

Book Review

Religion and Modernity in the Himalaya and The Sutta-Nipata. A New Translation from the Pali Canon

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Religion and Modernity in the Himalaya
Megan Adamson Sijapati and Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz
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Having travelled in the Himalayan region, especially in Bhutan and Nepal, I was curious when the book *Religion and Modernity in the Himalaya* came into my hands. A region that has captured people's imagination from many centuries with its pristine beauty, mountains, green-blue lakes and immense forests as well as its rich and complex cultures, societies and religious traditions.

The Himalayan region covers a vast extension of land, home to the nations of Bhutan and Nepal, the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim and Himachal Pradesh, Tibet and the regions of Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh. Religion has long been a powerful cultural, social and political factor there.

In the last two centuries different forces -from economic and cultural changes to the increase in different kinds of tourism and new ways of media and governance-, impacted the religious traditions of the Himalayan region. And pilgrimage tourism plays an important role in this transformation.

In the Himalayas, there are several places with a special significance for several religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism, each with its own history and system of thought and practices. One of these sacred religious sites is Taktsang Monastery (Tiger's Nest) in the Paro valley in the remote Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan. Guru Rinpoche, as it is called by the Bhutanese people I encountered, was incarnated as an eight-year-old child appearing in a lotus blossom floating in a lake in the old kingdom of Oddiyana (now this place could be the Swat Valley in Pakistan or Orisha in India). According to the tradition, Guru Rinpoche ("The Precious Master") (also called "Padmasambhava", literally meaning "Lotus-born") was a Buddhist tantric master that brought Buddhism to Bhutan and Tibet. In particular, in the eighth century he arrived to Takstang's cliff flying from Tibet on the back of a flying tigress, Yeshe Tsogyal (literally "Wisdom Ocean"). She was the consort of Guru Rinpoche and was transformed by him into this animal for the trip. Later Guru Rinpoche travelled to the Bumthang Dzongkhag (district), east of Bhutan, to subdue a powerful deity with his supernatural

powers and meditate. He left the imprint of his body on a rock close to a temple called Kurje Lhakhang in Bumthang. This important complex consists of three temples facing south in a row enclosed by 108 chortens (Tibetan word for the Sanskrit word “stupa”, meaning a mound-like or hemispherical structure containing relics).

Taktsang and Kurje Lhakhang represent very important places of pilgrimage for the Bhutanese as well as the Buddhists from all over the world. I was privileged to visit these (and other) sacred places during my first visit to Bhutan and learn more about Buddhism in Bhutanese culture in this small Himalayan Kingdom and analyze the impact of tourism on religious traditions and society in Bhutan.

The book *Religion and Modernity in the Himalaya* presents 9 essays that collectively provide new views and insights on the religious traditions of the communities and institutions of the region in the present Himalaya as well as their challenges. Based on exhaustive ethnographic field work and the review of sources in different languages (Burushaski, Dzongkha, Hindi, Nepali, Newar, Sanskrit and Tibetan), authors describe lived religion in the Himalaya today and discuss about the practices and discourses which are engaged by individuals and groups in this region, from government bureaucrats, Tibetan pop singers and tour operators to nuns and others.

After an introduction on modernity and religion in the Himalayas, the book is structured into 3 main parts. Part I, *Space, Place and Material Modernities* (Part I) discusses the complexities of the links between religious practitioners and their material worlds in the process of modernization in the Himalaya. Case studies cover interesting experiences, from the pilgrimage and tourist destination Kedarnath and the juxtaposition of geography and pilgrimage tourism, to the role of new technologies in the diffusion of Tibetan Buddhist rituals and values and finally the effect of sacred souvenirs in the pilgrimage experience in the Garhwal Himalaya (Uttarakhand, India).

Part II, *Gods and Place: Migration, Deities, and Identities*, explores the cases of two regional deities (goddess Svasthani and god Ganganath), the lived religious worlds around these deities and the issues of community, identity (caste, ethnicity, religion, etc) and space; and Part III *Education, Governance, Official Discourses and Religion*, studies the role of institutions in the transformation of discourses and rituals of a religion, for example, bureaucratic government initiatives to handle waste management in Bhutan and the rural resistance; education and development among Isma'ili Muslims in the Hunza Valley in Pakistan, or redefining monastic education in the Khachoe Ghakyil Ling nunnery in the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal and exploring the topics of Buddhism and feminism.

