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## Religious Belief in a Buddhist Merchant Community, Nepal

### Abstract

This paper presents an overview of religious belief in a Newar Buddhist merchant community in Kathmandu, Nepal, drawing on data obtained in a questionnaire study and life history research. After noting the plurality of Buddhist traditions in the Newar context, it outlines the research methodology used and clarifies several theoretical difficulties in the study of Buddhist belief. The research data is presented in two sections, one describing the central tenets articulated by a representative sample of the community and the other providing a series of individual portraits that illustrate in more extended and nuanced form the variation found among Buddhist devotees. The discussion of religious belief examines the effects of two especially salient and intersecting variables: the respective local Buddhist traditions (Newar, Theravādin, or Tibetan) and various modern ideologies (ecumenical pluralism or secular thought). The conclusion reviews the overall pattern of community belief and makes observations pertinent to Buddhist studies and the study of religious belief.

**Key words:** Newar—belief system—life history—syncretism—Marxism—modernity

SCHOLARS OF RELIGION have used the questionnaire and opinion poll to render richly nuanced portraits of religious belief in Judeo-Christian societies. Few attempts have been made, however, to apply these tools in studies of Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu contexts.<sup>1</sup> This curious and regrettable oversight has led to idealized or overly textual representations of these faiths, and to the neglect of an important field of information for scholars interested in the comparative study of religious belief.

Buddhism, as a refuge of intellectual freedom, has nurtured and enriched the civilizations of Asia. Over the centuries its teachers have articulated myriad traditions of practice and doctrinal analysis based on the Buddha's dharma (teachings). Both scholar and Buddhist believer are challenged by the sheer diversity of these doctrinal lineages as well as by the paradoxical attempt to extract systematic thought from a tradition that holds the ultimate to be beyond conception. Yet, though early texts recount the Buddha's dismay over those who intellectualize his spiritual path, it is nevertheless true that organized reasoning has its place in Buddhist history: right views are included in the Eightfold Path, doctrinal formulae abound, and royal court patronage debates required the mastery of doctrinal elucidation and argumentation. Compared to their Christian counterparts, Buddhist thinkers were rarely suppressed and the "inspired texts" became a vast literature.

Few connections have been made between the various disciplines that address the subject of Buddhist belief. The work of historians of religion has been dominated by the discourse of monastic intellectuals, while sociological discussions have focused on the debate about Buddhism's alleged "atheism" and its place in definitions of religion.<sup>2</sup> The few anthropological descriptions have been confined to small-scale village studies. The issue of syncretism is one of the few common themes that has been treated by all three groups, using different sources (e.g., MUS 1964, PYE 1971, BERLING 1980, BECHERT 1978, CLEARY 1991). The present essay will illustrate why the issue of syncretism is central to a treatment of Buddhist belief patterns.

## THE BUDDHIST TRADITIONS OF MODERN NEPAL

“Nepal” originally referred to the Kathmandu Valley alone, but in 1769 it was made the name of a much larger modern Hindu country by the mid-montane Himalayan peoples under the Shah dynasty from Gorkha, who conquered the city-states of the Newar people. From 1846 until 1951 the despotic Rana family sought to undermine both Buddhism and Newar culture through legal sanctions, land seizures, and persecutions (LEWIS 1997). The Shahs and Ranas did keep the state independent from the British empire and (after 1947) from India, virtually closing off Nepal from outsiders until 1951, when the Shah dynasty regained power (ROSE 1970).

The Newars have survived, though their culture was suppressed by the Gorkhali state and their valley inundated by ethnic migrations to the dynasty’s capital (GALLAGHER 1992). Although the Newars speak a Tibeto-Burman language, their distinctive urban society is ordered according to Indic caste principles and cultural traditions in art, music, literature, and religion (LIENHARD 1984). Numbering approximately a half of the Kathmandu Valley’s total population of roughly one million, Newars are about equally split in their allegiance to Hinduism and Buddhism. With adherence to Buddhism forming a group boundary marker, Buddhist high castes remain defined by their separate endogamous patrilineages.

The number of discrete Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions preserved in the Newar Buddhist community defies simple summary; the interested reader should consult recent publications documenting the myriad temples, monasteries, rituals, festivals, and community organizations.<sup>3</sup> I present here only the details necessary for our study of belief in the merchant sector; of especial importance is the diversity of Buddhist traditions that have shaped the views of individuals.

Unique to the modern Buddhist world is the Newar monastic community (*saṃgha*), defined by an endogamous caste that forms a Mahāyāna counterpart to the Hindu Brahmins. Like a Brahman caste, the Newar *saṃgha* has for centuries married, making the entire Buddhist community one of householders (LOCKE 1975; GELLNER 1992). A two-section, endogamous caste with the surnames Vajrācārya and Sākya, its members maintain the monastic ritual traditions and often still inhabit the residential compounds referred to by the classical term *vihāra*, “monastery” (over three hundred *vihāra* exist in the Valley today [LOCKE 1985]). The *vajrācāryas*, who act as priests for all other Buddhists, have developed a highly evolved and intricately ritualized Mahāyāna lifestyle for their community (LEWIS 1994a).

Most Newar Buddhists, including all lower castes, participate exclusively in the exoteric level of Mahāyāna devotionality. They direct their

devotions to the Buddhist shrines (*caitya*) that dot the urban landscape, and especially to the great hilltop complex of monasteries and stūpas just outside the city called Svayambhū. Most also make regular offerings at temples dedicated to the celestial bodhisattvas, especially Avalokiteśvara (Chinese: Kuan-yin), whose temples are found throughout the town (LEWIS 1995a). All Buddhist householders mark their major life-cycle events from birth to mourning with rituals performed by traditional *vajrācārya* priests. Indigenous Newar Buddhism also has a Vajrayāna (or “tantric”) elite; only high-caste Vajrācāryas, Sākyas, Urāy (merchants), and select artisans are eligible for the initiations (*dikṣās*) that direct meditation and ritual to the esoteric deities.

In addition to the already described “indigenous Newar” monastic lineages there are two other distinctive (and in some ways competing) Buddhist traditions in the Kathmandu Valley. The older is Tibetan Buddhism, which has been present in Nepal for at least a half-millennium and is centered upon celibate monastic schools. Tibetan monasteries cluster around regional sacred sites that for many centuries have been patronized by Tibetan immigrants and the Newar merchants who traded in the Himalayan highlands (some Newars even became Tibetan monks). Although not aggressive in missionizing the local society, the resident lamas have offered alternative festival, ritual, and meditation practices to the Newar laity.<sup>4</sup> The influx of refugees from the highlands after the Dalai Lama’s escape in 1959 has increased the number of Tibetan immigrants and monastic establishments in the Newar context.

A more recent introduction is the Theravāda school. Its origins in Nepal are connected to Sri Lanka in the last century, where a Buddhist revival occurred in the context of the Sinhalese anti-Christian and anticolonialist struggle (MALALGODA 1976). As a result of early encounters with confrontational Christian missionaries, Buddhist reform leaders adopted similar proselytizing tactics and emphasized a return to the early (Pāli) texts, education through printed materials, a simplified canon of belief, regular preaching by monks, communal services, and a key role for laymen. As a result a new form of “export Theravāda Buddhism” emerged, stripped of superstition and presented as compatible with science. Its leaders, drawn from the new urban middle class, directed the movement toward Buddhists of similar standing abroad. The movement reached Nepal by the 1920s through urban Newars disaffected with their own Buddhist tradition. Despite Rana persecutions, some Newars became monks and nuns (KLOPPENBERG 1977) and many others provided financial support; by 1952 proper Theravāda monasteries were established at Svayambhū and, by 1980, across the Kathmandu Valley. These continue to attract modest numbers of

Newars (BECHERT and HARTMANN 1988). Monks and nuns from these establishments have energetically inserted their own agenda of ritual, festival, publication, and public sermonizing into the Newar setting. Not all Newar Buddhists appreciate these innovations, however, especially the early polemics directed against the Newar Mahāyāna path (LEWIS 1984, 494–513).

Despite the anomaly of a caste-delimited, noncelibate *saṃgha*, and because of the diversity of traditions in their midst, Newar Buddhists follow practices that closely resemble those of coreligionists in other countries: they support the local *saṃghas* and perform rituals at stūpas and shrines to gain worldly and spiritual benefits (merit, *punya*). Believers have also underwritten a resurgence in the publication of devotional literature, including translations of classical Mahāyāna and Theravāda texts, popular story narratives, pilgrimage and ritual guidebooks, and discussions of scholastic philosophy.

