

Cameron David Warner

On the Road from Hinduism to Buddhism: Global Buddhism, the Conversion of Nepali Hindus, and
What Comes Between

[...]the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!"

-Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

Nepal has long been an important nexus for Buddhist pilgrims traversing the Himalayas. In the late 1960s, the concentration of teachers and holy sites in Kathmandu emerged as a polestar by which much of Global Buddhism continues to orient itself. In order to get a sense of the directions in which Global Buddhism is heading, we can follow the transnational flow of people and practices in and out of Kathmandu. The rise of Global or Globalized Buddhism has been the focus of a growing body of literature, some of which I engage with directly at the end of this chapter, where I make clear that I see Globalized Buddhism as an emergent form of religiosity in which there is an intra-Buddhist cross-pollination of self-cultivation practices, administrative structures and dispositions, regardless of lineage, ethnic or national boundaries. My primary concerns here are not what constitutes Globalized Buddhism, but rather what are the factors that are affecting religious change within Nepal and how do those domestic factors, such as dominant and counter discourses of Hindu identity and Nepali nationalism, relate to Kathmandu's role in transnational Buddhist networks.

What does contemporary Buddhism look like from the point of view of Mahayana Buddhists in Kathmandu? And how might this perspective cause us to view contemporary Buddhism elsewhere?

In this chapter, I focus on the education of Buddhist converts in one Mahayana Buddhist sangha (a semi-bounded constellation of Buddhist communities) in Kathmandu. I describe how three young-adult members of a particular sangha went from being curious non-members to serious adherents. In researching the educational remittances and social mobility of transnational Nepali youths, my work is inspired by the work of Karen Valentin (Valentin 2012). It also builds upon previous work that has looked at transnational networks of Buddhist connection (Cadge 2004, Bender and Cadge 2006, Zablocki 2009). I first encountered what I am calling ‘the Convert Sangha’ (for purposes of protecting anonymity) while I was living in Nepal for six months from the fall of 2012 to the spring of 2013. Over the past four years, I have spent a total of about twelve months visiting the Convert Sangha in order to interview members, and have continuously followed their presence on social media, as well as closely analyzed their liturgy and newsletters. The religious biographies of Convert Sangha members challenge our preconceived notions about religious conversion, the practice of religion in Asia, and its comparison to the practice of Asian religions outside of Asia.

In Nepal, Buddhism is often defined in relation to domestic discourses regarding Hinduism [locally called *Śivamargi* (the path of Śiva)], nationalism and concomitant issues such as caste, while at the same time presented as a globalized religion equally attractive to non-Nepalis. Ultimately, from the point of view of some Mahayana Buddhists, to become Buddhist, as an individual or an organization, is to engage in a project that is never finished, like embarking on a trip towards a receding horizon, where greater emphasis ought to be placed on *becoming* than on *being* Buddhist. And if there is a lesson to be learned from this ethnographic vignette, and the other chapters of this volume, it might be this: a more accurate portrayal of contemporary religion ought

to avoid fixed labels in favor of biographical accounts of the routes taken, future destinations and the means of navigation available. I use navigational metaphors because of their prevalence throughout Buddhist discourse and in order to retain a fidelity to the lifeworlds of my informants and myself. Throughout this chapter, I make brief references to the theoretical underpinnings of an anthropology of becoming, which has utilized *becoming* from Deleuze and Guattari (Biehl and Locke 2010). The language of Deleuze and Guattari, but also of Whitehead, ought to be compared with aspects of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy in order to explore what we might learn about an anthropology of becoming from the point of view of people for whom *becoming* is itself an articulated, idealized state of being. The editors of this volume asked that we focus on transnational flows that influence the West just as much as the East. In this chapter, I follow the routes of three recent Nepali converts to Buddhism, for whom the practice of Buddhism has been a series of significant interactions with Westerners as much as it has been an education in the religious roots of Nepal.

Territory

With its southern border melting into the plains of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and its northern border formed by the high peaks that lead onto the Tibetan plateau, Buddhism has a long history in Nepal. Siddhartha Gautama was born in the vicinity of Lumbini, in present-day southwestern Nepal. Until the unification of Nepal under Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1769, the fertile Kathmandu valley supported numerous independent dynasties, whose kings and aristocracies sometimes financially supported local Buddhist communities through temple building, annual religious festivals and a structured social system (*guthi*) where lands were placed into trusts managed for the support of particular religious sites.

Numerous ancient Buddhist shrines (*stupas*) and monasteries (Nep. *vihar*, Tib. *gompa*) have for centuries attracted religious scholars, students and pilgrims from South Asia and Tibet to visit the Kathmandu valley. For example, Bhagwan Bahal (the Bikramashila Mahavihar in Thambahi) is an ancient site of Vajrayana scholarship and practice that hosted Atisha Dipamkara Shrijnana (982-1055?), a Bengali saint and scholar who played a tremendous role in the spread and development of Buddhist practice in Tibet (Decleer 1996, 1997a, b).

