

CHAPTER 1



Introduction: Buddhism as a Pragmatic Religious Tradition

Our approach to Religion can be called “vernacular” . . . [It is] concerned with the kinds of data that may, eventually, be able to give us some substantial insight into how religions have played their part in history, affecting people’s ability to respond to environmental crises; to earthquakes, floods, famines, pandemics; as well as to social ills and civil wars. Besides these evils, there are the everyday difficulties and personal disasters we all face from time to time. Religions have played their part in keeping people sane and stable. . . . We thus see religions as an integral part of vernacular history, as a strand woven into lives of individuals, families, social groups, and whole societies. Religions are like technology in that respect: ever present and influential to people’s ability to solve life’s problems day by day.

Vernon Reynolds and Ralph Tanner,
The Social Ecology of Religion

The Buddhist faith expresses itself most authentically in the processions of statues through towns, the nocturnal illuminations in the streets and countryside. It is on such occasions that communion between the religious and laity takes place . . . without which the religion could be no more than an exercise of recluse monks.

Jacques Gernet,
*Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History
from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*

Whosoever maintains that it is karma that injures beings, and besides it there is no other reason for pain, his proposition is false. . . .

Milindapañha IV.I.62

Health, good luck, peace, and progeny have been the near-universal wishes of humanity. Buddhism, like all world religions, evolved to affect the human condition positively, utilizing its powers over the unseen forces that operate behind and beyond the mundane world. Since prosperity and security are optimum for both the individual and for the collective pursuit of spiritual goals, it was natural that Buddhism developed pragmatic means to achieve them. This “pragmatic ritual repertoire” included highly efficient donations to make good *karman* (*puṇya*) and to insure the regular recitation of the Buddha’s words; it also featured the performance of rituals (*pūjā*) specified by Buddhas and bodhisattvas designed to project auspicious influences, to engage protective beings throughout the pantheon, and to repel all evil.

While textbooks rarely emphasize it, ritual has always defined the devout and active householder’s adherence to Buddhism. The tradition’s earliest stories recount the advantages of ritual actions that worked for individuals while also serving the important role of unifying Buddhist communities, both spiritually and socially.

This book provides a sample of the key rituals and narratives in one surviving Indic community’s popular Mahāyāna observances. Each text focuses on the protective powers connected to the Buddhist *triratna* in order to spread well-being among the monks and nuns, among householders, and across the wider community, including the natural environment. Every Newar case study thus offers an example of how Mahāyāna masters extended their service to householders beyond instruction in salvation-oriented belief and practice so as to organize the performance of rituals. This “spiritual pragmatism” was one of the universal developments in the diaspora of successful Buddhist missions throughout Asia (e.g., Zurcher 1972; Yun-Hua 1977; Buswell 1990; Strickmann 1990).

Popular Narratives and their “Domestication” in Buddhist Communities

One attribute of Gautama Buddha as a “great teacher of gods and men” was doubtless his skillful turning of a story to demonstrate a doctrinal point, matching teaching to audience. Such para-

bles are found in all canons compiled by the early schools. Hundreds of stories attributed to Shākyamuni are *karman*-retribution parables that illustrate the cause and effect of moral acts and ritual actions. Throughout Buddhism's first millennium, literati collected and redacted many such tales, called *avadāna* and *jātakas*, and they are among the first identifiable genres of collected teachings (Law 1939). Many have pan-Indic elements, but were revised to conform to Buddhist doctrine, ethics, and hagiography. As indicated by its title, an *avadāna* (significant deed or adventure¹) is a form of Buddhist literature that imparts simple religious instruction through the heroic actions of a bodhisattva (the future Shākyamuni or another), Buddha, or another spiritually advanced being.

Familiarity with these narratives and with their public recitation eventually became a recognized monastic avocation, as one text notes six such roles within the *saṃgha* that include folklorists (*tirascakathika*). The magnitude of the folklore collections is striking, as clearly this genre found a widespread audience among the laity through public storytelling.² The earliest examples of Buddhist art contain scenes from these stories and they remained a major thematic focus on later Buddhist monuments (e.g., Fontein 1981; Krairiksh 1974; Grunwedel 1912; Mair 1997; Shih 1993). Among the earliest records of Buddhism in Nepal, a sixth-century inscription refers to a *stūpa* decorated with scenes from the *Kinnarī Jātaka* (Riccardi 1980: 273; Lienhard 1988: xiv).

It should not be assumed, however, that this literature was directed solely toward householders. Monks and nuns also collected these stories, but it seems that this was done just as much to explain the origins of prescriptions and proscriptions within the *saṃghas* as for preaching to the laity (Schopen 1994a, 1994b). The Thai tradition (since the eleventh century) of artists sculpting scenes from *jātaka* stories on the *sima* stones (those used to mark the boundaries for *saṃgha* assemblies) also indicates this monastic-narrative connection within the archaeological record (Krairiksh 1974). Thus, by focusing on popular narratives, one is examining one of the earliest genres of Buddhist text, one that traveled everywhere Buddhism did, a literature that was the concern of all Buddhists, monastic and laity.



