

A Study of Tantric Rituals in Nepalese Buddhism

—Saptavidhānuttarapūjā—

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1. Introduction

The traditional Buddhism prevalent in Nepal is popularly known as Newār Buddhism. It has been followed and preserved by Newārs (locally termed Nevāḥ), who are the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. It is often called Vajrayāna. The priests of Newār Buddhism are known as Vajrācāryas. As any other Tantric Buddhism in the world, Newār Buddhism is full of ritual practices. Newār rituals can be sociologically divided into two: obligatory and optional, though for some participants, some rituals can be obligatory while they are optional for others. Liturgically, Newār Buddhist rituals have two distinctive typologies: the exoteric (*bāhya*) and the esoteric (*guhya*). It is noteworthy that both exoteric and esoteric Newār Buddhist rituals may share common elements or ritual acts.

The ritual Saptavidhānuttarapūjā is one of the most popular exoteric Newār Buddhist rituals. The term Saptavidhānuttarapūjā is derived from an important Mahāyāna worship system known as *anuttarapūjā* or “supreme worship” that has seven parts. A set of Sanskrit verses from the *Bhadracarī* indicating these seven limbs of practice is extremely well known throughout Mahāyāna world.

vandana-pūjana-deśanatāya modana-adhyeṣaṇa-yācanatāya

yacca śubhaṃ mayi saṃcitu kiṃcid bodhayi nāmayamī ahu sarvam.⁽¹⁾

*Whatever merit that have accumulated in me with the acts of paying
homage, making offerings, confession, rejoice, asking for instructions*

and entreating, I dedicate it for the bodhi (enlightenment).

Many Mahāyāna rituals are performed in this seven-fold system of (i) Bowing down (*vandanā*), (ii) Making offerings (*pūjana*), (iii) Confession of sins (*deśanā*), (iv) Rejoicing in merit (*modana*), (v) Requesting the teaching (*adhyeṣaṇa*), (vi) Entreating the Buddha to remain in the world for aeons (*yācana*), and (vii) Dedication of merits (*nāmana*).

Saptavidhānuttarapūjā, employed with these seven orders, is performed by Vajrācārya priests during the annual cycle ceremonies of some monasteries, during some festivals and mostly in private houses when requested by *yajamāna* (patrons). In latter case, the person to perform the ritual has to be the family priest of the patron. Saptavidhānuttarapūjā is generally performed by a group of three, five or seven Vajrācāryas. In every case, one Vajrācārya performs as the chief priest while other two assistant priests perform as *karmācārya* and *upādhyāya*. Other assisting priests are simply called *guruju*. Usually the eldest male of the house participates actively as the chief patron.

Saptavidhānuttarapūjā is called *satvapūjā* in Nepālabhāṣā. The deity to be worshipped can be Tārā, Lokeśvara or Śākyamuni Buddha. In some cases all of them are worshipped together. Tārā is the most commonly worshipped one and hence *tārāpūjā* or *tārādharma* are the commonly used names for the ritual. The name *satasāhaśrapūjā* is also sometimes used. The ritual, in the optional case, is mostly performed seeking either merit (*puṇya*) or some worldly ends, such as the cure of an illness or consecration of a house.

2. The Ritual

The following description is based on the ritual of Saptavidhānuttarapūjā I witnessed on the day of August 28, 2004. The ritual was performed in a private house at the city of Lalitpur. The main priest was Dharmarāja Vajrāchārya. Preparations began several days prior to the ceremony that included collecting several offering materials, statues and

maṇḍala paintings. The ritual day began with the arrangement of the utensils and worship materials. First, the ritual ground was consecrated by applying a mixture of red mud (*siyuchā* in Nepalabhāṣā) and cow dung. A multi-storey altar was built. A statue of Āryatārā was placed on the top of it. The remaining space was decorated with *gulupāḥ*,⁽²⁾ butter lamps, *gvaḥjā*,⁽³⁾ and *tīcā*,⁽⁴⁾ each in one hundred and eight in number. A *tārāmaṇḍala* was drawn in front of the altar with white chalk powder. A series of objects like a copper *maṇḍala* plate, several flasks (*kalaśas*), *aṣṭamaṅgala* symbols, several flags etc. were then added to the *maṇḍala* drawing to build up to a full-fledged Maṇḍala. The task of establishing various utensils and setting the space up for the ritual is known as *thāpā* (see the included diagram for the drawing of the *thāpā*).

