

# Vaidya Mana Vajra Vajrācārya and the Buddhist Medical Tradition of Nepal

Todd Caldecott

## Introduction

According to the *Caraka saṃhitā*, Ayurveda is stated to have originated in the Himalayas thousands of years ago, with the advent of a great medical conference that drew sages and physicians together from disparate regions to address the cause of human suffering. The importance of the Himalayan range, with respect to its climactic, geographic, and biological diversity, is clearly evident in Ayurveda, with many species indigenous to this region playing a key role in its materia medica. Reflecting this diversity, there are a huge number of unique cultural groups found in the Himalayas. In the tiny country of Nepal alone, there are over 100 different ethnic groups that speak over 90 languages.

Among these are the indigenous peoples of the Kathmandu Valley, called the Newar, whose ancestors have inhabited this region since before recorded history. Although somewhat isolated geographically, the Newar people have been an active trading and mercantile community for millennia, facilitating the trade commodities such as rock salt, gold, silver, deer musk, and herbal medicines between the rest of India and Tibet.<sup>1</sup> As such, Newar genetics reflect a cosmopolitan origin, a trait similarly reflected in the rich, complex, and multi-faceted traditions of Newar culture. Among these traditions is the practice of Vajrayāna Buddhism, one of the three primary streams of Buddhism, which at one time was practiced extensively across India before its extirpation in the 13th century. Having inherited this tradition before it died out in India, along with its attendant medical practices and techniques, the

Newar people maintain the only living example of Indian Buddhism still in existence, and an authentic unbroken lineage of Ayurveda, as exemplified by the life of the Newar physician, Vaidya Mana Vajra Vajrācārya.<sup>2</sup>



## The origin and development of Vajrayāna Buddhism

The origin of the Nepalese Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition begins at Nālandā University, a famous school of learning established by the Gupta Empire in the 5th century. According to a 17th century Tibetan Lama named Tāranātha, Nālandā had become a Buddhist institution by the 3rd century, and was the home of the Buddhist Mahāyāna philosopher Ācārya Nāgārjuna.<sup>3</sup> Nāgārjuna is important to the Mahāyāna school for his introduction of *sūnyatā*, the concept of 'emptiness,' and for his association with the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, which promote the Buddhist concept of *bodhisattva*. Although used originally as a term by the historical Buddha in reference to his previous lives, the concept of *bodhisattva* came to refer to any being that is 'bound for enlightenment.' Unlike Theravāda Buddhism, which stresses the ideal of the *arhat* (*arahant*, in Pali) who practices to attain *nirvāṇa* (enlightenment) in the here-and-now, the *bodhisattva* ideal of Mahāyāna stresses the importance of perfecting oneself over several lifetimes, to attain a state of *buddhatva* (buddhahood) that is beyond that of an *arhat*.

The evolution of the Mahāyāna school and the concept of bodhisattva were concurrent with significant changes happening to Indian society at the time. By the 7th century, more than 1,000 years had passed since the arising of the historical Buddha, and the pre-eminent importance of the Vedas within Indian society had begun to wane. Although rulers were obligated to maintain their role as the guardians of the brahmanical social order (*varṇāśramaguruḥ*), their personal religious beliefs often took the form of more contemporary practices, including the support of Buddhism or Jainism, or devotion to specific gods, such as Siva, Viṣṇu, Sūrya, or Bhagavatī.<sup>4</sup> Śiva, in particular, was a popular deity, and aligned with Saivism was the worship of the Mother Goddess (e.g., Bhagavatī), who in her various forms was considered to be an embodiment of Śiva's divinity (i.e., Śakti).

During this time, both Buddhism and Saivism enjoyed royal patronage in different parts of India, but most notably in eastern India, under the influence of the Pāla Empire (750–1200 CE). The patronage and tolerance of both spiritual traditions by the Pāla rulers is thought to have fostered the development of a hybrid Buddhist practice called Vajrayāna, which incorporated tantric elements of Saivism into the fabric of Mahāyāna Buddhism. *Vajra* means



The deity Kāla Bhairava, Durbar Square, Kathmandu, Nepal.