“Domestication” is a central concern in this study. I define it as the dialectical historical process by which a religious tradition is

adapted to a region or ethnic group's socioeconomic and cultural life. While "Great traditions" supply a clear spiritual direction to followers who are close to the charismatic founders, including norms of orthodox adaptation and missionizing, religious traditions' historical survival has been related—often paradoxically—to their being "multivocalic" so that later devotees have a large spectrum of doctrine, rituals, situational instructions, and exemplary folktales to draw upon. In order to study "religious domestication" one seeks to demonstrate the underlying reasons for selectivity from the whole as the tradition evolves in specific places and times to the "logic of life" in a locality. As Charles Hallisey notes, this is one of the basic historical questions for locating and understanding the role of texts in any society:

If the survival of any particular text is not self-explanatory, but in fact it is normally the case that texts fade in their significance as social change occurs, then we need to discover how these texts that do endure are maintained. (Hallisey 1995b: 51)

Buddhism became an expansive movement, then, as it successfully conveyed its teachings in forms that could reach beyond ascetics and logicians, that is, in vernacular narratives that could effectively and distinctively shape the lives of those comprising the wider society.³ Through such domesticated stories, Buddhists grasped the significance of the religious teachings through example and exemplar, established their localities as sites of bodhisattva-related actions, and defined their moral duties and ethnic identities.

Stories reach deeply into a society's collective culture. They present, to use Clifford Geertz's terminology (1966), *models for* positive behavior and *images of* negative behavior, doing so with entertaining, multilayered plots that grip the individual's psyche (Amore and Shinn 1981). As such, as Stephen Crites points out, "[They] are the preconditions of experience to the extent that we move to their rhythms and they enter our dreams and ruminations, called to mind without our bidding, sometimes jarred into mind at unlikely moments by dramatically similar episodes in the broad daylight of our waking lives" (Crites 1975: 49).

The most influential Buddhist textual sources, then, cannot be equated with the entire canon that resides in the monastic libraries, but must feature the popular stories domesticated in vernacular tongues within given localities (Strong 1992: xi); their attraction

was that they came to engender the community's familiarity such that, as Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty has noted, "Retelling the myths takes on the function of communion rather than communication. People listen to the stories not merely to learn something new (communication) but to relive, together, the stories that they already know, stories about themselves (communion)" (O'Flaherty 1989: 87).

The moral-ethical and utopian dimensions of Buddhist *jātakas* and *avadānas* will be explored in this volume. In their article on this topic, Hallisey and Anne Hansen define a three-dimensional field of meaning enabled by these narratives:

Prefiguration (the effect of narratives in enlarging an agent's moral horizon), *configuration* (the power of narratives to expose the opaqueness of moral intention), and *refiguration* (the healing and transformative potential of narratives). (Hallisey and Hansen 1996: 308)

Buddhist stories also functioned via domestication to fix geographic and ethnic identification with the stories' places and characters. In the Indic hearth and out to the immediate Central Asian, northern, and southern frontiers, Buddhists identified places in the local topography where events described in these stories took place. (This "localization" is found in every Newar story.) They also in some cases claim as ethnic ancestors the protagonists found in a given story (as seen in chaps. 2 and 5). Literary "domestications" using such specific redactions of pan-Buddhist stories often have been done in the oral formulations in local dialects, as regional editors have "made a story their own."⁴

As Buddhism was constituted by myriad localizations without an overarching institutional authority, the doctrines and ethos of *avadānas* and *jātakas* provide invaluable insight about the missionary expansion of the faith, their becoming, in Arthur F. Wright's terms, "a treasure trove of legend" that "offered a new model for . . . the king who rules well and successfully through devotion to Buddha . . . and the related model of the munificent donor, the *Mahādānapati*. . ." (Wright 1959: 170). In China, too, monks composed a class of illustrated vernacular texts called *pien-wen* from the eighth century onward in order to domesticate Buddhist ideas for popular audiences (Overmyer 1980: 170).



In modern Nepal, the Newar Buddhist *saṃgha*'s role as translator and publicizer of the popular narratives also endures. "Folklorists" in the *saṃgha* still keep hand-copied personal story compilations that they use when invited by patrons to "tell stories" for an evening, a week, or a month. They still do so when they accompany disciples to Buddhist pilgrimage sites around the Kathmandu Valley. This recycling of tales from ancient texts by living teachers continues right into the modern period with the published editions featured in this book. The cultural process provides a Buddhist example of what A. K. Ramanujan so aptly describes as "The way texts do not simply go from one written form to another but get reworked through oral cycles that surround the written word" (Ramanujan 1990: 12). For, indeed, in modern Nepal the most popular stories are still told in public story recitations that attract hundreds.⁵ Several of the texts in this volume represent a literary rendering of the most renowned performances of Buddhist storytellers from the local *saṃgha*.