The ritual can be described in three parts. The first part consisted of purification rites and *gurumaṇḍala* offerings. The second or the main part consisted of the *samādhi* of the deity Tārā, *balipūjā* and maṇḍala worshipping. The third part consisted of concluding rites like dissolution of the maṇḍala and initiations to the *aṣṭamaṅgala* (eight auspicious symbols) and the *mūlakalaśa* (main flask).

2.1. Preliminary rites

2.1.1. *Sūryārgha*: an *argha*, meaning water for reception,⁽⁵⁾ is a welcoming rite performed at the beginning or at any time of the ritual when a deity has been invoked. The ritual of Saptavidhānuttarapūjā began with *sūryārgha*, reception of the Sun, by dropping a small amount of water from a conch-shell in front of an oil lamp.

2.1.2. *Gurupādārgha*: *Vajrasattva* was received by dribbling some amount of water from conch shell and offering flowers and vermilion powder in front of the lamp. The patron also received the priests at this point by dropping some water from conch-shell to their palms. He also offered ritual dresses to the priests that they wore throughout the ritual.

2.1.3. *Pañcagavyaśodhana*: *pañcagavya* is a mixture of the five

products of cow: milk, curd, ghee, urine and dung. To this is added a bit of *durva* grass on top. A small amount of this mixture was sprinkled to every ritual object as well as to the patrons as a purification process.

2.1.4. Recitation of *Samkalpa-vākya*: the priest declared geographic location of the ritual site, astronomical state of the sun, the moon and other planets at the time and intention of the patron for doing the ritual.

2.1.5. *Gurumaṇḍala* rite: *gurumaṇḍalapūjā* is the most basic of the elements of Newār Buddhist rituals. It is performed at the beginning of every *pūjā* by a Vajrācārya. During this, the priest built a *merumaṇḍala* which was then offered to the Gurus, i.e., the Buddha, the Dharma, the Saṅgha and Vajrasattva. The rite was concluded by reciting the hundred-syllabled *mantra* of Vajrasattva.

2.2. Main rites

2.2.1. *Samādhi*: the main rites began with the contemplation (*samādhi*) of two of the forms of Tārā. The first one, Mahattarītārā, is described in the ritual manual as green in color, with two arms and sitting in the *paryāṅka* posture. She is granting boon (*varada*) with her right hand and holding a stalk of water-lily (*indīvara*) in the left. The second one, Varadatārā, is green in color, holding a blue water-lily (*nīlotpala*) in the left hand, granting boon in the right and seated in the *ardhaparyāṅka* posture. She is flanked by Aśokakāntā and Mahamāyurī on the right side and by Ekajaṭā and Āryajāṃgulī on the left side. Then the priest meditated on Āryatārā from the world called *akaniṣṭha* and visualized that she had been summoned to the maṇḍala. At the next stage, Aryatārā was visualized into the *vajradhātumaṇḍala* with five transcendental Buddhas. The priest then made an offering to forty Tārās beginning with Aryatārā and ending with Vajratārā. He concluded the *samādhi* by worshipping the crown (*makuṭa*).

2.2.2. *Catuṣpādabalipūjā*: a *bali* is an offering of portions of foods and grains to certain gods and semi-divine spirits. In the case of Saptabidhānuttarapūjā, a set of four *balis* (*catuṣpādabali*) was offered to the

deities of ten directions, the Bhairavas, and the eight mother goddesses etc. When it had been offered, the four *balis* were taken to four directions of the ritual place.

2.2.3. *Kalaśapūjā*: *bali* offering was followed by the *kalaśapūjā*, the worshipping of the main flask of the *maṇḍala*. At this point the deity Tārā was summoned to the main flask (*mūlakalaśa*) and worshipped. Similarly, eight bodhisattvas were summoned to the eight surrounding flasks.

