

# The *Navagrantha*: an historical précis

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## 1 Introduction

The terms *navagrantha* or *navadharmā* refer to a collection of nine Mahāyāna books which is used within Newar Buddhism to ritually stand for all Mahāyāna literature. As we saw yesterday, a reading of all nine texts is profoundly auspicious, for it is a symbolic recitation of the nearly endless array of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna sūtras, tantras and śāstras. Arranged as a maṇḍala, the *navagrantha* make up the Dharma Maṇḍala which is drawn alongside the Guru, Buddha and Saṅgha Maṇḍalas. Thus, when the Lotus Research Centre set out to publish translations of key Sanskrit Buddhist texts for a modern Newari audience, the list of texts which they first published was almost given to them by the Newar Buddhist tradition. Today we are celebrating the release of the last of those translated volumes, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*.

As it happens, an historical study of the *navadharmā* reveals several interesting things about Newar Buddhism itself. Until recently, historians of Buddhism have assumed that the *navadharmā* was, like the *vaipulyasūtras*, an older Indian category which Newar Buddhism had preserved. It was also assumed that this supposedly ancient list of nine texts was fixed. However, we now know that the *navagrantha* as a list is only found in Newar Buddhism, and that the list of nine texts changed about six hundred years ago.

## 2 Ritual contexts

I need here to make a distinction between **ritual** and **analytic** lists. There are hundreds of analytic lists in Buddhist literature: the six senses, the five psycho-physical constituents and so on. Some of these are literary or interpretive categories, such as the Three Baskets, the different sorts of commentary (*tīkā*, *bhāṣya* and such) or the revealed treasure scriptures of the Nyingma school (*gTer ma*). Ritual lists, by contrast, are lists of items or attributes which occur within ritual contexts, such as the many different attributes of Vasundharā (book, rosary, pot filled with grains and so on) or the seven limbs of the Sevenfold Worship. While such ritual lists are often brought out for commentary and meanings are carefully assigned to each item, they are also mutable; the attributes assigned to a particular deity who is known to have eight arms may change from century to century or even artist to artist. Of course, certain attributes are crucial: Mañjuśrī's sword or Amoghpaśā's lasso cannot be omitted. However, especially where the number is large, the number of items in the list is

more important than getting them all exactly right; and a virtuoso artist or meditator may well invent ‘new’ forms of a deity. Such innovation is unthinkable with an analytic list.

## 2.1 Maṇḍala

The *navagrantha* does not appear to have been an analytic list before the modern era. I have never seen, for example, a commentary which considers a single term as it occurs in each of the nine texts. It is instead a ritual list which is necessary to draw the *dharma maṇḍala*, a maṇḍala which features in a small number of Newar Buddhist rituals. It has nine members not because there are nine especially important Mahāyāna texts, but because nine is the number of items needed to make up a simple maṇḍala.

Where do we find this maṇḍala? During the Aṣṭamī Vrata and certain other related rituals, the officiating priest first worships the Guru Maṇḍala, and then worships three more maṇḍalas for each aspect of the Three Jewels, Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha. In modern Newar practice this is well documented both in Newari language ritual handbooks and in ethnographic studies by John Locke and David Gellner. The most popular ritual handbook for the Aṣṭamī Vrata, the *Aṣṭamīvratavidhāna*, occurs in manuscript back to at least the 17th century. The earliest source for the *navagrantha* in a recognisable form is a ritual handbook, long since fallen out of use, called the *Poṣadhānuśaṃsā*, which was apparently popular in the 14th or 15th century.

Its symbolic purpose as a maṇḍala is to allow for the worship of the Dharma Jewel. This is understood in the first instance as both that truth which Buddhas discover and also the continuous tradition of teaching which descends from the Buddhas in the form of books and oral instructions. In the Dharma Maṇḍala, emphasis is placed on the books themselves, the manuscripts as an object of veneration; but the Dharma Maṇḍala once constructed stands for the entirety of Buddhist teachings.

## 2.2 Recitation

The ritual of reciting the *navagrantha* probably derives from the Dharma Maṇḍala. The recitation of texts is recommended in the earliest Mahāyāna sources, and I have elsewhere written about the the viral logic of Mahāyāna textual practices, which fervently encourage their own recitation, promulgation, copying, sponsoring and publishing, much as organisms struggle to breed and become numerous. In any case, the public recitation of texts such as the *Prajñāpāramitā* or the *Nāmasaṅgīti* is a very old feature of Mahāyāna Buddhism and a prominent part of Newar ritual praxis. Once there was a list of nine texts that somehow stood for the entire mass of Mahāyāna literature, the obvious thing to do would have been to recite it! Although outside observers have noted the practice of reciting the entire *navagrantha*, especially during Gūlā, there is little if any evidence from inscriptions or account books that tells us how old the practice is.

## 2.3 Reification

As a result of the writing of the 19th century British author Brian Hodgson, who was anxious to make claims about historical Indian Buddhism on the basis of his research among Newar Buddhists, the notion of a fixed list of nine key Mahāyāna texts as an analytic category began

to circulate among foreign scholars.<sup>1</sup> It is possible that Amṛtānanda Vajrācārya, Hodgson's main informant, also began to use the *navagrantha* as an analytic category after this date; certainly he was enthusiastic about composing encyclopedic summaries of Nepalese religion. In the 20th century a major publishing Indian publishing project based at the Darbhanga Institute in Mithila chose to publish editions of these same nine texts on the basis of Hodgson's descriptions of Sanskritic Buddhism. This has led many students of Sanskrit Buddhism to the false assumption that the *navagrantha* are a category within medieval Indian Buddhism.