However, Buddhist institutions fared relatively poorly under the reign of the Shah Dynasty and the Rana hereditary prime ministers. Prithvi Narayan Shah from the Gorkha district west of Kathmandu, unified Nepal in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Under the Shahs, the culture of Newari inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley began to suffer as the language and administration of the Shah dynasty took hold in the capital and spread throughout the new country. In 1846, Jang Bahadur Rana took over control of the country and established a dynasty of hereditary prime ministers, sidelining the Shah royal family. Under the Ranas, the government legally enforced a caste-based social hierarchy, in large part through discrimination against high Himalayan peoples who were more likely to practice Buddhism (Höfer 1979). The Ranas also promoted cults of particular Hindu gods, such as the celebration of the national festival of Dasain, which is devoted to the Hindu goddess Durga. Over time, some groups that had historically been Buddhist began to practice a syncretism of Hinduism and Buddhism. It appears that from the point of view of the court, Buddhism was a degenerate form of Hinduism. And further, Brahmin priests employed by the government prohibited official conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism, such as taking Buddhist monastic vows, for men from Hindu families (Mahapragya 1983, Dietrich 1996).

In the post-Rana era, there has been a reversal of fortunes, in which Buddhist practice has flourished in Nepal, especially in Kathmandu, under the leadership of mainly Tibetan lamas. After a period of exile in India, in 1951, King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah finally overthrew the

Rana dynasty. In 1959, after a failed uprising against the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the Dalai Lama fled into exile in India. Tens of thousands of Tibetans, especially members of the aristocracy and religious orders, followed him into exile in India and Nepal. Some of these Tibetan lamas and monks settled in the Kathmandu valley near two massive Buddhist shrines, the Svayambhunath and Boudhanath Stupas. With support from the Shah royal family, local Buddhist leaders like the third Chini Lama Punya Vajra (1886-1982), the Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora and foreign tourists, Buddhist lamas from Tibet and high Himalayan districts in Nepal began building new monasteries and nunneries in the vicinity of the two stupas, and near pilgrimage sites in neighboring valleys. Currently numbering more than seventy-five, these institutions house an estimated 2,000 Buddhist monks and nuns. Alongside these Tibetan-influenced Vajrayana academies and meditation centers, there has also been a sustained effort to ordain Theravada Buddhist monks and nuns and cultivate a lay support for their activities (LeVine and Gellner 2005).

Despite the attention it receives, Buddhism remains a minority religion in Nepal. According to the 2011 National Census, only nine percent of Nepalis self-identify as Buddhists. Ethnic activists had long predicted that the more relaxed political atmosphere following the end of the Maoist insurgency and the end of the monarchy in 2006 and 2007 would lead to a significant increase in the number of Buddhists in the census, and consequently a greater share of political power, neither of which occurred. However, demographics plus affirmative action policies within the already established political parties have quieted many of the demands of ethnic activists who represent historically Buddhist groups. While Nepali discourse and practice marks ethnic difference relatively easily, through facial appearance, language, traditional dress and territory, religious differentiation has been more problematic. Some groups have switched official religious affiliation

from Buddhist to Hindu, Hindu to Buddhist, Buddhist to Christian, Hindu to Shaman¹, etc (Levine 1987, Letizia 2014, Ripert 2014). Despite this apparent fluidity, the three Buddhists I profile below will show that there is still a strong expectation in Nepali society that one's endogamous birth group (*jat*, caste) determines one's religious affiliation. Especially from the point of view of more conservative Hindus, Buddhism is in its essence a form of Hinduism, making 'conversion' to Buddhism anything from unnecessary to nonsensical. Therefore, Hindus who are becoming Buddhists go to great lengths to articulate what exactly Buddhism is in relation to Hinduism in Nepal.

Map Is Not Territory

In the following section, I present my subjective experience learning about the routes some Hindu converts have taken on their way to becoming Buddhists. It should go without saying that the three biographies presented here are not intended to be representative of the experiences in their sangha, nor is this sangha meant to be representative of contemporary Buddhism in Nepal today.

Beginning in 2012, I have been following the activities of a possibly unique Buddhist sangha in Nepal, which consists primarily of Hindu converts. For the purposes of preserving their anonymity, I will refer to them as 'the Convert Sangha.' The Convert Sangha emerged in the 1990s around their guru, who is Nepali and a descendent of elite political families. The Convert Sangha is a relatively new Buddhist group with headquarters in a formerly aristocratic neighborhood of Kathmandu, and outposts of their global *maṇḍala* in Europe, America and sub-saharan Africa. On

¹ By Shaman, I refer here to a basket of terms for religious practice, many of which refer to cultural traits of specific endogamous groups in Nepal, such as Kirati shamanism, Tamu shamanism, varieties of Bon shamanism, as well as shamanic aspects of syncretized practices such as those found among the Thami, and other Tibeto-Burman groups.