2.2.4. *Maṇḍalapūjā*: The *maṇḍalapūjā* consisted of visualizations of Mahattarītārā, Varadatārā, Parṇaśavarītārā, Vairocana, and a rather detailed *maṇḍala* of Vajratārā. Then a *nyāsa*⁽⁶⁾ of the *mantra*, *Oṃ tāre tuttāre ture svāhā*, was performed. This was followed by the worshipping of Vajradhātu, Dharmadhātu, five Buddhas with their consorts, and the hundred and eight Tārās. During the rite, the patron was asked to offer water, incense, sacred thread, flower, food, and light to the *maṇḍala*.

2.2.5. *Nīlasūtrasādhana*: the main priest hold a flower and balls of a five-colored thread and a green-colored thread connected to the *maṇḍala* and the *kalaśa*. According to the priest Dharmarāja, it was a rite to secure the *maṇḍala* (*tāraṇa*). During this time, assisting priests recited the *dhāraṇīs* of Aryatārā, Amoghpāśa and Aparimita simultaneously.

2.2.6. *Vastrapādāna* and *Tripādapūjā*: the priests are offered clothes of blue, yellow and white. Following this, a threefold invocation (*tripādapūjā*) was performed to Śākyamuni Buddha, Āryatārā as the Dharma, and Aryāvalokiteśvara as the Saṅgha. The patrons did an eightfold prostration at this point.

2.2.7. The priests then performed *Saptavidhānuttara-bhāvanā*, meditating on the each of the seven orders. Verses from the *Bhadracarī* were muttered followed by confession of sins and generation of *bodhicitta* again.

2.2.8. *Pañcopacārapūjā*: the priests recited the mantras of *pañcopacārapūjā* while the five kinds of offerings; flowers, incense, butter-lamps, *Tormās* and water, were made 108 times each accompanied with

hand gestures (*mūdras*). Members of Yajamāna's family were asked to offer the five elements decorated in the altar.

2.2.9. *Ratnamaṇḍala* offering: Then the *ratnamaṇḍala* offering was made to the Triple-Gems. The *ratnamaṇḍala* can be described as a world decorated with various kinds of precious jewels which has eight peaked Mt. Meru in its centre. Offered to the guru or a deity, it is an essential part of the Tārā rituals both in Tibetan Buddhism and in the Buddhism of Kathmandu Valley. During the rite, *ratnamaṇḍala* was offered in four different ways: firstly, as a mental offering by dropping 21 pieces of flowers or petals to the ground; secondly, by creating 21 mounds of rice grains on a flat metal plate representing different points of the maṇḍala; thirdly, by filling with rice a Tibetan style four-tiered tray decorated with patterns of jewels and other symbols; and lastly, by forming a hand gesture in such a way that the ring fingers are joined in the centre representing Mount Meru while the remaining fingers are joined to represent the four major continents that surround it. The patrons made five-fold prostrations to four directions after this.

2.3. Concluding rites

2.3.1. *Kīgaḥ Tinegu*: the concluding rites began with *kīgaḥ-tinegu*, where a handful of rice grains were given to every participant of the ceremony and the main priest directed everyone to offer small portion of rice to specific places of the ritual space. With this, the *maṇḍala* of Aryatārā was dismissed (*maṇḍala-visarjana*). The patron then offered some money as *dakṣiṇā* to the priests.

2.3.2. Next the priests put *ṭikā* (a paste of red vermillion powder) in the foreheads of every participant. This is called *sinhaḥ-tikegu*. Flowers and a piece of green string were distributed as tokens of Tārā.

2.3.3. *Maṇḍala-pradakṣiṇā*: then the patron pulled out the copper plate at the centre of the Tārāmaṇḍala and carried it around the house. All the participants of the ceremony could worship the maṇḍala at this point. This is

called *maṇḍala-pradakṣiṇā*.

