

# Between Awakening and Enlightenment

## The first modern Asian Buddhist and the first Buddhist Englishman

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**ABSTRACT** | The last form of Buddhism surviving on the Indian subcontinent was revealed to the West for the first time through a collaboration between Paṇḍita Amṛtānanda (1774–1835), a Newar Buddhist native of the Kathmandu Valley, and Brian Houghton Hodgson (1801–1894), the East India Company's envoy in Kathmandu. The groundbreaking account of Buddhism that Hodgson published, with Amṛtānanda's guidance, drew on traditional learning and texts preserved only in the Himalayas. However, it also included formulations of doctrine that were fundamentally new. Both hoped, for different reasons, that Buddhism might engage the hearts and minds of the nascent West. Nonetheless, Hodgson's work was soon put aside by textualists more interested in classical sources, and Amṛtānanda's innovative writings have remained overlooked in studies of Buddhism and modernity. This article reassesses the first attempt to bring the ancient religiosity of awakening into the rational discourse of the Enlightenment.

**KEYWORDS** | Modernity; Colonial; Tradition; Buddhism; Sanskrit; Nepal; Nineteenth Century

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## 1 Introduction: British India, Modernity and Buddhism<sup>1</sup>

Just as the Enlightenment in Europe was kindled in part by discoveries of other peoples and ways of thinking, the sheer extent of the differences that Europeans encountered in South Asia fueled the modern study of religion. Buddhism, unfamiliar to Westerners in the early colonial era, was especially mysterious because it had disappeared as a living presence from India, the land of its birth, while remaining widespread elsewhere. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, fundamental questions about whether Buddhism was theistic or atheistic, and whether it was or was not part of Hinduism, had not been answered (Almond 1989, 15, 97). Such questions had socioreligious dimensions and implications for the governance of the colonies in the “Indies.”

In 1828, brilliant new light was shed on the situation of Buddhism with the publication of Brian Houghton Hodgson’s “Notices of the Languages, Literature, and Religion of the Bauddhas of Nepal and Bhot.” For the first time in modern discourse, the religion of the Buddha was described with reference to the scriptural texts in Sanskrit that had been authoritative across South Asia, and with the aid of a pundit belonging to the associated Buddhist tradition. But the follow-up “Sketch of Buddhism,” centred on a dialogue between Hodgson and his Nepalese pundit Amṛtānanda, made claims that other scholars could not verify in their sources, and which led to their work being put aside in the fast-changing modern discourse on Buddhism. Hodgson and Amṛtānanda had in fact tried to articulate Buddhism in a new way, anchored in the scriptural tradition but reoriented towards modern audiences.

Amṛtānanda was the first Buddhist of the South Asian heartland to display modern tendencies in his writings, and Hodgson did his groundbreaking work on Buddhism both as a scholar guided by the emancipatory ideals of the Enlightenment and as an ardent private student of the religion. These extraordinary figures and their milieu, Kathmandu Valley in the early nineteenth century, have not, however, been noticed in previous surveys of modern Buddhism (e.g. McMahan 2008). A few words on how modernity is construed in relation to Buddhism are then in order. This article makes use of manuscript sources that expand what is known about these incipient Buddhist moderns, although there is no scope here to examine every facet of their collaboration.

The beginning of the modern era is often associated with the second or third decades of the nineteenth century, or the start of the Industrial Revolution (Robertson 2020, 302–305). But since there is no consensus on where or when ex-

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<sup>1</sup> This is a rewritten version of a previously unpublished paper presented at the Fourth International Conference on Nepal Mandala in Kathmandu. It was revised in part during the author’s fellowship at the Humanistic Buddhism Centre of Nan Tien Institute in 2022. The present paper makes use of manuscript scans provided by the British Library, and has benefited from perceptive comments on previous drafts by the late Hubert Decler and an anonymous reviewer.

actly modernity begins, or on what in particular separates it as an intellectual movement from the humanism of the Enlightenment, it is useful to understand modernity in a more general way. Modernity is not simply originality or newness; it is a thought process in search of betterment, aware of how and why innovation is sought. The Habermasian abstraction of modernity as an attitude of deliberate distancing from the past is compatible with Buddhist subjectivity, notwithstanding the fact that Habermas' theory gives little attention to non-Western historical contexts. In the incidents of encounter, discovery and reinterpretation that are discussed in what follows, a "consciousness of a new epoch [that] formed itself through a renewed relationship to the ancients" (Habermas 1981, 3) indeed begins to emerge.

## 2 Amṛtānanda, Hodgson and Early Nineteenth-Century Nepal

The new directions taken by Paṇḍita Amṛtānanda come out of his position as the first Buddhist on the Indian subcontinent to explain his religion to a Westerner. An innovative, well-connected thinker and a prolific writer, Amṛtānanda has nonetheless received little attention outside a couple of short studies in Newar and English (Śākya 2002; Joshi 2004). Amṛtānanda was born into a Buddhist family of the Mahābuddha branch of Rudravarṇamahāvihāra in Lalitpur, Nepal, which was renowned for its tradition of learning and punditry (Śākya 2002, 56, 66–67). Unlike the modern-minded Buddhist Newars who lived under harsher social conditions in later generations, he was not a reformer, revivalist or an activist, but a traditional literatus drawn into the colonial knowledge-creation enterprise, which had just reached into Nepal at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Amṛtānanda's knowledge of Sanskrit, long the *lingua franca* of Buddhism in the South Asian heartland, was outstanding for his place and time. He rewrote a Sanskrit treatise on prosody to suit Buddhist tastes (Mitra 1989, 86), composed a rudimentary grammar of the Sanskrit and Newar languages (Joshi 2004, 42), and wrote several original works in Sanskrit, most of them relating to Buddhism (Śākya 2002, 104). In general, he acted as a confident custodian of the Sanskrit Buddhist literary legacy, as has been noticed, for instance, in the way that he copied and extended Aśvaghōṣa's famous epic poem, the *Buddhacarita* (Johnston 1935, viii; Mitra 1989, 145). These literary talents eventually led Amṛtānanda into the clerical service of the British Residency in Kathmandu, while also putting him in a commanding position to do something new with the Sanskrit Buddhist legacy.

Brian Houghton Hodgson's intellectual orientation led him to study areas that were at the frontier of Anglo-European experience in the early nineteenth century. A descendant of a formerly well-to-do Derbyshire family, he trained for a career in the East India Company, and in 1821 was posted to Nepal (Waterhouse

2004, 1–3). Hodgson's scholarly training had emphasised the paradigm of political economy. As a teenage student at the East India College, he was taught by Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834), one of the foremost political economists. Hodgson's association with this towering figure of Enlightenment thought has been credited with inspiring his "comprehensive study of the institutions and constitutional problems of Nepal" (Hunter 1896, 23; Waterhouse 2004, 3). In a report for the College printed during Hodgson's student days, Malthus reaffirmed that future Company employees had to be educated to (Malthus 1817, 6, 10):

dispense justice to millions of people of various languages, manners, usages, and religions; to administer a vast and complicated system of revenue ... Their duties are those of statesmen.

Most of Nepal was *terra incognita* to the British at the time and Hodgson soon embarked on the study of everything in Nepal that might interest the Company and the scholarly community in Britain and Europe. In 1833 he was promoted to Resident, a powerful position comparable to that of ambassador, which he held until his dismissal in 1842 — the end of his stay in Kathmandu and his diplomatic career (Hunter 1896, 125, 216).

The expansion of Company rule, together with the growing demands on its administrators and the wider maturation of scientific discourse, helps to explain why Hodgson studied Nepal in such a variety of ways, working on subjects that now belong to unrelated and specialized fields: geography, economics, law, linguistics, ornithology, zoology and so on. Hodgson's efforts to share his discoveries on the last bastion of Buddhism on the Indian subcontinent were motivated by the fact that Buddhism still puzzled Western cognoscenti. Nonetheless, the study of Buddhism stands out as an anomaly in his otherwise entirely materialist and science-oriented research efforts. The subjectively experienced religion of awakening had no place in the objectivism of the Enlightenment or in the business of modern, non-theological rule.