The texts that are presented in chapters 2, 4, and 5 were compiled and published by Badri Bajracarya, modern Kathmandu's storyteller extraordinaire and respected scholar. Whether in one of the town's *vihāras* or in the Kāṣṭamaṇḍapa, the great public assembly building from which Kathmandu derives its name, it was Badri's sessions in the early 1980s that drew hundreds to hear his dramatic, multivocalic, and clearly elucidated doctrinal presentations as he read from, and expounded upon, popular *avadānas* and *jātakas*. The simple language of his stories employs repetitions to capture the storyteller's expository manner. In this continuance of ancient tradition, such Newar pandits conform to observations made in India fourteen centuries ago by the Chinese pilgrim I-Tsing: "The object of composing *jātakas* in verse is to teach the doctrine of universal salvation in a beautiful style, agreeable to the popular mind and attractive to readers" (Takakasu 1896: 163).

What Newar tradition affords, then, is the chance to study literary redaction as part of the larger domestication of the Buddhist faith in the Kathmandu Valley. A useful question to ponder is this: among the many hundreds of *jātakas* and *avadānas* composed in the Buddhist world, most of which in their Sanskrit redactions were conveyed into Nepal, why were these few adopted, given local identification, and repeatedly recited within the local Buddhist community?⁶ This study will attempt to formulate answers to this question for these five texts.⁷ As it considers both popular Mahāyāna

texts and rituals, another useful and recurring concern will be to consider how Buddhist rituals derived from these texts exemplify and express doctrinal views, a subject we must now introduce.

The Development of Buddhist Ritualism

Buddhist doctrine explains that all six realms of existence⁸ are linked by causal contingencies and that the *dharma* affects all spheres universally.⁹ Because the forces of the universe are connected to the unfolding actions associated with the *triratna*, the earth may quake (e.g., when a Buddha reaches enlightenment or reveals a *sūtra*) or rend apart (e.g., throwing Devadatta to Avici Hell), heavens can open (e.g., as part of a *sūtra* revelation), or “magical” transformations of outward appearances may occur (e.g., in response to an “Act of Truth” or when a householder realizes nirvaṇa and is instantly transformed into a monk/nun). All schools accept this nexus of causal contingency.

To evoke this fundamental cosmic power, the earliest tradition identified certain collections of the Buddha’s words that had an extraordinary effect when carefully recited. In the Pali literature, there are passages in which Shākyamuni utters mantras to heal a woman who suffered a miscarriage, to remedy snake bites, to cure diseases, or to make rain fall (Bharati 1955: 104).¹⁰ A *Dīgha Nikāya* passage states that the “Four World Lords” had given *mantras* to the Buddha and promises certain protection to anyone chanting them (Thomas 1951: 186).¹¹ These short recitations were remembered and classified under *paritta* in the Pali tradition and as *rakṣā* in Sanskrit texts (Skilling 1992). Such spells were regarded as efficacious for promoting longevity, for alleviating suffering from a variety of crises, and for creating a sort of radiant auspiciousness permeating individuals and/or localities (Gombrich 1971; Prebish 1975b: 168). Such *mantra* recitations are elements in all of the Newar texts considered in this study. (Further discussion of this subject is found in chap. 6.)



The presence of such recitation traditions in all schools underlines the important early doctrine that not all phenomena are caused by karmic contingencies. This teaching is forcefully

expressed in the Theravādin *Milindapañha* through the Monk Nāgasena's explanation of how the Buddha Shākyamuni had been subject to pain and disease throughout his lifetime:

. . . It is not all suffering that has its root in karma. There are eight causes by which sufferings arise, by which many beings suffer pain. . . . Superabundance of wind and of bile, and of phlegm, the union of these humors, [seasonal] variations in temperature, the avoiding of dissimilarities, external agency, and karma. . . .

And there is the act that has karma as its fruit, and the pain so brought about arising from the act done. So what arises as the fruit of karma is much less than that which arises from other causes. And the ignorant go too far when they say that every pain is produced by karma.

No one without a Buddha's insight can fix the extent of the action of karma.

(Rhys-Davids 1963: 191–93)

Since most of still-unenlightened humanity cannot “fix the extent of the action of *karman*,” it is always apt to chant *mantras* that can harness both the powers of the Buddha and his teachings to affect both karmic and nonkarmic contingencies. This core Buddhist understanding of the multifaceted causalities affecting human destiny was no doubt the foundation for the later elaboration of Buddhist ritualism—in all lineages—directed toward the devotee's search for health, prosperity, long life, and good rebirth.¹²