### 3 Historical development

The Aṣṭamī Vrata is a very old ritual with its roots in the 6th century Indian *Amoghapāśa Sūtra*, and we might therefore expect to see the maṇḍalas of the Three Jewels in medieval Indian sources. However, the ritual as we see it in Nepal developed here and does not appear to have been practised anywhere else. Several versions of the ritual are described in Sanskrit and Tibetan sources, but only the Nepalese sources give detailed instructions on setting out the Guru Maṇḍala and the maṇḍalas of the Three Jewels.

I noted above that there are two ritual handbooks which describe these maṇḍalas, and especially the Dharma Maṇḍala which interests us today. It will be clear from my argument so far that the history of the *navagrantha* is in fact the history of the Dharma Maṇḍala. When we look at the older sources, what we discover is that the Dharma Maṇḍala was somewhat different in the earlier sources. In fact, there are three distinct versions of the Dharma Maṇḍala which we can find from the 14th century to the 18th; the modern form agrees with that of the 18th century.

#### 3.1 Conspectus

I have laid out the three forms of the maṇḍala in a table (1) for easy comparison, although this hides their diagrammatic form. The earliest form is that given in the *Poṣadhānuśaṃsā*; the middle form is the revised version as found in the *Aṣṭamīvratavidhāna*; and the last form is that found in modern Nepal.

#### 3.2 Development

I have elsewhere speculated about the reasons for the revision of the earliest form. In brief, I believe that prurient reformers, prudens if you will, decided to clean the Vajrayāna texts out of a ritual which was commonly performed in public. They eliminated, therefore, two books which Newar Buddhists all love: the *Pañcarakṣā* and the *Nāmasaṅgīti*. Instead of these two texts they inserted the *Suvarṇaprabhāṣa* and an otherwise unknown and rather boring Mahāyāna scholastic summary called the *Tathāgataḡuhyaka*. This last book was so unpopular that there may not be a single complete manuscript surviving anywhere, although there are attempts being made as we speak to edit the remaining manuscripts. This reform

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<sup>1</sup> Christian researchers in the 18th and 19th centuries frequently sought to describe other religions by identifying their fundamental texts. Given the Christian emphasis on their own Bible this deep interest in texts is an understandable bias.

Location	Oldest	Changed	Modern
Centre	Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā	Aṣṭa– Prajñāpāramitā	Aṣṭa– Prajñāpāramitā
East	Pañcarakṣā	Gandhavyūha	Gandhavyūha
South	Nāmasaṅgīti	Daśabhūmi	Daśabhūmi
West	Gandhavyūha	Samādhirāja	Samādhirāja
North	Daśabhūmi	Laṅkāvatāra	Laṅkāvatāra
SE	Samādhirāja	Saddharmapuṇḍarīka	Saddharmapuṇḍarīka
SW	Saddharmapuṇḍarīka	Tathāgataḡuhyaka	Guhyasamāja
NW	Lalitavistara	Lalitavistara	Lalitavistara
NE	Laṅkāvatāra	Suvarṇaprabhāṣa	Suvarṇaprabhāṣa

Figure 1: The three forms of the Dharma Maṇḍala

must have taken place around the 15th century, at a time when many great changes were sweeping through Newar Buddhism. Some centuries later, when the priests responsible for performing the ritual had largely forgotten the eminently forgettable *Tathāgataḡuhyaka*, they were confused by the references in the ritual handbook to a forgotten work and instead substituted the basic Vajrayāna tantra called the *Guhyasamāja*, which is today found in place of the lost *Tathāgataḡuhyaka*.

## 4 Conclusions

The *navagrantha* is therefore a unique feature of Newar Buddhism, and one which reflects the historical development of the Newar Buddhist tradition. Newar Buddhists have always been rather shy of asserting their uniqueness. Especially in the modern world, where the Newar Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition has to compete not only with the official Hindu religion of the Nepalese state but also several other varieties of Buddhism, this conservative stance is understandable. Newar Vajrayānists have always preferred to argue that their tradition is the only real descendant of high Pāla Vajrayāna Buddhism; and in many ways this is true. It is time, however, to celebrate the distinct and unique features of Newar Buddhism.

I may well have offended some of my listeners by arguing that the ritual performed yesterday has no Indian antecedents but is entirely a Newar invention, and that the list of nine books, the *navagrantha*, which the Lotus Research Centre has published is also entirely a Newar construction. Worse still, I have claimed that there is an older form which we have lost! Yet my purpose is certainly not to argue that the Newar Buddhist tradition is inauthentic. Any of you who have heard me speak or read my work will know that I have argued the importance of the Newar Vajrayāna tradition in conferences worldwide. So too now: my point is that publishing the *navagrantha* is an excellent way to celebrate Newar Buddhism. When in the last century Indian publishers in Mithila published the Sanskrit of these works, they believed they were publishing a set of books which stood for the whole tradition of Sanskrit Buddhism. They were wrong. While the individual works that make up the *navagrantha* are all part of the Indic Mahāyāna tradition, the *navagrantha* as a category belongs to Newar Buddhism and should be recognised as such.