Hodgson presented his work as a self-conscious modernist, claiming to have lived by an adage of Francis Bacon: "they that reverence too much old times are but a scorn to the new" (Bacon 1801, 114; Hunter 1896, 23). The title of his first collection of essays, *Illustrations of the literature and religion of the Buddhists*, published in 1841 and reprinted in 1874, evokes the ethos of Enlightenment on at least a literal level. His trailblazing studies of Buddhism aimed to introduce a "new subject" to "enlightened Europeans" (Hodgson 1836, 29; 1841, 94; 1874, 65). However, Hodgson was not a classicist at home in the European academies, as were his correspondents Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852) and the Hungarian Tibetologist Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1784–1842). Hodgson's preference was to study Buddhism in the field, where he could receive first-hand commentary from the local experts. In this he was assisted above all by his "old friend" Amṛtānanda —

“chiefly through his kindness, and his influence with his brethren in the *Bauddha* faith” (Hodgson 1830, 222; 1841, 30; 1874, 35).

Hodgson’s frequent remarks about his camaraderie with his “old *Bauddha* friend” demonstrate that the first substantial encounters between Buddhists and modern Westerners were not bound to be inherently difficult. With respectful curiosity on both sides, there did not need to be a prejudicial clash of civilizations like the “vain debates” ignited by missionary activity in Sri Lanka from the 1830s onwards (Young and Somaratna 1996). Nor did Western engagements with Buddhism have to remain the province of romantics, exemplified in the case of theosophist Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), the American who whimsically adopted Buddhism in Sri Lanka in 1880. Amṛtānanda’s and Hodgson’s partnership in documenting and rearticulating Buddhism for Western minds preceded and laid the ground for these better known developments.

### **3 Amṛtānanda’s Writings: On the Cusp of Modernity**

Few Europeans had visited the Kathmandu Valley before the early nineteenth century, and the Buddhist community there had given no attention to their presence in South Asia up to that point. The novel elements in Amṛtānanda’s writings are no doubt due to his extraordinary personal contacts with the British. Yet it is neither Westernness per se, nor the colonial period itself, that most differentiates Amṛtānanda’s work from that of his predecessors. Nor is his body of work distinguished by its occasional focus on non-religious topics such as prosody, lexicography and so on; Buddhists long before him had also shown interest in such topics. Instead, like the Nepalese artists Hodgson employed to portray local wildlife in a naturalistic manner for the purposes of scientific illustration (Waterhouse 2005, 7), Amṛtānanda is distinguished from his predecessors by his adjustment to a new way of seeing the world, empirical and agnostic, and different from, yet still grounded in, what had come before. It is this conscious distance from inherited habits and preconceptions, unparalleled among his Buddhist contemporaries, that constitutes the main measure of modernity in his work.

The writings produced by Amṛtānanda for Hodgson show a shift in the pundit’s mode of expression — from the prescriptive towards the descriptive, from depicting things as they ought to be to things as they are. Several examples are found in a miscellany compiled by Amṛtānanda in 1826, the *Dharmakośasaṃgraha*. Here the shrines on the sacred hill of Swayambhu are described factually and prosaically (Mukundarāja 2002, 74), in contrast to the mythopoetic descriptions of the premodern *Svayambhūpurāṇas*. His short biography of the Buddha, likewise, condenses florid classical narratives — often drawn from the ancient

*Lalitavistara* — into a dense abstract for modern consumption. The achievement of awakening is described in traditional yet minimally embellished terms:

The monk Sarvārthasiddha, having reached the bower of awakening, was diamond-seated at the Bodhi Tree as a result of breathing meditation, [having] undertaken six years of hard practice. Then, having become the defeater of Māra, attaining awakening, he became awakened with the name of Śākyasiṃha the Great Buddha, the Bhagavān possessing the six superknowledges and a splendid body with the thirty-two marks and eighty minor marks. Then, in the Deer Forest of Benares, sat on his fourth seat, surrounded by many monks, having put in front Brahmin, bodhisattva and wheel of dharma, he was doing the Dharmacakra Sermon.<sup>2</sup>

What marks the *Dharmakośasaṃgraha* as the product of a new era is its status as a commission for a non-Asian “sahib” of the colonial period, which brings it partly within the cultural and chronological ambit of European modernity.<sup>3</sup> Innovative stylistic features in the *Dharmakośasaṃgraha* and other works commissioned for Hodgson show that it was written for a new kind of audience. Amṛtānanda often incorporates loanwords from Newar and Tibetan into his Sanskrit prose in a transparent way, flagging them with phrases such as “thus in the vernacular ...” (*iti bhāṣāyā*). For instance, the phrase “image of his Holiness Śākyasiṃha” is furnished with the glosses “*shā kya thub pa* in the Tibetan vernacular” and “*kvācapāla deva* in the Nepalese vernacular.”<sup>4</sup> These glosses are not linguistically exact — the Tibetan term usually translates the name Śākyamuni, and the Newar term is a generic name for the principal image housed in a monastery — but they enrich the text semantically and add to its usefulness. The overt presence of Sino-Tibetan words in a Sanskrit Buddhist work is another sign of a changed epoch in which the centre of the living Buddhist religion has shifted out of the Indian heartland.

While many more examples of newness in his work for Hodgson could be given here, on the whole, Amṛtānanda’s other writings are conventional in their style and subject matter and could not be seen as the work of an author yearning to break away from tradition. The slight modern tendencies that are seen in

2 *bodhimaṇḍapam anuprāpya bodhivṛkṣe vajrāsana āsphānakadhyānataḥ śa varṣāṇi duṣkaram cakāra* [read: *cacāra*] *sarvārthasiddho bhikṣuḥ* | *tato mārjīd bhūtvā bodhim āśāya buddho babhūva śākyasiṃhanāmā mahābuddhaḥ śa abhijñāḥ dvātriṃśallakṣaṇāśītyanuvyañjanavirājitaḥ bhagavān* [||] *tataḥ kāśyām mṛgadāve caturthāsanaṣṭho bahubhir bhikṣubhiḥ parivṛto dharmacakraṃ bodhim sattvaṃ* [read: *bodhisattvaṃ*] *brahmāṇaṃ ca puraskṛtya dharmacakravayākhyānam akarot* | (*Dharmakośasaṃgraha*, ed. Mukundarāja 2002, 49–50). Author’s translation.

3 *śrīsāhebājñāyā lekhaḥ* (read: *likhaḥ*) *amṛtaḥ śākyasānaḥ* (*Dharmakośasaṃgraha*, ed. Mukundarāja 2002, 202): “Amṛta the Śākyan religious writes at the command of His Grace (śrī-) the Sahib [Hodgson].” Author’s translation.

4 *tatra prathamatarāṃ śrīśākyasiṃhabimbaṃ* | *kāmbojadeśīyabhāṣāyā śākyā thūmbā iti* | [*nepāla-bhāṣa-yā*] *kvācapāla deva iti* (*Dharmakośasaṃgraha*, ed. Mukundarāja 2002, 208–209, sic). Author’s translation.

Amṛtānanda rather reflect his exposure to colonial administrative methods and their expectations of pertinent, verifiable and actionable information.

### 3.1 Amṛtānanda and Knox, the First Briton to Accept Buddhism

Amṛtānanda's unprecedented role in disseminating Buddhism to the British had started well before his dealings with Brian Houghton Hodgson. The way in which he sought to win the hearts and minds of East India Company officials over several decades is very unusual in his milieu and points to political as well as religious motivations. Over fifteen years before meeting Hodgson, Amṛtānanda had been in contact with Captain William Douglas Hunter Knox (1763–1829), who headed the East India Company's second embassy to Nepal.<sup>5</sup> Knox arrived in Nepal in 1801, in the aftermath of the 1792 Sino-Nepalese war, which briefly brought Qing dynasty troops to the edge of the Kathmandu Valley, seen at the time as close to the northern frontier of British India (Kirkpatrick 1811, vi–viii). The Company's embassy sought to cooperate with the Hindu Gorkhali kings who had replaced Hindu-Buddhist Newar rule in Nepal, but it also represented a potential challenge to these kings. In a history of Nepal later written by one of Amṛtānanda's relatives, Guṇānanda, these years are remembered for their bad omens, disasters, violent court intrigues and sacreligious acts by Gorkhali despots (Wright 1874, 262–263). In this atmosphere, it would be understandable if well-connected Buddhist Newars had seen the East India Company as the regional power least threatening to their interests.