Thus, it became the ubiquitous goal of Buddhists to sustain and to nurture the monks and laity—the *pariṣad*—as this constitutes the central “project” of any Buddhist community. In exchange for the material donations (*dāna*) that have housed, clothed, and fed them, monks and nuns from the earliest days were instructed to serve the world through their example of renunciation and through meditation (Wijayaratna 1990), by performing rituals (Gombrich 1971: 201ff; Carrithers 1990: 149), and by providing medical service (Zysk 1991). All Buddhist rituals stem from this compassionate occupation, expressing devotion to the *triratna* and asserting their interrelationship: on the authority of the Buddha, the *saṃgha* acts to utilize the *dharma* to create mundane and supramundane blessings.¹³ Domesticated Buddhisms across Asia developed many avenues

whereby monastic leaders adapted their lineage's resources as a "Triple Jewel" to remain a compelling refuge.¹⁴

The Ritual Innovations of Mahāyāna Buddhism

For those who adopted the Mahāyāna bodhisattva ethos, serving the lay community was their compassionate duty and an important channel for this was ritual. It was doubtless *saṃgha* specialists who applied the Mahāyāna doctrines on emptiness, mind, and Buddha nature to articulate myriad efficacious actions and utterances¹⁵—*mantras* and *dhāraṇīs*—to mitigate suffering and to cultivate spiritual insight.

To tap the often invisible but always-enduring Buddha/bodhisattva connection to the human world and to express their aspiration for compassionate service, Mahāyāna practitioners sanctioned an immense ritual agenda to enhance their society's well-being and to make the laity's spiritual journey easier (Miller 1962: 430; Strickmann 1990; Lewis 1993c). Michael Pye has noted the doctrinal basis of this development:

The main focal point of Buddhist devotions from earliest times . . . [must be seen in] the context of the thought of skillful means [*upāya*]. It is not only doctrinal concepts which are understood as skillful means but also ritual practice. . . . The Mahāyāna articulation of Buddhism as a working religion along these lines is altogether controlled by the concept of skillful means. (Pye 1978: 58–59)

The evolution of Mahāyāna Buddhist ritualism must also be understood in relation to other developments in Buddhist history. The growth of popular devotion to celestial bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteshvara and Tārā fostered ritual elaborations. Indic Mahāyāna *bhakti* texts directed Buddhists to take refuge in these divinities that occupied a similar, competing niche alongside the great *devas* of the Brahmanical pantheon. Popular texts recount these bodhisattvas' rescuing devotees, bestowing boons, and controlling nature. The establishment of Buddhist temples to these saviors created the need for attending ritualists and for the development of proper ritual procedures for daily, lunar monthly, and yearly observances. For this reason, the great texts of the later tradition, for instance, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* and the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, all contain chapters concerned with Buddhist *pūjā* and its rewards. A

host of ritual guidebooks were also composed in this later Buddhist era.

As an extension of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Vajrayāna tradition that grew in importance from the fifth century C.E. onward in South Asia furthered these ritualistic tendencies (Snellgrove 1987: 456), representing both a critique and a fulfillment of early Mahāyāna praxis (Gomez 1987). The chief *tantra*-path exponents and exemplars, the *siddhas*, developed *sādhana* traditions outside of the scholarly monastic circles and rejected the prevalent multi-lifetime, slow approximation bodhisattva approach to enlightenment. These yogins introduced the means to cultivate *prajñā* (insight) by visualizations from *shūnyatā* (emptiness) and by directly associating with the Buddha's three "secrets": Body (*mudrā*), Speech (*mantra*), and Mind (*samādhi*) (Wayman 1971: 443). Through a host of innovative techniques, the Vajrayāna masters showed the immediate possibility of harnessing the experience of *shūnyatā* in order to attain enlightenment.

As a corollary to their soteriological discoveries, the *siddhas* also composed rituals that applied a master's power to accomplish both supramundane and mundane goals. The later scholars who eventually organized and domesticated the *sādhana* practices fashioned a Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna Buddhist culture that emphasized *pūjā* (ritual performance) and *vrata* (devotional rites to a chosen deity, as in chaps. 4 and 5). It is likely that both were originally designed for use as intensive practices on the two *uposadha* days each month and on the two *aṣṭamī* days. At the root of advanced Vajrayāna practice was *abhiṣekha* (esoteric initiation) and ritual performances that constitute an important part of most tantric texts (Snellgrove 1987: 456); pilgrimage was also emphasized in the religious life-style (Bharati 1955).

This shift in religious emphases was also accompanied by adaptations within the *saṃghas*. Mahāyāna monks who adopted the bodhisattva ethos viewed serving the lay community as their chief duty, and ritual was a principal medium. As Robert J. Miller has noted:

This responsibility may be thought of as community service. Thus, the . . . monk . . . rejects complete release from the cycle of existence, choosing instead to return again and again in the world in order to aid others in attaining release. This new duty is added to the old one of achieving personal enlightenment through the performance of the regular

prayers and observances. . . . Since the layman is unable to pursue enlightenment directly, the *saṃgha* . . . is obliged to find a means by which he can pursue it indirectly. (Miller 1962: 430)

Thus, by establishing many levels of legitimate religious practice for layfolk and for many areas in which the *saṃgha* served society, the Mahāyāna tradition sought to inspire and to unite a large community. Farmers, traders, and artisans had a place in the spiritual hierarchy, as ritual offerings linked householders to temple-dwelling celestial bodhisattvas as well as to their ritualists and teachers in the *saṃgha*. By the Pāla period in northeast India (ca. 750–950), this sort of Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna culture flowered (Dutt 1962: 389); it clearly shaped the emergence of Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley, located just north of Bihar in the Himalayan foothills, as it did the successful domestication of Buddhism in East Asia and Tibet. Before proceeding further in this area, we must finally introduce the community of contextual reference, the Newars of Nepal.

