

### A review on Nepalese Himalayan Buddhism – By Dhakal, D.

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#### Abstract

*Nepalese Himalayan Buddhism represents a distinctive cultural, spiritual, and philosophical tradition shaped by centuries of trans-Himalayan exchange between Tibet, India, and indigenous Himalayan communities. This review synthesizes the existing scholarship on the origin, evolution, and cultural specificities of Himalayan Buddhism in Nepal, with particular focus on the practices of the Sherpa, Tamang, Gurung, and Yolmo communities. It further examines the doctrinal influences of the Vajrayāna and Mahāyāna schools, the role of monasteries (gompas), ritual traditions, art and architecture, pilgrimage culture, and contemporary challenges. Current literature suggests that Himalayan Buddhism in Nepal is a living heritage that continues to evolve amid modernization, tourism, and global spiritual trends. The review concludes by identifying research gaps and recommending areas for future ethnographic and interdisciplinary studies.*

**Keywords:** Gompa, Himalayan Buddhism, Indigenous faith, Sherpa, Vajrayāna,

#### Introduction

Nepal's Himalayan belt has long served as a spiritual crossroads where Buddhist philosophy blended with indigenous animistic, Bon and shamanistic traditions. Himalayan Buddhism—often referred to as Tibetan Buddhism—developed uniquely in Nepal due to its historical and geographical proximity to Tibet, the influence of Mahāyāna thought, and the cultural practices of local ethnic groups (Atkinson, 2019). While Buddhism in Kathmandu Valley is predominantly Newar-based, Himalayan Buddhism flourished in northern Nepal across Solukhumbu, Mustang, Manang, Dolpo, Rasuwa, and Sindhupalchok.

Himalayan Buddhism refers to the distinctive form of Buddhism practiced across the Himalayan belt, shaped by centuries of cultural exchange between Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and northern India.

Rooted primarily in the Vajrayāna and Mahāyāna traditions, it blends classical Buddhist philosophy with local customs, ritual practices, and indigenous beliefs (Samuel, 2012). In Nepal, Himalayan Buddhism evolved among ethnic communities such as Sherpa, Tamang, and Gurung, who preserved monastic institutions, pilgrimage traditions, and ritual arts (Fisher, 1997). Its monasteries, festivals, and spiritual practices continue to influence cultural identity, social structure, and religious life throughout the Himalayan region. This paper reviews major scholarly findings on this tradition, focusing on origin, cultural expression, practices, current transformations, and research gaps.

### **Objectives and Methodology**

The primary objective of this review is to examine the historical evolution, doctrinal foundations, cultural expressions, and contemporary transformations of Nepalese Himalayan Buddhism. Specifically, it seeks to:

- (a) explore the historical transmission of Himalayan Buddhism in Nepal and its links with Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions;
- (b) analyze key religious practices, monastic systems, and ritual traditions among Himalayan communities;
- (c) assess the cultural role of Buddhism in shaping ethnic identity and community life; and
- (d) identify emerging challenges, research gaps, and future directions for preserving this living heritage in Nepal.

This review employed a qualitative, literature-based methodology grounded in secondary data analysis. Academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, ethnographic studies, and credible digital archives related to Himalayan Buddhism were systematically examined. Buddhist hermeneutics is a tool to generalize the ancient facts on Buddhism into present scenario systematically (Badal, 2021). Sources were selected from anthropology, religious studies, Himalayan studies, and cultural heritage research published between 1980 and 2024. A thematic review approach was used to categorize literature into historical, doctrinal, cultural, and contemporary themes (Snyder, 2019). Inclusion criteria focused on research directly related to Nepal's Himalayan Buddhist communities, monastic practices, and trans-Himalayan cultural

exchange. The methodology allowed for a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge and helped identify areas requiring further field-based and interdisciplinary research.

### **Historical Evolution of Himalayan Buddhism in Nepal**

Himalayan Buddhism emerged in Nepal through three major historical streams. The first wave is linked to the spread of Mahāyāna Buddhism from Nepal and India into Tibet and the Himalayan region during the 7th–11th centuries (Snellgrove, 1987). The second wave occurred when Guru Padmasambhava traveled through the Himalayas, establishing tantric Vajrayāna practices that deeply influenced Mustang and Yolmo communities (Samuel, 2012). The third phase relates to Tibetan immigration following the 1959 political shift, which revitalized monastic institutions and Buddhist scholarship in Nepal (Hansen, 2020).