Toward the end of Knox's short stay in Kathmandu, Amṛtānanda presented him with an illuminated manuscript of the *Lalitavistara* copied in his own hand. The gift of the *Lalitavistara* marks a historic moment: the first known transmission of the dharma — Buddhist teaching in the Sanskrit language — to a Westerner. The manuscript itself is now preserved in the British Library (MS Thomas 1935, 1420–1421, No. 7800). Amṛtānanda's gift represents a traditional transaction of “givable religion” (*deyadharmā*), but what is novel is not just that the recipient of the gift was a person from outside the Eastern Hemisphere, but also that the relevant points of protocol were updated to reflect this fact.

The colophon of the gifted *Lalitavistara* lauds Knox with Persian titles and in Sanskrit as one “whose liberality surpassed the Hindu divinities and proved him to be an *Avatāra* of Buddha” (Thomas 1935, 1421). Here Amṛtānanda could have been alluding to the fact that Captain Knox was previously stationed in the Bodhgaya district, the place where the Buddha attained awakening. There Knox engaged with local literati by starting a Persian–Hindi translation contest (Blumhardt 1899, 50). This episode shows that Knox was interested in cultures other than his own, and that he may have been able to communicate directly with Amṛtānanda, who was Persian-literate, about the fact that he had resided at

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<sup>5</sup> For Knox's dates see n. a. (1870, 350), and on the second embassy and its wider historical contexts, see Sanwal (1965, 84–114).

Bodhgaya. As is well known, Amṛtānanda felt a connection with Bodhgaya — he lived in a compound containing a unique miniature replica of the Bodhgaya shrine — and later went on pilgrimage there (Hodgson 1841, 204–205; 1874, 135; Śākya 2002, 74). He seems to have become well acquainted with Knox because he finished copying the *Lalitavistara* at a critical time in Knox's stay. The manuscript's date of completion — February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1803 — was just two weeks before an ultimatum from the Company to the Nepalese government was due to expire.<sup>6</sup> When it went unanswered, Knox closed the embassy in Kathmandu and left for good (Sanwal 1956, 111–112), taking the manuscript with him.

The *Lalitavistara* manuscript was also endowed with innovative iconography that incorporates the first portrayal of an Anglo-European as a recipient of Buddhist teaching. The manuscript cover depicts five figures in a horizontal tableau (Waterhouse 2004, plate 2). On the right, Captain Knox is portrayed sitting in a chair wearing military dress — a scarlet coatee and bearskin hat — and holding a prayer wheel. On the left, Amṛtānanda is depicted kneeling with hands clasped. Both men are turned towards three objects of worship in the middle: in the centre, the Swayambhū stupa of Kathmandu, identifiable as such by its shrines; the Arapacana form of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī on the left; and on the right, an inverted triangle (*dharmodayā*) standing for the secret goddess Guhyeśvarī. Pride of place is given to Buddhist tantra and the Kathmandu Valley faithscape, rather than to exoteric Buddhism and India. The manuscript's final folio similarly depicts Amṛtānanda handing over the manuscript to Knox, with Swayambhū again in the centre (Waterhouse 2004, plate 3).

Amṛtānanda's gift of the *Lalitavistara* visually and textually idealises the participation of the *sahib* in the Buddhism of the Kathmandu Valley. If there was any hope that British colonialists might take up this tradition of Buddhism in the long term, or even intervene some day on the side of Buddhist Newars, it was a hope that would never be realised. Nonetheless, the manuscript itself and its striking iconography was not forgotten by its British custodians. Amṛtānanda's *Lalitavistara* manuscript generated two copies and a summary written by a Brahmin pundit (Thomas 1935, 1421). It was later displayed at the 1911 Festival of Empire and Imperial Exhibition in London's Crystal Palace, "chiefly noticeable as a fine modern example of the ancient Nepalese and Tibetan miniature illustration" (Hendley 1913, 89). This extraordinary manuscript has remained an obscure curio, even as it documents the first transfer of South Asian Buddhism by its sympathisers from the Eastern to the Western hemisphere.

### 3.2 Buddhas of Meditation, as Opposed to Buddhas of Flesh

In his dialogue with Hodgson, which started in 1824, Amṛtānanda coined two terms that soon became widely accepted in modern scholarly discourse. He dis-

6 The date of the manuscript is given as *naipālike 'bde guṇanetraratnair [3-2-9] yute ca śāke dvibhujādrīcīṃdaiḥ | ... nśrīnepālasamvat 924 śrīśāke 1724 śrīvikrama 1859 miti phālguṇavadi 6 roja 2 subham* (Thomas 1935, 1421).



tinguished the “thought buddha” who manifests in meditation from the “manish buddha” of flesh and blood – the *dhyānibuddha* and the *mānuṣibuddha*. The main referents of the term *dhyānibuddha* are the five gnostic Buddhas of the five directions, Vairocana et al, whereas the *mānuṣibuddhas* are the seven earthly Buddhas, up to the historical Śākyamuni, who are believed to have taught humankind in successive epochs. These two terms sharpened a distinction between subjective and objective manifestations of Buddhahood that was not so clear in the premodern religion. The historical Buddhas could also be objects of contemplation (*buddhānusr̥ti*), and any contention that the gnostic buddhas lack presence or reality would clash with traditional buddha-body theories.

Modern thought, by contrast, seeks to differentiate the apparitions of the inner world from living beings who existed in historical time. “Apt as Buddhism is to forget the distinction of divine and human nature” (Hodgson 1828, 422–423; 1841, 18; 1874, 12), Hodgson solicited detailed definitions of the two Buddha types from Amṛtānanda. In 1825 Hodgson asked the missionary William Carey (1761–1834) to translate these definitions. Carey obliged by sending back a full English translation, but expressed strong reservations about the value of the material and asked Hodgson to “not send me more to translate, as I must be forced to return it untranslated” (transcribed from MS Dhungel 2008, vol. 18, no. 7, fol. 112b). Hodgson’s publications do not mention his correspondence with Carey on this subject, and liberally use the terms *dhyānibuddha* and *mānuṣibuddha* in a show of confidence in Amṛtānanda’s teaching. It is worth giving the relevant part of Carey’s unpublished translation verbatim, as it stays close to Amṛtānanda’s text and retains the flavour of the period in which these subjects were being discussed in English for the first time:

5. *Of the Dhyani-booddha*. The word is compounded of Dhyani, and Booddha. He who thinks or meditates is Dhyani. What is thought of in the mind is Dhyana. Sacred meditation, or that by which a person is saved from the world is also Dhyana. A dhyani-booddha is a mental Booddha. He who is produced or made such, by the power of the thought of his own or another’s mind is a Dhyani-Booddha. The first five were Vairochana, Ukshobhya, Ratna-sambhava, Umitabha, and Umogha-siddha. There are also many Dhyans [*dhyānibuddhāḥ*] produced from the atmosphere, and some from the Lotus (perhaps Brahma) without a maternal womb, by their own will Oupapadookas, who traversing the circle of wisdom and acquiring the highest wisdom are Dhyani-Booddhas. The names of the first four have been already mentioned, many others viz. Samgeeta [*Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*] etc. past, pafsing, and who will pafs, are not mentioned through fear of prolixity.<sup>7</sup>

7 Transcribed from MS Dhungel (2008, vol. 18, no. 7, fols. 110b–111a). The corresponding Sanskrit text reads: *dhyānibuddha iti | tasyārthaḥ | dhyānī cāsau buddhaḥ dhyānibuddhaḥ | dhyānī nāma · dhyānāni vidyate yasya sa dhyānī · sa cāsau buddhaḥ | dhyānaṃ nāma dhyāyate bhāvayate manasā · samādhim*