‘thunderbolt,’ and in this regard, Vajrayāna teaches that its techniques and practices represent an accelerated path to the achievement of the bodhisattva ideal. Not only relying on abstract meditative practices, Vajrayāna is notable for its incorporation of ritualism and esoteric teachings, often binding the practitioner to strict vows of secrecy.

The Vajrayāna tradition accounts for 84 Mahāsiddhas (Great Attainers) that lived during the early medieval period of India, mostly centered around the Pāla Empire, who all played a part in the development of its practices. Many of the Mahāsiddhas were wandering sages who rejected the comfortable monastic life of Buddhism, as well as normative distinctions of society such as caste and gender. Among the most important of the Mahāsiddhas was a second Nāgārjuna referred to as Siddha Nāgārjuna, who lived during the 10th century.<sup>5</sup> One Tibetan account claims that as a child Nāgārjuna was sent to Nālandā seeking treatment for a fatal sickness, and was cured when the sage Saraha taught him an esoteric teaching of Vajrayāna Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> Nāgārjuna later became the abbot of Nālandā, and apart from his role as a spiritual teacher, was a highly accomplished physician and surgeon. Nāgārjuna is famous for his contribution to the field of alchemy, including the *Rasendramāṅgala* and the *Kakṣpuṭa*, and is considered to be the originator of the *Rasa Śāstra* tradition of Ayurveda.<sup>7</sup>

One defining difference between Vajrayāna Buddhism and the monastic Buddhism that preceded it, is that the interpolation of Saivite philosophy into Buddhist practice allowed for the incorporation of sexuality as part of spiritual practice, and the elevation of the feminine principle. The advent of Vajrayāna thus marks a shift in Buddhist practices, not only away from a life of austerity and contemplation, but a transition from a strictly celibate practice to one that also became a tradition for the *grhastha* (householder). Over time, this led to the development of a lay-monastic tradition that resembled the classical *upanayana* consecration of Hinduism (acceptance of a student by a teacher).<sup>8</sup> In this tradition, a young man having undergone the proper training would formally undertake the Buddhist rite of *pravrajyā* (going forth) and become ordained as a celibate monk. After a brief period, however, the young man would

disrobe and return to society, to provide an ongoing service to his community as a Vajrācārya priest.

Near the end of the 12th century, a Turkish general name Bakhtiyar Khilji descended upon Nālandā. His was among the final thrusts in a centuries-old push by Islamic invaders to subjugate India. Coursing down the Gangetic Plain in search of riches and glory, the invaders systematically destroyed what they could only understand as idolatrous and blasphemous. Although all the spiritual and cultural traditions of India suffered, the inherently pacifist tradition of Indian Buddhism, with its esoteric practices maintained by an intelligentsia located primarily in major centers, was completely wiped out. In the case of Nālandā, the Muslim historian Minhaj-i-Siraj Juzjani writes that Bakhtiyar Khilji's army killed anyone with a shaved head, effectively wiping out a thousand-year-old monastic tradition.<sup>9</sup> Accounts of later travelers, such as the Tibetan pilgrim Dharmasvamin, fail to mention the splendid library of Nālandā, which before invasion contained hundreds of thousands of texts on a great diversity of subjects, including Buddhism, grammar, logic, literature, astronomy, and medicine.<sup>10</sup>

### **The development of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Nepal**

Although the extinction of Buddhism in India was nearly complete by the early 13th century, the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition continued on in Nepal. This is but one in a series of examples in which the mountainous region of Nepal has served as an important reservoir for the continuance of Indian culture. Beginning around the 3rd century BCE, there was an influx of Indic peoples from eastern India into Nepal, including the Licchavi, Sakya, and Malla peoples.<sup>11</sup> These immigrants brought with them their own culture and the use of classical Sanskrit, intermingling with the local Kirāti population, a Tibeto-Burmese people that had already inhabited the Kathmandu Valley for thousands of years. This later gave rise to the Licchavi dynasty in the 5th century CE, and many of Kathmandu's most famous *caityas* (shrines) and *vihāras* (monasteries) were built during this period. Beginning with the reign of Narendradeva in the 7th century, Kathmandu also became a spiritual center for Tibetans, who employed Nepali teachers to translate Sanskrit texts, and had

