

HIMALAYAN CONUNDRUM? A PUZZLING ABSENCE
IN RONALD M. DAVIDSON'S *INDIAN ESOTERIC BUDDHISM*

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Ronald M. Davidson's *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (2002, New York: Columbia University Press) is, in many ways, a masterpiece. It synthesizes an enormous mass of material, fearlessly crosses conventional disciplinary boundaries, and makes a qualitative leap forward in the understanding and interpretation of early Buddhist Tantrism. Davidson has marshalled internal textual evidence in great quantity, and related it to epigraphical and other historical evidence, in satisfying and original way. For once, the eulogistic citations on the book's back cover (in this case by David F. Germano, Matthew Kapstein, and Phyllis Granoff) do not exaggerate.

Early scholars of Buddhism found Tantricism to be so offensive that they could not bring themselves to study it dispassionately — and as Davidson emphasizes, it is offensive, no matter how apologists, whether inside or outside the tradition, have tried to explain its antinomianism away. This early attitude was to a considerable extent shared by David Snellgrove; that and the intellectual rationalism of his approach (and his concomitant lack of interest in the details of political arrangements) meant that his mature synthesis *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan Successors* does not represent anything like as important an achievement from the point of view of historical sociology. Geoffrey Samuel's *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* is a similar highly laudable attempt at synthesis and overview, but covers a later period and deals only briefly with the Indian background.

Davidson's thesis is that the new, politically more insecure conditions in India after the Gupta period generated a new kind of feudalism, which, following BD Chattopadhyaya, he calls *sāmanta* feudalism (p. 137). Power was more decentralized than it had been in the preceding period, long-distance trade (which had been strongly supportive of Buddhism) was in

decline, militant Shaivism was increasing in importance, regional art traditions and languages were flourishing, and populations were dispersing from old to new centres. In this context, Buddhism had to adapt and one way it did so was to take on the language and ritual of political imperialism. Davidson demonstrates in fine detail how the terminology of the initiation of Tantrics parallels exactly that of the feudal ruler. He concludes:

Buddhists derived their mandala forms and functions, not so much from the theoretical treatises of Indian polity as from their immediate observation at the disposition and execution of realpolitik in their environment... by observing the actual relationships of the overlords and their peripheral states... Indeed, the Buddhist mandala is a classic analysis of the system of *sāmanta* feudalism in early medieval India, all sufficiently sanctified for the monastic community. (p. 139)

It was not that the founders of Buddhist Tantrism were

sycophantic actors imitating the domain of mere politics... [Rather t]hey attempted to transform power and hierarchy into community and congregation. Swimming in the sea of *sāmanta* feudalism, they tried to see it as an ocean of gnosis and to engage it in the creation of merit for all beings. (p. 161)

In doing so they went far beyond any previous Mahayanist adaptations in the name of 'skilful means'. As Davidson points out, esoteric Buddhism spread through royal patronage outside India, and it would have been strange if the same were not true inside India as well (p. 115). In spite of the use of tribal imagery in Tantrism, everything points to its being the creation of urban intellectual elite (p. 238).

Davidson emphasizes that the Tantric Buddhist corpus was produced and systematized within a remarkably short time: "in a matter of a few decades, not over the centuries sometimes proposed" (p. 338). One would have expected him therefore to welcome Alexis Sanderson's demonstrations that numerous passages of the Buddhist *Yogini* Tantras were lifted directly from Shaiva originals (Sanderson 1994, 2001). But Davidson is concerned rather to insist (p. 203ff) that Buddhist Tantras took their materials from other sources as well, and not just from the Shaiva *Kapalikas*. Be that as it may, Davidson has certainly produced the most sophisticated account yet of what he calls "the esoteric conundrum": how it could be that a religion based on renunciation, moderation, and non-

violence could adopt rituals of sex, violence, and the infraction of all social rules, and introduce symbolic forms fully reflective of this dramatic antinomianism.

The aim of this communication, however, is not just to praise Davidson, but also to point out a surprising and mysterious lacuna in his book, namely Nepal, and more particularly the Buddhist culture of the Kathmandu Valley (which in the period he is dealing with, and indeed well into the twentieth century, went by the name ‘Nepal’).

It is not that Davidson is hostile to anthropological or ethnographic evidence as such. In his introduction, he writes:

Since the time of Herodotus’ description of the Skythians in his *Histories*, however, participant-observation data have proved of extraordinary value in assessing foreign cultures, whether accrued by the historian, by anthropologists, or both, as in the case of this book. We cannot underestimate [sic] the value to the historian of learning the colloquial languages of these cultures, living in villages, or (in our case) in Buddhist monasteries. Indeed, many Indologists would affirm that they did not truly understand much of this complex society until they had lived and worked there among the descendants of those very people under investigation. (p. 21)

