



Vak Vajra and His Contributions to the Buddhist Heritage of Thatu-Pui

Prem Thapa

PhD Scholar

Central Department of Buddhist Studies

Article History: Submitted: 23/10/2024 Reviewed: 09/02/2025 Accepted: 13/06/2025

Corresponding Author: Prem Thapa, Email: zorbanianprem@gmail.com

Copyright 2025© Author/s and the Publisher

Abstract

Vak Vajra Vajracharya is considered one of the four patrons of Kathmandu's Vajrayana Buddhist tradition. However, very little is known about him in Buddhist academic circles. Among the available descriptions of Vak Vajra, the majority take the form of legends and stories. This paper explores Vak Vajra's historicity within these legends, shedding light on his life and works. The paper provides a brief introduction to the Vajracharya's life, his main monastery, Kwā- bāha also known as Maitripur Mahavihara, and examines the period in which he flourished. The paper also describes his contributions, and explains how his works have influenced the living Vajrayana Buddhist heritage of Kathmandu's Thathu: Pui (one of the four regions of Kathmandu). While there is no consensus on the exact period of his flourishing, this research analyzes available documents to determine the most plausible timeframe. Additionally, the paper uncovers previously unknown works of Vak Vajra Vajracharya. Through an exploratory analysis, this study adds valuable insights to the limited literature available on him.

Keyword: *Vak Vajra, Tantric Master, Kwā- bāha, Bajracharya of Kathmandu, Thathu Pui.*

Introduction

The Kathmandu Valley is a living heritage that remains vibrant, with people continuing to practice everyday rituals and festivals both as individuals and as members of the community traditions that have persisted for millennia. This living heritage represents

the Buddhist cultural legacy of Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur. The Buddhist heritage of the Kathmandu Valley has attracted the attention of both Buddhist and non-Buddhist cultural scholars worldwide. Moreover, Kathmandu's tangible and intangible Buddhist heritages have been largely made possible by the living Vajrayana tradition of the Valley. This tradition, which still boasts highly realized Siddha Vajracharyas from the past, has contributed significantly to the living Buddhist heritage of the Kathmandu Valley, a land revered by the ancient Siddhas as the Nepal Mandala.

Cultural expert Mary Slusser aptly comments on Kathmandu Valley's ever-intriguing living heritage, stating, "Kathmandu Valley is thus not only an immense museum of Buddhist antiquities but also a unique oasis of surviving Mahayanist Buddhist doctrine, cultural practices, and colorful festivals" (1998/1982, p. 270). In addition to the Buddhist Vihara of Lalitpur and Bhaktapur, Kathmandu itself is home to eighteen Mahaviharas (Bāhas and Bahis). These Mahaviharas have long served as Buddhist learning centers, maintaining an unbroken lineage for centuries in Kathmandu. However, these Bahas and Bahis are now limited to daily rituals and occasional festivals. They no longer hold the same significance as they once did, serving as practice centers for locals and foreigners alike, including Tibetans and Indians. This paper focuses on Vak Vajra of Thathu Pui or region.

Clarifying the concept of Pui, Buddhist scholar Surendra Man Bajracharya explains that "the eighteen principal monasteries and other monasteries of Kantipur (Kathmandu) were distributed in four regions from north to south and each region has one separate greater Saṅgha called Pui Ācā Gu. The regions are called Pui" (2014, p. 320). Each Pui has one principal monastery, therefore the four regions have four principal monasteries and the founders of these four monasteries are revered as the four pillars of the Vajrayana tradition of Kathmandu. One such pillar, Vak Vajra was the founder of monasteries of Thathu Pui. Similarly, Surat Vajra was the founder of the monasteries of 'Dathu Pui'; Lilāvajra was the founder of Sikhomu-bāhā of Lāyaku Pui; and the founder of Kwathu Pui was Manju Vajra.

There are numerous works of literature on the Buddhist culture and practices of Kathmandu, yet only a handful of biographies focus on Buddhist masters and their contributions. These masters are often mentioned briefly in historical texts, shrouded in ambiguity and myth. Bhuvanlal Pradhan's *Kathmandu Upatyakaka Sanskritik Chhirkā Mirka* (2021/2007) and Nepal-ma Buddha Dharma (2076 B.S.) vividly describe the colorful aspects of Kathmandu's Buddhist culture, filled with joyful festivals and mystical rituals.

Nepal ka Prachin Bajracharya: Lila Vajra (2010), written in Newari by Yagyamanapati Vajracharya and translated by Guhyashowriraj Manandhar, is limited to one of the four Vajrayana masters of Kathmandu. The text elaborates on Lila Vajra's life and

works, including the mythical story of how he convinced the Tree God to offer a massive log for the construction of Kasthamandap.