Nepali artisans build, decorate, and paint their *stūpas* (sacred mounds) and *vihāras*.<sup>12</sup> It is believed that Siddha Nāgārjuna visited Kathmandu during this period, meditating in a cave that still bears his name, on the side of Jamacho hill on the outskirts of the city. Other famous Mahāsiddhas that were drawn to Kathmandu include Padmākara (Padmasambhava, i.e., Guru Rinpoche), Tilopa, and Nāropā.<sup>13</sup>

With the fall of Nālandā in the 13th century, and the rise the Islamic sultanate in India, many of the surviving Buddhists fled to Nepal, leaving Kathmandu isolated as the last remaining center of Indian Buddhism. During this time, under the rule of the Malla dynasty (c. 1200–1768), there was a consolidation of Buddhist Newar culture in the Kathmandu valley. The Malla king Jayasthiti had a profound influence in this regard, dividing Nepalese society into 64 sub-castes, in which even spiritual mendicants were forced, and over time, the monastic tradition of Buddhism in Nepal began to fade.<sup>14</sup> The spiritual tradition of Vajrayāna, however, continued to thrive as a *gṛhastha* tradition. During this period, the ancient *guthi* system of community land trusts was reinvigorated to support the families that had been tasked with the protection of Nepal's spiritual heritage, including the maintenance of local *caityas* and *vihāras*, and the material support of the Vajrācārya and Śākya priests and their families that served the community. Although this tradition was undermined by the rulers of the foreign Rānā dynasty (c. 1846–1951), which imposed severe sanctions against the local Newar community, the Vajrayāna tradition survived, and continues to live on to this day.

### **Vaidya Mana Vajra Vajrācārya**

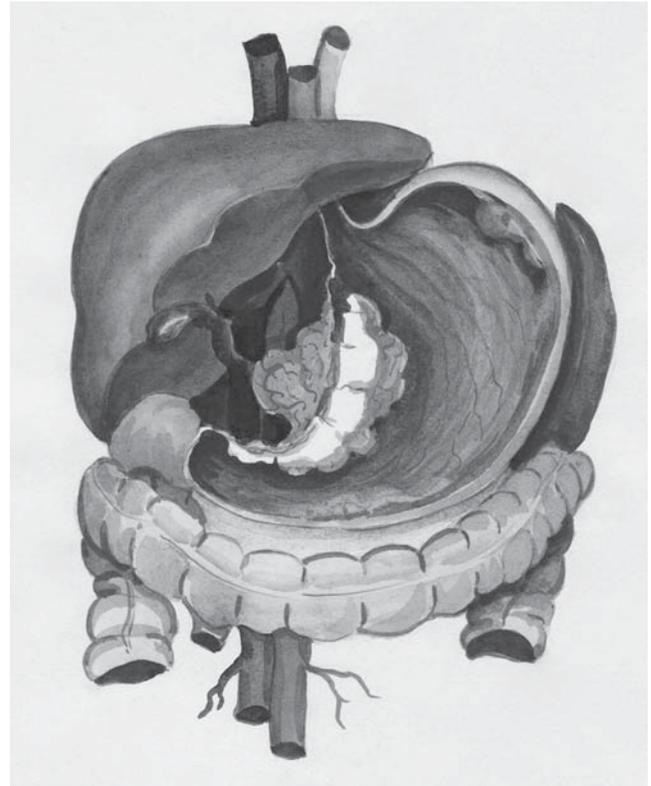
One recent exponent of this tradition was the late Vaidya Mana Vajra Vajrācārya (c. 1930–2001), a highly regarded *vaidya* (physician) well known to the local Newar community and to the many Westerners that first began to visit Nepal in the early 1970s. Vaidya Mana's family are members of the Kanaka Caitya Mahāvihāra, better known locally as Jana Bahāḥ, one of the most famous *vihāras* in Kathmandu Valley. Vaidya Mana's grandfather, Nīla Vajra Vajrācārya, was a specialist in *Bhūta Vidyā Tantra* (spiritual healing), and served as the royal physician of Nepal.

