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**A Brief Biography  
of  
Ven. Bhikkhu Amritananda**

By  
**Kesar Lall**

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**A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF VEN. BHIKKHU AMRITANANDA**

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An audience with His Majesty King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev.  
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## Publisher's Note

We have much pleasure to bring out this Brief Biography of Ven. Bhikkhu Amritananda written by Mr. Kesar Lall. We are specially pleased to be able to bring it, the 52nd in the series of Ananda Kuti Vihar Trust publications, on the occasion of the 15th General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Kathmandu.

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## PREFACE

This is an exciting time in the history of Nepal. We have witnessed the change from an autocratic and feudal system of administration to a representative government. In religious matters too, which form a very integral part of our life, we had seen how Lord Buddha had been forgotten in the land of his own birth, but then also witnessed how, after the revolution of 1950, the noble King, His Late Majesty Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah Dev, restored the ancient tradition of the Kings of Nepal to give patronage to the cause of Buddhism also.

The Buddha's Birthday has become a national holiday. Lumbini has received Royal patronage and it is being developed with international cooperation. Delegates from Nepal have participated in every important gathering of Buddhists in the world and Nepal itself hosted the Fourth General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in 1956. The Fifteenth General Conference is being held again in Kathmandu in this International Year of Peace, 1986, with the theme, "Lumbini- A Symbol of World Peace."

The early years of the 20th century saw the birth of a number of remarkable persons in Nepal. The Ven. Bhikkhu Amritananda is one of them. This brief biography can hardly cover the full extent of his activities nor do him full justice, but it is hoped that it will at least shed some light into his life, time and work.

K.L.

Kathmandu  
October 27, 1986



## STATE OF BUDDHISM IN NEPAL, 9-19TH CENTURY A.D.

THE decline of Buddhism in India has had a disastrous effect upon Nepal. Tradition has it that monastic institutions ceased to exist in Nepal in the 9th century A.D. after a visit by Sankaracharya, who, in his zeal to revive Hinduism, travelled all over the sub-continent and defeated the monks in debates. In the words of a historian, "Very rightly it has been remarked that Sankaracharya did for Buddhism in Nepal what the Buddha did in relation to Hinduism in India." The Shakyas have, however, continued to call themselves Shakya Bhikkhu and undergo an initiation for monkhood lasting for a few days in early manhood.

The Muslim conquest of India had more serious consequences. Refugees flocked to Nepal for safety and eventually Buddhism became weak in Nepal itself. Then, for a long period, except for a link with Tibet, Nepal followed a policy of isolation. The first Europeans to arrive in India in the early 17th century A.D. first heard of Nepal when they went to Tibet via Bhutan.

By this time, Lumbini the birthplace of Lord Buddha, was lost in the forests and Buddhism had disappeared from Jumla and its vicinity. In the mountains elsewhere, a very few devoted Lamas managed to survive in their monasteries in isolated pockets. Most laymen were content on occasions to have a priest recite for them some sutra from Tibetan texts while they remained ignorant of the teachings of the Buddha.

In the Kathmandu valley, the great traditions of Vajrayana had lost their meaning even to those who practiced them. Only a semblance of Buddhism had remained in rituals and prayers and recitations of great texts like the Pragyaparamita and Namasangiti.

In the valley, for centuries, strangely but truly, Buddhism and Hinduism had coexisted just as Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism had done in China or as Shintoism and Buddhism in Japan, influencing one another and in the process strengthening the nation. Religious tolerance in Nepal was unique. The Nepalese did not fight each other in the name of religion. They drew inspiration from both Buddhism and Hinduism and led a life of peace, not conflict; of religious freedom, not of bigotry.

### A Lost Opportunity

During the 18th century great changes, alas, not for the better, were taking place in India and elsewhere. At this critical juncture King Prithvi Narayan Shah laid the foundation of modern Nepal but his death and that of his successors in quick succession nearly undid the work of nation building.

Just as the Shoguns had wielded power in Japan, Bhimsen Thapa and, later on, Jung Bahadur and his successors did in Nepal. Under them, for a century and a half, warlike qualities were certainly cultivated and excelled but the task of nation building and civilised living were completely ignored. The ancient tradition of the kings of Nepal to patronise without distinction both Buddhism and Hinduism continued on by King Rana Bahadur Shah (1778-99) and King Rajendra Bikram Shah (1816-46) was totally disregarded. (A hymn of Karunamaya by King Rana Bahadur Shah and a drama based on the Vyagri Jataka by King Rajendra Bikram Shah in Newari are extant.)

The arts were neglected. Education was never mentioned. Even industry was discouraged. Initiative in any field was discouraged. In such circumstances it was but natural for Buddhism to suffer.

Writing about the state of Buddhism in Nepal, Dr. Henry Oldfield, after years of observation in Kathmandu, wrote in 1880: "Buddhism in Nepal has sadly degenerated from the high standard of doctrine and of discipline which was established by the Buddhist Church .... It is slowly but steadily being supplanted by Hinduism, and before another century shall have passed away, the religion of Buddha will have died a natural death, from the effects of its own internal corruption and decay."