Modern Newar culture in the Kathmandu Valley has been an important topic of research since it comprises the sole frontier area where one still finds Indic Buddhism, a tradition that declined in its hearth region by 1200 CE (SNELGROVE 1987; SLUSSER 1982; LÉVI 1905–1908). Studies of Newar rituals, festivals, shrines, socio-religious accommodations, Buddhist pluralism, etc., must now be integrated into the scholarly discourse on Buddhist history and the sociology of religions.<sup>5</sup> This article is intended as a contribution to both disciplines.

#### METHODOLOGY

Between 1979 and 1982 I first conducted research to describe and analyze the Buddhist traditions observed in a community of high-caste merchants in the markets of Kathmandu.<sup>6</sup> The name of the caste, Urāy, is thought to derive from the Buddhist term *upāsaka*, meaning “devout lay follower.” The community, composed of about 1,100 households, is divided into eight named subcastes (GREENWOLD 1974). The Urāy are almost universally literate and are clearly regarded as an educational, economic, and political elite in modern Nepal. My decision to study merchants was based upon the special affinity between Buddhism and merchants that has existed since the time of the Buddha (LEWIS 1993b) and upon the Newar merchants’ “maximal expression” of devotion.

This ethnographic project began with demographic, kinship, and caste inquiries (LEWIS 1995a), proceeded to the mapping of the urban religious geography, then continued with the documentation of the extensive ritual practices and festival observances that define the Newar Buddhist identity. It was also necessary to survey the competing array of local Hindu practices as well as the other Buddhist traditions in the Kathmandu Valley. Specific

inquiries on Buddhist belief were made at the end of a two-year fieldwork period, when the task of ethnographic documentation was in its last stages.

To investigate the merchant community's understanding of their religious observances and beliefs, I administered two questionnaires. Following the methodology of John Collier (COLLIER and COLLIER 1986), the first research design employed black-and-white photographs. The sampling of photographs comprised over 114 important visual images from my files under seven categories: life-cycle rites (12 photographs), rituals (15), festivals (15), religious officiants (14), deities (35), cultural media (11), and miscellaneous subjects (12). I also formulated key questions to accompany the pictures presented. This large group of photographs was pretested, then shown to a representative sample of the Newar laity comprising thirty-five respondents, both male and female, aged nine to sixty-eight.<sup>7</sup> This provided the data for the thematic presentation given later in this article.

The second source of information was a standard interview questionnaire centering on thirty-eight topics explored in more open-ended discussions. This was administered as part of an in-depth survey of twenty merchant households and was designed to touch upon areas not amenable to the pictorial study. The individuals featured as representative case studies below, in the section "Portraits in individual belief," were interviewed using both questionnaires, with some revisited for follow-up discussions.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE NATURE OF BUDDHIST "RELIGIOUS BELIEF" IN CONTEXT

Before considering belief patterns among Newar merchants, it is important to clarify the nature and context of Buddhist belief. First, a simple definition: by "religious belief" is meant a set of intellectual tenets that individuals articulate, identify with, and act upon. A tenet here is an idea that orders and interprets experience. As Martin SOUTHWOLD noted, "The tension between the normative interpretations of Buddhist doctrines and the symbolic meanings they bear in the context of actual life is...an important dynamic in Buddhist societies.... We should not be surprised that religious tenets...sustain a variety of meanings" (1979, 640). This paper explores the Newar field of understanding, delving especially into the question of how individuals have integrated competing classical Buddhist tenets with non-Buddhist modern ideologies.

The discussion of "Buddhist belief" must be framed by several specific points pertinent to Buddhism. The first concerns the significance of belief and the way in which belief is acquired for a typical devotee. For householders, belief in formal doctrines is not at the center of "being a good Buddhist," and there is no tradition of "professing faith," public or private, beyond the universal taking of refuge in the Buddha, his teachings, and the

monastic community. The Newar tradition, like Buddhism elsewhere, emphasizes ritual and festival performances within kin or caste groups, and these are carried out without any overt articulation of religious tenets (BEYER 1973, xii; GELLNER 1988, 753–54; 1992, 134). Beyond whatever insight may be derived from family rituals, individual Newars generally acquire knowledge of Buddhist doctrine on their own: from informal family discussions, from shrine artwork, from reading modern printed religious publications, and from public storytelling by *vajrācārya* pandits, who usually recite and explain stories from the narrative literature (*jātaḥas, avadānas*) (LEWIS 1984, 637–38).

A second set of problems concerns Buddhist doctrine and its relation with the social scientific assumption of a self: Can we agree upon what the “individual” is that “adheres to” a belief? Or how to be faithful to the intellectual Buddhist’s view that the human mind’s experience is always evolving and inherently impermanent? Or how, even, to define a standard of orthodoxy given the tradition’s acceptance of a hierarchy of legitimate, sometimes contradictory, doctrinal viewpoints? This is a problem addressed by the second-century Mahāyāna philosopher Nāgārjuna, who specifically speaks of relative truths that can be constructed in the mind’s discursive language even as he posits an absolute truth that lies beyond all such ego-constructed and assumption-dependent statements. His view, accepted as normative by later Mahāyāna traditions (including those that dominated Newar and Tibetan interpretation), is that the highest truth can only be experienced in meditation. To communicate it in language is impossible, though it can be pointed to by using silence or by labeling all semantic constructions with the term *śūnya* (empty) (WAYMAN 1984; JACKSON 1989). Given that this doctrine is known in local intellectual culture and readily articulated by savant Newar priests and lay intelligentsia (see below), one can see how problematic such an inquiry is, both for the Buddhists queried and for the researcher.

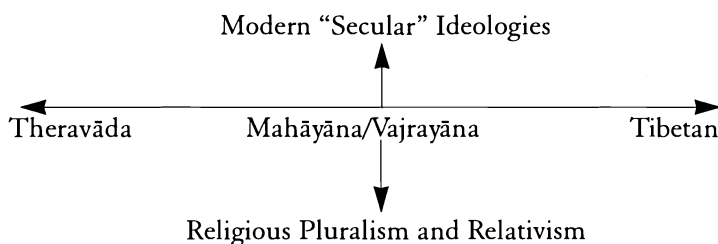
Related to this is the issue of skepticism. During the research it was often clear that most Buddhist merchants regarded religious stories, explanations, and philosophical theories with some degree of personal detachment. When pressed, many respondents placed some distance between their own professions of belief and the pronouncements of tradition.<sup>9</sup> Such skepticism also seems to explain the range of ostensibly paradoxical or inconsistent beliefs—ancient, Buddhist, and modern—that individuals voiced.

A final complication in any analysis of Buddhist belief is the problem of individual differences in intellectual inclination. Western academics carrying out inquiries of this kind often overestimate the importance of philosophical and intellectual concerns in the life of the average person. Most

Newar laity venture no farther into Buddhist philosophy than the basic notions relating to cultic offerings, mantra recitations, and merit-making. In common with Buddhists elsewhere, Newar householders are primarily concerned with making the *punya* necessary to affect their destiny positively in this life and in future rebirths, something that involves a relatively simple body of beliefs and practices. Only few individuals, especially those involved with Vajrayāna or the Theravādin movement, have grander vistas. And the Buddhist texts consistently remind even these “virtuosi” that the Buddhist spiritual path should culminate in meditation practice and personal transformation, not mere intellectualism.

Modern patterns of belief among Newar Buddhists can be presented in terms of two variables: competing cultural traditions and varying modern ideologies. As Peter BERGER (1980) has observed, modernity imposes an ever-expanding menu of choices upon individuals; conveying this pluralism in modern Nepal is the central challenge taken on in this paper.

To illustrate the landscape of belief, I have constructed the following two-dimensional grid to portray the intersection between the Buddhist traditions and the most important modern ideologies.



Along the horizontal axis are the Buddhist traditions present in modern Kathmandu. Note that this schema does not imply a strict exclusivity toward one tradition that rejects the others as false.<sup>10</sup> The location of an individual on this axis is based upon a composite determination of two factors: the “most strongly held opinions” as expressed in the interviews, and the distinctive devotional behavior as determined by the history of rituals performed, patronage choices made, and initiations taken. While Urāy merchants see themselves as uncompromisingly Buddhist, they do not necessarily restrict themselves to any one of the three Buddhist lineages. It is therefore not uncommon for families to have rituals performed by their *vajrācārya* priest, a favorite monk, and a notable lama over the course of a year (in some cases, affluent Urāy may even call upon them all on the same day). Newar laypeo-



ple thus view all of these people as within a single field of Buddhist specialists who meet their needs for *pūjā*, merit-making, and doctrinal teaching. Beyond the *vajrācārya* dominance in life-cycle and festival ritualism, all of these groups—*vajrācārya*, Tibetan lama, and modernist Theravādin monks—compete today for merchant patronage.