6. *Of the Manooshi-Buddha.* This word is compounded of Manooshin, human, and Booddha. He who having lain in the womb is born from his own promises (made in a former life), performing the ten prescribed actions, having left the state of a householder becomes an ascetic, lives on alms, attending the tree of knowledge acquires wisdom is a Manooshi-Booddha. These are numerous, viz. Shravanka-yonisha, Prutyeka-yonisha, Muhayanika, etc. gone, pafsing, and will pafs, throughout the Satya, Treta, Dwapara, and Kali Yoogas.<sup>8</sup>

The distinction between “thought buddhas” and “mannish buddhas” helped to differentiate objects of praxis from the preachers of the scriptural tradition. The word *dhyānibuddha* was quickly adopted to designate a mode of the religion that was becoming familiar to Europeans through colonial exploration in the early nineteenth century. As the detritus of tantric Buddhism was uncovered at defunct sites such as Bodhgaya, Sanchi, Borobudur and so on, it was realised that these sites preserved the common iconography of the *dhyānibuddhas*, which was still part of the living tradition in Nepal but extinct in India (Hodgson 1841, 103, 207–211; 1874, 71, 133–135). The term took on a life of its own in the West, acquiring overt historical and geographical associations. In the emerging hypothetical distinction between “Northern” and “Southern” Buddhism, the figures of the *dhyānibuddhas* were associated with the “North,” even though Hodgson pointed out several times that these figures were also prevalent far to the South in Java (Hodgson 1841, 211; Yule and Hodgson 1873). Eventually the term *dhyānibuddha* was identified as a neologism originating in nineteenth-century Nepal (de la Vallée Poussin 1908, 94; Saunders 1962). However, the nomenclature devised by Amṛtānanda had already left a deep mark on modern scholarship, even in dictionaries and encyclopedias (Regamey 1959, 1343; Jobs 1962, 1062).

### 3.3 Four Schools of Thought on Cyclic Existence and the Natural World

The avant-garde centrepiece of Hodgson and Amṛtānanda’s ‘Sketch of Buddhism’ was an exposition of cosmogenetic theories. Four theories were discussed under

*jagaduddharaṇādikaṃ aneneti dhyānaṃ tad vidyate yasmin sa dhyānī · sa eva buddhaḥ dhyānibuddhaḥ | iti padārthaḥ || sa dhyānibuddhaḥ mānasibuddhaḥ | svasyāny asya vā dhyānaprabhāvat svasmān manaso bhāvanata eva samutpanno yo buddhaḥ sa dhyānibuddhaḥ | iti bhāvārthaḥ || viśeṣārthaḥ tu | te ca vairocānādayaḥ pañca · ādyāḥ vairocānākṣobhyaratnasambhavāmitābhāmoghasiddhāḥ | atha ca bahavaḥ saṃti dhyānibuddhāḥ ye mātṛpitṛrahitāḥ · gaganataḥ samupajātāḥ katicana kamalataḥ samutpannā · mātṛgarbhaṃ vinā svecchataḥ saṃjanya aupapādukāḥ saṃtaḥ bodhicaryāṃ caraṃtaḥ samyaksaṃbodhim āśādy sambuddhāye te · dhyānibuddhāḥ | te ca ādyāḥ pañcabuddhāḥ prāg likhitāḥ | anye ca nāmasaṃgītyādayo bahavo dhyānibuddhā gatā gacchāṃti gamiṣyāṃti | vistarabhayān nāmāni na likhitāni* (“Terminology of Buddhism,” transcribed from MS Keith 1935, 1397, no. 7727, fol. 104; see also Dhungel et al 2008, vol. 26, no. 16).

8 *mānuṣibuddha ity asyārthaḥ | mānuṣī cāso buddhaḥ mānuṣibuddhaḥ | manuṣye bhavaḥ mānuṣī · sa cāsau buddhaḥ mānuṣibuddhaḥ | iti padārthaḥ || mānuṣyaṃ garbhaṃ āśṛitya svasvapratijñāto jātaḥ manu · daśākarmāṇy ācaran gr̥hasthacaryāṃ ujritvā pravrajyāṃ upagato bhiḥsur bhūtva bodhivṛkṣam upāśino bodhim āśādy buddhaḥ iti mānuṣī buddhaḥ | iti bhāvārthaḥ || viśeṣārthaḥ tu | te ca mānuṣibuddhā bahavaḥ saṃti · śrāvakaṃ pratyekamahāyānikāḥ · te ca paśyādāyāḥ śākyasiṃhāṃ tāḥ · mahāyānikā buddhāḥ · anye · śrāvakayānikāḥ pratyekayānikāḥ asaṃkhyeyā · mahāyānikā api asaṃkhyeyāḥ gatā gacchāṃti gamiṣyāṃti · satyatretādvāparakālīṣu ...* (“Terminology of Buddhism,” transcribed from MS Keith 1935, 1397, no. 7727, fol. 104).

the names Svābhāvika, Aiśvarika, Kārmika and Yātnika. Hodgson called them “four schools of Bauddha philosophy,” and discussed them in several articles (Hodgson 1828, 423; 1841, 19; 1874, 13). Amṛtānanda’s own terminology is more narrow and specific; he refers to a “genesis-account of the four kinds of cyclic existence” (*caturvidhasya saṃsārasya samudbhava-māhātmyam*; cf. Thomas 1935, 1395, Nos. 7719, 7720). Their exposition was an intellectual co-creation: “I conceived the idea of drawing up, with the aid of my old friend [Amṛtānanda] and his books, a sketch of the terminology and general disposition of the external parts of Buddhism” (Hodgson 1830, 223; 1841, 30; 1874, 36).

It is now known that the “Bauddha philosophy” presented by Hodgson in fact put forward a novel interpretive structure (Gellner 1989, 8). In spite of Hodgson’s transparency about how it was formulated, the actual extent of both its novelty and its fidelity to tradition has not yet been made clear. And unlike the new term *dhyānibuddha*, this “philosophy” did not straightforwardly correspond to anything then or since discovered about Buddhist philosophy. It was soon noticed in the pages of scholarly journals that “something had gone wrong” in this exposition (Lopez 2004, 58). The modern expression of Sanskrit Buddhist thought was going off the rails just as it was getting underway.

It will be shown here that the four views of cyclic existence, the “four schools,” are derived from the ninth canto of Aśvaghoṣa’s *Buddhacarita*, verses 60 to 67. The fact that these verses were important for Amṛtānanda was noticed long ago (Johnston 1936, 135 n. 61), but they have not previously been related to Hodgson’s “Bauddha schools.” With the identification of the *Buddhacarita* as the classical locus for the four categories, it is plain to see what these categories originally referred to, why they were regarded as relevant to modern minds, and how new meanings came to develop around them. The theories in question are conveyed by Aśvaghoṣa as a dialogue between the buddha-to-be Siddhārtha Gautama and one of his father’s ministers. In this dialogue Siddhārtha, who had just become a wandering ascetic in the hope of overcoming birth and death, is debated by the minister on the subject of rebirth in an effort to persuade him to return home. It is the ideology of the minister’s speech that Hodgson associates with the “Bauddha schools,” even though his speech represents pre-Buddhist worldviews rather than the teaching of an awakened mind (cf. Johnston 1936, 135 n. 62).