the one hand, the Convert Sangha might be unique. They are a group of over 500 Nepalis,² some of whom come from elite families that constitute the privileged sub-castes within the hill Brahmin and Chhetri castes. These older members of the Convert Sangha are closely related to the former monarchy and the hereditary office of the Prime Minister, but have converted from the Hinduism of their forefathers to Tibetan-style Vajrayana Buddhism. Another large group are Newars, some of whom come from predominantly elite or well-to-do families, such as Shresthas who historically patronized Hindu priests and worked in government administration and business. There are also some more middle-class Newars from farming or artist castes, such as Maharjans. An increasing number of Tamangs are also joining the Sangha through a branch in Hetauda. The leaders of the Sangha, though Nepali, can also be described as Westernized. Some were educated in English in India, some worked in the five-star hotel industry in Kathmandu, one is a university professor of science. One recently graduated with a Master's degree from Harvard Divinity School. They are just as fluent in the minutiae of Tibetan religious practice and doxography as they are about scientism, modernism, interest in mindfulness meditation and contemporary psychological healing practices such as the Emotional Freedom Technique and Psych-K. The organization of the Sangha, their website, bureaucratic structure, use of the internet, newsletters, and even the manner in which they combine monthly community ritual practice with potluck vegetarian dinners, poetry readings and community singing, resemble Western Buddhist communities much more than the historical practice of Buddhism in Nepal, at least to my knowledge. Even the monthly sermons delivered to the Sangha are first written in English by their guru and later translated into Nepali for oral delivery by other teachers.

Paths Taken

² Through their U.S. and U.K. branches, the Sangha also has an increasing number of Western students.

Nearly half a century ago, Donald Swearer drew our attention to the role of the laity in the reform and revival of Buddhism in Ceylon (today Sri Lanka) (Swearer 1970). Since his pioneering work, many further studies have pushed against the assumption that celibate monasticism has been the sole source of innovation and leadership in Buddhist communities. To cite just one example, again from Swearer, much of the reform of Buddhism in Southeast Asia of the past few decades has stemmed from a lay population that is no longer satisfied with merit-attaining practices for achieving better rebirth. Going against the prevailing notion of the arhat as the saintly ideal in Theravada Buddhism, Swearer showed that over twenty years ago, lay populations in SE Asia pushed for access to practices that would result in the attainment of Buddhahood in this lifetime (Swearer 1995).

The Buddhist laity in Kathmandu, far from a homogenous group, has also influenced local reform and revival movements. A number of authors have described the complicated relationship between caste and religion, lay and monastic Buddhism, among the Newars in the Kathmandu valley. David Gellner mapped the roles of various Buddhist and Hindu ritual specialists, patrons and caste, showing us that a priestly caste, who only took temporary ordination, performs tantric rituals for Buddhist patrons (Gellner 1992). Siegfried Lienhard made a distinction between what he called ‘Sangha’ and ‘caste’ Buddhism among the Newars. In Sangha Buddhism, Vajracaryas and/or Shakyabhikshus lived in closed communities around private *vihars*, with roots in the principles and rules of celibate monasteries. Whereas, the Jyapus (Maharjans) and Urayas live a life more akin to ‘the conditions of life in genuine lay communities’ (Lienhard 1989). And LeVine and Gellner have written on the Theravada movement in contemporary Nepal (LeVine and Gellner 2005). However, to my knowledge, this chapter is the first time anyone has written on

Shresthas and Buddhism, as they would be expected to patronize Hindu priests, not engage in Tantric Buddhist soteriological practices.

In order to conceptualize Buddhism among the three Shresthas I profile here, it is worthwhile to review how theories of religious conversion have been studied in relation to Nepal, in particular Gellner's seminal article, "The Emergence of Conversion in a Hindu-Buddhist Polytypy: The Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, c. 1600-1995" (Gellner 2005). Gellner takes up the question of conversion between Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal from the point of view of the philosophy of rational choice by Edna Ullman-Margalit in "Big Decisions: Opting, Converting, Drifting" (Ullman-Margalit 2005). She puts forward a series of distinctions between types of decision-making, and life-changing decisions she designates 'opting.' Ullmann-Margalit points out that 'opting' is similar to 'converting' in that both refer to 'life-transforming, core-affecting, largely irrevocable' life events. However, unlike opting decisions, when converting, one does *not* believe that one is called upon to make a genuine decision between equally viable alternatives. From the point of view of the convert, he has no choice in the matter; his previous life is not just technically rejected, but also normatively rejected. The convert views his previous life as wrong or wicked (Ullman-Margalit 2005, 162). Thus the defining criteria of conversion in this terminology are the *experience* of compulsion and the *rejection* of the previous life. Ullmann-Margalit goes on to discuss the rationality of opting: How can one rationally make a decision which involves assessing and possibly discarding the very criteria of rationality one has accepted up till now?

