

Three Buddhist Hymns from Nepal

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The modern style of hymns, known as *bhajan*, accompanied by the harmonium, were introduced to Nepal in the 1880s. At first the songs were entirely in Hindi and were Hindu in affiliation. In the early 1920s Prem Bahadur Khyahju Shrestha (1901-1979) was asked to compose some Buddhist hymns by his friend Dalchini Manandhar. In order to help him do so, Manandhar gave him a copy of Pandit Nisthananda Vajracharya's Nepal Bhasha version of the *Lalitavistara*, the life of the Buddha, which Nisthananda had had printed in Calcutta in 1911. Prem Bahadur composed the hymns, and they quickly became very popular (they were in Hindi as was still customary). As a result of reading the *Lalitavistara*, Prem Bahadur, who had been raised a Hindu, became a Buddhist.

In 1925 the Tibetan Nyingma renouncer, Kyangtse Lama, came to Kathmandu, having prostrated all the way from Kham, taking two and a half years. He was welcomed as a great Buddhist teacher and looked after by Dharma Narayan Tuladhar (1861-1937), usually known as 'Dhama Sahu', a rich merchant who restored the Swayambhu *stupa* and supported Buddhist causes. Many people came to hear Kyangtse Lama's religious discourses, which were based on Patrul Rimpoche's commentary on the *Longchen Nyintig* of Jigme Lingpa. His Tibetan was translated into Nepal Bhasha by Bekha Ratna Tamrakar, and then rephrased in more religious terms by Pandit Buddhi Raj Vajracharya (some say this last step was necessitated by the fact that Bekha Ratna had a very soft voice).

Swayed by the force of Kyangtse Lama's teachings, Prem Bahadur and four others became Buddhist monks under the tutelage of another Tibetan lama, Tsering Norbu. Prem Bahadur became Mahapragya, his friend Dalchini Manandhar became Mahavirya, and their three other companions took similar monastic names (Mahagyana, Mahachandra, and Mahakshanti). When the Ranas came to hear of this (informed, it is said, by Vajracharya priests who were jealous of the success of Kyangtse Lama and annoyed at the loss of patronage from their rich Uday patrons), they decided to send the monks, as well as their preceptor Tsering Norbu, into exile, on the grounds that they had encouraged a Hindu to change from his traditional religion. Expelled to India, the monks went to Sarnath, where they met a Theravada monk, and to Calcutta where they were taken in by Dharmaditya Dharmacharyya (Jagat Man Vaidya, 1902-1963), a Buddhist modernist and the first Newar cultural nationalist. Although they did not convert to Theravada Buddhism immediately, this expulsion from Nepal to India laid the seed of Theravada Buddhism in Nepal, a paradoxical result quite the opposite of what the Ranas intended.

When the Theravada movement gathered steam in the 1930s Theravada monks started to encourage the singing of Buddhist hymns in the vernacular (i.e. in Nepal Bhasa). The earliest song book, printed in India by Bhikshu Pragyabhivamsa, was called 'Bhajanmala' (Garland of Hymns). It had no name on the frontispiece in order to avoid troubles with the Ranas' censors. It was brought to Kathmandu by Bhikshu Dhammalok and the first performances were held in Swayambhu in 1937. Two years later a similar group was formed in Kwa Baha, Lalitpur, and it named itself the Taremam Sangha. Within several years half a dozen other groups had sprung up in Lalitpur and Kathmandu, as well as outside the Valley in Tansen and Butwal.

Bhikshu Amritananda argued that the hymns should not propagate a purely devotional attitude, but impart Buddhist wisdom. So both the hymn books and the hymn groups became known by the generic term 'Gyanmala' (Garland of Wisdom) from 1943. Buddhist monks are forbidden by the Vinaya, or monastic code, to observe or participate in hymn singing. But they have been among the most prolific of composers of hymns. And it can be argued that many of the hymns that the monks composed encouraged a more sharply Buddhist, attitude, and often a more Theravada attitude as well, on the part of those who sang them.

