns took much longer than monks to secure places in foreign training institutions, today young nuns are studying in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Taiwan as well as Burma. However whereas most novice monks attend universities most nuns study in nunneries.

observes that these days you're lucky if you can "book" one of them for a visit even once a year. In an era when Nepal is being drawn into the global economy and technological innovations, including cable TV and the Internet, have invaded many urban homes, Buddhists of all ages, pressured by societal change and heightened economic competition, are looking to the *gurumās* for emotional support and spiritual guidance. In addition to long-scheduled appointments, they may be called out to the homes of devotees two or three times in one twenty-four hour period.

Anoja, who like her guru, Dhammavati, is a compelling preacher, outgoing in character and seemingly tireless, is developing an economic base for her new nunnery, Sulaksmānakīrti Vihāra at Chobar on the outskirts of Kathmandu, which promises to be on a par with Dharmakīrti⁴⁶. She comes from a devout, loyal and relatively affluent family which has given generously to her projects. But since her relatives, generous as they are, cannot finance them alone, like her mentor, she spends a great deal of time and energy developing and maintaining her "donor network". Although a few *dāyakas* are members of the old upper-caste *sāhūjī* families, most are businessmen belonging to farming and occupational castes. "They like to drop in at the *vihāra* and talk to me whenever they feel like it," she remarks. Officially, they come to discuss difficulties they encounter in their meditation practice, questions they have about the dharma, and so on. But in reality, says Anoja with a shrug, "mostly they're here to gossip. Though I always have work waiting for me I can never send them away because if I did, they'd be offended. Until the construction of this temple is finished I'll have to sit and gossip and wait for them to take themselves away of their own accord." She adds with a wry smile, that even when the construction is finished, she'll have to sit and gossip because then she'll need more donations to maintain what their earlier donations helped build! In sum, "development" is a continuous process...

Conclusions

Since 1988, thirty-three Nepalese nuns — more than one third of those who are of age (20) to do so — have taken full ordination (*upasampadā*)

⁴⁶ In 1998 she received her PhD in Philosophy from the Sanskrit University, Varanasi.

in the Chinese tradition in various foreign countries. The senior monks, who consider *upasampadā* for Theravāda nuns invalid, have refused to acknowledge their new status; they still refer to them as *anāgārikā* and have not invited them into the Nepal Sangha. For their part, the laity, still address the nuns as *gurumā*; and, while some admire their courage and determination, most are confused about just why, given the esteem in which many are held by the community, they regard full ordination as necessary. Dhammavati, Burmese-trained and doctrinally conservative, had never thought about taking *upasampadā* until she was exposed to western feminist ideas of gender and institutional equality at the Conference on Buddhist Women at Bodh Gaya in 1987⁴⁷. An abrupt shift in her thinking occurred in this regard and the following year, she and two of her colleagues took full ordination according to Dharmaguptaka rites from Chinese monks and nuns at Xilai Monastery in Hacienda Heights, California.

Thus far however, even though full ordination may have increased the nuns' self-confidence, the international feminist movement has not done much to help the nuns financially. The Nepalese Theravāda community is small and little-known outside Nepal. Most westerners who wish to study Theravāda Buddhism or to practice *vipassanā* meditation go to Southeast Asia or Sri Lanka, not Nepal. Unlike the Tibetan Buddhist nunneries at Svayambhu and Bauddha, the Theravāda nunneries of Kathmandu and Patan receive few foreign visitors. Whereas the Tibetan nuns have begun to get attention and substantial donations from foreigners⁴⁸, to date the Theravāda nuns have attracted only small sums from Asian Buddhists and even less from westerners. Although many, including most of the senior nuns, have traveled to the US, mainland China, Taiwan and India to take full ordination, few speak English or Mandarin effectively. Thus communication remains a much greater problem for them than for their male counterparts, most of whom have spent many years abroad in university settings and speak at least one international language well.

⁴⁷ See, K. L. Tsomo, ed. 1988.

⁴⁸ A group of Tibetan nuns from Svayambhu visited the US in 1998 to demonstrate their skills in mandala painting on college campuses, where they raised funds for their home nunnery. See, M. Kerin, 2000: 319-337. In 2000, a school for young Tibetan tradition nuns was established at Svayambhu with funds from a Chinese-Singaporean donor; the director is Italian and some American and European volunteer teachers are on its staff.

Unlike the monks who are old hands at the game, the nuns are only just beginning to explore foreign sources of funding⁴⁹. Now, as in the past, they continue to look to people in their own community whose support they must work hard to retain. Their success in this regard is due to dynamic leadership, to the persistence of merchant families in supporting their daughters and sisters, and in the latter's willingness to share their resources with their companions. Giving *dāna* is centrally important to monks and nuns as well as to lay people since they, too, earn merit by sharing what they receive with other monastics, including with novices and young nuns whose ordinations ceremonies they sponsor, whose food and clothing they provide, and whose educational costs they underwrite. Another important factor in the nuns' successful fundraising is their ability to develop and maintain relationships with individual devotees and to engage their interest in nunnery programs. Furthermore, in the long run their localized fundraising efforts may be to their advantage. Out of necessity they have cultivated their own garden and because the laity see them as responsive to their needs and opinions they have rewarded them with both trust and money. In recent years, as the community they serve has grown, the nuns have been in dire need of funds to repair and extend their quarters and to build new facilities. But whereas the monks' efforts have focused on Southeast Asian Buddhist communities, the nuns have raised considerable sums at home⁵⁰. Ironically, the monks have found that their success in attracting foreign funds has damaged — perhaps permanently — their relations with their devotees, many of whom, feeling slighted and ignored, have distanced themselves from the *bhantes* and transferred their trust — and their *dāna* — to the *gurumās*.

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⁴⁹ In 1999 the Nepalese nuns' order received funding from a private American foundation for the secondary and tertiary education of young nuns. This is the first substantial amount they have received from any foreign source.

⁵⁰ In 2000, Drabya Man Singh Tuladhar, a Kathmandu businessman, donated 12.5 million rupees (\$170,000) for the reconstruction of Dharmakīrti Vihara; he also provided a house for the nuns to live in while the work was being carried out.

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