The vertical axis represents new directions of intellectual orientation. This influence is a product of contact with the outside world, predominantly India but also the countries of Southeast Asia and such distant states as China, Japan, the Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States. On this axis there are two recurrent and, in this case, opposing orientations. The first, pluralism, extends the realm of possible religious affirmation by admitting the truths of Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, etc. This ecumenism was most commonly expressed in the neo-Vedantin terms of modern Hinduism. The opposite standpoint is one embracing recent ideologies that could be labeled as “secular” (BERGER 1969, 107) and entertaining skepticism toward all traditional claims of sacred revelation. This includes such ideologies as materialism, positivism, and Marxism.<sup>11</sup> The vertical zero point, then, is one that places Buddhism at the center of truth and subjects modern thought to the Buddhist standard.

These two scales imply an interaction of viewpoints between Buddhist preferences and the choices offered by modernity, with the crossing point of the scales indicating someone who embraces the Newar Mahāyāna tradition as the superior form of Buddhism and the dominant ideological orientation.

#### TERMS OF CONSENSUS IN BUDDHIST BELIEF

The intellectual diversity and freedom of doctrinal expression seen throughout Asian Buddhist history is evident in the modern Newar community as well. My inquiries revealed that advanced age correlates with ready, detailed knowledge of the Buddhist teachings; that women know a great deal of the folklore but show less formal doctrinal knowledge; literacy correlates with a higher awareness and understanding of the teachings; and family traditions of activism and study can reverse other tendencies. We now summarize the chief tenets utilized in discussions with Buddhist merchants.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Karman*

While intellectuals often hold the philosophical view that all doctrinal statements have merit as expressions of relative truth, most Newar Buddhists content themselves with a simple faith in *karman*-rebirth doctrine. This core doctrine considers all individuals to possess karmically determined capacities for spiritual understanding and practice. It thereby underlies the Buddhist acceptance of a pluralism of beliefs, describing the dharma both

metaphorically and practically as having different “medicines” to cure a host of different “illnesses” (greed, lust, anger, delusion) that afflict humanity.

Every informant in our study expressed a belief in *ḥarman* as a force that conditions individual destiny. Newar laypeople view *ḥarman* as a physical presence, written on the forehead (and, some add, on the palm of the hand) and deposited in the *ātman* (soul) situated in the human heart.<sup>13</sup> This *ātman* centers and energizes individual consciousness, forms the repository for *ḥarman*, and after death leaves the body through one of the bodily orifices and becomes the vehicle that endures to the subsequent rebirth. Most Newar Buddhists are vaguely aware of these mechanics and believe that the *ātman* may hover around the house for a number of days after death, and so during the mourning period put out offerings to satisfy it (LEWIS 1994a, 18).

For the Newar laity the most important fact about *ḥarman* is that one cannot know what one’s own “karmic deposit” is. The ethos that follows is that life must be lived with a commitment to make as much *punya* and as little *pāp* (demerit) as possible. This is an orientation common to Buddhist laymen across Asia and also one shared with Hindus (e.g., KOLENDA 1964, SHARMA 1973).

Although one cannot know one’s *ḥarman* with certainty, there are indices by which one can discern its general condition. The most important of these are the attributes one is born with. In Newar society the caste into which one is born is a prime indicator. Although Newar merchants differed on the details of how the castes in Asan should be ranked,<sup>14</sup> they were clear that they were near the top of the nonpriestly rankings in the caste system and that untouchables were far below. Other indicators of a person’s karmic state are wealth, length of life, proclivity to sickness, and circumstances at death. Merchants were well aware that individuals could fall quickly from states of high karmic standing because of *pāp*.

For the Newar laity, the belief that life is conditioned by *ḥarman* does not lead to a fatalistic attitude. Life is regarded as an ongoing, changeable phenomenon, with karmic influences usually remaining a subliminal presence. Newar laity understand that *punya* can result in favorable effects both within the present life and in future incarnations. About one-third of the informants stated that most children make much *pāp* in their youth that could, if not countered by *punya*, gravely affect their lives as adults.

*Karman* is not, in the common view, the sole factor conditioning an individual’s existence: chance, “luck,” and the influence of deities, planets, and physical laws may also act independently of karmic law. (*Karman* may also block the effects of these.) Belief in astrology remains especially strong among merchants. Traditional charts made at birth are consulted throughout life by the specialist, the *jyotis*. These individuals designate the correct

moment (*seit*) for auspicious events such as birth ceremonies and marriages, and use astrological analysis to seek resolutions to crisis situations (LEWIS 1984, 151–53). Yet, because *karman* theory can subsume astrology and all other systems of causal explanation, it remains the ultimate explanatory framework. Karmic influence is felt to be “contagious,” or better, socially transmittable: one person’s *karman* may affect others. Family members, for example, may suffer or prosper due to an elder’s *karman*. This effect is especially recognized between husbands and wives (LEWIS 1994b).

Thus a large part of Newar Buddhist religious life is directed towards the improvement of *karman* through *punya*-making. *Pūjās* (rituals) and offerings to religious figures are made with *punya* clearly in mind. Unlike early modern Chinese Buddhists (GREENBLATT 1975), Newar laity do not keep *punya* account books, but they are aware of the need to make as much *punya* as possible given their economic means. Newar tradition specifies that individuals acquire vast stores of *punya* when they sponsor the great patronage rituals (Samyak, Pañcadāna, All-Monastery Pilgrimage, etc. [GELLNER 1992]), and the interviews made it clear that those who sponsor these events are primarily motivated by the desire to acquire *punya* and its rewards.

The Newar laity is also very aware of the need to avoid making bad *karman*. The *pañcaśīla* (five moral principles: not to kill, steal, lie, indulge in sexual misconduct, or take intoxicants) are known by almost all adults. The first four rules are significant guidelines for individuals; the last is not regarded as absolute in the popular view since alcohol is essential to the householders’ Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna rituals.<sup>15</sup>

Two of the moral precepts with quite salient effects on *karman* deserve special comment. The precept against violence has made the Newars known in their own community and outside for their nonviolence (LEWIS 1997). This has affected the history of interpersonal relations and is one of the reasons for Kathmandu’s reputation as a peaceful city. The Buddhist merchants themselves see their pacifism as a quality that led to the overthrow of their independent state in 1769. Most Newar laity extend their nonviolence to animals as well. Although this has not led to widespread vegetarianism, most Buddhists do not sacrifice animals for *pūjā* or kill the rats they trap in their shops (they release them every morning outside the town boundaries).

The precept not to lie, say many Newar laypeople, is impossible to observe. To do business in present-day Nepal and bargain effectively require, they say, *maḥugu kham* (untrue statements). About a third disagreed, however, saying that this view is a recent one and is untrue according to the Buddhist teachings. “Business *pāp*,” one articulate young layman noted, can be seen in the same way that Buddhist farmers view their tilling of the soil (and consequent killing of insects): a necessity that requires

making *punya* in other activities to offset the negative karmic burden.

Beyond the belief in this ongoing cause-and-effect *karman* relationship, I found no single pattern in the way individuals understand how *karman* “adds up.” Most had no deep convictions, and were content with the assurance that making *punya* and avoiding *pāp* were the proper religious activities for them.

Newar laypeople differ over the relationship between *punya* and *pūjā*. Merchants view offerings to deities as *punya*-producing, and most felt that the same karmic benefit derived from worshiping the Hindu deity Śiva as from worshiping the celestial bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. The laity’s faith in the latter’s ability to confer karmic benefits on individuals is considered in the next sections.

### *Deities*

Only slightly less ubiquitous than the acceptance of the doctrine of *karman* is the belief in the existence of deities. Most Newars adhere to a view of a divine hierarchy in which Buddhas are above bodhisattvas, and bodhisattvas preside over all cosmic and regional deities. These include the Hindu deities, a view expressed iconographically in the image of Śriṣṭikantha Avalokiteśvara, which has all deities emerging from its body. (This image was used in the questionnaire.) All who receive *pūjā* offerings—the Hindu deities Gaṇeṣa or Kṛṣṇa, the bodhisattva Padmapāṇi, even stūpas—are referred to colloquially as *dyah* (deity).

Most of the older laity view the world as everywhere populated by deities of various sorts. Newar laypeople vary considerably in their degree of devotional involvement with the vast pantheon of deities in their tradition, but there is still widespread belief in their ontological reality. Although a certain undercurrent of skepticism does exist among the young, even the doubtful believe in spirits called *khyāh*.<sup>16</sup> The deities, like the bodhisattvas (see below) are regarded as present in this world, as available for *pūjā* offerings, and as embodying personalities that can affect the world according to their divine desires. Both deities and spirits are believed to possess people and speak through them; this is vividly conveyed by the mediums (*dyah va:mha*) that practice healing in the Newar communities (GELLNER and SHRESTHA 1993).