Throughout the 19th century an atmosphere of suspicion and fear pervaded Nepal. One brother was set against another. Jung Bahadur sent one brother, Badri Narsingh, to internal exile in Palpa. Another brother and successor, Rana Udip Singh, and his own son and grandson perished in one day in 1885. Violence bred violence for, as the Buddha had said, hatred never ended hatred.

In 1887, Khadga Shumshere was found plotting against his brother and Prime Minister, Maharaja Bir Shumshere. He too was sent to Palpa, from where too he fled to India in 1902 when Chandra Shumshere seized power.

A chance to break the vicious circle and correct the aberration was lost at the beginning of the 20th century when the liberal-minded and progressive Prime Minister, Maharaja Dev Shumshere, was forcedly removed in 1901 and sent to live at Dhankuta in eastern Nepal. Perhaps, if Maharaja Dev had his way, he would have followed the example in Japan and made Nepal a happy and prosperous country.

Finally in 1934, Rudra Shumshere was exiled to Palpa by Prime Minister, Maharaja Juddha Shumshere.

## THE COMING OF THERAVADA IN NEPAL

JUST as the decline of Buddhism in India in earlier centuries has had an adverse effect upon Nepal, the movement to revive it by introducing Theravada begun by Anagarik Dharmapal at the beginning of the 20th century also had a positive influence here. Anagarik Dharmapal, a national of Sri Lanka, had taken part in the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, U.S.A. in 1893 and he had made a name for himself as a devoted and learned Buddhist missionary. By 1920, he had established a footing in India by founding a vihara in Calcutta.

It was about this time that a young scholar from Lalitpur, Jagat Man Vaidya, arrived in Calcutta and was much influenced by what Anagarik Dharmapal was doing. He began to study Theravada Buddhism, changed his name to Dharmaditya Dharmacharya and began to spread the word of the Buddha according to Theravada from Calcutta itself. He wrote articles and published magazines in Newari, Nepali, Hindi, Bengali and English. His greatest achievement was the All-India Buddhist Conference in Calcutta in 1928, the first ever held in India by Buddhists.

Upon his return to Nepal, however, his talent and learning were wasted and his great enthusiasm withered in a hostile environment. The government discouraged him by all means.

In the meanwhile, a number of persons had become monks seeking ordination either by a Tibetan Lama in Tibet or by a Burmese monk residing in India. Although there were never more than a dozen monks, the Rana government tried to suppress the revival of Buddhism in Nepal by expelling them from the country. These expulsions tarnished the image of the government of Nepal in India, Burma and Sri Lanka. The monks were welcomed and they were helped by fellow Buddhists and by their own compatriots living in these countries.



An audience with His Majesty the King of Thailand.  
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Prominent among the monks of the early period were the Ven. Mahapragya, the Ven. Karmashila and the Ven. Dhammaloka. Their followers and sympathisers in Kathmandu and elsewhere who were working for the same purpose were not touched as they were not in the monk's yellow robe. An account of their trials and tribulations covering a period of a quarter century, from 1924 to 1950, would fill a whole book.

### EARLY DAYS IN PALPA

TANSEN is a small town in the district of Palpa, some 200 miles west of Kathmandu and 50 miles north of Lumbini. Perched partly on the shelf and partly on the top of a hill, it has a certain charm. Like any other Newar town, it has temples and houses built of red bricks and with roofs of tile. Little shops line the narrow, crooked, sloping streets, some with names similiar to those of Kathmandu.

To the south, the hill slopes down to a small valley and yet lower hills until the forest is reached and the plain came into view from the town of Butaul at the foothills. In all other directions are other hills, at the foot of one, a day's distance from the town, flows the Kali Gandaki river, and there, at another town, Ridi, thousands of people gather for a ritual bath, for here the river acquires holiness, specially for Hindus.

Tansen, then, was one of the most important towns outside of Kathmandu valley, where an important Rana, an aspirant to the Prime Minister's office, one to be feared by the Ranas themselves, was sent to live with a show of prestige, albeit without any real power, and lead a life he was used to, of luxury and ease.

It was in this town- during a dark period in modern Nepalese history, after the First and before the Second

World War, when the Ranas were at the peak of their power—that a boy was born to a Shakya couple— Hira Kaji and Moti Maya. They named the boy Lal Kaji Shakya.

Hira Kaji Shakya had carried on the traditional occupation of the gold and silversmith that his own father had begun in the 1880's. The father had come to Tansen from Lalitpur, where, unwillingly drawn to a law court, he had suffered injustice and harassment and in a rage, he had beaten up an official. He had then gone to the Prime Minister, Maharaja Rana Udip Singh, confessed what he had done and left his home to make a fresh start in life elsewhere.

A Buddhist, Hira Kaji was a very pious person. He used to care for every Hindu mendicant who came to the town. He believed in serving and helping all men of religion. He had a guru also, Swami Sachitananda, who lived in the town permanently.