In his overview of the historical relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism in Kathmandu valley, Gellner (2005) describes Rana-era Buddhist Nepalis as drifting towards Hinduism through the adoption of Hindu rites, due to push and pull factors. Push factors included the State-requirements of a minimal Hinduism through reverence for the cow and participation in the national festival of Dasain. Pull factors included upward social mobility. In the later Rana

period, the State went a step further and outlawed ‘conversion’ to Buddhism in the sense of taking ordination or changing family priests. This period of official State-suppression of Buddhism, as well as influences from abroad, led Buddhist activists to attempt to define themselves and their religion in opposition to Hinduism after 1990. It is this complex interplay between a national discourse that still portrays Buddhism as an inferior version of Hinduism and a counter discourse among activists that serves as the backdrop of how Newars who patronized Hindu priests, such as Shresthas, might narrate their engagement with Buddhism. It is unsurprising that their initial contact to a Buddhist sangha would come through a process more akin to drifting, where at some later point they would point to a personal experience more akin to opting. At the same time, however, one informant at the Sangha specifically rejected the label of ‘convert.’ When unprompted, many of my informants described themselves as ‘becoming Buddhist’ in the dual sense of both being on the path to an unrealized goal, as well as the ideal state of being itself.

It is of course impossible to choose a handful of biographies to represent the variety of experiences that can occur as one converts from Hinduism to Buddhism, just as one biography cannot represent the experiences of every member of the Convert Sangha. Additionally, converting from Hinduism to Buddhism is still a social taboo among the more conservative members of high-caste Nepali society. Therefore, many of my informants only agreed to relate their biographies to me if I agreed to maintain their anonymity. There is also a dearth of research on the lives of contemporary lay Buddhists in Asia, especially women, which has only recently been partially remedied in *Buddhists: Understanding Buddhism Through the Lives of Practitioners* (Lewis 2014), *Women in Tibet* (Gyatso and Havnevik 2006), and other select publications. Even the portraits we have of Buddhist women tend to focus on oral and written biographies of deceased saints. In the case of women specifically, the ethnographic record is in need of more accounts of lives as-yet-unfinished on par with the excellent work of Geoff Childs on Tashi Dondrup (Childs 2004), or

Robert Desjarlais's work with Kisang Omu (Desjarlais 2003). The education of three young, lay Buddhist converts I present here, one of whom is a woman, all share similar biographical details, including coming from the Shrestha *jat* and integrating their reflection on conversion with that of their university-level education.

The Ritual Expert (R.E.)

One of my initial contacts to the Convert Sangha, a university professor, informed me that on the first Saturday of each month, the Sangha meets for lectures on Buddhist philosophy, ritual practice, community bonding activities such as singing and reciting poetry, a Tsok vegetarian meal and audiences with their guru. A visitor might depart before the Tsok, as it is an esoteric part of the overall ritual structure, but as I had an official invitation from the professor, I was allowed to attend the entire day's events, except for an audience with their guru.

On the day of the Saturday meeting, the Sangha hall differed from my previous visits. There were a tremendous number of people, eventually over 200, and a bustle of activity. Many cars and motorbikes were parked along the road outside and inside the gate. Nepalis of all ages were chatting outside the Sangha hall and slowly drifting in. A whole bunch of kids were chasing after what looked to be at least fifteen little Lhasa Apso puppies. Like the others, I removed my shoes, prostrated three times and sat down in the middle towards the back.

The Sangha hall had been transformed from a construction to site to a proper place of worship and celebration. Ladders had been taken down and stowed away. Paint supplies and line drawings for the emerging murals had been removed. A group of middle-aged men and women were hanging colored lights around the doorway. And the floor of the hall had carpets and cushions

arranged in neat rows. Families sat together in these rows facing forward with their copies of the prayer manual.

I was not seated long before a woman in her early to mid-twenties came over and introduced herself to me. She had a kind and studious look, with a big smile and glasses. She said that as the professor would be too busy giving the lecture of the day and assisting the guru's consort in leading the rituals, would it be ok if she sat with me and guided me through the day's events? She suggested that we sit to the right side of the hall, where we could be closer to the front, have a commanding view and whisper in English without disturbing others. For me, this seat was beneficial as I could also watch the audio-visual technicians work to simulcast the day's events over the Internet. Surprised that I could read the Devanagiri script used for writing Sanskrit and Nepali, she helped me to obtain a copy of the prayer manual, the Sangha newsletter and copies of the published transcripts of the Saturday lectures. Throughout the event, she provided periodic, but minimal, narration and direction. At the end of the very long day, we arranged to meet over lunch at the Ariya Café in the Boudha neighborhood on New Year's Eve.

The events at the Convert Sangha that Saturday could have transpired, with little change, at many Buddhist sanghas across N. America, or in the Chinese diaspora, especially those led by disciples of Tibetan lamas. For example, lamas who reside permanently in N. America regularly give lengthy sermons on the practice of Buddhism within daily lay life, often peppered with assumptions about the psychological disposition of sangha members. A potluck vegetarian meal, heavy in Asian cuisine, can be expected at weekly or monthly gatherings. Chinese-Singaporeans and Westerners sit on the floor at their sanghas like Nepalis, though perhaps with less ease. More than an hour at the Convert Sangha's monthly meeting is devoted to ritual recitation of repetitive visualization, offering, and supplication prayers, just like in other communities of converts to Vajrayana Buddhism. Sanghas in East Asia, N. America and the Convert Sangha in

Nepal all produce their own books of liturgy, translated from Tibetan into their mother tongue. In both form and content, ritual observance and social cohesion formed by communal experience is strikingly similar in Tibetan-inspired N. American Buddhist sanghas and the Convert Sangha in Nepal. And yet, how have these similarities arisen, when lay Tibetans in South Asia and N. America do not engage in such practices? Are the similarities attributable to these sanghas being comprised of converts? (Even the Chinese diaspora are in a sense converts to specifically Tibetan Buddhism.) And is there an identifiable network of mutual influence between the Convert Sangha, N. American and diasporic Chinese sanghas?