### *Bodhisattvas*

Bodhisattvas are ideal beings who pursue their own enlightenment while working for the spiritual benefit of all (WAYMAN 1971, 398). In the Mahāyāna tradition advanced bodhisattvas may assume either a human form or the form of a celestial deity (BASHAM 1981; ROBINSON 1966).<sup>17</sup> The

most revered celestial bodhisattva is Avalokiteśvara. Avalokiteśvara, who resides in the local temples, is described in local stories as a powerful being who acts on petitioners' prayers, brings the rains, subdues lesser deities, and assists human beings in reaching Amitābha's paradise, Śukhāvātī, where attaining enlightenment is guaranteed. (This, as discussed below, is not regarded as a plausible rebirth destiny for many individuals today.)

Newars may also see themselves as bodhisattvas if they work to fulfill the perfections (*pāramitās*; WAYMAN 1971, 409) after taking a vow to aim for an enlightened mind (*bodhicitta*) and help all beings achieve that goal. In every Vajrayāna ritual sponsored by a Newar individual, the *vajrācārya* priest generates *bodhicitta* and repeats (albeit in Sanskrit) the bodhisattva vow (STABLEIN 1976; GELLNER 1991).

We have noted that Avalokiteśvara is by far the most popular celestial divinity among Kathmandu Valley Buddhists. Interestingly, only half of the laity recognized Avalokiteśvara as a bodhisattva, but all knew that the deity is distinctively Buddhist. Most were aware of the fact that Avalokiteśvara is both male and female, with some citing as evidence the dual gender rituals performed yearly in the temple image's restoration (LOCKE 1980, 208–21). Some say that their last hope for avoiding hell is the intervention of this deity; all laypeople are especially aware of Avalokiteśvara's capacity of acting out of compassion for and granting assistance to suffering humanity, as its familiar name *Karuṇāmāya*, "The Compassionate," suggests. But the textual ideal of sharing merit with devotees was articulated by only several respondents.

Few Newar laity know the identity of Vajrapāṇi, the bodhisattva who protects all Buddhist shrines in the Kathmandu Valley. Fewer still know the name Maitreya, the bodhisattva who is supposed to be reborn in the future as the next human Buddha.

Most merchants know the basic teachings on the bodhisattva ideal, with the popular image of this figure being that of someone who works unselfishly for the good of others. Today a person suffering ill-treatment with patience may be referred to, half-jokingly, as a bodhisattva. At present, though, most people do not think of bodhisattvahood as a relevant ideal for human beings, nor do they feel that human bodhisattvas are common in today's world.

#### *Svārga and Nāraḥ (Heaven and Hell)*

The Buddhist merchants strongly believe in spheres of rebirth outside of the human realm and outside of "this earth." Viṣṇu's paradise *Vaikuṅṭha* is recognized by most. *Sukhāvātī*, the above-mentioned Mahāyāna paradise ruled by Amitābha, is also widely recognized; most informants know of it only as

a Buddhist paradise and are not aware of the textual doctrine that Avalokiteśvara is one of its reigning bodhisattvas. Because one needs vast quantities of *punya* to be reborn there, most merchants did not think of it as a serious possibility for themselves. Several said that even the possibility of rebirth in Sukhāvātī required the performance of special rituals (*vrata*<sup>18</sup>); others mentioned tantric initiation as a prerequisite (LEWIS 1996).

Most Newar laypeople, however, believe that rebirth in *nāraḥ* (hell) is a definite possibility for them. Almost half of my informants mentioned that to them *nāraḥ* would be rebirth as a sweeper, a butcher, or a fisherman.

### *Nirvāṇa*

Newar merchants understand nirvāṇa as a state to be reached in a distant rebirth after many lifetimes devoted to attaining spiritual perfection. Most identified nirvāṇa as an attribute of a Buddha. Given the exalted manner in which the Newar laity views the celestial bodhisattvas and Buddhas, it is perhaps not surprising that only one man (out of thirty-five informants) regarded the attainment of nirvāṇa as his own immediate pursuit. Those informants who inclined toward the Theravāda movement said that such attainment was a common subject of the monks' and nuns' sermons. Most, however, recognized nirvāṇa was the ultimate goal of all Buddhists, something that made them different from Hindus; the latter's highest goal, they said, was merely *svārḡa* (heaven). Newar laypeople who made this distinction knew that Buddhism regards heaven as merely another realm for rebirth.

An operational definition of reaching nirvāṇa was also commonly given: one attains nirvāṇa when Yama Rāja, the Lord of Death, does not see one immediately after death because there is no *ḥarman* left.

Almost every merchant stated that of the contemporary religious in their midst, whether monk, lama, *vajrācārya*, Brahman, or Hindu renunciant, none seemed capable of reaching nirvāṇa.

### *Other Topics in Buddhist Philosophy*

A topic analysis of the terminology used by questionnaire respondents revealed a number of other concepts that are especially emphasized in modern Nepali religious discourse.

*Āyur* is the life force necessary for existence. One has at birth an endowment of *āyur* based upon one's *ḥarman*. When one's *āyur* is finished one's time has come, and only divine intervention can forestall death.

*Karuṇā* is a quality of compassion associated with celestial bodhisattva Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara, a fact encoded in this deity's epithet of *Karuṇāmāya*. Many spoke of this quality as an ideal they should cultivate as

followers of the Buddha dharma.

*Pāramitā* is a term that about half the informants knew as a quality of the bodhisattva. Several could name the “six *pāramitās*,” the six perfections: *dāna* (generosity), *śīla* (discipline), *ksānti* (patience), *vīrya* (energy or exertion), *dhyāna* (meditation), *prajñā* (wisdom).

*Bodhicitta* was defined in several ways: as a vow to reach enlightenment, as the thought of enlightenment, and as the enlightened mind.

*Ekaṅcitta* is a term commonly used to describe the ideal state reached through meditation. Most Newar laypeople say that the different methods prescribed by Theravādin *vipassanā*, Newar Mahāyāna meditations, and Tibetan practices, if properly practiced, all lead to *ekaṅcitta*. To reach nirvāṇa, they say, it is necessary to realize this state.

Questions about the core Mahāyāna philosophic term *śūnya* led to a range of responses. The word is known by almost everyone, for it is used to designate “zero.” About one-third of the adults knew that as a Buddhist term *śūnya* is used to indicate the ultimate “no-thing-ness” that marks all phenomenal existence. As such, explained the most learned informants (three of thirty-five), it is the basis for the classical Mahāyāna teaching that nirvāṇa and *saṃsāra* (the cycle of birth and death) are the same. Several stated that *śūnya* is the source from which the myriad Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities are manifested. As one middle-aged woman said, “There is only one deity and his name is *śūnya*.”

As a final note, it should be mentioned that the Buddhist merchants have little knowledge of the Vajrayāna symbols that pervade the religious geography and are employed in the rituals. Most could not offer any symbolic explanation for their *vajrācārya* priests’ *vajra* (ritual thunderbolt) or *ghaṅṭā* (bell). Few made any Buddhist association with the Śrī Devi yantra (mystic diagram); almost everyone (thirty-one of thirty-five) said it was “Sarasvatī’s heart.” The omnipresent eyes that mark the *harmikā* (the cube above the mound on virtually all Newar stūpas, shown in almost every Nepal tourist brochure) were likewise not widely understood, and few could speak about the Mahāyāna theory of cosmic Buddha emanations that they represent.

#### *Attitudes on Their Own Traditions, Past and Present*

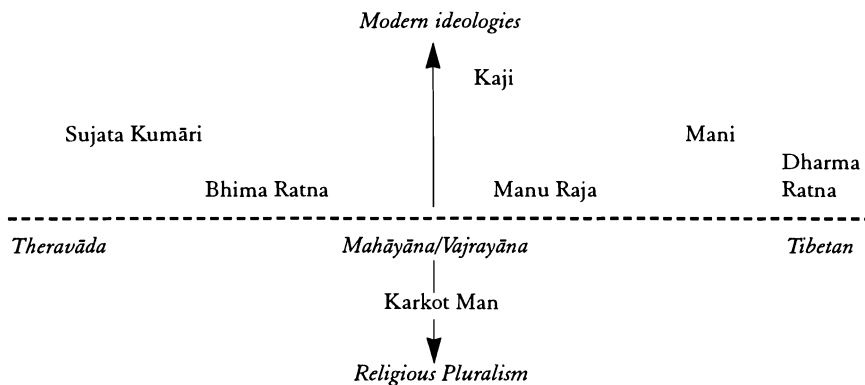
Most Buddhist merchants still view their traditions as something unique and valuable. This is partially due to their great antiquity: according to the *Suayambhū Purāṇa*, the authoritative text that describes the Kathmandu Valley’s origins, Newar Mahāyāna tradition predates even Śākyamuni Buddha. According to the same source, the Kathmandu Valley was a special site where the forces of the Buddhist cosmos were uniquely manifested; the

Newars' proximity to the hilltop stūpa called Svayambhū, the relic of that revelation, is regarded as a special blessing. This legendary scenario is widely known, as it is often summarized in modern Mahāyāna publications.