When his son was seven years old, Hira Kaji brought him to his ancestral vihara, Hiranyabarna Maha Vihara, at Lalitpur, for the initiation known in Newari as "Bare Chhuigu" which every Shakya boy has to go through before he is accepted as a full-fledged adult member of the community. It literally meant living like a monk, but for a couple of days. He shaves his head and never wears a top-knot as people belonging to other castes do.

There were no monks living in the viharas or monasteries in Kathmandu valley then. But in this vihara there were mural paintings of monks. Pointing to the painting, one old man said to the boys undergoing initiation: "There are no living monks. They can be seen only in pictures like these."

Lal Kaji Shakya remembered these words for a long time.

Lal Kaji was rather naughty, full of mischief and a worry to his father, who made him sit in a corner of his workshop and read the book of Chanakya over and over again. In those days, it was a standard work of ethics and morals, which every boy aspiring for an education was given to read. It was a collection of maxims attributed to Chanakya, the celebrated minister of King Chandragupta Maurya of north India (4th-3rd century B.C.). The hand-copied book was available in three languages, Sanskrit, Newari and Nepali. Later, for a while, he attended a school where a Brahman teacher named Chakrapani taught him Nepali.

To add to his worry, the father had been told once by Swami Sachitananda that his boy won't stay home; he would develop a wanderlust.

In 1929, when he was but ten years old, Lal Kaji lost both parents within the year. An uncle, Moti Kaji Shakya, was kind to him and took care of him.

When he had a mind, Lal Kaji helped his uncle in the workshop but he often stole away and smoked ganja (hemp), a common practice then among old men and mendicants. They met in a temple or elsewhere in the evenings and smoked and sang hymns in praise of the gods.

Hoping to keep his naughty nephew under some control, Moti Kaji got him married at the age of 14, but he was not to be controlled. He often ran away.

Once he went as far away as Calcutta. After several months, he appeared at the town of Bhojpur, in eastern Nepal, where some Shakyas from Lalitpur had settled down, and some among them were his relatives. They took the trouble to take him back to Tansen.

On the way back, the Shakyas came to Kushinagar, where the Lord Buddha had attained Nirvana. There, in a temple,



for the first time, Lal Kaji saw a monk, someone that appealed to him much. Then and there, before the image of the reclining Buddha, he made a silent vow to become a monk on the thrice-sacred day of Vaisakh Purnima the following year.

Back at Tansen, he read a book about the life of the Buddha by Rahul Sankrityana, and during the holy month of Gunla, he read Nistananda's Lalitavistara. From the day he had met the monk, he had somewhat lost his restlessness; he had found peace in his mind that he had not known before. But then his wife conceived and once more he was troubled. He was afraid that his desire to become a monk was not going to be fulfilled.

He was fond of music and he could sing. Being still full of mischief, play and pranks and with a wife with a child within her, his uncle and his friends thought that he had been tamed at last and would not run away. But he did, once more, for good, with great determination when his wife had been pregnant for five months.

## THE ORDINATION

LAL Kaji arrived at Kushinagar and approached the Ven. U. Chandramani Mahathera, who had come from Burma and was residing at the Buddha temple. Having no parents, he was required to get the consent of his guardian and uncle before he could become a monk. Before long, the harassed uncle also arrived at Kushinagar and told the Ven. Mahathera about a pregnant wife left at home.

Moti Kaji Shakya succeeded in frustrating his nephew's scheme of becoming a monk, but he failed to take the wayward boy home along with him. Lal Kaji stayed on at Kushinagar, hoping that his uncle would eventually relent. In the

meantime, he became ill with malaria and in a state of utter dejection, he wrote a post card fervently imploring his uncle to let him become a monk.

His uncle wrote back tersely saying he could do as he wished. At last he was happy.

He soon recovered from the illness. With his uncle's letter, once more he approached the Ven. U. Chandramani Mahathera, and on August 2, 1936, he was ordained as a Samanera or novice. He was full of joy and he prostrated before the Teacher in gratitude. He was then aged 18 and he had a new name - Amritananda.

In a world full of suffering, Amritananda was very happy. A new life had begun for him, and if he tried hard enough, he could end the suffering, born of ignorance.

Soon after the ordination, the Ven. Mahathera suggested to Amritananda that he might go to stay with an older monk, the Ven. Mahapragya, at Kalimpong in Darjeeling district, where it would be congenial for him in the hills and among Nepalese and Tibetans. Kalimpong was the gateway to Tibet.

Like Amritananda, the Ven. Mahapragya was a Newar but born in a family professing a Hindu sect which Newars called Shivamargi or the Way of Shiva. The Buddhists among the Newars called themselves Buddhamargi or those who went the Way of the Buddha. The Newars have been influenced by both religions and they took part freely in the practices of both. It was not unusual for a person professing one faith to embrace the other faith too.