Nepal and Newar Buddhism

Any scholar who has worked with Indic Mahāyāna texts or with later Buddhist iconography knows of the plenitude of Sanskrit manuscripts preserved in the Buddhist and state libraries of the Kathmandu Valley. The discovery of these Nepalese manuscripts in the nineteenth century was a landmark in modern Buddhist studies; sent out to Calcutta, Paris, and London by the indefatigable collector Brian H. Hodgson, the British Resident from 1820 to 1843, these texts gave European scholars their first complete overview of northern Buddhism's vast Indic literary heritage (Hunter 1896). Since Nepal was largely sealed off from the outside world until 1951, only recently have scholars recognized the value of Sylvain Levi's long-ago assertion (1905, 1: 28) that other aspects of Buddhist culture there *besides Sanskrit texts* might provide case studies for garnering insight on the faith's later Indic history.

"Nepal" until the modern state's formation (1769) referred only to a roughly three-hundred-square-mile valley in the central Himalayan foothills. The mountainous topography shaped Nepal's destiny to remain as an independent petty state and its predominantly Indicized civilization developed relatively unmolested by

outside states. The fertility of valley soils allowed for intensive rice and for other crop cultivation; more lucrative were the earnings from trans-Himalayan trade, as merchants centered in the valley could control the movement of goods from the Gangetic plains to the Tibetan plateau using the valley as an entrepôt (Lewis 1993b). The wealth from trade allowed the peoples of the Kathmandu Valley to import, domesticate, and reproduce many traditions in a distinctive urban civilization organized on caste principles and around both Hinduism and Buddhism. There have been Sanskrit *paṇḍitas* in Nepal for over fifteen hundred years; equally long-established were Hindu temples and *ashrams*, Buddhist monasteries and *stūpas*, and wealthy aristocrat and merchant patrons.

“Newār” derives from the place name “Nepāl.” There has also been a diaspora of Newars to market towns throughout Nepal, the eastern Himalayan hills, to Tibet, and across South Asia (Gellner 1986; Lewis and Shakya 1988; Lewis 1993b). “Newari” is a modern English neologism for the Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the Kathmandu Valley. There are two emic terms preferred by Newars: the colloquial *Newa: Bhāy* or the Sanskritized *Nepāl Bhāṣa* that also expresses the old pre-Shah (before 1769) boundary of “Nepāl” as the Kathmandu Valley.

The Newars also proved themselves exceptionally able artisans, adapting and domesticating Indic ideals into quite beautiful expressions of lost wax metal icons, stone and wood sculpture, multistory wooden architecture, and painting. Over the past millennium, Newar artisans were employed across Tibet and their workshops in the valley supplied the needs of the “devotional goods market” that accompanied the expansion of Buddhism across the Tibetan plateau (Vitali 1990; Bue 1985, 1986).

Three city-states—Bhaktapur, Kathmandu, and Lalitpur—came to dominate the valley, although smaller towns and villages have given the polity a broad variation in settlement types (Gellner and Quigley 1995). After conquest by a Kshatriya dynasty from Gorkha in 1769, state policies favoring Hinduism precipitated the decline of Buddhist traditions, although a great wealth of both devotional and cultural observance remain. Today, with Kathmandu the capital of the modern state and a center of contact with the outside world, there are still many surviving archaic cultural traditions. A Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna Buddhist culture is among the most unique of them.

Buddhism has existed in Nepal since at least the Gupta era. Throughout the centuries of political autonomy, the Kathmandu Valley remained accessible to migrants, monks, and traders. Newar

Buddhism has always been predominantly “Indic,” and through Nepal later Indic Mahāyāna traditions were conveyed to Tibet; at times, too, Tibetan Buddhist influences have been strong (Lewis 1989c, 1996d; Lewis and Jamspal 1988). In at least the last four centuries, Nepalese Buddhism has shared much in common with the domesticated forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism in modern Tibet and Japan, notably with a householder *saṃgha*, special emphasis on death ritualism, and most preeminent devotion shown to great regional *stūpas* and to the celestial bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