All respondents mentioned the decline of traditional observances. Many traced the beginning of Newar Buddhism's decline to the loss of monasticism and the imposition of caste order, both of which are dated in popular opinion to the reign of King Jaya Sthiti Malla (r. 1382–95). The decline of the priests' competence as teachers and ritualists is the subject of many family conversations. In the right mood almost everyone could be cynical about the religious practitioners in their midst. Newar Buddhists see these developments as part of the general decline of civilization in the *kaḷi yuga* (final age) that is predicted in their texts and in pan-Indic tradition. A few said that only with the coming of Maitreya, after millennia, will this decline be reversed.

#### PORTRAITS IN INDIVIDUAL BELIEF

The religious life histories presented below were selected as a representative sample of the spectrum of Buddhist belief in the merchant community. To help visualize this complex matrix and indicate the full sample's "belief pattern," I have first located all of my informants on a grid model, below, that arranges the individuals along two axes, one showing the nature of their predominant Buddhist belief (Theravāda, Mahāyāna/Vajrayāna, or Tibetan) and the other showing the extent to which they accept either modern "secular" ideologies or non-Buddhist beliefs.<sup>19</sup>



#### *Manu Raja*

Born in 1926, Manu Raja has seen the transition from the Rana period to democratic Nepal (1951). As a manufacturer and merchant of ready-made clothing he has adapted well to the changing times, and his large family is



quite prosperous. Manu Raja (hereafter MR) grew up in a family that energetically followed the practices of the older Newar Mahāyāna tradition. He has performed all of the major *vratas*, attended several years of river confluence rituals (*tīrtha pūjā*), and led an all-monastery pilgrimage that was sponsored by his family. He has learned a great deal of the lore and legend of his tradition and can refer not only to local texts like the *Svayambhū Purāṇa* but also to great pan-Asian texts like the *Lalitavistara* and *jātaḥas* to discuss his understandings. He is familiar with secret lore on tantric initiations and much of the oral tradition associated with recent events. MR still participates actively in several religious organizations (*guthis*), does daily meditation, and calls his family priest for many special *pūjās* and for the daily reading of the family's *Pañcaraḥṣā* text during the month of *Gumla* (LEWIS 1993a). He is dissatisfied with the present generation of *vajrācāryas*, but still calls them for all major rituals.

MR expresses admiration for the great lamas who still study and meditate, but he has only called them once, for a *nāga* (snake deity) *pūjā* many years ago. He has seen the Theravāda movement develop, but has, for the most part, kept his distance. He comments, "Although Gurumā [the nun Dhammavati] is persuasive, the monks bicker and compete with one another," and adds, "The Theravāda stories are good, but sometimes they are not mature enough for me." He did allow his daughters to spend their premenstrual ritual confinement (LEWIS 1984, 276–80) with the nuns of Dharmakirti *vihāra*. MR refers to the Theravādins in classical Mahāyāna terms as *śrūvaḥas* (mere listeners) and asserts that the bodhisattva ideal is a higher goal and teaching. He disagrees with the secrecy that the *vajrācāryas* insist on maintaining for their tantric initiation and teaching. MR sees this as another destructive aspect of the present situation: "Such secrecy will result in the death of these teachings in our tradition." He already knows many aspects of the "inside" Vajrayāna philosophy, which he has picked up in conversations with friends. He hopes to take the tantric initiation sometime soon if it can be arranged.

Although he believes that all meditations lead to the same goal, MR still insists that there is a firm contrast between Buddha dharma and Hindu dharma. He is one of those who regards heaven as the highest goal of Hinduism, an objective much less difficult than the Buddhist *nirvāṇa*.

### *Bhima Ratna*

When Bhima Ratna (BR) was a youth he wanted to study in order to pursue his interests in music and religion. But his father said that as the oldest son he had to carry on the family grain business, so this is the calling BR has followed throughout his sixty-six years.

BR has done many *vratas* and river confluence pilgrimages (*tīrtha jātra*). About fifteen years ago he visited all the different monasteries and other shrines around the Kathmandu Valley in a two-year program led by a prominent *vajrācārya*, who told stories from the Newar tradition about each place. From this, BR says, he learned most of what he knows of his tradition. BR is one of the regulars in the caste's devotional music group and one of its best musicians. He has also worked hard to maintain his family's involvement in seven other religious organizations.

BR does Mahāyāna meditation daily but has not taken tantric initiation. The latter does not interest him: "It is too expensive and the *vajrācāryas* know too little. I am content without it." In spite of this indifference and a resigned sense of dissatisfaction with the *vajrācāryas* ("In my youth they were as good as the lamas; now they are not"), BR has made Buddhist teachings and the details of religious life his lifelong hobby. He reads many of the books published by *vajrācārya* pandits and Theravādin authors and always has his ears open for religious programs in town, be they Theravāda gatherings, events at the school for Vajrācārya boys, or Tibetan ceremonies. BR can recite long devotional verses from memory and identify many deities using the iconographic verses. He knows the directional Buddhas, their consorts, and is especially devoted to the goddess Annapūrṇa.

BR maintains his ties with the traditional Newar Vajrayāna rituals and caste organizations (*guthis*), but these have not satisfied him. Although he sometimes attends Tibetan and *vajrācārya* programs, BR now leans heavily toward the Theravādin movement. From childhood onward he has attended programs at the first monastery. Having read their publications and heard many sermons by the monks, BR's intellectual understanding of Buddhism seems shaped largely by Theravādin teachings.

BR might say that identifying him with the Theravādins is too strong. He emphasizes the continuities between the different Buddhist traditions, noting that *karman* is the chief factor involved in religious life and that whatever program of meditation is followed the goal is the same. He hesitates to make a final commitment to any one approach, although he does not extend this relativism to the Hindu dharma. Still, he does point out several differences between Vajrayāna and Theravāda Buddhism that are important to him, and that reveal the influence of the Theravādin critique of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Mahāyāna Buddhism, he says, leads laymen to seek rebirth in Sukhāvātī, whereas Theravāda teaches that nirvāṇa is possible in this lifetime. His second criticism is that the Vajrayānists emphasize worship of the deities far too much: "Buddha dharma should be first of all concerned with improving an individual's mind and *karman*; it should be centered on meditation and not on worshipping deities."

*Sujata Kumāri*

For the past ten years Sujata Kumāri (SK) has been one of the young women most active in organizing and orchestrating Theravādin Dharmakirti Vihāra activities. Although she married several years ago (at twenty-five) and moved into her husband's house, she continues to enjoy the freedom of a full-time job in a government institute. With an M.A. and a distinguished record of achievement, she is one of the top young women in the ranks of government service in Nepal.

SK has been interested in Buddhism from early childhood. As a young woman in her religiously active natal home she spent many mornings preparing the elaborate offering plates that are part of the daily household *pūjās*. After years of questioning elders and getting explanations that never satisfied her intellectual curiosity, SK had by her early teens come to dismiss Vajrayāna as superstition and Mahāyāna as blind faith.

When she began going to Dharmakirti she was pleased to find clear information on Buddhist philosophy. She soon started attending lectures, joining study groups, and reading Theravādin literature, and became a close friend of the charismatic nuns. With several friends she eventually went on religious retreats to remote Theravāda monasteries that emphasized study and *vipassanā* meditation.

To SK, the Theravāda claim of being "pure Buddhism" is a powerful truth. The deemphasis of ritual, the straightforward analysis of life and attachment, and the compatibility she sees between modern ideas and doctrine all satisfy her educated sensibilities.

Recently, Sujata has come to suspect that her dismissal of Vajrayāna was premature. With the doctrinal framework of the Theravāda tradition as a starting point, she has become curious about Vajrayāna teachings, and is reading some Western authors on the subject.

*Mani*

Mani does not like the Theravāda movement because, he says, its leaders are out to destroy older Newar culture. Unlike his father, who is a fairly regular supporter, Mani derides the monks as pale imitations of the classical ideal. Instead of begging for their alms, says Mani, they live very comfortable lives surrounded by material comfort. Moreover, they are quarrelsome, proud, and, in the case of a few leaders, morally suspect.

Although he is only twenty-five, Mani recalls their family's beloved *vajrācārya* priest, the late Suklānanda. Suklānanda was able to teach with clarity and imbue the rituals with special meaning, and, above all else, was devoted to living in accordance with the Buddha dharma. Mani severely criticizes the modern *vajrācāryas*, but knows that their fallen standards do not

mean that the Vajrayāna tradition is similarly degraded.