Surely, then, he must deal somewhere with the Newars who are the last remaining Mahayana South Asian Buddhists, as a long line of scholars have recognized — from Sylvain Lévi, to David Snellgrove, Siegfried Lienhard, Dhanavajra Vajracharya, Hemraj Sakya, John Locke, Mary Slusser, Michael Allen, Niels Gutschow, Bernhard Kölver, Gautam Vajra Vajracharya, Kashinath Tamot, Ian Alsop, Karunakar Vaidya, Min Bahadur Sakya, Todd T. Lewis, Kimiaki Tanaka, K. Yoshizaki, Bruce Owens, Gregory Sharkey, Alexander von Rospatt, Will Tuladhar-Douglas, John Huntington, Dina Bangdel, and myself¹. Surely Davidson will at least mention the one South Asian society where the *Namasangiti* is still recited in Sanskrit as part of the daily liturgy and where each complex Buddhist ritual begins with a *samkalpa* that locates the action as taking place in the mandala of Sri Samvara in the northern Pancala country of Bharatavarsa? But no, Davidson proceeds to claim, in the one statement of the book

¹ See references for main publications. One should also consult Levy (1990) and Toffin (1993) on Hindu (Shaiva) Tantrism in the Kathmandu Valley.

which I feel wholly competent to say is a fundamental, and very unfortunate, error of fact and interpretation, "... there are no continuously surviving Indian Buddhist institutions..." (p. 24).

This is very strange. Nepal does not figure in the index of *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, but there are in fact a number of mentions, as well as at least one to Newars, and two to Newari, and he implies that he has been to Nepal². Davidson is not averse to citing anthropological authors on India. Thus Jonathan Parry and Lynn Teskey Denton are quoted on ascetics in Banaras (p. 95), Gross is cited on modern Indian sadhus (p. 207, 238), Elvin, Gell, Vitebsky, and Boal are invoked on the Murias and their tribal neighbours (p. 321). Davidson also mentions his own field visits to some Indian sacred sites (e.g. p. 309 to Brahmaur in Himachal Pradesh), but not his visit to Kathmandu. He castigates other scholars for ignoring tribal ethnography (p. 321) and for labelling phenomena as Tibetan when they are actually Indian (p. 374 n. 97). So what can possibly explain the fact that he ignores Nepal and the Nepali descendants of the Buddhists he is discussing in this way?

Nepal was only recognized by the British as a separate kingdom, that is to say, as different in status from the princely states of India, in 1923. Had history been a little different, had Nehru not been such a gentleman, Nepal could easily have ended up inside the Indian union. Even today the border is open and the citizens of both countries are free to travel to and work in the other country without the need for any documentation. At any period before the nineteenth century what is now called Nepal was just another region of the subcontinent. Surely Davidson cannot have fallen for the fallacy, which he would (and does) castigate in other scholars, of reading back into history the contingent political arrangements of the present day?

² Davidson notes, "My experience with Buddhist scholars in India, Nepal, and Tibet has been exclusively textual, with little interest displayed towards epigraphy, archaeology, or other sources" (p. 352 n. 52). I cannot speak for India or Tibet, but several Buddhist scholars in Nepal have indeed paid considerable attention to epigraphy, notably Hemraj Sakya in his numerous historical works (see Sakya 1977 for his magnum opus on the history of the sacred complex of Svayambhu). For various reasons to do with Buddhist identity and Nepali nationalism, several Nepali scholars have also been very concerned with the epigraphy and archaeology of Lumbini.

Not being personally acquainted with Davidson, and not being able to find one in the book itself, I have no answer to this question. As someone who has written at length on Newar Buddhism — precisely in the framework of Sylvain Lévi (whom Davidson would surely honour as a great Sanskritist, Tibetologist, Sinologist, and Buddhologist) that Nepal is “India in the making” (Lévi 1905 I: 28) and that Newar Buddhists are indeed the last South Asian Mahayana Buddhists — such neglect is both galling and puzzling. Had Davidson deigned to look at the history of the Medieval Malla kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley, he would have found ample evidence to illustrate how Tantric Buddhism there evolved a close and symbiotic relationship with royal power, and with Shaivism, as indeed he argues was the case for medieval India. Had he looked at the traditional and still current practice of Buddhism among the Newars he would have found as a clear case as he could have wished of Vajrayana’s efficacy at “transform[ing] power and hierarchy into community and congregation”.

I shall close by quoting the words of another prominent historian of Buddhism in India, Greg Schopen:

It is a curious fact that scholars interested in Mahāyāna Buddhism in India have paid so little attention to Nepal — indeed it may actually be perverse. It was Nepal, after all, that first revealed, and continued to supply, most of the Mahāyāna literature that we have in Sanskrit... Ironically, while some students of the Mahāyāna have understood this [the importance of studying ethnographic accounts of actually practised Buddhism], they have generally not looked in the most obvious places... where, one wonders, are the names of those who are working in an actual South Asian Mahāyāna culture — John Locke, David Gellner, and Todd Lewis? There is something rather strange here and it is time — indeed long overdue — that Newar Buddhism assume its rightful place in Buddhist studies. (Schopen 2000: ix-xi)

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