Over time, I got to know R.E. rather well. When we met she was studying for a BA at the Kathmandu Centre for Buddhist Studies at the Rangjung Yeshe Institute. Her degree program, designed for European and American students, consisted primarily of courses in classical Tibetan, with some courses in Buddhist philosophy, history and culture.

Immediately, I was struck by the similarity between her orientation towards Buddhism in her student years, the interests of myself and some of my classmates at Harvard Divinity School between 1999-2001. R.E. seemed to have little concern for the practical uses of her degree. She said that if she passed her master's degree, she could teach in a Nepali college, but it did not appear to have a significant influence on her choices. When we met, she talked about possibly doing an MA in Buddhist Studies through Tribhuvan University, but certainly cared more about the role Buddhism played in her personal life than her future career prospects. In particular, she approached learning about how Buddhist teachings might relate to her own life through participation in the Sangha as well as academic coursework, without much concern for the relationship between her immediate education and her future employment. But whereas I first encountered Buddhism through a college undergraduate course, R.E. found Buddhism intriguing in her early education. Like many Nepalis, she learned stories about the Buddha's life in school, but no specialized

knowledge. She assumed the Buddha was something like a Hindu god, and was completely ignorant of his teachings. She found her way to the Convert Sangha through the influence of her aunt. Many members of the Sangha had prior kinship ties.

According to his printed biographies and statements from Sangha members, the Guru of the Convert Sangha studied and teaches an eclectic mixture of different philosophies and practices, which are predominantly, but not exclusively, Buddhist. In his youth, the Guru studied a variety of different Hindu philosophies under various teachers before turning his attention to Zen Buddhism. He eventually studied alternative psychology before focusing primarily on Tibetan tantric Buddhism. For his students, he offers teachings based on all of his experiences. For example, he teaches seminars in Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT). R.E.'s aunt attended a seminar that the Guru held on EFT and later became interested in Dharma teachings. In 2007, R.E. decided to join the fifteen-day seminar with her aunt. On meeting the Guru, he asked her, 'Why join? Will it benefit you?' In what seems like a cliché of Western depictions of Hinduism versus Buddhism, R.E. found the Guru to be different than the Hindu priests she had known. For her, Hindu priests were only ritual specialists, typified in the example of performing the *arati* (offering of light) at temples, but they could not give her any advice or counseling. EFT's emphasis on self-healing and the Guru's expression of interest in her personal welfare, his practical concern that his teachings actually benefit her, drew R.E. towards the Guru and deeply informed her own distinction between Buddhist lamas and Hindu priests.

Over the years, R.E. and I have kept up our friendship. For a year, she worked as my research assistant in a project to translate the introduction to the Convert Sangha's prayer manual. We have met frequently in Kathmandu and keep in touch over Facebook Messenger. In 2015, she graduated from Kathmandu University with her BA in Buddhist Studies, but decided to take up a job working for the Sangha rather than immediately pursue her MA.

R.E.'s experience is far from typical. It is rare for Nepalis to enter the Buddhist Studies program at the Rangjung Yeshe Institute. In the time when R.E. began her BA, the program had a total enrollment between 250-320 BA students, of which around only 10% were Nepalis. Since 2010, the percentage of Nepali students has fluctuated between 7-18%. When I inquired about her decision to join the program, she immediately mentioned another member of the Sangha who had already finished his master's degree at the Rangjung Yeshe Institute, the second interlocutor of this chapter, whom I will call "the Best Student."

The Best Student (B.S.)

"The Best Student (B.S.)" is another young leader within the Sangha. Unrelated to R.E., but sharing the same *jat* (endogamous birth group), B.S. first studied at Trichandra College, one of the oldest branches of Tribhuvan University. B.S.'s father wanted him to become a doctor. But his experience with the Sangha drew him in another direction. He first visited the Sangha in 2000, but did not meet the Guru until 2003 because the latter was still in the midst of the stricter period of his meditative retreat. When B.S. met the Guru for the first time, he cried for five minutes, a very embarrassing experience for a Nepali man. Similar to the Guru and other leaders of the Sangha, B.S. was naturally drawn to philosophy and existential questions. Whereas R.E. found Hindu gurus to be ritualists lacking pastoral care, B.S. found them to be blissful, presumably due to their own meditative experience, but relatively unlearned, in the sense that their answers to his philosophical questions were dissatisfying.

Just as R.E. found her way to the Sangha through her aunt, kinship ties have played a significant role in how B.S. has navigated his own life choices. More than thirty members of his family are now Sangha members. Some of them have had unexpected, transformative experiences.