Mani runs a successful new shop that sells clothes and cottage industry products to tourists. He is well read and aware of the many “new winds of change” from the outside world. Dissatisfied with the religious movements around him, he has constructed his own religious view from many sources. The gods, he says, are all just manifestations of one superior deity, mere incarnations that act as “policemen” of the world and enforce the karmic destiny of individuals. They are all inferior to Buddhas and bodhisattvas, whose actions can also affect human life.

But on certain days Mani is skeptical of all of the old philosophical concepts. As he once said to me, “You tell me who ever came back from the dead to verify these things. All teachings are only ideas constructed by men. They may all just be stories, for we cannot really know for sure if they are true.” Ultimately, however, he sides with his tradition: “Or else why would past generations have developed all of these ideas and the elaborate *pūjās*? There must be something to them.”

### *Dharma Ratna*

For most of his fifty-five years Dharma Ratna (DR) has been a master carpenter, an occupation not common anymore among the merchant caste. From his youth DR has been drawn to the Buddha dharma—in his childhood he participated in such traditional observances as a year-long *vrata* and became a member of his caste’s music group (he remained one of Asan’s finest senior musicians). His doctrinal understanding began to mature when at the age of fifteen he took an initiation from a Tibetan lama into the worship-meditation on the celestial bodhisattva Amoghapāśa Lokeśvara. Soon after this experience he studied the *Nāmasaṃgīti* text with a local *vajrācārya* teacher and began to read other philosophically oriented works. By the time he was thirty DR had taken another initiation, to Apāramitā, given by a Tibetan lama living in the town of Patan. He has worshipped and meditated according to these initiations every day since.

DR has continued his study of Buddhist texts, and can quote from the *Śatasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* and discuss the concept of *sūnya* in the style of a learned teacher. On his own he learned the priest’s central rite, the *guru maṇḍala pūjā* (GELLNER 1991), every verse of which he can chant; he also knows the longer formulae (*dhāraṇī*) for the worship of many deities. DR can explain the philosophical foundations of all of the major Vajrayāna rituals and has written on what he has learned over the years in a collection of commentaries that now runs to over a thousand pages in three volumes. I am sure that in other circumstances (e.g., in Tibet), DR would have become a monastic teacher of the highest caliber.

DR criticizes the Theravādins from the classical standpoint of the Mahāyāna: the monks are just *śrāvaka*s; they don't know *sūnyatā*; their teachings are not sufficient to lead the way to nirvāṇa. Śākyamuni Buddha, he says, taught less public doctrines and the Theravādins have only the simplest, least developed of his teachings.

About fifteen years ago DR began studying informally with one of the old *vajrācārya* masters, Jog Muni. Although he did not take a tantric initiation from him—something he would like to do but cannot afford—he did study the philosophical-meditative principles of advanced Vajrayāna practice. There are very few other *vajrācārya*s that DR respects; he invariably falls into disputes with his family priest because of the latter's sloppiness in ritual performance and his ignorance of Vajrayāna doctrine.

The essence of Buddhism, says DR, is found through meditation leading to the realization of *sūnya*. For this, "initiation and teachings" (*dikṣā* and *siḥṣā*) are necessary. Buddhist ethics, he says, is based on the realization that all beings are related and should be treated as our mothers and fathers. DR sees the Western world as a morally bankrupt realm where people become cruder and less capable of cultivating insight. "Despite all its material comforts, your country [the United States] moves further away from *sānti* (inner peace). And so, when our children here learn English, they lose their inclination towards the dharma."

DR is bitterly critical of his own society and especially of the rich Newar merchants who claim that they no longer have the time to meditate and observe the old traditions. "They waste the rare opportunity of their birth status. They will be reborn again in low castes or worse," he says. DR is likewise embittered about the turn away from the Buddha dharma he sees everywhere in the market. "Here, in our society, our wealth was the dharma, and now it is being thrown in the rubbish bin." He feels isolated in his knowledge of the finer points of Mahāyāna philosophy and Vajrayāna practice, and once complained, "There is really no one left for me to talk to."

When I was leaving Nepal in 1982, DR was very ill with diabetes. He told me that his main concern in life now was to prepare for dying, explaining, "If I can maintain, undistracted, my concentration in *sūnya* and hold steadfast to my mantra at death, then I will not be reborn."

### *Karkot Man*

Karkot Man (KM) was one of the most loved men in the northeastern city market called Asan. When he died of cancer in 1980 at the age of fifty-six, the Urāy community was deeply shaken. KM represents a complex believer who embraced a diverse range of beliefs and did so with a distinctly modern attitude.

In the mid-1940s KM's father started Kathmandu's first modern optical business, a lucrative trade that his son excelled at. The family has also been known for its musical talents since the time his father organized and directed dramatic musical performances for the Ranas. He and his brothers all learned the different musical traditions that their father imported for this endeavor, mostly from Calcutta. KM learned dance, drama, and singing, but the violin was the interest that he pursued throughout his life. Although he taught himself using English-language books on classical Western technique, KM became a master of the Indian devotional style. KM was known and loved for showing no egotistic pride in this talent; he would play for anyone and did not insist on payment or special circumstances.

KM's religious biography began in Benares, where he was sent for a year to complete his SLC (high school) diploma. After his return his family noted the change in him regarding spiritual matters. Soon afterwards he met Śivapuribaba, a Hindu holy man who had gained a considerable Newar following and organized a small *āśram* (commune) near the national Hindu temple complex, Paśupati.<sup>20</sup> KM visited him as frequently as possible, studied his teachings, and made donations until the saint's death in 1965 (at the age, say his devotees, of 136). Śivapuribaba taught a version of Vedāntic Hinduism that values all religious traditions, East and West, as partial revelations of the ultimate truth. He also taught vegetarianism, a practice KM followed the rest of his life.

This attachment to Śivapuribaba did not, however, result in KM limiting the breadth of his religious activity. He patronized most religious movements in Kathmandu and was always doing something "for the dharma." KM was renowned among his friends (and not infrequently scolded by his family!) for his seemingly limitless energy in these matters. At home KM insisted that his family adhere to their own Newar Buddhist traditions: he was active in all the Buddhist musical groups, had his children take the traditional Mahāyāna initiations, and gave special attention to the *vajrācāryas'* ritual performances at his home. Though never interested in tantric initiation, KM was very active in the Theravādin movement. He supported the first monastery from its earliest days and was a leader in introducing Newar merchants to the reformist school's activities. The Sri Lankan monk Narada Thera, who visited Nepal intermittently at the time of the Rana persecution in 1945 (and intermittently thereafter), was another influential figure throughout KM's life. Right before his death, KM made a pilgrimage to Burma and Thailand with a Theravādin group.

Despite this involvement, KM would not abandon Śivapuribaba's Vedāntic position or concede that his ultimate religious identity was Theravādin. He was not impressed by the local monks but still supported

them. As he said, "They are not enlightened, but they are respected for they are the mouthpiece for spreading the Buddha's dharma at this time." Unlike many of his merchant contemporaries who make invidious comparisons between the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, KM argued for the spiritual vitality of the Hindu path. He would always insist to Theravāda and Mahāyāna adherents that they had not grasped the spirituality of the Hindu dharma. He constantly made donations to Hindu renunciants who stopped at his shop and even offered them lodging in his house.

KM's ties to India also remained strong over the years. He was an avid fan of the Indian cinema and an importer of *āyurveda* medicines. In 1973 he traveled all over India for six months on a pilgrimage of religious sites; living simply, he played his violin for lodging and traveled with Hindu ascetics. KM subscribed to various Vedāntin publications and disseminated them to friends, and he read every work of the modern teacher Rajneesh. Just as some Newar merchants were cultural middlemen for Tibetan traditions, KM linked his community with the religious movements of modern India.

Given this vast range of interests and activities plus his love for his own traditional Buddhism, KM would not limit himself to any one dharma. As he said, "My dharma is not from any one tradition."

### *Kaji*

From childhood onward Kaji has had an unusual life. He has never attended school. His mentally disturbed mother died when he was ten, and his father was unable to support his family adequately. When Kaji was nineteen his father was struck by typhoid, and Kaji had to take responsibility for the family himself. He has tried his hand at various enterprises: sewing cloth shoes, making chupples and kites, selling used military clothing, and bookselling. Only the last has proved workable, and until recently the family barely scraped by, often with the help of generous friends and his wife's modest teacher's salary.