2.3.4. *Mūlakalaśābhīṣeka* and *Aṣṭamaṅgalābhīṣeka*: At the end of the ritual, all the participants are initiated to the *mūlakalaśā* (main flask) and to the *aṣṭamaṅgala* (eight auspicious symbols that consists of a Yak-tail fan, a couple of fish, an umbrella, a conch shell, an endless knot, a lotus flower, a banner, and a flask) by circulating them to everyone for worshipping. During this the priests sprinkle the water from the flasks to the participants. This concludes the ceremony.

3. Early Saptavidhānuttarapūjā

The seven-fold worshipping in Mahāyāna Buddhism dates back to the beginning of the Christian era. Several verses related to this worship can be found in the *Bhadracarī*, which is usually appended to the *Gaṇḍavyūha* as the 56th chapter. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* is believed to be from the 2nd or 3rd century.⁽⁷⁾ Paṇḍit Āśākājī Vajrācārya has stated that the *Bhadracarī* could be older and that it was appended to the *Gaṇḍavyūha* in a later period.⁽⁸⁾ In the same article, he wrote that the first ever Saptavidhānuttarapūjā was performed by Sudhana-śreṣṭhīdāraka to the Vairocana Buddha in the form of 63 verses of the *Bhadracarī*. However, the use of supreme worship can be pushed back further; because some of the main elements of the worship are enumerated in a Mahāyāna *Sūtra* called the *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā* which was translated into Chinese in the second century CE by Lokakṣema.⁽⁹⁾

Atiśa, who is known to have propounded the concept of *Ādikarmika Bodhisattva*, describes about performing seven-fold ritual in his *Bodhisattva-ādikarmika-mārgāvatāra-deśanā*.⁽¹⁰⁾ Anupamavajra, who was contemporary to Atiśa, has a profound impact on Newar Buddhist traditions. His work *Ādikarmapradīpa*, composed in 1098 A.D., prescribes the recitation of the *Bhadracarī* as a part of the daily ritual.⁽¹¹⁾

The *Kriyāsaṃgraha*, which is believed to be created by a Newar

scholar, Kuladatta, also discusses Sapavidhānuttarapūjā. The seventh chapter of the *Kriyāsaṃgraha* discusses that the seven colored lines (*valaya*) of a wooden gong (*gaṇḍī*) epitomises the purity of Sapavidhānuttarapūjā.⁽¹²⁾ Similarly, the *Sāadhanamālā* refers to Saptavidhānuttarapūjā in at least nine of the *sāadhanās*.

References to seven-fold worshipping can also be found in several śāstras like the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva, and the *Abhisamayamañjarī* of Śubhākaragupta etc.

4. Conclusion

Saptavidhānuttarapūjā is one of the most widely performed *bāhya* rituals of Newar Buddhism today. Because of its wide use, we can find slight variations in the procedures of this ritual in different Newar Buddhist monasteries of Kathmandu Valley. Though it is difficult to date the beginning of present form of this ritual, we know that Saptavidhānuttarapūjā was already an essential part of many Mahayāna rituals by the 10th or 11th century.

Notes

- (1) Dr. P. L. Vaidya (1960): p. 431 and Paṇḍita Dīvyavajra Vajrācārya (1996): p. 1105. Both the publications have it as the 12th stanza.
- (2) Small bowls filled with rice grains, a flower and a stick of incense on top.
- (3) Small cones made of a mixture of wheat flour, sugar, coconut powder, honey and water. In Tibetan, they are called *Tormā*.
- (4) Small bowls filled with water.
- (5) M. Williams Sanskrit Dictionary translates *argha* as respectful reception.
- (6) *Nyāsa* is the process of placing mantras over different parts of the body.
- (7) Nalinaksha Dutt (1931): p. 639. David Gellner (1992): p. 357 mentions the date of the *Bhadracarī* as fourth century. However, we know that the *Gaṇḍavyūha* was first translated into Chinese in the fourth century CE (Crosby, 12).
- (8) Āśākāji et. al (1990): p. 9.