In 1924, the Ven. Mahapragya had chosen to be a Buddhist monk; he had followed a Tibetan Lama across the

border to Tibet and had been ordained according to the tradition of the land. However, the Rana Prime Minister, Maharaja Chandra Shumshere, invoked a law that no conversion from one religion to another was permissible and he had been expelled from Nepal along with four others who had also become monks. In 1928, he had embraced Theravada in India.

In Kalimpong, Amritananda began to learn Pali from the older monk, but before long both of them made their way to Bhojpur in Nepal. There the Bada Hakim or governor learnt about the expulsion of the Ven. Mahapragya in 1924. Both of them were held in jail for four months and then escorted back to India by two policemen.

In 1937, Amritananda went to Moulmein in Burma, where two monks, the Ven. Shakyananda and Ven. Anirudra were staying in a monastery. But because the food was not agreeable to his constitution, Amritananda went to Colombo, Sri Lanka.

After some time at Vidyalankara Pirivena, Amritananda found a place at Vajiraramaya, Bambalapitiya, Colombo. And there he devoted himself to the study of the Pali canon. He also learnt Singhali and English.

On January 25, 1940, the long-cherished desire of becoming a Bhikkhu was fulfilled when he got his Upasampada (higher ordination) from the late Siri Dhammarakshita Vansalankara Palane Vajiraramaya Mahanayaka Mahathera.

## A MONK'S LIFE AND WORK

AFTER spending five years in India, Burma and Sri Lanka, Bhikkhu Amritananda returned to Nepal at the end of 1942. He found a place to stay in the woods of Swayambhu hill where the Ven. Dhammaloka was trying to build a vihara, which later was to become famous as Ananda Kuti. It was a small hut in a quiet spot.

It was however a time of great disquiet in the country. Political dissatisfaction had begun to come to the surface not from within the Rana family as before but the people themselves were involved. The Ranas were very nervous about this new development in the country. Four patriots were martyred and many others imprisoned. Every prominent person was watched and no meetings were allowed.

Bhikkhu Amritananda quietly began to preach at Swayambhu hill. Sometimes he went from one village to another and spread the word of the Buddha. Those who heard him were much impressed by him. He also wrote some books in Newari, which were later seized by the government.

In 1944, the government asked eight other monks living in Kathmandu either to cease preaching or to leave Nepal. They chose to leave. Bhikkhu Amritananda happened to be on a visit to Sarnath in India at that time. The other monks also arrived at Sarnath.

It was then that a Nepalese Buddhist association was formed by the monks and laymen, and Bhikkhu Amritananda, as the General Secretary of the Dharmodaya Sabha, as they called the association, appealed to various organizations and persons in India and Buddhist countries to protest to the government in Nepal against the expulsion of the monks. In the circumstances, he thought it would be prudent of him to go to Sri Lanka.

In 1946, Bhikkhu Amritananda returned to Nepal with a goodwill mission from Sri Lanka under the leadership of the late Ven. Narada Mahathera, the head pupil of Ven. P. Vajiranana Mahathera. Two memorable events took place because of the mission.

The foundation of a chaitya or stupa was laid at the new vihara- Ananda Kuti, and Bhikkhu Amritananda was able to make an appeal personally to the Prime Minister, Maharaja Padma Shumshere, to permit the Nepalese monks to return to Nepal. The Maharaja kindly agreed to let one- the oldest of them, Ven. Dhammaloka- to return at once. Then gradually, over a short period of time the other monks returned, one by one.

The Ven. Narada Mahathera came again the next year, bringing with him the sacred relics of Lord Buddha and a sapling of the Mahabodhi tree from Anuradhapura for Ananda-Kûti Vihara. In 1948, he returned for the third time to inaugurate the new chaitya.

In the meanwhile political changes had taken place in Nepal. The liberal Prime Minister, Maharaja Padma Shumshere, had resigned and Mohan Shumshere had succeeded him. The new Prime Minister had the reputation of being a very conservative autocrat and a very orthodox Hindu with the backing of a hardcore, extremist elements among the Ranas and in the army. But he was desperate and seeking allies far and near. So, he was amenable to a suggestion by the Ven. Narada Mahathera to make the thrice-sacred Vaisakh Purnima a public holiday in Nepal. Accordingly, Buddhists in government employment were given a holiday that year, but only in Kathmandu valley.



With His Holiness the Panchen Lama and the Late Prime Minister of India, Shri Jawahar Lal Nehru.

## DAWN OF A NEW ERA

THE overthrow of the Rana regime in 1950-51 brought about far-reaching changes in Nepal.

His Late Majesty King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah Dev restored an ancient tradition of the Kings of Nepal by taking keen interest in Buddhism and in the affairs of his Buddhist subjects. The noble King also restored Nepal's prestige in the Buddhist world. The damage done by the Rana regime by expulsion of monks from the land of Buddha's birth was repaired.

Many memorable events took place in the year 1951.

His Majesty the King granted an audience to Bhikkhu Amritananda along with the Ven. M. Pannashila Mahathera who had come on a visit from Sri Lanka.

