

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 nirvāṇa 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 *dhāranīs*—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 *Saddharmapundarīka* and the *Bōdhicaryāvatāra*, 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 *intēnsiyē* practices on the two *uposadhā* 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 Lévi'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 Newārs to market towns throughout Nepal, the eastern Himalayan hills, to Tibet, and across South Asia (Gellner 1986; Lewis and Shakyā 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, Kathmaṇḍu, and Lalitpur—cāmē 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 Jampal 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 *saṅgha*, 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 *dharmaśāstra* 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 Mahākālā, among others. Newar Buddhists participate periodically in special observances dedicated to these divinities—a host of *pūjās* and *jātrās*—which hold the promise of transforming their worldly and spiritual destinies (Locke 1987, Lewis 1989a). Most laity also worship other Indic deities: Gaṇeśa, Bhīmsen, Śhiva, Viṣṇu, Devī in many guises, *nāgas*, and so forth. One strong belief is that worshiping 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) *shrāvāka*-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 *punya*, 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.

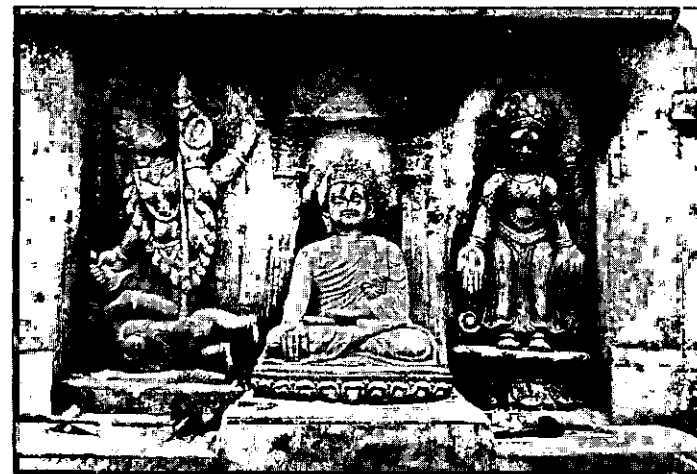


Fig 1.1. Sculpture Illustrating the Three Paths of the Newar Buddhist Tradition

Judging by the central Sanskrit texts, icons, and rituals still utilized by *Vajrācāryas* and *Shākyas* 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 Mādhyamaḥka 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):

Prajñāpārāmītā
Saddharmapuṇḍarīka
Lalitavistara
Subvarṇaprabhāsa
Laṃkāvatāra
Dashabhūmika
Gaṇdhavyūha
Samādhirājā
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 Jamspal 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 *dharma* 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