For example, B.S.'s mother used to be a very devout Hindu. She would frequently visit Pashupatinath, the holiest shrine to Shiva in the Kathmandu valley. After joining the Sangha, she not only stopped going to Pashupatinath, but she took all of the things out of her home that she associated with Hinduism. From the point of view of the Sangha, she made very quick progress on stabilizing her meditative absorption. Though they were initially doubtful of Buddhist teachings, B.S., his mother and his brother began to cultivate more interest from their larger extended family in following them down the Buddhist path, through talking about their positive experiences and increasing leadership opportunities.

B.S.'s personal engagement with Buddhism and his academic education in Buddhist Studies has been a complex assemblage of personal growth and educational and social capital, both of which are enmeshed in an international network of globalized Buddhists. In 2005, B.S. began a second bachelor's degree in Buddhist Studies at the Rangjung Yeshe Institute, a department of Kathmandu University, housed and administered by the Ka-Nying Shedrup Ling Monastery in Boudhanath, Nepal. The Rangjung Yeshe Institute (R.Y.I.) offers BA and MA education in Buddhist Studies, historically geared for Western students. According to its website, R.Y.I. has formal affiliations with the Université de Lausanne, Boston College, Eastern Tennessee State University, the Universität Wien, the Universität Hamburg, the Universität Leipzig, the International Association of Buddhist Universities and the Università degli Studi di Napoli – L'Orientale. Its graduates have gone on to higher degrees at prestigious universities in Canada, the US, Germany, the UK, Denmark and Sweden.

B.S. navigated his personal educational and spiritual path around obstacles and towards opportunities in ways familiar to many N. American and European undergraduate and graduate students of religion and theology. While a student, he held a part-time job as a library assistant. Between his BA and his MA, he attended classes at the Dzongsar Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö

Institute in Chauntra, India. He also had a merit-based scholarship from the Khyentse Foundation to support his studies. The similarity between B.S.'s path of study and scholarship and that of N. American and European students is due in part to previous Nepalis and Westerners with global experiences who have shifted the educational landscape for nascent Buddhists, not unlike prominent geological features that have been carved out of a landscape by water. There is a profound circularity to these paths as Westerners are drawn to Nepal for spiritual study, head back to the West to be near family and friends, only to end up forging a related career that brings them regularly back to Asia. At the same time, wealthy Asians commit significant resources to establishing scholarship opportunities for Nepalis and Westerners to study Buddhism both in Asia and the West. B.S. represents the confluence of these streams: the personal investment of Western Buddhists and the financial investment of East Asian Buddhists. Not only was B.S.'s MA co-supervised by a French scholar together with a Tibetan abbot with a PhD from Harvard, but after graduating from the Rangjung Yeshe Institute, B.S. obtained a one-year scholarship from the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation, based in Hong Kong, to study Buddhist ministry at Harvard Divinity School. Towards the end of his time at Harvard, a series of massive earthquakes struck central Nepal, and B.S. returned to assist in relief efforts.

The Auspicious One (A.O.)

The 2015 Nepali earthquakes disrupted my own plans to visit Nepal, but like a rock that falls into one stream creating two, it eventually led to a third Shrestha worth mentioning here. In the spring of 2016, I stopped by the Sangha to say hello to old friends and struck up a conversation with “the auspicious one (A.O.)”, a young Nepali man who had just discovered the place. I nicknamed this informant “the auspicious one,” as we happened to meet as I was writing this chapter and his

perspective on becoming a Buddhist shifted my analysis to include him as representative of an earlier stage in the process than either R.E. or B.S.

A.O. followed a different path than R.E. or B.S., but with familiar landmarks, on his way to the Sangha. While R.E. pursued and completed her academic education in Buddhist Studies in Nepal while deepening her relationship to the Sangha, and B.S. began his academic education in Nepal and finished it in America, A.O. first began his education in America at an elite liberal arts college in New England and then returned to complete his BA in Nepal. Unlike R.E. and B.S. who simultaneously pursued academic and spiritual education related to becoming Buddhists, A.O. still struggles with identifying as a Buddhist. There is no direct parallel for him between his academic education and spiritual pursuits. Instead, academic and existential questions connect for him more on the level of living the life of the mind so touted as the selling point *sine que non* of American liberal arts education. A.O. is articulate and deeply reflexive regarding the evolution of his knowledge of Buddhism. He is open, but also very careful in how he chooses his words when he compares what Shiva meant to him with what the Buddha or a future *yidam* (personal tantric Buddhist deity) might mean to him.