Despite Newar Buddhism’s slow decline, over three hundred Buddhist *vihāras* (monasteries) still exist (Locke 1985) as do *vajrācārya* ritualists, bodhisattva temples, *stūpas*, Mahāyāna festivals, tantric meditation passed on through *dikṣā* lineages, and *avadāna*-related pilgrimage traditions. Devout Buddhists still form a large proportion of the valley’s urban population and being Buddhist remains a vital marker of group identity (Gellner 1992; Lewis 1989b, 1995a, 1996c). This rich cultural survival disproves the often-repeated assertion that Indic Buddhism ever completely died: the Newars in their small but vibrant oasis of tradition continue to practice Indic Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna Buddhism (Lienhard 1984) alongside a Hindu majority. In fact, Buddhism has survived in Nepal by adapting to the logic of caste society, by incorporating the pollution/purity ethos of Brahmanical *dharmashastra* law codes, and by supporting Hindu kingship while continuing to articulate an alternative counter-(Hindu)-culture where Mahāyāna practices, deities, and tantric initiations were considered superior.

The Buddhism of most Newars is exoteric Mahāyāna devotionism, as they direct their devotions to *caityas* in their courtyards and neighborhoods and to the great *stūpas* such as Svayambhū (Locke 1986, Lewis 1984: 86–120, Gutschow 1997). Mahāyāna adherents also express strong devotion for the celestial bodhisattvas and make regular offerings at temples and shrines dedicated to them, especially to Avalokiteshvara and Mahākāla, among others. Newar Buddhists participate periodically in special observances dedicated to these divinities—a host of *pūjās* and *jātras*—which hold the promise of transforming their worldly and spiritual destinies (Locke 1987, Lewis 1989a). Most laity also worship other Indic deities: Gaṇeśha, Bhīmsen, Shiva, Viṣṇu, Devī in many guises, *nāgas*, and so forth. One strong belief is that worshipping all local deities is the Mahāyāna ideal (Gellner 1992: 75,82).



The Newar Buddhist *saṃgha* is one of the “householder monks” now limited to only two endogamous caste groups having the surnames *Vajrācārya* and *Shākya*. These *saṃghas* still dwell in courtyards referred to as *vihāra* (New.: *bāhā*) and undergo first (in local parlance) *shrāvaka*-styled celibate ordination, then (usually just a few days later) Mahāyāna-styled initiation into the householder bodhisattva *saṃgha* (Locke 1975; Gellner 1988). Like married Tibetan lamas of the Nyingmapa order, they then serve the community’s ritual needs, with some among them specializing in textual study, medicine, astrology, and meditation. David N. Gellner has aptly characterized modern Newar Buddhism as a religion in which “the good Buddhist” is one who conforms to prescribed ritual practices (Gellner 1992: 3, 134); local Buddhist intellectual culture today does not emphasize any singular doctrinal formulation of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The lay majority in the Newar Buddhist community understands basic Mahāyāna doctrines as conveyed by *avadāna* and *jātaka* stories that feature bodhisattvas, their spiritual virtues (*pāramitās*), and related practices (e.g., Lienhard 1963). In addition to compiling many recensions of these tales and telling them in public sessions, the *vajrācāryas* also perform for their community dozens of highly sophisticated Buddhist life-cycle rites (Lewis 1994a), healing ceremonies, and many other rituals adapted for local festivals and pilgrimages.



Newar Buddhism also has an esoteric level: Vajrayāna initiations (Skt.: *dīkṣa* or *abhiṣeka*; New.: *dekka*) that direct meditation and ritual to tantric deities such as Saṃvara, Hevajra, and their consorts (*yoginīs*). It is the *vajrācārya* spiritual elite that also passes on these Vajrayāna initiations to members of other high castes, including merchants and artisans; this training in tantric meditation and ritual forms the basis for the authority of their ritual service for the community (Stablein 1976c). Newar laity support the local *vajrācārya saṃgha* that helps them, in return, to look after their spiritual destiny in this world and beyond. In their maintenance of this exchange and out of concern for *puṇya*, most Newars very closely resemble lay Buddhists in other countries. We now turn to the central interest of this study, the pragmatic ritual and narrative traditions incorporated into the Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna culture of the Kathmandu Valley.