The historical development of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the Himalayan region evolved through a gradual fusion of trans-Himalayan cultural exchange and indigenous traditions. Mahāyāna teachings first entered the Himalayas between the 7th and 11th centuries through scholarly contacts between Indian Buddhist centers and Tibetan rulers (Snellgrove, 1987). The later transmission of Vajrayāna—an esoteric extension of Mahāyāna—deepened monastic, ritual, and literary traditions, particularly after Guru Padmasambhava’s influence. Monasteries became hubs for scriptural learning, meditation, and community culture. Over time, Mahāyāna integrated local beliefs, shaping a distinct Himalayan Buddhist identity (Samuel, 2012).

Himalayan Buddhism in Nepal is fundamentally rooted in Vajrayāna, incorporating tantric rituals, mantra recitation, mandala visualization, and deity yoga. The tradition also embraces Mahāyāna philosophy of compassion (*karuṇā*) and the Bodhisattva ideal. Ritual specialists—lamas, nuns (*ani*), and monks—hold significant positions (Caple, 2020). Practices such as life-release rituals (*tsethar*), prayer flag offerings, and butter-lamp lighting reflect a fusion of doctrinal texts with local cosmology.

The doctrinal foundations of Himalayan Buddhism rest on the intertwined principles of Mahāyāna philosophy and Vajrayāna esoteric practices. Central teachings emphasize the Bodhisattva ideal, compassion, and the pursuit of enlightenment for all beings (Samuel, 2012). Vajrayāna contributes tantric methods such as mantra recitation, mandala visualization, deity yoga, and ritual

empowerment. Monastic life, meditation, and scriptural study guide spiritual development, while lay communities engage in prayer flag offerings, butter-lamp rituals, and pilgrimage. Religious specialists—lamas, monks, and nuns—play key roles in sustaining teachings and performing rites for communal wellbeing (Caple, 2020).

### **Cultural Expressions and Identity**

Ethnic communities serve as living custodians of Himalayan Buddhism. Among the Sherpa of Solukhumbu, monasteries such as Tengboche play a significant cultural and religious role, particularly during Mani Rimdu festival (Fisher, 1997). The Tamang and Yolmo blend Buddhist beliefs with Bon and shamanic elements, while in Upper Mustang, the walled city of Lo Manthang hosts ancient monastic arts and masked Cham dances (Vinding, 1998). Material culture—thangka paintings, stupas, carved mani stones, and ritual music—preserves centuries-old craftsmanship. Cultural expressions in Himalayan Buddhism reflect a close link between religious practice and ethnic identity.

Artistic traditions such as thangka painting, mani stone carvings, ritual music, and masked Cham dances preserve sacred narratives and community memory (Vinding, 1998). Festivals, including Mani Rimdu among the Sherpa, reinforce social cohesion and spiritual values (Fisher, 1997). Monasteries function as cultural hubs where language, oral history, and ritual knowledge are transmitted across generations. Indigenous beliefs and Buddhist teachings blend to form a unique cultural identity that shapes daily life, social norms, and shared spiritual heritage in Himalayan communities.

Monasteries (gompas) function as centers of meditation, education, art, and community leadership. Monastic curricula often combine Buddhist philosophy, grammar, logic, meditation, ritual performance, and Tibetan language studies (Kelly, 2021). The Nalanda-inspired scholarship system coexists with lay spiritual practices such as Ngöndro (foundational practices) and pilgrimages to sacred Himalayan sites like Tsum Valley and Maratika (Hales, 2016).

Globalization, tourism, and digitalization have reshaped Himalayan Buddhism's landscape. Treks to Everest and Mustang have increased Western engagement, often commercializing spiritual experiences (Byrne, 2022). Younger generations are gradually shifting from monastic life toward

secular education, raising concerns about sustainability of traditional practices. Yet, there is also a revival of nunnery education and women's spiritual leadership across Himalayan regions (Wangmo, 2018). Climate change threatens sacred landscapes and monastery architecture, while diaspora communities are transmitting their heritage globally.

Although numerous ethnographic studies exist, several gaps remain. Limited research explores Himalayan Buddhism through indigenous epistemology rather than Western anthropological perspectives. Comparative studies between Himalayan Buddhism in Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet remain underdeveloped. Future interdisciplinary research may focus on eco-spirituality, digital preservation of monastic texts, gender-inclusive religious education, and youth engagement in monastic leadership.

## Conclusion

Nepalese Himalayan Buddhism is not merely a religious tradition but a holistic cultural ecosystem. Its identity has been shaped by trans-Himalayan cultural exchange, indigenous practices, tantric philosophy, and monastic scholarship. While modernization poses preservation challenges, the spiritual vibrancy of Himalayan Buddhism continues to adapt and thrive. Strengthening community-based research and cultural preservation efforts will be crucial in safeguarding this intangible heritage for future generations.

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