As A.O. started to follow a Buddhist path relatively recently, and primarily through the influence of the Sangha, his method of orientation is very comparative. For example, in our ongoing email exchange, A.O. reflects with me on the differences between having a personal relationship with Shiva and hypothetically what it might be like for him to settle on a *yidam*. A.O. and I discuss how liberation is defined, obtained, and by whom, in Hinduism versus Buddhism. And of course much of our ongoing conversations have been on the ontological status and role of the guru in both traditions. A.O. and I are both curious about the relative merits of guru-student relationship metaphors that are kinship based (in particular father-son) or political (king-subject/elected representative-citizen), and how these metaphors relate to our own experiences of

these relationships within our own families and within various national contexts, especially in the two countries where we have both lived, Nepal and America. And due to our similar educational backgrounds, questions of psychology, hierarchical organization and degrees of democracy remain fluid and germane to our correspondence regarding becoming Buddhist.

Of course, A.O. is well aware that in practice there are multiple meditation traditions, and not a neat bifurcation of Hinduism versus Buddhism. But his tendency to compare is characteristic of new members of the Sangha who come from Hindu backgrounds. In particular, it was the Guru's writings on the differences between specific Hindu meditation practices, such as Nirvikalpa Samadhi of the Yoga Sutra and Vedanta, and Tibetan Buddhist practices that appealed to a young, educated man like A.O. From his point of view, the real issue at hand is that Nepalis have many deep misconceptions of Buddhism. The purpose of comparison for the Guru is not to establish superiority, but to clarify those misconceptions. This particular comment resonates with references older Sangha members have often made about their own discovery of Buddhism and the Sangha's work at a group level. Many Sangha members have spoken to me about the forgotten ritual landscape of Mahayana Buddhism present throughout the Kathmandu Valley. How most sites visited by Hindus also have Buddhist significance, which is sometimes older, sometimes contemporary. Yet the Buddhist valence has been mostly forgotten over time. In that sense, Sangha members seem to have a natural kinship with foreign historians who view the Valley as a lost world of South Asian Buddhism (Desjarlais 2003), or foreign anthropologists who prefer to speak in terms of syncretism and the relative degree of non-sectarianism in the Valley (Lienhard 1984, Rospatt, 2001) in order to counter the tendency of Western, perhaps unconsciously Protestant-influenced scholars of religion, to overemphasize differences of belief in lieu of recognizing similarities of practice. One member of the Sangha even asked me to track down a copy of the rare, *Mythological History of the Nepal Valley from Svayambhu Purana*, for the Sangha's research into the Buddhist

history of Kathmandu. As the Sangha engages at the group level of attempting to uncover or differentiate Buddhism from Hinduism, an individual like A.O. deepens and complicates his own understanding of self in relation to externalized terms such as Nepali, Western, Hindu and Buddhist.

Paths To and Fro

Exegesis on Buddhist practices has always abounded in *path* metaphors, which are intended to assist one in navigating oneself from suffering to awakening, from past states to future potential. The Noble Eightfold Path (Skt. *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*) is eight practices that guide one between the extremes of asceticism and sensual indulgence. The *Stages of the Path* (Tib. *lam rim*) is a set of instructions that gradually guides one through all of the stages on the path to complete awakening. Many different lineages of Tibetan Buddhism have organized practices and teachings in a ‘Stages of the Path’ form, with the most famous being the *Stages of the Path* taught by Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (1357-1419) (Tsong-kha-pa and Ba-so 1972, Bstan ’dzin rgya mtsho et al. 1995). The highest teaching of the Sakya lineages of Tibetan Buddhism is the *Path and Fruit* (Tib. *lam ‘bras*), a primarily tantric meditative system in which the result of the practice (awakening) is said to already be contained within the path to awakening (Kunga Tenpay et al. 2003). From one perspective then, everything that one sets out to achieve on the Buddhist path to awakening has already been achieved. Though not all Buddhist metaphors for self-cultivation use navigational vocabulary, the prevalence of words such as path are common and important enough to make deliberate use of them ethnographically when analyzing Buddhist self-cultivation. Add since the Convert Sangha specifically practices the *Path and Fruit*, I use navigational vocabulary in order to retain a fidelity to the lifeworlds of my informants.

I also chose this vocabulary to retain a fidelity to myself. In the section above, I described the intersections of secular and spiritual education in the lives of three Nepalis who have joined a sangha comprised of converts to Buddhism, a sangha that practices the *Path and Fruit* teachings of the Sakyas, among other things. I see a little of my earlier self in them. My knowledge of and experience within Buddhist worlds has never been far from educational settings, whether it was first studying Tibetan on the floors of Buddhist meditation centers in Berkeley or the Upper West Side, or writing term papers on the patterns in Asian religions in the suburbs of Philly and Boston. For me, the practice of Buddhism has been a lifelong education across continents with different types of teachers. It is difficult and unrealistic to ask Nepali friends to be hyper self-aware and reflective of their choices in life, when it has been easiest for me to just keep putting one foot in front of the other unreflectively, only stopping to apply artificial labels in hindsight. Tim Ingold questioned the assumption that an authentic life is lived on the spot, in a moment, rather than along paths. I agree with him that life is lived along paths that inform our knowledge of the world and the stories we tell (Ingold 2007, 2). An assemblage of people and places, overlapping with these three Nepalis, has deeply affected my own career. I am also a product of east-west routings.