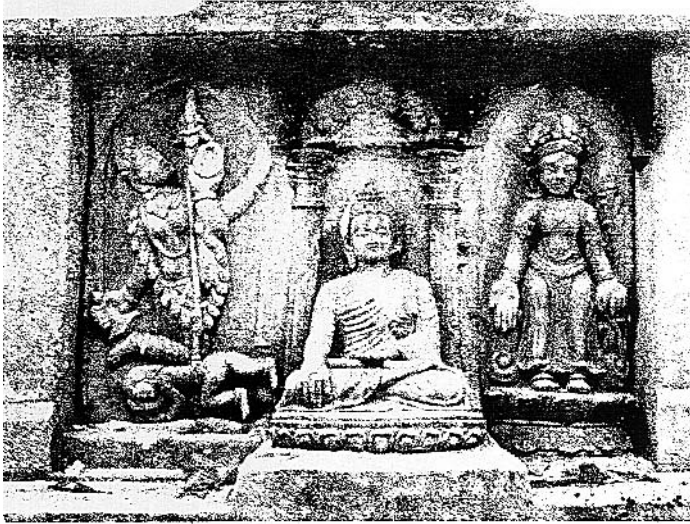


Fig 1.1. Sculpture Illustrating the Three Paths of the Newar Buddhist Tradition

Judging by the central Sanskrit texts, icons, and rituals still utilized by Vajrācāryas and Shākya of the Newar *saṃgha*, it is clear that for roughly the last one thousand years Kathmandu Valley Buddhists have roughly extended the cultural developments that coalesced in the Pala regions of northeast India.¹⁶ The Newars, as with most Buddhists across Asia, seem to have closed the door on core formulations of doctrine; perhaps influenced by teachings of the *dharma*'s decline (Williams 1989: 10; Nattier 1991), and possibly overwhelmed by the sheer diversity of alternative doctrinal formulations, new emphasis, and high priority shifted toward “preserving Buddha tradition.”

One could surmise that certainly by 1200 Mahāyāna devotees in Nepal regarded the basic religious questions as solved: the bodhisattva ideal became the predominant religious standard and the philosophical understanding of the universe—for those concerned with intellectual subtleties—was rooted in Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamaka dialectic or in Yogācāra idealism (Willis 1979; Mus 1964). Householders inclined to more immediate accomplishments could proceed upon any among dozens of Vajrayāna paths that held the promise of attaining quick spiritual progress toward enlightenment. The status of Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna texts as they evolved in the early modern Newar tradition is expressed in the set of Nine Texts (*Navadharmā*

or *Nava Grantha*) arranged in the *dharma maṇḍala* and used in the *vrata* rituals (discussed in chaps. 4 and 5):

Prajñāpārāmitā
 Saddharmapuṇḍarīka
 Lalitavistara
 Subvarṇaprabhāsa
 Laṃkāvatāra
 Dashabhūmika
 Gaṇḍhavyūha
 Saṃādhirājā
 Guhyasamāja Tantra

Since so many manuscripts and tantric praxis traditions were brought to the Kathmandu Valley after the Muslim conquest of polities across the Gangetic plains, the Newar *saṃgha*'s major areas of religious focus turned to perfecting ritual expressions of the doctrine within society and preserving the *dharma* via manuscript copying. For this reason, Nepal for the centuries since then became a center for the copying of Buddhist manuscripts, and this specialization in the Newar *saṃgha* was a source of both merit and a lucrative scribal occupation (Lienhard 1988: xvi). The scale of this reproduction was so great in medieval Nepal that, since the time of the British resident Hodgson (1820–40), modern scholars have found that Sanskrit texts from Kathmandu *vihāras* have been extensive and invaluable, a resource that Tibetans had recognized and utilized for centuries before (Lewis 1989b; Lewis and Jamsal 1988). This has been so despite the uneven quality of the manuscript copying (Brough 1954). As with acquiring tantric initiations, to get a copy of a text required payment; as in China, too (Gernet 1995), there developed a commoditization of the later Mahāyāna traditions.

Even in modern Nepal, one finds the continuity of the “cult of the book” (Schopen 1975) in the popular Buddhist festivals that involve the display of gold leaf manuscripts. This distinctly Mahāyāna form of ritual, which many texts hail as highly beneficial for those who copy, worship, or recite the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, doubtless contributed to the strong copying tradition among the Newar Buddhist elite. The long-standing Newar practice of copying manuscripts has given way since 1909 to the printing press, with the community showing great piety and energy in producing over a thousand Buddhist publications like those featured in this book.¹⁷

In this case, modern technology has *expanded* the opportunities for authors and patrons to express their *traditional* spiritual goals: spreading the *dharmā* and benefiting sentient beings. Both of these ideals are usually stated in the printed texts.



Ritual priests in medieval Nepal also devoted themselves to adapting Mahāyāna/Vajrayāna religious understandings in ritual terms. We have already noted how this was done in a most thoroughgoing manner. Lifelong ritual relations tie householders to a family priest among *vajrācāryas* in the *saṃgha*, and their services include Buddhist versions of Indic *dharmashāstra saṃskāras* (Lewis 1994a), *homa pūjās* (Gellner 1992), the *nitya pūjās* for temple-residing bodhisattvas (Locke 1980), and their *ratha jātras* (Owens 1989, 1993). Based upon the Mahāyāna householder bodhisattva ideology and tantric practice,¹⁸ the Newar *saṃgha* members still justify their Buddhist occupation, continuing to use monastic designations and claiming to be worthy of merit-making *dāna* from others. Layfolk and the *saṃgha* exchange material support for ritual protection and merit accumulation. For Newar *upāsakas* (devout layfolk), their expression of distinct Buddhist identity became adherence to this ritually-centered life-style, patronage to the *vajrācārya saṃgha*, devotion to Mahāyāna savior deities, and faith in the *siddhas* and *yoginīs* who discovered the tantric paths.