Vaidya Mana's family are members of the Śākya caste, which reflects their connection to the Śākya clan of Kapilavastu, the birthplace of Gautama Siddhārtha. Around the 13th century, Vaidya Mana's ancestors received the consecration of Vajrayāna, based on the principles of the *Heruka Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, bestowing the title of Vajrācārya. As part of this consecration his family undertook a vow to help alleviate the suffering of humanity, and since then have maintained an unbroken tradition of Ayurveda serving the local community and beyond, never charging for medical consultation. Vaidya Mana's family holds an extensive library of Sanskrit and Nepali texts of Ayurveda and Buddhism, carefully protected and maintained for centuries, many of which remain entirely unknown to the outside world.

Vaidya Mana's education began at a young age, learning to become fluent in classical Sanskrit, which is required to understand the traditional texts of Buddhism and Ayurveda. During this time, Vaidya Mana apprenticed with his grandfather and worked with his brothers to run their family medical clinic. At the age of 17, Vaidya Mana completed his formal study of Sanskrit, and turned to the classical texts of Ayurveda, including the *Caraka saṃhitā* and *Suśruta saṃhitā*, as well as the primary texts of the Mahāyāna tradition (e.g., the *Prajñāpāramitā*), continuing this study for eight years.

As he was gaining clinical experience, Vaidya Mana developed an interest in painting and sculpture, and practiced his knowledge of Ayurveda by painting medicinal herbs and making clay models of the human body, which helped him to recognize the herbs more easily and to understand human anatomy. In 1955, Vaidya Mana undertook a two-year trek across Nepal and India, traveling on foot, to catalogue the medicinal plants used in Ayurveda growing in their native habitat, collect specimens, and make watercolors.

Upon returning from his sojourn, Vaidya Mana began to treat patients without supervision at his family's clinic, and over the next fifteen years served his local community as a physician, gaining a high degree of clinical experience. Seeing the gradual influx of Westerners into Nepal during this time, Vaidya Mana



Gulma (abdominal tumor); watercolor by Vaidya Mana.

decided to learn English, and undertook a detailed study of Western medical texts. He began to teach Buddhism and Ayurveda medicine to Westerners visiting Kathmandu, and in 1972, he traveled to Europe and the United States at the invitation of his students. Upon his return to Nepal, seeing this appreciation for his family's traditional knowledge, Vaidya Mana opened up a clinic called Pīyūṣavarṣi Auśadhalaya to treat foreigners. He developed a reputation for successfully treating many diseases that Western medicine considers incurable.

Over the next 30 years Vaidya Mana devoted himself to the protection and propagation of Ayurveda, both in Nepal and internationally. His daily routine consisted of four hours of writing in the morning, and five hours of working in the clinic in the afternoon. During this time, he wrote a number of books on Buddhism and Nepalese culture, as well as 47 texts on the practice of Ayurveda, including treatises on the subject of cancer, liver disease, ophthalmology, and spiritual healing. With his intimate knowledge of the countryside, Vaidya Mana was



Vaidya Mana consulting with a patient at ancestral clinic near Mahaboudha, Kathmandu, circa 1986.

particularly aware of the ecological destruction that was occurring in Nepal. In response, he developed a model farm in Kathmandu to teach farmers how to grow some of these medicinal plants, not only to take pressure off of wild stands, but to help improve the incomes of farmers.