With His Majesty the King as Chairman and Bhikkhu Amritananda as Secretary, a committee was formed to receive the sacred relics of Lord Buddha's two foremost disciples- Sariputta and Maha Maudgalyana- from the Maha Bodhi Society in Calcutta.

The sacred relics were received at the airport by His Majesty the King with a 31-gun salute, and kept at the Narayanhity Royal Palace for one night. The next day a grand procession accompanied the sacred relics from the Palace to Ananda Kuti Vihara. Hundreds of thousands of Nepalese paid their respects to the sacred relics for a fortnight, at the end of which they were returned to the Maha Bodhi Society in Calcutta.

On His Majesty the King's birthday Paritrana was chanted for 24 hours in the Palace, and His Majesty gave

dana (alms) to the Bhikkhu Sangha of Nepal. (Since 1951, Paritrana has been chanted at Ananda Kuti Vihara on the King's birthday annually.)

This is perhaps the greatest service that Bhikkhu Amritananda has rendered to the Buddhist cause- enlisting the support of His Majesty the King of Nepal.

The untimely passing away of His Majesty King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah Dev in 1955 was a great loss to Nepal and to His Majesty's Buddhist subjects in particular, but it was compensated by the interest taken by His Late Majesty King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev.

In 1956, His Late Majesty King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev presided over the opening ceremony of the Fourth General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Kathmandu. In the same year, during a visit to Lumbini- the first ever by a King of the Shah dynasty- His Majesty the King proclaimed that no animal shall be killed throughout the Kingdom on the day of Baisakh Purnima. His Majesty also enlisted international support for the development of Lumbini as a project of the United Nations, thanks also to the then Secretary General, U. Thant of Burma.

His Majesty the King also took keen interest in the welfare of the Buddhists living in the remote and less developed regions in north Nepal.

In 1975, on the occasion of the auspicious Coronation His Majesty King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev has proposed, in keeping with Buddhist ideals, that Nepal be declared a "Zone of Peace."

By an Act of the Rastriya Panchayat, His Majesty the King created the Lumbini Development Trust in 1986. In order to give the highest priority to the development of Lumbini,



His Majesty the King chose to be the Patron of the Trust and appointed His Royal Highness Prince Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah as Chairman.

It is only because of His Majesty the King's pious intention and the endorsement and support of His Majesty's Government that the 15th General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists is being held in Kathmandu in this Year of International Peace, 1986, with the theme of "Lumbini- A Symbol of World Peace."

### IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

IN 1950, the World Fellowship of Buddhists (W.F.B.) was founded by the late Dr. G.P. Malalasekara and the first general conference was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Bhikkhu Amritananda was invited; he led a Nepalese delegation to Colombo. That was a turning point in the history of Buddhism in Nepal and in the life of Bikkhu Amritananda personally.

Nepal formally became a member of the comity of Buddhist countries in the world. The Dharmodaya Sabha was recognized as the Regional Centre of the World Fellowship of Buddhists for Nepal.

As for Bhikkhu Amritananda, he was increasingly drawn into the deliberations and activities of the international Buddhist movement. He has since then attended all the general conferences of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, besides attending the Asian Buddhist Meeting and the World Religions Conferences. In 1956, he was elected Vice President of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, a position to which he has been re-elected at the end of every five-year term.

In 1956, the Fourth General Conference of the World

Fellowship of Buddhists was held in Kathmandu, largely due to the pious intentions of His Late Majesty King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah Dev and the efforts of Bhikkhu Amritananda himself.

He led Nepalese delegations to the Chhatta Sanghayana in Rangoon in 1954 and to the 2500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations in 1956 in New Delhi. Thus, he had opportunities to personally know various Buddhist leaders in many countries.

In 1982, Bhikkhu Amritananda was invited to the Conference of Buddhist Scholars and Leaders in Sri Lanka, and in the following year, he was present in Dhaka, Bangladesh, to attend the 1000th Birth Anniversary of Atisa Dipankara Srijnana.

On his way to Tibet, Atisa Dipankara Srijnana had come to Nepal; he had been hailed as the Buddha himself. To this day, a thousand years later, he is remembered and venerated in Kathmandu valley. An annual festival is held to celebrate his visit.

It is largely again because of Bhikkhu Amritananda's efforts that the 15th General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists is being held once more in Nepal.

### Travels

Swami Sachitananda is over 100 years old. After having spent many years at Tansen, where he had been a guru and friend of Hira Kaji Shakya, he now lives at Lalitpur. In 1919, when he first saw Hira Kaji's son, he noticed signs of wanderlust in the boy and so he had told the father.