Vajrayana (2014) by Naresh Man Bajracharya provides a general introduction to the Vajrayana tradition. It begins with an overview of Vajrayana philosophy and practice, followed by a brief history of the tradition, and then explores its philosophical aspects in relation to practice. In short, it serves as a concise primer on Vajrayana.

Buddhist Monasteries of Nepal: A Survey of Bahas and Bahis of the Kathmandu Valley (1985) by John K. Locke primarily examines the history and traditions of Kathmandu's Bahas and Bahis. While it briefly mentions the Vajracharyas associated with these institutions, it does not delve into their lives or teachings. In contrast, Vajrayana Master Shreedhar Rana offers a short hagiographic account in his essay titled "The Four Pillars of the Vajrayana of the Kathmandu Valley" (2011, pp. 55-64). Thus far, none of the above-mentioned works of literature explain or elaborate on the life and works of Vajrayana master Vak Vajra's contribution to the Thathu: Pui, one of the four domains of Vajrayana tradition of Kathmandu.

This paper explores the life and contributions of Vak Vajra to the living tradition of Vajrayana Buddhism in Thathu: Pui or Upper region of Kathmandu. Informative documents on Vak Vajra are scattered in fragments across various texts written on Kathmandu's Buddhist traditions, but there is no single text written on Vak Vajra and his works in Nepali or in English language. This paper delves into the significant Buddhist cultural and historical texts of Kathmandu shedding light on Vak Vajra's life and works.

The research adopts a qualitative methodological approach, employing a descriptive style to examine supportive texts and data. The paper follows an exploratory research framework rather than an analytical one. It utilizes both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected during field visits to Vak Vajra-related sites and also through interview with a Vajracharya descendant of Vakvajra from Kwā-bāha.

Dating Vak Vajra's time

Vak Vajra Vajracharya was the Vajra Master of Kwabaha, one of the first Vajrayana Viharas among Kathmandu's eighteen principal Viharas. Vak Vajra is one of the few Vajracharya masters of the Kathmandu valley who stands out in Vajrayana Buddhism for his significant contributions (Thapa, 2015). Therefore, he is revered as one of the "Four Pillars of Vajrayana Buddhism in the Kathmandu", alongside Lila Vajra, Surata Vajra, and Manju Vajra (Rana, 2011).

Today's living heritage and vibrant cultural landscape owe much to the Vajracharya masters who devoted their lives to disseminating Vajrayana Buddhism, establishing Buddhist learning centers, and composing commentarial texts on Tantras. Among them, Pandit Vak Vajra was instrumental in constructing chaityas, founding viharas, and writing commentaries on Tantric texts and Caryagiti (Thapa, 2015).

Known as Ngak Dorje among Tibetan Buddhists, Vak Vajra was the resident Sthavira of Maitripur Mahavihara in Tha-Hiti Tole, Kathmandu. According to scholar Vijayaraj Vajracharya, this Siddha Vajracharya is believed to have brought the Kashi Simbhu from Kashi in Nepal Sambat (N.S.) 330, at which time he was believed to be around 50 years old (Vajracharya, 1993).

However, there is scholarly debate regarding Vak Vajra's birth date and period of activity. Nepali scholars and Buddhist historians differ in their calculations. Buddhist scholar and practitioner Sridhar Rana, along with historian Professor Shankar Thapa, disagree with Vijayaraj Vajracharya. Rana claims, "Vak Vajra was a contemporary of Surata Vajra (16th century CE). He lived in Maitripur Mahavihar (Kwabaha) in Thainti" (2011, p. 61).

Furthermore, a Sanskrit legend titled The Legend of Vak Vajra Bajracharya begins in the 5th century CE in the historic city of Kathmandu, Nepal. According to Bajracharya.org (2024), Vak Vajra was born during the Licchavi Dynasty, a period noted for cultural and religious development, and left an indelible mark on the spiritual landscape of Nepal.

Similarly, Yagyamanapati Vajracharya (2010), a Buddhist scholar of the Nepal Mandala, claims that Vak Vajra was a disciple of Bandhudatta the monk credited with bringing Machhendranath to Nepal in 522 CE. If so, Vak Vajra's flourishing period would be around 550 CE.

In contrast, both Shankar Thapa (2015) and Vajra Master Sridhar Rana (2011) estimate Vak Vajra's period of prominence to be the 16th century. However, considering Vak Vajra is regarded as one of the early Vajrayana masters, this would place his activity nearly eight centuries too late. And, Bhuvanlal Pradhan offers a middle ground, suggesting that Vak Vajra flourished between the 9th and 12th centuries CE. The oldest surviving tadapatras (palm-leaf manuscripts) from Vak Vajra's Mahavihara in Shreegha Bahal are dated to Nepal Sambat 579 and 672.