Vaidya Mana's dream was to establish an International Ayurveda Research Center, based in Kathmandu, to restore the knowledge of Ayurveda to the people and to protect Nepal's botanical and medical heritage for future generations. Sadly, Vaidya Mana passed away in 2001 before his vision was complete, but his work continues in the efforts of his only son, Madhu Vajra Vajrācārya. Trained in Ayurveda at his

father's side, Vaidya Madhu also holds a BSc in Zoology, and has been in clinical practice since 1976, providing clinical services at his family's ancestral clinic in Kathmandu. In 2009, I traveled to Nepal to meet with Vaidya Madhu to finish editing the first of the 47 books his father wrote, which was published later that year as *Ayurveda in Nepal*.

While it might be difficult to imagine, given its undaunting survival over the centuries, the reality is that environmental, economic, and political pressures in Nepal are threatening the future of the Vajrācārya medical tradition. Along with my colleague, Alan Tillotson, who was one of Vaidya Mana's senior Western students, we are working hard to publish

Vaidya Mana's corpus on Ayurveda. To help facilitate interest in our endeavors, for the first time I will be taking a group of students to Nepal in February 2017 to study with Vaidya Madhu and other Nepalese vaidyas, in order to learn more about this venerable tradition. With an appreciation of its immense value and rich history, my hope is that we can help realize Vaidya Mana's dream to support and maintain one of the world's oldest continuously practiced traditions of Ayurveda – before it's gone forever.

## References

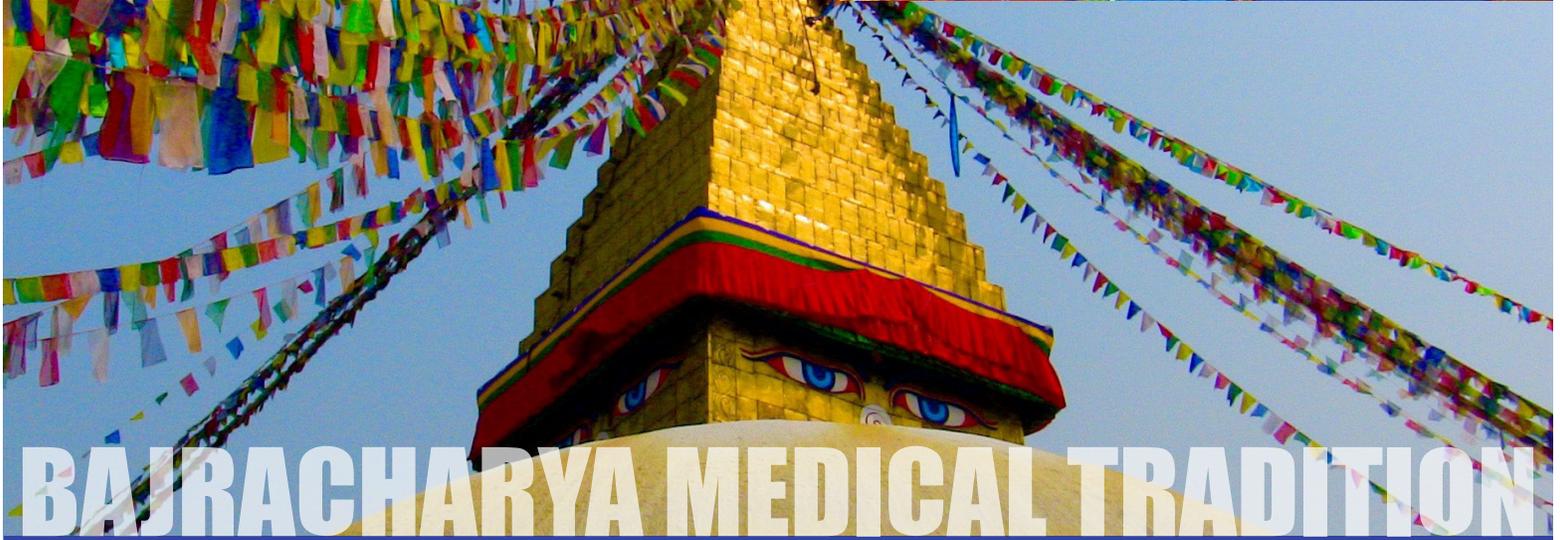
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5. The issue of Nāgārjuna is highly convoluted, mostly due to later Tibetan commentaries that conflate Ācārya Nāgārjuna with Siddha Nāgārjuna. In addition to these two personages, however, there may be a third Nāgārjuna that lived at Nālandā sometime during the 7th century, and may have been the redactor of the *Suśruta saṃhitā*.
6. Dowman K. *Masters of Mahamudra: Songs and Histories of the Eighty-Four Buddhist Siddhas*. Albany NY: State University of New York; 1985:118-19.
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**Todd Caldecott** has been in practice as a medical herbalist and practitioner of Āyurveda for two decades. He has had a broad array of clinical experiences in diverse locations, including North America, SE Asia, and the Caribbean, working with a variety of conditions, including autoimmune disease and metabolic disorders. He is a registered professional member with both the AHG and NAMA, and serves as Director of the Dogwood School of Botanical Medicine. He is author of the book *Food As Medicine* and co-editor of *Ayurveda In Nepal*. In 2014, he was honored at Bastyr University as the Visiting Mitchell Scholar.