As a youth Kaji became involved in Newar political protests against the government's dissolution of parliamentary democracy in 1961. This led him into circles interested in Communist thought, so that he began reading (a self-taught skill) the works of Marx, Mao, and Lenin in Nepali translation. Kaji recalls how his philosophical outlook crystallized at that time: "I realized that anything I cannot see with my eyes and verify I would not believe in. From this year I refused to bow to any image and refused to do *pūjā*, something I haven't done to this day" (1982). Thus when his father, delirious with typhoid fever, claimed to be possessed by various gods, Kaji did not believe it. Kaji's "conversion" followed several years of active religious interest that touched upon the Bahai faith, and later, Christianity, both of which had

been introduced into the market by Newar friends with ties to Darjeeling. He ultimately rejected both and chose politics. In 1965, when the government banned Newari-language radio broadcasts, Kaji led organized groups to protest this policy. Risking arrest, he gave speeches all over the Kathmandu Valley and made friends in many circles. He also started a bookstore in the small resthouse outside the entrance to the courtyard where he lives.

Kaji still maintains this business. The majority of his inventory of over 500 publications is in Newari, but he also carries Chinese, Russian, Korean, and Cuban selections. Kaji's bookstore is one of the landmarks of the Asan Töl market and a center for the Newar intellectuals of Kathmandu, so that hundreds of people stop by to chat every day. It is the place to glean the latest news and find out what is really happening. In addition to being a source of up-to-date information, Kaji lends a sympathetic ear to many people with problems. During the unrest that swept Nepal in 1979 and after the 1980/81 reforms that expanded the democratic participation in elections, Kaji's stall once again became a center of political organizing and campaigning.

Kaji's religious views are based on his commitment to positivism and modern science. He likes to find rational interpretations for what he considers ostensibly unfounded beliefs. For example, he says that, "All of the deities, all thirty-three hundred thousand of them, exist nowhere else but in the body." Kaji does believe in karmic retribution, and says that the *ātman* is a psychological assumption necessary to explain the fact of consciousness and the operation of *karman*. He remains agnostic on the question of rebirth.

Ethics and social justice in modern Nepal, he feels, are only possible after the rejection of the hierarchy and discrimination of the caste system. Kaji wants Newars to modernize their ideas and improve their material state. He is the dominant person in his courtyard, not as a religious leader, but as the "local mayor" who enforces modern standards of hygiene and calls upon all families, rich and poor, to participate in the yearly round of activities that are part of their cultural endowment.

Despite his rejection of traditional belief, and in seeming contradiction to his personal refusal to take up a religious role, Kaji is fervent in his love of Newar tradition and in his efforts to preserve Newar language and culture. In 1981, for example, he organized and assisted in the complete restoration of the main *vihāra* shrine. His identity as a Newar is very important to him, and he speaks often about the task of retaining the things that make Newar culture unique and great. Kaji relates his religious agnosticism, activism, and Marxism to his notion of the bodhisattva: "In these times, the good Communist is the greatest bodhisattva."



## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Having seen the terms and possibilities of individual belief in an Indic Buddhist community, let us now summarize our findings and consider the study's wider significance for a number of fields.

*Buddhist Pluralism and Unity of Belief*

Confronted with such fundamental diversity, we have to discard any essentialist conception of Islam. Instead, Islam has to be understood as the totality of all symbolic forms considered Islamic by people regarding themselves as Muslims; i.e., as an essentially unbounded complex of symbols and principles which on most any issue offer a wide range of possible, even opposing conceptions, meanings, attitudes, and modes of thought, each formulated with sufficient fluidity to allow ever more spinoffs, elaborations, and interpretations. (LOEFFLER 1988, 246-47)

Like Iranian Islam, Newar Buddhism affords a nearly unbounded range of interpretations to individuals as they adaptively construct their belief standpoints. Several summary observations can be made on the nature of contemporary Newar Buddhist belief. First, most of the community has not drifted substantially from adherence to Buddhism, and only the very rare individual has been drawn away to other faiths or secular ideologies. The belief in divine bodhisattvas, *karman*, and meditation has not declined significantly. Although Newar merchants are, to varying degrees, disenchanted with their *vajrācārya* priests and are moving away from practicing Buddhism solely through them, every individual asked still insisted that he/she remained firmly grounded in the Buddha dharma. Almost as strong is the belief in the existence of divine beings, "Buddhist" and "Hindu." It is noteworthy that such beliefs remain despite the recent popularity of Communist political parties (LEWIS 1997). Second, there has been a general shift among the younger generation toward the modernist Theravāda form of belief and practice. Third, interest in Tibetan Buddhist devotions has grown only modestly.

Finally, the merchant families still support their *vajrācārya samgha* out of loyalty to the traditional Vajrayāna rituals, but they increasingly (and, again, generationally) lack an understanding of the doctrines underlying these practices. The subtleties of the older Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna tradition, with its abstruse philosophical critiques, extensive pantheon, and esoteric symbolism, are now clear to only a very few individuals in Kathmandu. Its "center" has not held. Despite the erosion of this elite culture, a more rudimentary "core tradition" of belief endures: just as the ancient religious geography still

provides the focal sites for the community's devotional practices, so do the most elementary Buddhist teachings persist as landmarks informing the merchants' understanding of self, life, death, and spiritual destiny.

Although this study has been concerned primarily with merchants,<sup>21</sup> it suggests several concluding observations about scholarly representations of Buddhism, method in the study of religious belief, and modernization in Buddhist contexts.

*The Domestication of Mahāyāna Relativity Doctrine*

In the variations of belief among individual merchants and the widespread acceptance of many levels of praxis it is plausible to see a successful domestication of classical Mahāyāna Buddhist relativity doctrine. The Mahāyāna critique of all utterances is accompanied by the corollary acceptance of varying belief understandings. Newar Buddhists legitimately formulate spiritual paths and views differently. The common ethos of intellectual tentativeness, even among those quite skilled at "discussing the dharma," supports this conclusion. I suggest that this cultural orientation and ethos may be characteristic of Buddhist societies generally. As SOUTHWOLD has concluded from his study of Theravāda Buddhists in Sri Lanka:

The tenets of Buddhism can be broadly ordered along a continuum ranging from the most basic and indispensable to the most accessory and optional; as I have remarked, such distinctions are reflected in the cognitive attitudes of at least some Buddhists. For example, it is basic to hold that rebirth, determined by *karman*, is real; that nirvāṇa is a real state attainable by human beings; that the Buddha and others have attained it; that the Buddha's teaching provides efficacious directions for attaining it. But it is optional to hold that, e.g., participation in rites is conducive to attainment [and] that the services of Buddhist clergy are essential at funeral and mortuary ceremonies. (1979, 632)

*Community Belief and the Writing of Buddhist History*

Religious systems are not texts.... Obvious examples include ritual, a wide array of non-ritual religious practices, and nearly all iconography. The insistence on construing all cultural phenomena along textual lines inevitably blinds inquirers to many of their non-linguistic features. (LAWSON and McCAULEY 1993, 214)

Our findings from Nepal undermine any analysis that centers the historical dynamics of Buddhism on the interplay of philosophical doctrines within the literary canon. Buddhist pluralism in modern Nepal, while admittedly complex, probably resembles the state of Buddhism in North India after the Gupta era (700–1200), when Theravādin, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna lineages were all present. The Newar case suggests that lay patrons have always sought to support precept-observing Buddhist monks, ritualists, and scholars living in their localities. To center an understanding of the tradition—either synchronic or historical—in texts of interest only to the literary elite is to ignore the wider, more pervasive Buddhist culture of assimilation. The few intellectuals in our study who did explore doctrinal possibilities did so unimpeded, and this long-standing efflorescence of human thought is a historical continuity in Nepal, as it is elsewhere. Nevertheless, Buddhist communities cohere far less around philosophy than around the shared ideology and rituals associated with merit-making. Interpreters of Buddhism should heed the comparative insights of J. PELIKAN on Christian tradition in Europe:

The authentic tradition of orthodoxy was not a matter to be decided by an intellectually formulated rule of faith set forth by scholars and theologians, but by the rule of prayer of the thousands of silent believers who worshipped in the spirit of truth. (1984, 30)

### *Belief and Nonbelief*

The fieldwork for this study, the data analysis involved, and the experience of teaching world religions for over a decade have all convinced me of the necessity of investigating disbelief as part of any exploration of belief. Robert MURPHY's description of this dialectical process should have special force in framing the sociological study of belief:

The critical attitude is one that examines what constitutes and lies beyond the parameters of any series of events that we wish to treat as facts.... Relatedness always implies a universe of nonrelations, and membership rules are predicated upon rules of exclusion. Contained in every opening outward is a tendency toward closure within, and in every bond, a series of alienations (1971, 154).