The Swami's prophecy has come true. By leaving his home at Tansen, the monk has made the world his home. Perhaps, he

is the most travelled man or monk in Nepal. He has visited almost every important city in the world. Not to mention the number of times he has visited India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, Bhikkhu Amritananda's travels include: Burma (1937, 1954); Japan (1952, 1958, 1964); Taiwan (1958); Italy (1954; 1960); United Kingdom (1957); Scandinavia (1957); United States of America (1958); Indonesia (1958); Singapore (1958); Malaysia (1958); Cambodia (1958); Hong Kong (1958); The Phillipines (1958); Laos (1958); People's Republic of China (1959); North Viet Nam (1959); Mongolian People's Republic (1959, 1970); USSR, including the Buryat Mongolian Autonomous Republic in Siberia (1959, 1962, 1970); Poland (1962); Czechoslovakia (1962); Hungary (1962); Bulgaria (1962); Yugoslavia (1962); Austria (1962); Germany (1962); Iran (1962); Iraq (1962); Pakistan (1962); Finland (1965); Egypt (1969); Israel (1969); South Korea (1970); Afghanistan (1970); and Bangladesh (1983).

Bhikkhu Amritananda has written an account of some of his travels in his book, "Buddhist Activities in Socialist Countries." Sometimes deep emotions were stirred within him suddenly. He had a very moving experience during a visit to Gandantegchenling Monastery at Ulan-Bator, the capital of the Mongolian People's Republic.

He wrote: "At the end of every month the Buddhists of Mongolia hold a big ceremony in this monastery. So there was a big crowd in the temple compound. People from far and near came to take part in the ceremony. No sooner was the door of my car opened than the mass rushed towards me. I never expected to see such a big crowd. The monks and the police could do nothing with the crowd as it closed upon me as I tried to get into the monastery. Everybody was waiting there with great regard and devotion to meet me. Most of the people, I was told, had heard of my visit to Mongolia on the radio or read about it in the newspapers. Although I was shielded by the monks, I was really squeezed in by the

crowd. As I progressed through the crowd, the people lowered their heads to me and I touched their heads in blessings, in accordance with their custom.

"I was taken into the shrine room where many monks were already engaged in their ceremony. .... They performed the ceremony wishing my health, after which they opened the door to let the people gathered outside, one by one, in order to have my blessings. As the crowd was very big, it took me more than four hours to bless them. Some of the people offered me their personal belongings, such as coral necklaces, etc. while others offered money, which I, in my turn, donated to the Red Cross and the monastery. By the time I came out of the shrine room I could scarcely move around my neck and the right arm.

"Some old ladies, who may be over seventy or so, shed tears on their wrinkled cheeks when they saw me and bowed their heads. ... I nearly felt like weeping when I saw some of the very old people in their blessed innocence."

Sometimes, he was suddenly reminded of his own Nepalese heritage. During a visit to the National Library of Mongolia, he wrote: "my joy was very great when I saw some books in our Newari and Ranjana characters. There I saw a copy of Astasahasrika Pragyaparamita in Newari characters written many hundred years ago."

During a visit to the temple of Pi-yun-sze in Peking, he wrote: "I was surprised to see many sacred words written in our Newari characters." In the temple of Wu-ta-sze too, he found Ranjana characters of Nepal.

In Soochow, "the heaven on earth," with its temples and monasteries, Bhikkhu Amritananda "felt as if I was in one of our cities in Nepal."

Kunming looked to him "like our city of Kathmandu."

## SERVING THE SANGHA AND THE SOCIETY

THE Sangha or the fraternity of monks in Nepal is quite small but it is an active one. Although in recent years Bhikkhu Amritananda has been devoting his time to the scholarly pursuits of research and translation, he is one of the senior and most active members of the Sangha.

What may now appear to be but a small event, yet nonetheless a significant service to the cause of Buddhism, and in particular, to the Sangha in Nepal was his successful move in 1946 to bring the mission from Sri Lanka under the leadership of the late Ven. Narada Mahathera, and his plea for the return of the Nepalese monks from exile. Upon his return to Nepal, the late Ven. Dhammaloka had said to him: "Amritananda, you have rekindled the light that has been extinguished."

In 1951, he founded the Akhil-Nepal Bhikkhu Mahasangha (All-Nepal Bhikkhu Council) in Kathmandu. He was elected its President, a position he still holds. Another service that he has rendered to the Sangha is the establishment of the Ananda Kuti Vihara Guthi (Trust) in 1977. Its aims and objectives are:

- (1) To maintain the Vihara, founded in 1943 by the Ven. Dhammaloka;
- (2) To provide boarding and lodging to the Bhikkhus in residence;
- (3) To look after visiting Bhikkhus;
- (4) To publish books on Buddhism; and
- (5) To propagate Buddhism in other ways.

In 1962, Bhikkhu Amritananda founded the Nepali Yubak Baudha Parishad (Young Men's Buddhist Association of Nepal) and for some time was its President.

Bhikkhu Amritananda's work has been appreciated more in Sri Lanka than anywhere else because of his close association with the Sangha there. In 1955, the Amarapura Nikaya conferred on him the title of "Nepala Sasana Sobhana Siri Dhammarakshita Vamsalankara."