Under pressure to reveal the sources for his “Sketch of Buddhism,” Hodgson named the *Buddhacarita* as an authority in his 1835 follow-up article. His anxiety about setting the record straight on the four “Bauddha schools” shows in his “express invitation” to the Asiatic Society to reprint the entire 1835 article in order to correct a minor typesetting error (Hodgson 1836a, 28–29; 1836b). His revised presentation of the “schools” brought in other textual authorities — which were supplementary, and will not be discussed here — such that the *Buddhacarita* was obscured as the main inspiration for the “system.” Hodgson’s revised

translations of the verses in question (Hodgson 1835, 296–297; 1836a, 73–74; 1841, 107–108; 1874, 74) are free in places but prove that his confused treatment cannot be solely attributed to what he called “want of languages.” His translations of the pivotal verses, 9.61–63, can be compared with the following literal translations of the same verses, presented in the original order of the *Buddhacarita*:

11. That hands and feet, and belly and back, and head, in fine, organs of whatever kind, are found in the womb, the wise have attributed to *Swabhāva*; and the union of the soul or life (*A'tma*) with body, is also *Swābhāva*. (*Buddha Charitra Kāvya*.)<sup>9</sup>

When, conceived in the womb, it develops hands, feet, abdomen, back and head, and when it is united with its *ātman*, those in the know explain that as inherent disposition (*svābhāvika*). [9.61]

9. Who sharpened the thorn? Who gave their varied forms, colours, and habits to the deer kind, and to the birds? *Swabhāva*! It is not according to the will (*ichchha*) of any; and if there be no desire or intention, there can be no intention or designer. (*Buddha Charitra*.)<sup>10</sup>

Who made the thorn's sharpness, or the diversity of deer and birds? All of this occurs as a result of inherent disposition (*svābhāvataḥ*); there is no creation by willpower (*kāmakāraḥ*), much less effort (*prayatnaḥ*). [9.62]

6. Some say creation is from God: if so, what is the use of *Yatna* or of *Karma*? That which made all things, will preserve and destroy them; that which governs *Nirvṛtti*, governs *Pravṛtti* also. (*Buddha Charitrakāvya*.)<sup>11</sup>

So too others claim heaven is due to a Sovereign (*īśvarataḥ*); in that case, what is the use of man's effort (*prayatna*)? Whatever the cause of world creation (*pravṛtti*), it is certainly tied to the cause of cessation (*nirvṛtti*). [9.63]

Hodgson's presentation of the four theories of cyclic existence can now be checked against its classical locus. *Svābhāvika* doctrine, inherent disposition, is meant to account for natural phenomena such as morphogenesis and species

9 *yat pāṇipādodaraprṣṭhamūrdhnām nirvartate garbhagatasya bhāvaḥ | yadātmanas tasya ca tena yogaḥ svābhāvikaṃ tat kathayanti tajjñāḥ* (*Buddhacarita* 9.61, ed. Johnston 1935, 103).

10 *kaḥ kaṇṭakasya prakaroti taikṣṇyam vicitrabhāvaṃ mrgapakṣiṇām vā | svābhāvataḥ sarvam idaṃ pravṛttaṃ na kāmākāro 'sti kutaḥ prayatnaḥ* (*Buddhacarita* 9.62, ed. Johnston 1935, 103).

11 *sargaṃ vadantiśvaratas tathānye tatra prayatne puruṣasya ko 'rthaḥ | ya eva hetur jagataḥ pravṛttau hetur nirvṛtau niyataḥ sa eva* (*Buddhacarita* 9.63, ed. Johnston 1935, 103).

diversity. It has a rough analogue in a pre-Enlightenment worldview characterised as the doctrine of qualities or causal powers. According to this view, things are believed to act by virtue of a unique quality, power or propensity in them, their particular thingness (Hutchison 1991, 245). Although the doctrine of qualities had been deprecated in Enlightenment discourse from Molière onwards as unscientific, Hodgson's imagination was fired by its counterpart in *Buddhacarita* 9.61–62, which he wrongly believed to be Buddhist philosophy. These classical musings on “the diversity of deer and birds” resonated with Hodgson's discoveries in the natural sciences, which are honoured in the scientific names of the Tibetan antelope, *Pantholops hodgsonii*, and of several other species including birds such as the Tibetan partridge, *Perdix hodgsoniae* (Datta 2005, 137, 156, 168). Hodgson hoped that the thought of the Buddha might shed light on the question of how species changed over time, which intrigued many other nineteenth-century naturalists. Ultimately, Hodgson's zoological findings were credited by luminaries such as Charles Darwin, another Malthus aficionado (Darwin 1868, 26, 36 n. 68, 95, 102), while the cosmogenetic theories of the *Buddhacarita* were never cited as an inspiration for his natural history achievements.

The doctrine characterised by Amṛtānanda and Hodgson as *yātnika*, “involving personal effort” (*prayatna*), is contrasted with *svābhāvika* doctrine and *aiśvarika* doctrine, pantheism, in *Buddhacarita* 9.62 and 9.63. Together these positions capture the tension between determinism and free will well known in Western philosophy. The fourth doctrine of cause and effect, here called *kārmika*, is not treated in the *Buddhacarita* verses in question. Karma is, however, the main subject of the *Buddhacarita*'s fourteenth canto, which tells of the newly awakened Śākyamuni having a vision of sentient beings undergoing rebirth according to their good or bad deeds. Here the process of karma and rebirth is put forward as the correct understanding of cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*), as opposed to the three pre-Buddhist worldviews taught in the ninth canto. “Kārmika” causation is standard Buddhism, and Hodgson correctly associated it with the core doctrine of dependent origination (Hodgson 1836a, 80). In short, Amṛtānanda's and Hodgson's Svābhāvika doctrine corresponds to the doctrine of qualities, Aiśvarika doctrine is creation theism, Yātnika doctrine corresponds to the philosophy of self-determination, and Kārmika doctrine is metempsychosis, the doctrine of rebirth.

While Hodgson's groundbreaking paper on Buddhism and its “schools” was in press, an important article on Indian tenet systems was published. It revealed to Western scholars the names of the four schools of Buddhist exegesis discussed in Hindu philosophical works in Sanskrit: the Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Yogācāra and Mādhyamika (Colebrooke 1827, 558–559). Shortly afterwards, Alexander Csoma de Kőrös established that the four exegetical schools of Buddhism treated in Hinduism were also accepted in Tibetan Buddhism (Kőrös 1834, 276; Kőrösi 1838, 143). These are the schools recognised today by insiders and

outsiders alike as constituting Buddhist philosophy proper. Although Hodgson found “no authority in *Saugata* books” for them (Hodgson 1836a, 82 n. ‡), Eugène Burnouf concurred with Csoma de Kőrös, pointing out that the four exegetical schools of the Vaibhāṣika and so on were in fact discussed in major Sanskrit Buddhist works, the *Abhidharmakośa* and *Prasannapadā* (Burnouf 1844, 445–448, 559), which had been put at Burnouf’s disposal by Hodgson himself. At the same time Burnouf damningly remarked that Hodgson’s Nepalese informants “gardent un profond silence” about the four exegetical schools of the Sanskrit mainstream, while only they and Hodgson knew about the Svābhāvika and so on (Burnouf 1844, 445). As far as Burnouf could tell, Buddhists in Nepal had ignorantly confected a philosophy in response to Hodgson’s questions. Over thirty years after initial publication, in a note to a reprint of his “Quotations,” it had to be conceded that (Hodgson 1874, 23 n. †):

My Bauddha pandit assigned these titles [Svābhāvika et al.] to the Extract made from his Sāstras ... I erroneously presumed them to be derived from the Sāstras, and preferable to Mādyāmika &c., which he did not use ...

The creative cornerstone of Hodgson’s presentation of Buddhism had in this way been found to be unverifiable and therefore unusable. In the words of his own biographer, “his work fails of course in several respects to fulfil the punctilious demands of modern scholarship” (Hunter 1896, 280). The Protestant-influenced methodology of Buddhist studies that emerged in the course of the nineteenth century only accepted primary textual sources and emic interpretive traditions as authoritative. Yet Hodgson had indeed been reporting emic interpretations, grounded firmly in an ancient Buddhist text; it was just that he did not disclose (or realise) that these interpretations had been devised specifically for him.

As for Burnouf’s charge that Newar Buddhists knew nothing about the four classical Buddhist schools of exegesis, it should be pointed out that Amṛtānanda had some knowledge of the textual authorities mentioned by Burnouf, because he had summarised the *Prasannapadā* (under the name *Vineyasūtra*) in his *Dharmakośasaṃgraha* (Mukundarāja 2002, 197; Hodgson 1828, 431), and had of course supplied the copies of the texts that reached Burnouf via Hodgson. Although Amṛtānanda may still have been unaware of the four standard exegetical schools of Buddhism, he was responding to questions on cosmogenesis, not scriptural exegesis as such.