Additionally, Vajrayana Buddhist scholar Naresh Man Bajracharya asserts that Vajrayana practice must have developed by the time of King Amsuvarma, based on a rock inscription dated between 606–622 CE that mentions the words Vajra and Swayambhu.

Therefore, he suggests the origins of Vajrayana in the Kathmandu Valley may date as far back as the 4th century CE.

Despite these varying scholarly interpretations regarding the life and period of Siddha Vak Vajra, one thing is certain: he lived sometime between the 12th and 16th centuries CE. I leave the debate over his exact dates to the historians of the Nepal Mandala.

Life and Works of Vak Vajra

Kwā-bāha (Maitripur Mahavihara) is one of the eighteen major Bahas of Kathmandu. According to members of the Sangha, the monastery was established by Vak Vajra Vajracharya. Despite its historical importance, little is known about the written history of Kwā-bāha. It is, however, recognized as the oldest Baha of Thathu Pui and is often listed first among the Bahas of the Acharya-Guthi (Locke, 1985).

Newar cultural historian Bhuvanlal Pradhan suggests that "Kwā-bāha sounds like the name of an administrative office. Therefore, the name is understood to be Kwatah Bahal. Among locals, there is a prevailing impression that the actual name is Kwatha Bahal" (2023, p. 14). As mentioned earlier, this Bahal is associated with the four zones of Kathmandu: Thathu Pui, Dathu Pui, Layaku Pui, and Kwathu Pui, each corresponding respectively to Vak Vajra, Surata Vajra, Lila Vajra, and Manju Vajra (Pradhan, 2003/2007).

Kwā-bāha is located at the northern end of Thathu Pui (Upper Zone). To the south were stone spouts (Tha-Hiti), and the surrounding city was then known as Suvana Paranali. These spouts were buried in 1459, and a brick Chaitya was erected on the site (Pradhan, 2021). However, according to Dhanavajra Vajracharya (1973), this brick stupa exhibits characteristics of the Lichhavi period. Many stupas and water spouts were constructed in Kathmandu during this time. Therefore, Vak Vajra's descendants might have been correct to claim that the stupa at the Thahiti plaza as maintained by Vak Vajra after the Licchavi period.

The monastery is situated in a partially preserved baha courtyard, just north of the Tha-Hiti. The shrine is a three-story structure topped with a small cupola. The carved and embossed frame of the shrine is flanked by images of Sariputra and Mahamaudgalyayana. The main *torana* above the shrine of Kwapa-dya is undated, but the entrance to the baha compound features an identical but older *torana* dated N.S. 789. Kwapa-dya is identified as Dipankara Buddha, depicted with the left hand in *abhayamudra* (gesture of fearlessness) and the right hand in the preaching gesture.

According to the Vak Vajra Sangha family, the Mahavihara has a branch called Musya Baha, also known as Karunapur Mahavihar, which was founded by Majindrapala,

the son of Vak Vajra. Moreover, the priests and Sangha members of the monastery informed that Kwā-bāha has its own Kumari (living goddess), selected from the daughters of Sangha members. The Kwā-bāha Kumari comes from the Vajracharya clan, unlike the Basantapur Kumari, who belongs to the Shakya clan. This Kumari is considered Buddhist, as she is worshipped as Vajrayogini, never as Durga. Although affiliated with Kwā-bāha, most of her ritual functions are performed at Tham-Bahi, where Vajracharyas serve as priests. The annual festival of the Baha takes place on the eighth day of the bright half of the month of Falgun.

In terms of historicity, the earliest known reference to Kwā-bāha appears in an inscription at Sigha Baha, dated N.S. 672, which mentions a bhikshu from Kwā-bāha who was a member of a Guthi there. The earliest reference to the Sanskrit name Maitripur is found in a manuscript of the Aparamitayu Dharani Sutra, copied in N.S. 779 by Vajracharya Jinadeva of Maitripur Mahavihara in the city of Sauvarnapranali (Locke, 1985, p. 270).