Towards the end of the Rana regime Gyanmala hymn singers were involved in several oppositional incidents. Shortly after eight Theravada monks were expelled by the Ranas in 1944 (this time the charge was that they were encouraging women to renounce and were thereby undermining family life), a Gyanmala group, singing lustily, led a procession from Swayambhu to Jana Baha in the centre of Kathmandu. When they reached Jana Baha the group was surrounded by the police, who seized as many copies of the hymn books as they could. A court case followed, in which the singers were accused of encouraging conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism and ridiculing Nepali, the national language. The case was heard by Padma Shamsher, the Rana Prime Minister, who decided to reject all the charges. In 1948 in Lalitpur the Taremam Sangha joined with Hindu singers organized by Tulsi Meher to sing Buddhist songs and "Hare Ram" around the city of Lalitpur as a protest against the political repression of the Ranas. The police arrested about 150 people on that occasion.

Of the three hymns translated here two are by monks, though of course Mahapragya stopped being a monk and lived in Kalimpong as a layman, earning his living as a photographer, for many years, before renouncing again and passing the rest of his life with an orange robe and long beard as a 'Buddhist sage' (Baudha Rishi) in Kathmandu. This particular hymn is considered to be highly poetic and very moving by many Newars. The second hymn is another popular hymn by Bhikshu Subodhanand, one of the most prolific composers of *bhajan*. The last hymn is a very recent composition, from Pokhara, and written in Nepali. It is not credited to anyone in the booklet in my possession (*Jñānmālā mye munā – tāsā 1*), but members of the Taremam Sangha, with whom I sang the song in May this year told me it was written by Biswa Shakyā. It seems to me to represent a deeply heartfelt response to the tragic and brutal war which has consumed rural Nepal in recent years.

The Light of Wisdom has Died (*Gyān Mata Sita*) by Bhikshu Mahapragya

chorus:

Wind came through the window, the light just went out.

Oh mother! How shall I close this window?

The eighteen good human qualities are missing,

While trying to find them, the light just went out. (1)

Exceedingly beautiful, the jewel of understanding is lost;

Searching searching, you cannot find it; the light just went out. (2)

The house of the five elements [i.e. the human body], it is so beautiful,

It may be beautiful, but it has no grace; the light just went out. (3)

A window may have a bolt, and you can make a window seem closed,

But there is no bolt of understanding; the light just went out. (4)

Oh devotees, listen to what the followers of the Buddha have said:

[Peering out] through the window, the five senses have spoilt the mind. (5)

(Dhammalok & Amritanand 1984: 66)

Foolish Mind (*Man Murkha*) by Bhikshu Subodhanand

chorus:

Oh foolish mind, how many times you have gone round (in samsara),

Saying and saying you'll find happiness? It is suffering you have known.

You think you'll get happiness from all the things under the sun,

You wander around, overwhelmed by desires, one engendering another,

You have been burned by the heat of passion's fire,

You cry and cry because you lack understanding. (1)

You go out to obtain the things that you desire,

But out there you are struck by the arrow of hatred.

You suffer, oh, oh, hit by sin's flame,

You have been blinded by the net of delusion. (2)

Now that's enough of confusion, oh, foolish mind,

A birth like this one will be hard to achieve again,

Hard to cross is this samsara in form like the Ganges,

Your birth as a man is your boat to get across. (3)

How long will you last, with your lack of wisdom?

Follow the path of wisdom, and experience bliss.

Lord Buddha told it all,

Let your conduct be good and, see, you'll get liberation. (4)

(Dhammalok & Amritanand 1984: 14)

Buddha Come (*Buddha Āū*) by Biswa Shakya

Your advocacy of non-violence and peace, your eternal teaching of wisdom,
In this pitiless world no one hears it now – Buddha come, Dharma come, Sangha come!

Not knowing dharma, not knowing karma,
Not knowing the heart of the Five Precepts,
Living beings are drowning in violence and chaos,
Not knowing love, compassion, or pity,
How are they to continue on the path of life?

It is you who must show us the way to be free – Buddha come, Dharma come, Sangha come!

Not knowing the meaning of the Four Noble Truths,
Not knowing the Noble Eightfold Path,
They are destroyed by pain and suffering,
In greed and delusion they are stuck.
You are the one who knows, you are the one who meditates.

It is you who must tell us the means to liberation – Buddha come, Dharma come, Sangha come!

(They follow) the dharma of selfishness, their karma is selfish,
Not knowing morality, concentration, or wisdom,
How can they get rid of the mind's stains? --
The Buddha's truth and teaching they know not.
From the bottom up chaos is swirling all around.

It is you who must light the lamp of peace – Buddha come, Dharma come, Sangha come!

(*Jñānmālā mye munā – tāsā 1: 12*)

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