# AYURVEDA in *Nepal*



## BAJRACHARYA MEDICAL TRADITION

Found nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas is one of world's oldest lineages of Ayurveda. Originating from the ancient splendor of Nalanda university in the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE, the Bajracharya lineage also represents the only form of Indian Buddhism still in existence. The Bajracharya lineage has protected and maintained this venerable tradition, serving a dual role as priests and physicians, providing these services to their community and beyond as an expression of the Buddhist vows they have maintained for the last 800 years.



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## About your teachers

### Madhu Bajra Bajracharya

Vaidya Madhu Bajra Bajracharya learned Ayurveda from his father, the renown Vaidya Mana Bajra Bajracharya, and has been in clinical practice since 1976. He is Chairman of the Association of Nepal Traditional Ayurvedic Medical Practitioners, and is a proud representative of Newari culture, serving as Vice Chairman of “Hapa Guthi”, an association of local Newari Culture. Vaidya Madhu also serves as a consultant for the Himalayan Herbal Preparation Pvt Ltd, a joint Nepali-Italian venture, and provides his clinical services at his family’s ancestral clinic in Kathmandu, Piyushavarshi Aushadhalaya, the oldest Ayurveda clinic in Nepal.



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### Immersion program: Feb 5 – 17, 2017

- Day 1: Arrive Kathmandu, transport to hotel
- Day 2: Lecture at Vaidya Madhu’s clinic; Welcome Dinner
- Day 3: Lecture at Vaidya Madhu’s clinic
- Day 4: Visit Pashupatinath, Boudhanath & Swayambhunath
- Day 5: Lecture at Vaidya Madhu’s clinic
- Day 6: Visit Bhaktapur & Changu Narayan Temple
- Day 7-8: Weekend for sightseeing and relaxation
- Day 9: Lecture at Vaidya Madhu’s clinic
- Day 10: Visit Ayurvedic Factories in Banepa and Arubari
- Day 11: Visit Devi Ma Kunja Rural Ayurveda Hospital
- Day 12: Kathmandu Valley, Full Day Trek & Herb Walk
- Day 13: Ayurveda Treatments and Farewell Dinner

### Clinical program: Feb 5 – Mar 10, 2017

- Days 1-13: Immersion Program
- Day 14-15: Sightseeing, relaxation, charity work
- Days 15-19: 9am - 5pm, Clinical Program
- Days 20-21: Sightseeing, relaxation, charity work
- Days 22-26: 9am - 5pm, Clinical Program
- Days 28-29: Sightseeing, relaxation, charity work
- Days 30-34: 9am - 5pm, Clinical Program
- Days 35-36: Sightseeing, relaxation, charity work
- Day 37: Holi Festival; Farewell Dinner



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