### 3.4 Ādibuddha Paramountcy

The presentation of Buddhism devised by Amṛtānanda and Hodgson nominated the Ādibuddha, the Primally Awakened, as its fundamental organising principle. In doing so they again foregrounded and centralised an understanding that had previously been only tacit and secondary in classical texts. The notion of the Ādibuddha as a kind of “first intellectual essence” (Hodgson 1841, 110; 1874, 77) was not present in all of the disparate streams of South Asian tantric Buddhism that existed in Nepal at the start of the colonial era. It is only in the Kālacakra tantric system that the Ādibuddha is a universal figure, and Amṛtānanda’s familiarity with this system is unusual in the Nepalese context.<sup>12</sup> Although Kālacakra tantrism is marginal in Newar Buddhism, on the whole, in the fifteenth century it informed two new Buddhist literary productions — the *Svayambhūpurāṇa* and the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha* — which positioned the Ādibuddha at the centre of cosmogenesis (Sinclair 2015, 442–452). The theism-friendly passages in the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha* on the Ādibuddha, which had appealed to Hindu rulers, were elaborated on by Amṛtānanda for Hodgson (Sinclair 2015, 456–458). Relevant passages from these texts were also given a prominent place in the “Sketch of Buddhism” (Hodgson 1830, 232–233, 242, 247; 1841, 60–61, 72; 1874, 50, 54).

In the scheme outlined by Amṛtānanda and Hodgson, the Ādibuddha, formulated as a monad (*ekāmnāya*), comprises the classical dyad of insight and means (*prajñā-upāya*), female and male. This dyad is succeeded by the Triple Jewel of Buddhism — the Buddha, the Dharma and the Saṅgha. These three in turn subdivide into the five *gnostic buddhas* and their consorts, the nine scriptures of the Sanskrit mini-canon and the host of bodhisattvas (Hodgson 1835, 319–323; 1836a, 94–96; 1841, 133–136; 1874, 93–96). This differentiation of the Ādibuddha into subcategories is broadly compatible with Buddhist doctrine. However, the reformulation of these doctrinal categories as a set of integrated dependencies, expressing the whole of Buddhism as the hierophany of a single transcendent figure, is a distinct innovation. It renders the religion as a whole more intelligible to Western universalism, and caters to the Enlightenment preoccupation with one-substance metaphysics (Robertson 2020, 301–303) that sometimes comes through in Hodgson’s writings.

Amṛtānanda’s and Hodgson’s monistic scheme nevertheless added elaborations that are neither scripturally condoned nor necessary for a modern articulation of Buddhism. For instance, they position the Ādibuddha as the generator not just of the gnostic *dhyānibuddhas* but also of the corporeal *mānuṣībuddhas*. Furthermore, the cosmogenetic process is tied to so-called Aīśvarika doctrine — that is, Brahmanical creation theism, according to its abovementioned classical locus — whereas the cosmogenesis of the Kālacakra is, strictly speaking, agent-

12 Amṛtānanda’s nomination of the *Kālacakratantra* as one of three principal Buddhist tantras followed in Nepal (Hodgson 1841, 71; 1874, 49) is quite idiosyncratic. According to Bhīmḍyo Gurujū, the late Cakreśvara of Bu Bāhā, Amṛtānanda was a practitioner of the Kālacakra six-part yoga in a lineage that survived him for two more generations (personal communication, 2001).

less and nontheistic (Sinclair 2015, 446). Such divergences from tradition contributed to the Buddhism of Nepal later being incorrectly perceived, “on Hodgson’s authority,” as aberrant and “essentially monotheistic” (Gellner 1989, 12).

#### **4 Hodgson’s Partiality to Buddhism**

Brian Houghton Hodgson enjoyed unprecedented, unrivalled access to the last form of Buddhism surviving on the Indian subcontinent during his stay in Nepal. His collecting activities were enabled and encouraged by a senior representative of South Asian Buddhism, unlike those of the few foreign scholars who gained entry to Nepal later in the colonial era. When, for instance, Sarat Chandra Das (1849–1917) visited Lhasa in search of texts, he faced suspicion and a polite interrogation about his personal faith in the Dharma (Das 1881, 30–31). Although Das and other later itinerants in the Himalayas may have been able to disguise their motives, it was more difficult for Hodgson, who resided in Nepal in a prominent official capacity for two decades, to feign his enthusiasm. Hodgson was aware of the fact that Nepal’s Gorkhali rulers remained willing to pit Qing-controlled Buddhist Tibet against the British (Hunter 1894, 78). In this context, his frequent complaints about the “corrupt Buddhism of Nepal,” or the “monstrously impractical and impious array of human perfectibility” in his sources (Hodgson 1841, 87, 92; 1874, 63, 60), come across as overly deferential to his readers’ low opinions of South Asian religions. He did not disclose the full extent of his massive investment in studying the topic, nor of his cordial personal relations with Himalayan Buddhists.

##### **4.1 Tibetan Buddhists, Tibetologists and the *Vajrasūcī***

Second only to Hodgson’s focus on revealing the texts and doctrines of Buddhism in Sanskrit was his effort to amass the teachings of Buddhism in the medium of Tibetan translation. This effort involved Hodgson meeting Tibetans in the Kathmandu Valley, learning some Tibetan, undertaking ethnographic studies of Himalayan peoples “preferring for the most part the Tibetan model of that faith,” and eventually delivering copies of the Tibetan canon — which had not previously been the subject of modern study — to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta. Hodgson also used his cordial relations with Tibetans to open up access to tantric Buddhist texts and images kept secret among the Newars (Hodgson 1830, 230; 1841, 57; 1874, 40).

Between 1828 and 1830 Hodgson corresponded with the tenth Dalai Lama (Ngag dbang blo bzang ’jam dpal Tshul khrims rgya mtsho, 1816–1837) about obtaining texts kept in Tibet. Hodgson’s affinity with Buddhism and Buddhist communities stands out in one letter of this correspondence. As the letter has not yet been published, it is discussed here on the basis of its summary in the Cam-



bridge Hodgson Papers catalogue (Dhungel et al 2008, vol. 102, no. 18). In the letter Hodgson asks the Dalai Lama for copies of Sanskrit Buddhist manuscripts kept in Tibet. The existence of Sanskrit manuscripts in Tibet had not been reported before by Western scholars. His inquiry precedes by over half a century the famous expeditions to Tibetan monasteries by outsiders in search of Sanskrit manuscripts, which began with the journey of Sarat Chandra Das to Lhasa (Das 1881, 30). Being confined to Kathmandu, Hodgson was evidently following up a lead provided by an insider familiar with the monastic libraries of Tibet (Hodgson 1828, 436; 1841, 33; 1874, 22):

the *Bhotiyas*, with whom I have conversed, assure me, that they got all their knowledge from India, that their books are translations, that the originals, here and there, all exist in *Bhot*, but that now no one can read them.

Further on, Hodgson's letter "appeals to His Holiness' great compassion and stresses the potential for spreading the Dharma and describes Tibet as the pure land for the dharma scriptures free from the influence of outsiders or impure objects" (Dhungel et al. 2008). This appeal eventually bore fruit, with the Dalai Lama delivering a printing of the Tibetan canon to Hodgson by 1838 (Hunter 1894, 270). While Hodgson's approach can be seen as ingratiating or even insincere, it does commit him to an acceptance of Buddhist norms and values far beyond what was required of either his scholarly pursuits or his position. He exceeded the brief of East India Company agents in the early nineteenth century to not "interfere in any degree beyond what the public welfare and safety absolutely require" in local religious affairs (Philips 1940, 165), as he did on other occasions.