Vajiraramaya also conferred on him in 1984 the title of "Dhammarakshita Vamsalankara Dhammakiriti Siri" followed by an even greater appreciation the same year by all the three Nikayas of Sri Lanka Bhikkhu Mahasangha, in a special ceremony, jointly calling him the "Mahanayaka" for Nepal with the title of "Tripitaka Visarada Sasanajotaka."

At the Gandantegchenling Monastery in Ulan-Bator in 1959, he had been given the title of "Gegen" (Holy) by the Grand Lama and President of the Buddhist Central Council in the Mongolian People's Republic.

In recognition of Bhikkhu Amritananda's service to the nation, His Late Majesty King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev awarded him the "Gorkha Dakshin Bahu" in 1968.

The titles that have been bestowed on him- Tripitaka Visarada, Acharya, Mahanayaka- attest to his learning and status within the Sangha in Nepal and in other Buddhist countries.

#### The Dharmodaya Sabha

The Dharmodaya Sabha has its roots in the hearts of the people of Nepal rather than in one place. It had as its Patron both Their Late Majesties King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah Dev and King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev.

Founded on November 30, 1944 by Nepalese monks in their place of exile, at Sarnath, where the Lord Buddha had set the Wheel of the Dhamma in motion, its activities shifted for some time to Kalimpong before its office was moved to Kathmandu in 1951.

The first President of the Sabha was the Ven. U. Chandramani Mahathera, the Teacher of so many Nepalese monks, and the Ven. Bhadanta Ananda Kausalyana was the first Vice President. Bhikkhu Amritananda was elected its first General Secretary. In 1956, he was elected President, a position he has filled up to the present.

The Dharmodaya Sabha has both monks and laymen as its members. It is the most active association working for the cause of Buddhism in Nepal, thanks to the devotion and interest taken in it by its lay members, specially Mr. Maniharsha Jyoti, one of its greatest supporters and, at present, one of its three Vice Presidents. The two other Vice Presidents are the Ven. Kuseo Chhechu and Mr. Lok Darshan Bajracharya, former Chairman of the Lumbini Development Committee.

The members of the Dharmodaya Sabha have represented Nepal in Buddhist conferences all over the world for the last 35 years. It has been the Regional Centre of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Nepal for the same period.

The Fourth General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists held in Nepal in 1956 under the auspices of the Dharmodaya Sabha was inaugurated by His Late Majesty King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev.

In 1986, His Royal Highness Prince Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah, Chairman of the Lumbini Development Trust, appointed the Ven. Kuseo Chhechu as a Member of the Trust.

### Ananda Kuti Vidyapith

Having grown up at a time when there was no school to go to, Bhikkhu Amritananda realised the importance of education. On the day that he was ordained in 1936, it

occured to him that he must serve his countrymen by establishing a school and a vihara.

Many years later, a pupil and friend, Nhuchhe Bahadur Bajracharya, having just returned from a visit to Tibet, asked him what useful work he could do in Kathmandu. Bhikkhu Amritananda said to him: "I have long cherished a hope to establish a school to serve the people of Nepal. If you can, go to Ananda Kuti and start a school there. I do not know how to teach myself but this is my earnest wish."

Before long Bhikkhu Amritananda received a letter at Tansen from Nhuchhe Bahadur dated February 6, 1952, as follows:

"Sir, as per your advice to me during our meeting at Gauchar airport, I have already opened a Buddhist boarding school at Ananda Kuti. For the time being, due to lack of space, I have enrolled only a dozen boys. There are more than 50 boys who wish to join the school.

"Sir, the seed has been sown. Now we must water it and nourish it with fertilizer from time to time.

It is also necessary to find another place, but without your presence here it cannot be done. Though we have begun in a very small way, we should aim to make it a great school. Therefore, Sir, you should not spend much of your time there but come here soon and kindly try to find a suitable place.

"Two rooms on the ground floor have been used as dormitory. Your room is used as a class-room. When desks and benches are available, the dining-room will be used for classes."

Thus, Ananda Kuti Vidyapith, the seed sown by Nhuchhe Bahadur Bajracharya and watered and nourished from time to



time by Bhikkhu Amritananda, has become one of the best schools in Kathmandu, visited by Kings, Presidents and Prime Ministers during their visit to Nepal.

Indeed, from an acorn an oak is grown.



## SCHOLARLY PURSUITS

THE little boy who spoke only his mother-tongue and sat in a corner of his father's workshop at Tansen trying unsuccessfully to digest the Chanakya in the 1920's has come a long way. He has become a distinguished scholar in an ancient language-Pali, or more properly Magadhi, the language spoken in the 6th century B.C.

Soon after his ordination in 1937, Bhikkhu Amritananda had his first lessons in Pali from the Ven. Mahapragya at Kalimpong. The same year he went to Burma and then to Sri Lanka to learn the ancient language. He spent several years first at Vidyalankara Pirivene and later at Vajiraramaya in Colombo studying the Pali canon.