Following Kwā-bāha, Kashi Simbu, also known as Santighata Chaitya, at Thahiti is considered another significant contribution of Vak Vajra to the Buddhist heritage of the Kathmandu Valley. This chaitya, reminiscent of the Swayambhu Maha Chaitya, contains several unique features. Notably, its dome rests on a whitewashed pedestal. Above the dome (garbha) is a four-sided harmika with eyes similar to those of the Maha Chaitya. Around the *garbha*, at the cardinal points, are images of the five Meditational Buddhas. Interestingly, the placement of Vairochana differs from that in Swayambhu: in the Kashi Simbhu Chaitya, Vairochana is situated in the southeast, between Ratnasambhava and Akshobhya, rather than inside the dome as in the Maha Chaitya. The earliest inscription at this site is dated N.S. 672 (Locke, 1985, p. 337).

A widely told legend explains the origin of this Chaitya¹. It is said that Vak Vajra never performed his morning ritual at the Maitripura Mahavihara without first bathing in the river and invoking Mamaki Tara by its bank in Kashi. He maintained a strict discipline, eating only once a day. During one such ritual bath, he was approached by a Jaina king whose Buddhist wife had requested the construction of a Buddhist stupa. Upon its completion, the king sought an Acharya for its consecration. When none could be found, someone remembered a Nepalese Acharya who bathed in the river each morning—none other than the famed Vak Vajra.

He was summoned to consecrate the stupa. However, he merely sprinkled water over it, leading the onlookers to believe the ritual was incomplete. Offended by their lack of

1 Based on a personal communication with Milan Ratna Vajracharya, a descendant of Vak Vajra who lives at the Maitripur Mahavihar complex.

faith, Vak Vajra told the king that the stupa was built on a cremation ground and was thus spiritually impure. He advised relocating it and, after receiving permission, tied the stupa with mantra-charged threads and lifted it using his riddhi powers. Witnessing this miracle, the citizens hailed him as an emanation of the Buddha. Vak Vajra brought the stupa to Nepal and placed it at Shani-ghat, Thahiti, now known as Shree Gha, a site where sacred water pots were enshrined. He then properly consecrated the stupa and established Shanti-ghat Vihara around it for daily rituals. He then initiated the Shakyas of Ason Tole and entrusted them with maintaining the Vihara.

By the time of Vak Vajra, Vajrayana Buddhism had fully matured, becoming the accepted path of Buddhist practice in both India and Nepal. From the Nepalese Buddhist monasteries, it spread into those of Tibet. This era was marked by the emergence of Siddhas and Yogins, great perfected beings, Tantrics who, through rigorous discipline and study, possessed supernatural powers and were assiduously sought out as teachers (Slusser, 1998/1982, p. 281).

Vak Vajra composed several tantric texts that are still studied in Vajrayana practices today. Among his known works are:

Sri Cakrasamvara Tatvabhanga Sangraha
Sri Kalacakra Supratisthipayika Vidhi
Vajravarahi Sanksipta Stotra
Samvaradvaita Dhyanaopadesa Yoga Candali

In addition to these tantric texts, Vak Vajra contributed significantly to the tradition of Caryagiti, songs of realization. Four of these Caryagiti are still performed in Newar Buddhist rituals today (Rana, 2011, p. 61). Among the many tantric rituals, Carya (or Caca in Newari) singing and dancing remain integral elements. Caryagiti are regarded as expressions of profound realization, while Carya dance is considered "meditation in action." These songs are composed spontaneously, capturing the enlightened state of the practitioner.

Newar scholars, particularly the Vajracharyas, made significant intellectual contributions to the development of the Caca tradition. Hundreds of Caca songs were composed by Newar Buddhists, with Vak Vajra standing at the pinnacle of this literary and spiritual tradition. These songs trace their roots to the Mahamudra masters of ancient India. While the first Carya songs were composed by the Siddhas, their practice continued among the Newar Vajracharyas of Nepal.

In Kathmandu, it is believed that Caca writing began with Vak Vajra Vajracharya and Surata Vajra Vajracharya (Thapa, 2015, p. 107). Vak Vajra's composition Raktavarna

is one such example. Professor Thapa states, “The actual history of Caca goes back to the 11th century. Caryagiti quickly reached the Kathmandu Valley due to frequent contact with the Buddhists of Northern India” (2015, p. 206). The Caca performance tradition continues unbroken to this day. Nepal still preserves “the living culture of Carya dance performed by initiated Vajracharyas during various tantric rituals” (Thapa, 2015, p. 116).

Conclusion

Without the life story and contributions of Buddhist masters such as Vak Vajra, Buddhism in Nepal might have suffered the same fate as it did in India. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, French scholar Sylvain Lévi made a chilling observation. He wrote: “Nepal is India in the making: Here, in the Kathmandu Valley, one could study as in a laboratory the relationship of late Buddhism to Hinduism and to Hindu kingship, a dynamic process which culminated in India in the elimination of Buddhism” (as quoted in Gellner, 1996, p. 2).