While corresponding with the Dalai Lama, Hodgson succeeded in publishing the *Vajrasūcī*, a classical anti-Brahmanical and anti-caste tract which had been privately propagated among the Buddhist Newars for centuries. Hodgson quickly published a translation, guided by Amṛtānanda's excited participation (Hodgson 1831, 61; 1841, 192; 1874, 126), and facilitated the publication of the Sanskrit text by Lancelot Wilkinson (1805–1841), a Political Agent of the Company based in India. The arguments of the *Vajrasūcī*, which poked holes in Brahmanical scriptural claims, provoked indignation among Brahmins even before it had been published (Hodgson 1831, 61; Wilkinson 1839, 4). Hodgson went so far as to encourage missionaries to learn from the antistrophe of the *Vajrasūcī*:

there is no method of assailing Brahmanism comparable to that of 'judging it out of its own mouth'.

Christian missions in Calcutta were soon thrilled to receive new ammunition against “this most unnatural and perverse institution of caste ... calculated only to hold the mass of men in a condition of abject mental and social servitude” (Cinsurensis 1840, 167). Here Hodgson revealed not only his distaste for Brahmanism, which was widespread among his British contemporaries, but also and more unusually his enthusiasm for the humanistic potential of Buddhism, which would later receive much more attention from others (Wilson 1877, 283–315; Almond 1988, 72–76). He sent a signed copy of his article on the *Vajrasūcī* to his father, as if to signal that his work on Buddhism was motivated in the main by egalitarianism.<sup>13</sup>

Hodgson’s favourable view of Buddhism was communicated to Tibetans. In an episode that is supposed to have taken place in about 1821, but which was recorded only in 1837, the Tibetan yogi Zhapkar (Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol, 1781–1851) recalls his monastic disciples meeting with a “foreign notable residing in Nepal” who has been identified as Hodgson (Ricard 2001, 433, 446 n. 56). This “notable” is said to have borrowed and had translated a collection of Zhapkar’s songs, reflecting: “This person [Zhapkar] seems to be a real Buddha; teachings like these are certainly beneficial to the ethical principles of a country” (trans. Ricard 2001, 433). No work by Zhapkar has been identified in Hodgson’s earliest inventory of Tibetan printed texts (Hodgson 1828, 431–433; 1841, 29–31; 1874, 20–21). However, the yogi’s anecdote reflects known proclivities of Hodgson, such as his book collecting and keen interest in Buddhist teaching.

The expense lavished by Hodgson on the study of Buddhism — he purchased hundreds of Tibetan as well as Sanskrit texts, and commissioned dozens of original writings — is not the approach of a disinterested scholar. Hodgson’s receipts show, for instance, that he paid 1,200 Shah-issue silver coins to procure a printed copy of the Tibetan Buddhist canon (Dhungel et al 2008, vol. 93, no. 10). He bragged about his spending (Hodgson 1841, 146; 1874, 103):

I cannot but smile to find myself condoled with for my poverty when I am really, and have been for ten years, *accablé des richesses!*

This growing personal stake in understanding Buddhism also dimmed Hodgson’s view of his less invested yet more focused scholarly rivals. In a letter to Burnouf, Hodgson slighted Alexander Csoma de Kőrös — whose research, unlike Hodgson’s, was directly funded by the East India Company — as a suspicious character (Yuyama 2000, 57). During the years in which he corresponded with Hodgson, Csoma de Kőrös made massive strides in the study of Tibetan Buddhism, starting with the publication of his dictionary (Kőrös 1834) and continuing with his groundbreaking survey of the Buddhist canon in Tibetan translation (Kőrösi 1836). His work was more accurate and comprehensive than Hodgson’s, and it

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<sup>13</sup> Papers of Brian Houghton Hodgson, Royal Asiatic Society Archives, GB 891 BHH/15/2.

made solid use of material sent to Calcutta by Hodgson himself. In defence of the sources used for his “Sketch of Buddhism,” Hodgson fumed (Hodgson 1835, 288; 1836a, 29; 1841, 94–95; 1874, 65):

these [Sanskrit] ‘original authorities’ ... are original in a far higher and better sense than those [in Tibetan] of DE KOROS ...

There was much more in this vein (e.g. 1841, 32–33), even though Csoma de Kőrös had done Hodgson the favour of independently confirming some of his findings. However, the feeling of rivalry was without doubt reciprocated. “What would Hodgson... and some of the philosophers of Europe not give to be in my place when I get to [Lhasa]!” was a “frequent exclamation” of Csoma de Kőrös recorded by his British handlers, along with his unelaborated accusations of “mistakes” in Hodgson’s papers (Campbell 1842, 304–306).

Hodgson’s expensive studies of Buddhism were then seen as a race for priority of discovery by himself and his competitors alike. Yet his work in other fields, in which he also sought to exploit the advantages of his posting to a remote colonial frontier, was respected and did not engender such bitter competition (Pels 1999, 93). While he fostered friendships with Asian Buddhists, his responses to Europeans who studied Buddhism, such as the Sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832), were often touchy overreactions (Hodgson 1841, 138, 145; 1871, 97, 102). The study of Buddhism was the only subject that aroused such strong feelings in Hodgson.

#### 4.2 Hodgson’s Induction into Buddhism in Nepal

Hodgson’s collaboration with Amṛtānanda was much more wide-ranging than he reported. Among the masses of documents generated by Amṛtānanda and preserved in Hodgson’s personal papers, unpublished and largely unstudied, are transcripts of private teaching sessions. One example concerns the visualisation of the mandala of the four-armed Mañjuśrī (Thomas 1935, 1402, No. 7745). Here Hodgson was once again working through a text composed for him, and taught to him face-to-face, by Amṛtānanda:

*Description of Dharm Chukcar Mundla.* Munjusry is sitting in the *Kornica* or centre of a *Lotos* with *Bujer Āsan*. His colour is that of *Saffron* he has one head and four hands, by two of which he is performing *Dharma Chukra Moondra* putting his hands on his breast and from the other two in one he has a book and in the other a *jupmala*, and is beautified himself by the undermentioned ornaments viz. *Chuckry*, *Koondull* (or a large ring worn in the ears) *Kunthi* (or a short necklaces [sic]) *Rochuck* (or stomacher) *Makhla* (an ornament worn in the waist) and *Napoor*. Out of this *Kornica* of *Kamal* or the centre of the *lotos*

there are two circles and out of that circle are eight *Dull* or leaves of the lotos and these leaves are without a single mark.<sup>14</sup>

This is a record of oral transmission. It has an unpunctuated, unpolished style, which indicates that the writer is dictating speech. There are impromptu Anglicisations of Newar pronunciations: “chukcar” or “chuckra” for *cakra*, “bujer” for *vajra*, “koondull” for *kuṇḍala*, “dull” for *dala* and so on. Hodgson’s ethnographic publications include wordlists transcribed in a similar manner (e.g. Hodgson 1828, 410ff). This, however, is a record of a teaching session on tantric Buddhism, which is open only to initiates, and which Amṛtānanda was evidently imparting to a Westerner for the first time.

Hodgson initially came up against the secrecy prohibitions surrounding tantric Buddhism in Nepal while trying to procure the major Buddhist scriptures, which included tantras. By the nineteenth century, the nine texts of the Buddhist mini-canon had incorporated the transgressive *Guhyasamājatantra* as a substitute for the then-scarce *Tathāgataguhyaka*, a non-tantric text. Tantric Buddhist initiation was needed in order to procure all of the scriptures of the mini-canon, by which “only can a knowledge of genuine *Buddhism* be acquired” (Hodgson 1828, 424). Such permission, or initiation, he seems to have eventually received (Hodgson 1830, 230; 1841, 57; 1874, 40):

The Nipāl Bauddhists are very jealous of any intrusion into their esoteric dogmas and symbols; so much so, that though I have been for seven years enquiring after these things, my old *Vajra Achārya* friend [Amṛtānanda] only recently gave me a peep at the esoteric dogmas ... I at last got my *Bauddha* assistants to draw up the veil of the sanctuary, to bring me copies of the naked saints, and to tell me a little of the naked doctrines.