All three of these Nepalis are becoming Buddhists during stages of their lives similar to each other and similar to when my personal and professional life began to intersect with Buddhism. I met all three of them at times when they were focused primarily on their education, just as I first encountered Buddhism through a university course. For many students, university is a particularly reflective time of life, where one first has the freedom and maturity to consider existential questions. Being a professor, it is also unsurprising that my conversations with them would veer in this direction. I met R.E. because my contact at the Sangha knew of my research interests and put us in touch. In the case of A.O., we continued to correspond over email because of our mutual interest in each other's expertise. His perspective on converting to Buddhism intrigued

me, while he is happy to have found a university professor with whom he could continue to have a dialogue outside of formal classes.

However, in narrating their lives, it strikes me that there are distinct differences between my Buddhist education in the United States and Nepal and the education of these young Nepalis. For example, each of them spoke to me about kinship ties that led them to the Convert Sangha or obstructed their path. R.E. spoke about her aunt encouraging her to attend a seminar. B.S. spoke about his mother's conversion from Shaivism to Buddhism and the increasing number of his family members who joined the Sangha. While any of these narratives might also be the case in America, when I have interviewed American converts to Buddhism, they have narrated their lives in more individualistic terms, comparable to previous research (Cadge 2007). I have not encountered large extended families, who in a relatively short period of time, together converted and joined a sangha. The meta-narratives that inform Nepali discourse on religion also differ from those in America or Europe in noticeable and obvious ways. In Nepal, a 'convert' to Buddhism will almost always be a former Hindu through simple demographics, but on another level, it is difficult for Nepalis to voice their Buddhist experience without direct or implicit reference to Hinduism. Returning to Gellner's reflection on models for conversion, in the future we ought to attend to the differences among conversion narratives that include and do not include an Abrahamic religion, as well as the continued prevalence of discourses in Nepal surrounding the proper place of Hinduism in society. While Nepal is no longer an officially Hindu kingdom, for some, the ongoing debates over the Nepali words for secularism in the new constitution belie neutrality, but actually display a deference to Hinduism as the preferred default mode of being in the public sphere (Letizia 2012).

The Distance Traveled Thus Far

I have tried to emphasize in this chapter that we should conceptualize *becoming Buddhist* as a project, both for individuals and groups, that is *always unfinished, emergent, polysemic, uncertain, but ultimately a creative experiment in thinking of the present as an event that links past action with future potential*. When we place the emphasis of our study on *becoming* as a process, instead of focusing on being Buddhist as a fixed identity, we admit our affinity with our informants as equally existential beings.

The means by which Buddhists practice self-cultivation—asceticism, meditation and education—is changing very quickly throughout Asia and in similar patterns. These multilocal changes mirror the development of Buddhism outside of Asia and point towards effects and influences through a myriad of networks transversing former boundaries in many simultaneous directions. The educational experiences of my three informants are both indicative of these patterns and yet only speak to a small fraction of what is happening to Globalized Buddhism. I use the term Globalized Buddhism here to refer to the types of Buddhist practices and discourses that happen under relatively reduced socio-political influence, and speak more to the emergence of a certain form of Buddhist identity that at times expresses itself irrespective of national boundaries. This type of Global or Globalized Buddhism has developed slowly over time and is only now being investigated by Buddhologists and scholars of religion. For example, as recently as 1999, Seager pointed to a “gulf between [Buddhist] immigrants and converts” (Seager 1999, 233). And two years later, Baumann argued correctly that the trends shaping the development of Buddhism worldwide fifteen years ago were not so much derived from ethnicity or ancestry, what he called “the religious concepts and practices followed” (Baumann 2001, 2).³ While Seager and Baumann’s findings are

³ Baumann made a distinction between “traditionalist” and “modernist” Buddhism, which I do not find to be very productive. Rather, we ought to continue to view intra-Buddhist differences with the Buddhist language of “lineage.” Lineage not only expresses an affinity with our informants, it skillfully avoids the pitfalls of defining modernity, which plagued academia for much of the early 2000s.

still valid, I argue that we have entered yet a new historical period, where we can also find patterns of self-cultivation, administrative structures, dispositions and worldviews that intersect across geographical boundaries, lineage and ethnicity. It is this boundary crossing, co-constitutive network of cross-pollination between Buddhists that I refer to as Global or Globalized Buddhism in this chapter. Some of the themes common in different settings of Globalized Buddhism include the adoption by laity of self-cultivation techniques previously reserved primarily for monastic yogis, the development of new techniques to suit lay life, including lay women in practice and hierarchical organization, and engagement in social issues (such as rapid responses to natural disasters) (Schorr and Warner 2015, Makley 2014). My informants discuss these developments as emergent properties. Their self-description is often in comparison to a not-yet, perhaps never, fully articulated Buddhist ideal, in which they place themselves in the inferior position as not-quite-yet-Buddhists. Given the similarities across the Himalayas, in the Chinese diaspora, SE Asia and in the West, a fuller accounting of these developments would demand a transnational perspective not possible here. But greater attention to the education of lay converts to Buddhism in Nepal will in time tell us much more about what it means to become a Buddhist in other places as well.

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