However, the foundation of Buddhism in Nepal was laid deeply enough that no foreign tradition could destabilize the Buddhism of the Nepal Mandala. While it was heavily influenced by foreign religious practices, the solid groundwork laid by Vajracharya masters like Vak Vajra enabled later generations to revive and preserve the tradition in its original form.

Although Vak Vajra’s life is shrouded in mystery and myth, he most likely lived between the 11th and 15th centuries. Despite the uncertainty about his exact birth date, his contribution to the development and promotion of the Vajrayāna tradition in the Nepal Mandala has been immensely valuable. According to local belief, after completing the construction of the Kashi Simbhu Stupa (Shrigha Stupa), Vak Vajra established another stupa in the main plaza of Thaiti (see Figure 4). He then entered the Agama (main shrine) of Maitripur Mahavihara to meditate and never returned. To this day, neither his family nor members of the Sangha have performed his final rites, which are typically conducted after death. He is not considered dead. Like other Vajrayāna siddhas, Vak Vajra is believed to have attained Khechara-loka². He is still remembered with reverence. On the 14th day of the bright half of the month of Ashwin, people gather at Santighat Vihara to perform Buddhist rituals in honor of the Vihara’s founding by Vak Vajra. He is venerated as one of the Four Pillars of Vajrayāna Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley.

2 The *Chakrasamvara Tantra* describes Khechara-loka as a mandala where the practitioner unites with the deity. In Tantric texts such as *Hevajra Tantra*, it is described as celestial realm associated with Dakinis (wisdom beings, often female) and advanced yogic practitioners.

References

- Bajracharya, D. (1973). *Licchavikalaka Abhilekha Dhanavajra Vajracharya*. CNAS
- Bajracharya, N.M. (2014). *Vajrayana*. Suresh Shakya.
- Bajracharya Org. (2024, February 13). *Wak Vajra Vajracharya: Legend from Maitripur Mahavihar*. <https://bajracharya.org/wak-bajra-bajracharya-legend-from-maitripur-mahavihar/>.
- Bajracharya, S.M. (2014). *Monasticism In Buddhism of Nepal-Mandala: Continuity and Changes*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Central Department of Buddhist Studies, Tribhuvan University.
- Bajracharya, Y. (2010). *Nepal's Ancient Vajracharya: Lila Vajra (Founder of Kasthamandap)*. Virinchi Moti Smriti Guhyatara Kosh.
- Gellner, D. N. (1996). *Monk, householder, and Tantric priest: Newar Buddhism and its hierarchy of ritual* (Special edition for sale in South Asia only; repr). Foundation Books [u.a.].
- Locke, John K. 1985. *Buddhist Monasteries of Nepal: A Survey of Bahas and Bahis of the Kathmandu valley*. Sahayogi Press. Page: 270.
- Pradhan, B. (2021/2007). *Kathmandu Upatyakaka Sanskritik Chirka Mirka*. Sumitra M. Gurung.
- Pradhan, B. (2076 B.S.). *Nepal-ma Buddha Dharma*. Nepal Pragya Patisthan.
- Rana, Sridhar. 2011. "The Four Pillars of the Vajrayana of the Kathmandu Valley". *Crazy Cloud*. Vol.1. Byoma Kusuma Buddha Dharma Sangha. pp. 55-64.
- Sharkey, G. (2001). *Buddhist Daily Rituals: the Nitya Puja in Kathmandu Valley Shrines*. Orchid Press.
- Slusser, Mary S. 1998/1982. "Buddhism: Evolution and Dissolution". *Nepal Mandala: A cultural Study of Kathmandu Valley*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point. (pp. 270-306).
- Thapa, Shanker. 2015. "Carya Songs and Newar Buddhists: Ritual Singing in Vajrayana Buddhism of Nepal". Ed. Andrea Loseries. *Sahaja: the role of Doha and Caryagiti in the Cultural Indo-Tibetan Interface*. Buddhist World Press. pp. 99-117.
- Vajracharya, Vijayaraj. 1993. *Dhi: Journal of Rare Buddhist Texts and Research*. Vol. xv. CIHTS.
- *Researcher, personally, interviewed Milan Ratna Bajracharya at Kwabaha at 11 am on Saturday 8th March 2025.

Appendixes



Figure 1. Shree Gha Chaitya, locally known as Kashi simbu or Shantighat Chaitya at Thahiti, Kathmandu.



Figure 2. Maitripur Mahavihara- Kwā-bāha , at Thamel.



Figure 3. Kwā-bāha gate



Figure 4. The Stupa at Tha-hiti Plaza, Vak Vajra believed to have made this Stupa.