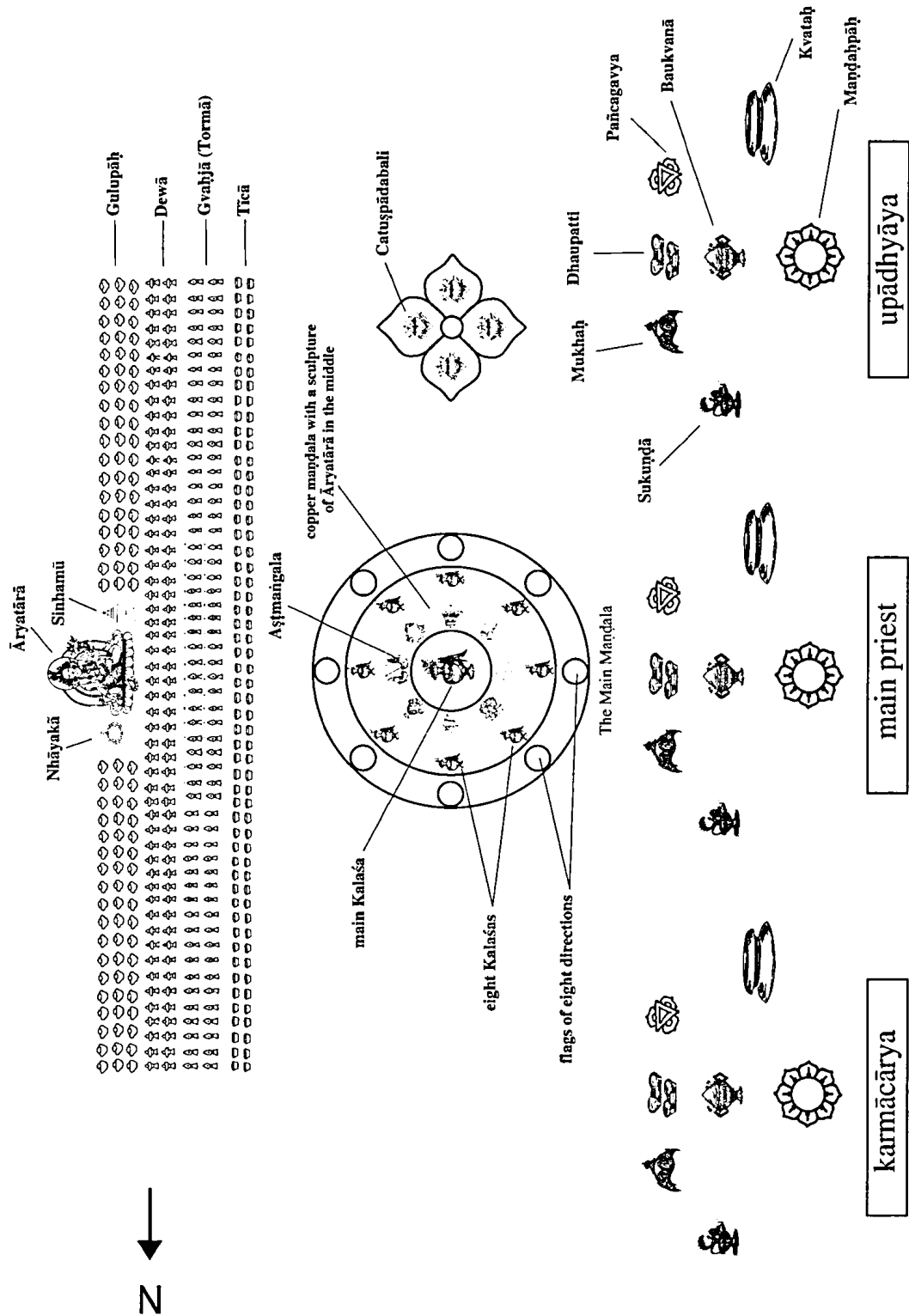
- (9) Kate Crosby et. al (2002): pp. 11–12. Cf. Taisho Tripitaka, Vol. 15, p. 394a, b.
 (10) A Sanskrit reformation of this text has been published. See Ramesh Chandra Negi (1992): p. 81.
 (11) Dr. Shanker Thapa (2005): pp. 77–80.
 (12) Tadeusz (2002): p. 159.

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Arrangement of ritual objects (thāpā) for a Saptavidhānuttarapūjā