After a lapse of almost two decades, he picked up his study again and in 1955, he passed the Acharya (M.A.) examination with distinction from the Pali Institute of Nalanda, Bihar, India. Two years later, he spent some time in London giving lessons in Pali at the Buddhist Society there.

In recognition of his knowledge of the Pali language, the Buddhist Academy of Sri Lanka conferred on him the honorary degree of Sahitya Chakravarti (D. Litt.) in 1976. The Pali Institute of Nalanda also gave him the honorary degree of Vidya Varidhi (Ph.D.) in 1979.

He does not however claim a proficiency in modern languages but he does not allow it to be a problem at any time. He spent some time learning English in London and Russian in Moscow. Of course, he speaks Singhalī and Hindi.

In 1972, Bhikkhu Amritananda embarked on a literary adventure not knowing when it would end nor where it would lead him to because it was such a vast project. With no one to assist him, he set upon himself the onerous task of making the Pali Tripitaka available in Nepali, because there was no Buddhist literature yet in the national language.

He began by looking up every single account and reference in the Pali Tripitaka concerning a number of eminent Brahmans who lived as contemporaries of Lord Buddha in the 6th century B.C. He translated these into Nepali, edited them and prepared an index of names, gatha (stanza) and significant words. Then, he got these published, volume after volume.

Bhikkhu Amritananda has so far produced ten titles, as follows: Brahmans of Buddha's Time (3 volumes- 1850 pages), Householders (3 volumes- 1792 pages), Women (2 volumes- 917 pages), Royal Families (3 volumes- 1442 pages), Paribrajaka (Ascetics, 3 volumes- 1483 pages), Brahma and Other Devas (Celestial Beings, 3 volumes- 1334 pages), Shravaka (Monks. 5 volumes- 1823 pages), Shravika (Nuns, 1 volume- 994 pages), Preta (Devils, 1 volume- 382 pages), and Bimana (Heavenly Beings- 1 volume- 388 pages).

These books give one not only a knowledge of Theravada Buddhism but reveal a very interesting picture of the social, economic and political conditions prevailing in the 6th century B.C. in these parts.

In addition to this major work, he has to his credit 25 other books on Buddhism in Nepali, 21 in Newari and three in English.

In a study of Theravada Buddhism in Nepal published in 1977, Ria Kloppenborg wrote as follows: "Amritananda, through his zeal and enthusiasm, was the most important leader of the movement for the following thirty years. His preaching, through which he became popular, resulted in a rapidly increasing number of sympathizers, mainly from the Newar part of the population. Some other monks joined him at Kindol Vihara, where religious meetings were regularly held. Dharmaloka Mahasthavira, impressed by Amritananda's popularity, urged him to write down his sermons and to publish books on Buddhism in Newari. This led to a very successful series of publications and translations of Buddhist literature in Newari, after the earlier attempts of Dharmaloka and the Newari Buddhist journal of Dharmaditya Dharmacarya had failed for lack of financial and editorial assistance."

The destiny of a person is linked with that of his people and his country. His life is influenced by the conditions obtained therein. Only rarely can he influence the course of events in his country. If Brian Hodgson may be given the credit for being largely responsible for informing the learned society in the West about Nepal's ancient heritage of Buddhism and the deplorable state of affairs in the 19th century, Bhikkhu Amritananda may be remembered in future as the person largely responsible for the revival of Buddhism in Nepal after the introduction of Theravada and for re-introducing Nepal to the rest of the Buddhist world in the 20th century.

Even as he worked for the cause of the Buddhists, the influence of his Hindu friends and countrymen may be traced

in Bhikkhu Amritananda's work. He has devoted many years to make available in Nepali, the national language of the land, the great treasure of the Tripitaka in Pali. What ancient books are available are mostly either in Sanskrit or in Tibetan and the more recent publications on Buddhism are in Newari.

The many volumes of his translation of the Tripitaka may remain unread at present but his objective of strengthening the modern nation of Nepal that King Prithvi Narayan Shah founded in 1769 shall be justified in the future. Thus Nepal has always been strengthened by a blending of two great religions, by remaining rooted to the past while changing with the times.



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## The Author

Kesar Lall was born in Kathmandu in 1927. His interest in religion took him to the Second W.F.B. General Conference in Tokyo in 1952 and his contributions include pamphlets for the Dharmodaya Sabha and articles in the Dharmodaya magazine.

His other interests include Nepalese folklore and culture. Numerous articles on these subjects and on pilgrimages and treks within Nepal have appeared in various magazines and in the Kathmandu dailies, The Motherland and The Rising Nepal. Some of his stories have been translated into German, Swedish, Hebrew and Japanese. His publications include the following:

1. Lore and Legend of Nepal.
2. The Seven Sisters and Other Nepalese Tales.
3. Nepalese Fairy Tales.
4. Nepalese Customs and Manners.
5. Nepalese Book of Proverbs.
6. This Beautiful Nepal (With Dorothy Mierow).
7. Marchen, Sagen und Legenden aus Nepal (Translation into German by Martin Lutterjohann).