This collection of case studies by different authors contribute to a better understanding of the religious life in the Himalayan region, providing interesting insights from reviews of material, interviews and author's own experiences there, with interesting cases on Bhutan, India, Nepal and Pakistan.

The book should be a valuable reference for academics, experts and students of Asian Culture, South Asian Studies and Himalayan Religion Studies, especially, Buddhism and Hinduism.

Title: The Sutta-Nipata. A New Translation from the Pali Canon

Translated by: H. Saddhatissa

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Two early translations of the Sutta Nipata are H. Saddhatissa's *The Sutta Nipata* and K.R. Norman's *The Rhinoceros Horn and Other Early Buddhist Poems*, both published for the first time in 1985.

The Ven. Dr. Hammalawa Saddhatissa Maha Thera (1914-1990) was an ordained Buddhist monk born in Hammalawa in Sri Lanka. In order to develop missionary work in India he learnt Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu. During his time in India, he got a university degree. In 1957 he travelled to London and obtained his PhD from the University of Edinburgh.

He worked in the translation of the Sutta-Nipata¹, providing a version to convey the spirit of this important Buddhist text in a contemporary language, abbreviating when frequent repetitions were found and providing some explanatory notes and comments to the *suttas* (sermons). Some critics of this translation argue that sometimes he provided a bit liberal interpretation of some terms in the original Pali text written in a mixture of prose and verse.

The Pāli Canon (pronounced as “Paali²”) represents the canonical texts of the Theravada School of Buddhism. They were transmitted orally and only transformed in manuscripts (ola leaf) in the first century B.C. The Pāli Canon (called “Tipitaka³”) is divided into three main sections called *pitakas*, (literally meaning “baskets”): Vinaya (it is the book of discipline, it contains monastic rules, disciplinary rules for monks), Suttas (discourses of Buddha or his chief disciples) and Abhidhamma (analysis of the teaching, psychological writing, general post-date the historical Buddha).

The Sutta Pitaka, the second section of the Tipitaka, is huge collection of more than 10,000 suttas. The Suttas are divided into 5 *nikāyas* or collections: Digha Nikaya (the collection of long discourses, 34 suttas), Majjhima Nikaya (the collection of middle-length discourses, 152 suttas), Samyutta Nikaya (the collection of connected discourses⁴), Anguttara Nikaya (the collection of further-factored discourses) and Khuddaka Nikaya (the collection of little texts or minor collection). Some of the nikayas are further divided into *vaggas* or “divisions”. An additional complexity to the study of the discourses is that they are not grouped in one of the five *nikayas* (collections) due to chronological reasons or by topic. Most of them are grouped by length.

Khuddaka Nikaya comprises a collection of texts, among them, Dhammapada (The Path of Dhamma), Jataka (Birth Stories) and Sutta-Nipata (Collection of Suttas or Discourses). Venerable Saddhatissa chose this text for his English translation. The Sutta Nipata is divided into five sections: I. Urugavagga (The Snake Chapter), II. Culavagga (The Lesser Chapter), III. Mahavagga (The Great Chapter), IV. Atthaka Vagga (The Octet Chapter) and V. Parayanavagga (The Chapter on the Way to the Far Shore).

Those interesting in reading the Sutta Nipata in prose and English will find here an alternative to other few published translations of these Buddhist scriptures, some with more traditional interpretations of the original Pali text.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Some authors translate Sutta-Nipata as the “Section of Suttas” or “Section of Discourses.”
- ² Traditional Theravadan commentarial literature says that the language of these canonical texts is Māgadhī, a language spoken in the north-east India of that time and related to Sanskrit, while modern texts consider that the language was indeed a dialect, linked to Māgadhī, and used in the north of India for the oral transmission of the Buddhist teachings.
- ³ In Pali, the Word used in Tipitaka while in Sanskrit is Tripitaka.
- ⁴ There is not an agreed number as translators have ambiguity about which texts can be considered as individuals.

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