Since skepticism toward all assertions is a trait actually encouraged in certain Buddhist texts,<sup>22</sup> it is sometimes difficult in Newar research to separate “traditional” doubt from the skepticism advocated by modern systems of thought. If studies of belief can identify the content and scope of local tradi-

tions of disbelief, they can give a more precise indication of the depth (or strength) of belief in the community.<sup>23</sup>

### *Buddhism and Modernity*

Finally, one must acknowledge the clear, ongoing efforts of Newar devotees to retain their Buddhist beliefs even in the context of the modern stress on scientific and Marxist thought. Contrary to the predictions of certain modernity theorists,<sup>24</sup> Newar Buddhists continue to express firm loyalty to core beliefs, meditate in increasing numbers, perform time-consuming rituals, and draw upon Buddhist ethics for guidance even as they absorb new technologies and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. The Nepalese merchant case study supports the conclusion that Buddhist doctrinal and ritual traditions remain an enduring refuge for individuals and communities in Asia and provide proven resources for those contending with the chaotic choices, crises, and questions raised by modern change.

### NOTES

\* I use the terms "Newar laity," "Buddhist merchants," and the caste name "Urāy" synonymously, unless qualified. For an overview of this community, see my article in GELLNER and QUIGLEY 1995. Technical terms from Sanskrit or Newari are defined upon first use and transliterated according to the system specified in this work. The author would like to express his gratitude for funding from the Fulbright Fellowship program that supported fieldwork in Nepal from 1979 to 1982, and for a Holy Cross Bachelor-Ford grant that supported subsequent analysis and writing.

1. Among the few exceptions are LOEFFLER's study of male Iranians in a rural village (1988) and the surveys conducted by SPIRO in Burma (1970) and GOMBRICH in Sri Lanka (1971). Sociologists of religion attempting to make belief pattern connections with non-Judeo-Christian faiths have had to rely on early, biased representations or generalize from the limited information ethnographers have provided on the subject. This is a problem that extends from Weber and Durkheim onward (TAMBIAH 1973; GELLNER 1982). As GEERTZ noted long ago, "Just what does 'belief' mean in a religious context? Of all the problems surrounding attempts to conduct anthropological analyses of religion, this is one that has perhaps been most troublesome and therefore the most often avoided" (1966, 24–25). LOEFFLER in his important monograph echoes his dismay at the neglect of this subject (1988, 247), rightly criticizing Geertz's own practice of bracketing off pluralism and "put[ting] aside at once the tone of the village atheist and that of the village preacher" (GEERTZ 1966, 39).

2. Much discussion on Buddhism by sociologists remains flawed by a lack of understanding of Buddhism's diversity and the assumption that texts alone can be used to construct a consensus belief pattern (e.g., ORRU and WANG 1992). This is a point made by scholars on both sides of the field of Buddhology (e.g., TAMBIAH 1970; SOUTHWOLD 1978; HERBRECHTSMEIER 1993).

3. These include the work of Siegfried Lienhard, Michael Allen, Gérard Toffin, John Locke, and David Gellner.

4. In other studies I have emphasized Newar-Tibetan relationships as an element in the

history of regional Buddhism (LEWIS and JAMSPAL 1988; LEWIS 1989b, 1993b, and 1993c).

5. Just as the Sanskrit texts found in the Kathmandu Valley in the nineteenth century were the landmark discovery that informed modern scholars of the existence of Indic Buddhist texts outside the boundaries of Southern or Theravāda Buddhism (MITRA 1971), so too do the multitude of Mahāyāna Vajrayāna traditions still observed in the Valley point to an alternative pattern of Buddhist sociocultural adaptation once found across India and Central Asia.

6. The first research is presented in a religious ethnography (LEWIS 1984). Subsequent visits were made in 1987, 1991, 1993, and 1994.

7. In a forthcoming article on the uses of photography in the study of religion (GREENWAY and LEWIS 1997), I outline the methodology in more detail, presenting photograph and note page examples from this questionnaire. The 112 pictures proved to be excellent stimuli for eliciting responses. In some cases the main concern was the recognition of a photograph's subject matter; for example, a set of deity pictures used images from local temples, monasteries, and resthouses to see if an individual could recognize the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon. In other cases pictures were used in conjunction with more abstract inquiries to heighten the informant's awareness of the specific issue being asked about. Thus, instead of simply asking respondents what they thought of untouchability, I would show them a picture of untouchable sweepers at work in a local courtyard. Associated questions could then be keyed to these images, e.g., "Does *karman* really determine rebirth in this caste?"

8. Since the questionnaires were administered in 1981–82, the findings presented in this article are somewhat dated. A generational shift has occurred (two of the old men and one old woman have died); modernization has increased in pace and in scope, ushering in such changes as the revolution of 1990 that established a multiparty democracy and reduced the king to a constitutional monarch. I attempt to discuss the impact of these factors briefly in LEWIS 1995b and 1997.

9. It was very common for individuals to repeat a story or an explanation heard from a Buddhist teacher in response to an issue I would raise. When I would then ask if they really believed this explanation, their response would be "Well, how can I be sure? . . . This is what I have heard [or read] . . . How to know for certain?" When pressed, or in offhand comments, some would add that all accounts from ancient tradition were just human ideas and therefore unproven. This ethos is consistent with my findings on intellectual culture among the Newar Buddhist merchants: there is no textual basis nor doctrinal press to reach a common philosophical center. I return to this issue in the conclusion.

10. For example, almost every Urāy family has retained the services of its *vajrācārya purohit* for performing life-cycle rituals and yearly festival observances. Only a few staunch Theravādin devotees view the issue in terms of choosing an exclusive Buddhist identity.

11. Living in the capital city of modern Nepal, the Buddhist merchants have had contact with many of the world's modern sociointellectual movements. But it is easy to assume a false depth to an individual's awareness, since outside intellectual ideas are known only through foreign languages or often-problematic translations. Individuals sometimes end up holding incongruous worldviews, as when modern Communist leaders (and supporters) continue to perform traditional Hindu or Buddhist rituals.

12. My goal in constructing this cumulative portrait of consensus is well articulated in the recent essay by LAWSON and MCCAULEY:

Our principal theoretical object is the knowledge that participants share about both the relevant system of ritual acts and the accompanying conceptual scheme on the assumption that an account of this shared system of knowledge will go a long way toward explaining many of the behaviors of the participants that it inspires. (1993, 218)

13. Those familiar with Buddhism through its scholastic literature (or through typical college coursework) will find this discussion of an *ātman* in stark contrast to the classical notion of *anātman*, “non-soul.” By contrast, scholars familiar with Buddhist practice across Asia are well aware that the “soul notion” is common everywhere, as in the Burmese *leikpya* (butterfly soul; SPIRO 1970, 85), the Thai *khwan* (spirit; TAMBIAH 1970, 58) or the Chinese *hun/p’o* (soul; TEISER 1988). How *karman* operates without a soul medium for next-lifetime transmission has been a central issue in Buddhist scholastic debate from the earliest discourses (e.g. THOMAS 1933, 93–106; SPIRO 1970, 84–91). This may be an indication of how peripheral philosophers were to the mainstream of popular Buddhist thought.

14. Only 40% of my informants believed that the *vajrācāryas* should be ranked above the Brahmins; 50% said Brahmins should be considered first, and 10% said that among Buddhist castes all are equal.

15. The same acceptance of alcohol consumption is reported in Sri Lanka, though there the tradition is Theravādin (SOUTHWOLD 1979, 639).

16. Some attribute the current lack of spirit sightings to the introduction of widespread electric lighting, which, it is said, has caused the *khyaḥ* to flee the old settlements.

17. Some informants suggested that the “Hindu” deities should really be considered bodhisattvas. Others, including several learned scholars, asserted that the Hindu deities like Śiva and Kṛṣṇa merely controlled their domains, but celestial bodhisattvas actively sought out those in need of their compassionate service. The lack of consensus on this fundamental issue indicates the failure of the Newar *saṃgha* to articulate the textual teachings clearly.

18. See LOCKE 1987 and LEWIS 1989a.

19. I have used pseudonyms in this section.

20. This teacher has also gained the interest of Westerners, who have written on his life (BENNETT 1975).

21. It is important to note that the data utilized is confined to Kathmandu’s merchant caste, the Urāy; because of the caste’s high class and caste-group boundaries, the sample is limited to five percent of Kathmandu Newars. A study of belief patterns in a lower caste (e.g., among farmers, the largest Newar caste) would doubtless yield somewhat different results, particularly in terms of greater Hindu-Buddhist syncretism and an absence of esoteric doctrinal awareness in community discourse.

22. Faith in the Buddha’s path as a way to escape the darkness of craving and ignorance is encouraged in other texts (DUTT 1940).

23. I would echo the anthropologist’s usual critique of “hit-and run opinion surveys,” as these encourage believer-positive responses; furthermore, this type of research methodology does not dwell long enough with individuals to sample the ambiguities and expressions of disbelief.

24. “If cognitive desires, for example, are satisfied by science; if substantive desires are satisfied by technology; or if expressive desires are satisfied by politics or art or magic, religion should, by that extent, be less important.... In short, the importance of religion would be expected to vary inversely with the importance of other, projective and realistic, institutions.” (SPIRO 1966, 116)

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