“Naked saints” was meant literally. Breaking through the secrecy that surrounded tantric Buddhist deities in Newar Buddhism, Hodgson was given detailed drawings of the goddesses Vajrayoginī, Siṃhinī and Vyāghrinī, depicted bare except for their bone ornaments, which he soon managed to get published (Wilson 1828, 464–465). When Newar officiants drew up the veil further for Western scholars in the 1970s, it became clear that the initiation process involves male initiands in physical contact with a female partner, guided by a guru (Asha Kaji et al 2009, 150). The eyebrow-raising claim that Amṛtānanda “had a sexual relationship with” Hodgson’s future wife, Meharunnisha Begum (Joshi 2004, 43), has not yet been investigated in connection with the possibility that Amṛtā-

<sup>14</sup> *namo ratnatrayāya || dharmacakramanḍalam || prathamam aṣṭadalakamalam · madhyakarṇikāyām dharmacakramamjuśrīḥ ekamukhaḥ kuṃkumavarṇaḥ caturbhujāḥ dvābhyām · hṛtpradeśe · dharmacakramudrām dadhānaḥ dvābhyām daśavāmābhyām · jāpamālāpustake vibhṛāṇaḥ cakrikunḍalakaṇṭhacakraamekhalānupurālāṃkāṛāṃkṛtāḥ kamalopari kulīśānaḥ* (transcribed from “Dharma Chakra Mandal,” MS Thomas 1935, 1402, No. 7745; Dhungel et al 2008, Vol. 28, No. 7). See also *Dharmakośasamgraha* (ed. Mukundarāja 2002, 220).

nanda procured a tantric consort for Hodgson. Hodgson did not tell his readers how he gained his authorisation to study Buddhist tantra, but it is evident that a formal induction of some kind had taken place (Hodgson 1830, 252; 1841, 85; 1874, 15):

There is indeed a secret and filthy system of *Buddhas* and *Buddha-Sakties*, in which the ladies act a conspicuous part; and according to which, A'DI-BUDDHA is styled *Yógambara*; and ADI-DHARMA, *Jñān-Eshwarī*. But this system has only been revealed to me, and I cannot say any more of it at present.

The two deities mentioned by Hodgson here belong to the system of the *Catuspīṭhatantra*. This is one of the advanced tantric Buddhist systems upheld in Nepal, and it centres on the male *Yogāmbara* and the female *Jñānaḍākinī* alias *Jñāneśvarī*. Documentation of the instruction Hodgson received in this system has survived. It includes diagrams of the mandala of *Yogāmbara-Jñānaḍākinī* (e.g. MS Thomas 1935, 1400, No. 7738) and manuals for yogic invocation, *sādhana*, of the kind that preceptors give to initiates to guide their tantric practice. The manuals received by Hodgson were not only handwritten by Amṛtānanda but were also for the most part Amṛtānanda's compositions. They leave little to the imagination. One is labelled "Yogambara & Jnyaneshwari — copulated" in English (MS Thomas 1935, 1401, No. 7739). It defines the secret enshrined tantric deity, the *āgamadevatā*, as one who is "frequented only by an initiated, sexually coupled pair" (*dīkṣitayor mithunayor eva gamanam*).

In Amṛtānanda's systematization of Buddhist doctrine, the differentiated female and male, *prajñā* and *upāya*, come together in the Primal Awakening of the Ādibuddha. Accordingly, in another tantric practice manual composed for Hodgson, he introduces the goddess *Jñāneśvarī* into a scene of Ādibuddha revelation cribbed from a text of the Kālacakra system.<sup>15</sup> Here Amṛtānanda complies with an obscure traditional directive that allows the practice of the *Catuspīṭhatantra* to be interpreted "by way of the Ādibuddha's statements" (Sferra 2005, 259). However, Amṛtānanda's priority in composing these tantric handbooks was not to follow tradition strictly, but to impose the thematic coherence and universalism that his *sahib* student expected Buddhist teaching to have — above all in the secret and sexually charged practices of tantric Buddhism.

With his deep and long-standing commitment to the study of Buddhism, it is not surprising to find that Hodgson was identified as a Buddhist. Another overlooked document, a copy of a Nepalese regnal chronicle scribed by Amṛtānanda in 1828, starts by praising Hodgson's faith in the *triratna*, the Triple Jewel that comprises Buddhism:

<sup>15</sup> *iha khalu śrīdhānyakaṭake mahācaitye ... ādibuddhaṃ viśphārya ... deśitāvān jñāneśvarīmāhātmyaṃ* (transcribed from "Account of the first Tantrika Devi named Jnyaneshwari — wife of adi Yogambara," MS Thomas 1935, 1400, no. 7738; Dhungel et al 2008, vol. 27, no. 8). This part of Amṛtānanda's text is adapted from Raviśrījñāna's *Amṛtakanikā* (ed. Lal 1994, 1).

In this land of Swayambhu [Kathmandu Valley], the Lalitpur-resident Amṛta the Wise [Amṛtānanda], his heart gladdened by the Sahib's order, has written the *Traces of Kings*. His Grace Hodgson, devotee of the Triple Jewel [*triratnabhaktaḥ*], engaged in all pursuits, what greatness he has ...<sup>16</sup>

Again, Amṛtānanda's praise not only flatters his honoree but also captures a quality perceived by others. The epithet "engaged in all pursuits" (*sakalārthayuktaḥ*) shows familiarity with Hodgson's scholarly project. The characterisation of Hodgson as a "devotee" (*bhakta*) acknowledges religious inclinations towards Buddhism. Hodgson often made declarations to the contrary to his Anglo-European audience: "I had no purpose, nor have I, to meddle with the interminable sheer absurdities of the Bauddha philosophy or religion" (Hodgson 1841, 140; 1874, 99). Such disavowals betray concern that his work on Buddhism might taint his reputation as a naturalist, ethnographer and administrator. But in Nepal, Hodgson had been recognised as a Buddhist — the first Buddhist Englishman.

## 5 Conclusions

Hodgson's and Amṛtānanda's groundbreaking presentation of Buddhism, created for Westerners in the early nineteenth century, is conceptually as well as chronologically a modern project. Enthralled by the intellectual novelty of Buddhism, Hodgson invested heavily in research, corresponded and clashed with scholarly contemporaries working across the globe, and disseminated Buddhist critiques of Brahmanical doctrine in print. While he pioneered and personified the model of the Enlightened scholar of Buddhism who could not express sympathy for his object of study in public, he was privately being tutored in Buddhism and was seen as a Buddhist, or a sympathiser, by Asian Buddhists. Amṛtānanda, for his part, devised nomenclatures and conceptual structures that made his tradition more accessible to modern minds. He acknowledged the new reality of an Indo-Newar Buddhism encircled by Hindu and Tibetan politics, and accepted the British as participants in the Buddhist world. Together the pair achieved an impressive list of firsts: the first published account of Buddhist theory and praxis based on primary sources and guided by a native Buddhist expert; the first publication of a complete text and translation of a Buddhist philosophical tract; the first authorised teaching of Buddhist tantra to a non-Asian student; and so on.

Although some of Hodgson's and Amṛtānanda's work on Buddhism has been called modern by others, it lacked the exacting literalism, reproducibility and

<sup>16</sup> *svayambhūḥṣetre 'smiṃl lalitanagariyo 'mr̥tabudho 'likhat sāhebājñānmuditahṛdayo rājapadaviṃ || 1 || triratnabhaktaḥ sakalārthayuktaḥ śrīhādaseno mahimāsyā kena || ...* (transcribed from "Modern Newar History of Nepal," MS Thomas 1935, 1548, No. 8184; cf. Dhungel et al 2008, vol. 26, No. 10). Author's translation.

transparency that would come to define modern Buddhist studies. Amṛtānanda himself was a traditional pundit who contributed to modern scholarship only indirectly. Both were concerned with a tradition that was and is marginal in the global Buddhist context, yet they managed to demonstrate and secure the primacy of Sanskritic terminology and ideas in the modern scholarly discourse on Buddhism. Nor did they seek to foment a modern social movement, although they had definite interest in the potential of Buddhism to spread and bring about sociopolitical progress. As just a fraction of Hodgson's and Amṛtānanda's output has been taken into account here, its impacts on subsequent Buddhist modernism and the modernities of Asia and Western Europe warrant further study.

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