This pattern of development can help explain why Newar Buddhist tradition seems to lack a strong philosophical/scholastic dimension. What *is* carefully elaborated is the ritualism that expresses and interjects the Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna worldview into every conceivable juncture: relating to deities, celebrating festivals, progressing through one's lifetime, and seeking nirvāṇa. Lacking a strong elite tradition of philosophical inquiry, the "genius" of Newar Buddhism lies in its pervasive orchestration of Vajrayāna rituals and teachings that channel blessings, well-being, and—for those willing to practice in the tantric path—accelerated movement toward enlightenment. In this respect, Newar Buddhism carries on the evolutionary patterns of ritual practice and the lay ideals of later Indic Buddhism.¹⁹



The Context and Paradoxes of Modernity

The discussion and utilization of contemporary traditions of Newar Buddhism in this book should not obscure the fact that in the modern setting the faith is in decline and what follows is, at times, a scholarly reconstruction of the recent past when belief and practice were more vibrant. Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley has declined throughout the modern period's transitions: from a polity of isolated medieval city-states, the Kathmandu Valley has become the capital region of the modern Nepalese nation. Far-reaching changes in many spheres have accelerated, with the medieval Newar preoccupation of celebrating the rich and elaborate cumulative religious traditions the cultural domain that has suffered the most precipitous decline.

Today there is no widespread understanding of the doctrinal concepts underlying the most common rituals still performed. Few *vajrācāryas* grasp the underlying philosophical assumptions or relate to the rituals beyond the procedural level of proper order and *mantra* recitations (Lewis 1984: 569–73). Nonetheless, these traditions are so deeply embedded in Newar life that they survive in many families, castes, and courtyards. Even though so many observances have been lost in the last century, the vast cumulative tradition of Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna ritual remains one of the most distinctive characteristics of Newar culture.

Suffering declining patronage, Hindu state discrimination, and anti-Mahāyāna missionizing by the revivalist Theravādin monks (Kloppenbergh 1977; Tewari 1983; Lewis 1984: 494–513), the Newar Buddhist *saṃgha* has struggled to survive over the last century. The authors who have redacted and compiled the modern printed works in this study are all Kathmandu *vajrācāryas* by birth and religious training, and they have been prominent leaders seeking to overcome these circumstances by establishing a school for training young Vajrācārya men, by giving public lectures, and by organizing a host of traditional ritual programs in *vihāras* and in other pilgrimage sites, including Vajrayāna initiations. Despite their anomalous social organization as a Buddhist caste, the Newar *saṃgha* has done what Buddhist leaders have always done to revive the faith: preach the *dharma* in society and encourage the performance of rituals,

both to support their *saṅgha* and for the good of all donor-practitioners.

As already indicated, the ability to use the printing press has enabled Buddhist revivalists to use modern technology to work for cultural survival. But as with the addition of all new media, especially in a rapidly modernizing environment, the results have not been so simple to assess: while the urge “to spread the *dharma*” that has motivated over a thousand Buddhist publications is traditional, their effect still has not stopped the decline of traditional Mahāyāna culture. Susan S. Wadley has noted the same situation in modern Hinduism:

While an explanation for this growing popularity cannot be explicitly stated, several factors clearly are important. Increasing literacy allows thousands to use texts where once they had relied solely on oral traditions. . . . Finally, texts are valued in Hinduism in part because of their traditional inaccessibility: to many newly literate persons, reading a pamphlet is more authentic and prestigious than reciting the stories of their elders. The stories of the elders had themselves taken the place of the teaching of *gurus*, to whom people had little access. Currently, then, written texts are replacing the elders and act as a stand-in for the traditions of the *guru*. (Wadley 1983:150)

Thus, despite the modern period’s remarkable record of having numerous Mahāyāna *sūtras* translated into, and published in, modern Newari, and even with the publication of hundreds of ritual guidebooks and traditional stories, the modern “cult of the book” has been overtaken by the “cult of the T.V.” and other mass media, especially for younger adults.²⁰



Finally, a few notes to introduce the organization of this book. Each chapter has a consistent order of presentation: a discussion of the Newari text’s Indic background and an introduction to its subject matter. Then follows the ritual or narrative text in translation. In rendering these translations, I have retained the modern authors’ terse shorthand style and I have also inserted only minimal explanatory glosses parenthetically. Most divisions in the

originals have also been retained. A third section in each discusses the text's use or "domestication" in local Buddhist traditions in the Kathmandu Valley.²¹ Every chapter ends with a discussion about how this text, its content, and related traditions might refine or revise the historical understanding of Buddhism. These observations are directed both to the general reader as he or she places the particular work in the wider context of understanding Mahāyāna Buddhism and to the more specialized audience of historians of Buddhism. The final chapter builds upon each of these final sections to reach some further conclusions and speculations regarding our assessment of Buddhism as a world religion.