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*Puṇya* and *Pāp* in Public Health:  
Everyday Religion, Material Culture, and Avenues  
of Buddhist Activism in Urban Kathmandu

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# *Puṇya* and *Pāp* in Public Health: Everyday Religion, Material Culture, and Avenues of Buddhist Activism in Urban Kathmandu

Todd Lewis<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In the dense settlements of old Kathmandu city, an urban ecology is fueled by abundant natural resources and sustained by a complex web of predator and prey species, all in a space dominated by human presence and practices. These include everyday activities in temples, roads, and homes that are rooted in Buddhist and Hindu doctrines. Both traditions emphasize non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) to all living beings, and adherents seek merit (*puṇya*) daily from feeding some of them. In light of the still chronic outbreaks of diseases like cholera, and especially in light of the threat of future avian-vector epidemics, a new avenue of doctrinal interpretation favoring human intervention might be developed based on the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, an im-

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portant Mahāyāna Buddhist text. In the spirit of “engaged Buddhism,” the discussion concludes with suggestions on how Newar Buddhist teachers today can use their cultural resources to shift their community’s ethical standpoint and take effective actions.

One should not kill a living being,  
 nor cause it to be killed,  
 nor should one incite another to kill.  
 Do not injure any being,  
 either strong or weak, in the world.

—*Sutta Nipāta* 2.396

If the suffering of many disappears because of the  
 suffering of one,  
 Then a compassionate person should induce that suffering  
 For himself and for the sake of others.

—*Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Chapter VIII

## Introduction

A basic insight from the anthropological approach to history is that religion is central to a society’s culture; and since that is true, religious traditions are integral to a group’s adaptation to its environment. As the cultural ecology school of American anthropology founded by Julian Stewart and developed by Marvin Harris (and others) has shown, there are many examples in which religious norms have contributed to a community’s ecological practices and its survival. Harris and his stu-

dents developed prominent case studies regarding the cow in Hindu-dominated culture zones, and pigs in the Middle East and Polynesia.<sup>2</sup> Later studies revealed the complexity of these and other cases. One of the insights from this approach to culture is that just because a certain norm allows for successful ecological adaptation, it does not necessarily lead to the optimal equilibrium point. This paper explores a new context and situation in this realm, that between the Newar Buddhists of the Kathmandu Valley and their urban ecology.

It is important to indicate at the outset the various modalities through which “religion” most forcefully affects human life: (1) as a set of doctrines, usually codified in written texts, that provide a world view and norms of behavior; (2) as inspiring an ethos, or spirit of engagement with the world; and (3) as shaping prominent institutions that influence individuals, communities, or an entire society. These interconnected modalities will be drawn upon later.

### **Setting: Urban Kathmandu**

The dense settlements of the old city of the Kathmandu Valley were built up around monastic centers (*bāhā*), deity temples (*dega*), and residential courtyards (*cok*), with narrow lanes connecting dozens of named neighborhoods (*tols*). The royal palaces occupied their central spaces; city settlement was informed by ancient Indic norms according to which the highest castes were closest to the king, with the lowest groups nearer to the town walls or living outside them. These urban centers, known for their distinctive domestic architecture and the artistry of their sacred buildings, were created by the Newars, a Tibeto-Burman language speak-

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<sup>2</sup> The popular book detailing this approach and these case studies is Harris 1974.

ing people who have dominated the cultural life of the Kathmandu Valley for over one thousand years.

In most neighborhoods, houses continue to rise ever higher as the population of the Kathmandu Valley has grown seven-fold since 1980. The largest of the Newar “pre-industrial cities” (Kathmandu, Patan, Bhaktapur) were also regional trade *entrepôts* since the time of their origins, and their arts



1. *The Asan Tol Market Community*

and artisans flourished. Agricultural fields once surrounded Newar towns and their farmers grew rice and a variety of vegetables in its very fertile, irrigated soils. Villages across the Valley and beyond provided a ready supply of goats, water buffalo, and cows in the city’s urban mar-



2. *Cleaning a market alley*

kets. The productivity of these irrigated lands, along with the considerable profits from trade, including networks reaching from Bengal to Lhasa, created the surplus wealth that under-

wrote an extraordinarily creative cultural life. In

this Valley, local wealth was such that patrons sustained a sizeable population of Buddhist monks and Hindu priests, who lived and worshipped

in over 300 monasteries and even more numerous temples enshrining a large pantheon of Indic gods.

Our interest in this study is the urban ecology of the old Newar cities. This city environment has its distinctive natural resources and



3. *Temple and Pigeons, Shi Gha.*

includes predator and prey species in a constructed setting dominated by human presence and practices. In the dense settlements of the old city, houses are rising ever higher, and more people than ever seek food, goods, and sustenance. I have done research on the religious traditions of the Newars since 1979 (and as recently as winter, 2015). During the years of my recurring and intermittent residence in courtyard houses and courtyards in old Kathmandu, in this world of narrow gullies, monastic courtyards, house-on-house dwellings, and rooftop gardens, I have thought often about the connection between religion and urban public health. A recurring topic of interest has been in connecting the everyday practices in homes, courtyards, roads, and temples with Buddhism and Hinduism, the vibrant living religious traditions practiced there.

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## Newar Urban Ecology and Public Health Practices

Newar urban life, even in large farming villages, is built with houses side by side, as people prefer to live in connection with each other both literally and figuratively. Domesticated animals are often present: cows stabled in houses graze in the evenings; goats and sheep are brought in to be sold for butchering; and chickens and ducks are kept by families in their courtyards, eventually headed for market or the family table.



4. *Cows as foragers of urban refuse.*

Feral dogs are ubiquitous. Some family pets also provide security for courtyards and homes by their bark and



5. *Street dogs guarding a back courtyard.*

menace. Almost all cats are feral and can survive only on the rooftops; the city is a dangerous place for kittens, as dogs menace them on the ground and fierce male tomcats defend their territory without mercy. As studies of cats and rodents in other cities have indicated, Kathmandu cats subsist more on human waste than on rats, mice, and the occasional inattentive bird.<sup>3</sup> Kites, crows, swallows and sparrows join pi-

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Childs 1991. Urban rats grow so quickly (and fierce) on human refuse that cats can prey only on the very young rodents. My unsystematic observation living in Asan is that although cats are almost never taken in homes as pets, Newar housewives do feed a favored four-legged rooftop neighbor. Huge male cats can be especially



geons in filling the skies above and nest below among human residents. There are scattered trees and a few gardens behind some homes in the ancient city. A variety of snakes live among building foundations and street drains. Monkeys and leopards occasionally roamed into the old Newar cities, but because the construction boom of the last two decades has denuded the lands just outside them, such incursions of the former are rare, and the latter now occupy only the legends of great-grandparents.

It is always interesting to take rambling walks down the roads and gullies of the Newar cities; they are a rich assembly of architectural

virtuosity in various states of repair, courtyards full of human and animal life, small manufacturing workshops, and all the exchanges and struggles that are at play in a poor yet expanding Asian city . . . with its



shopkeepers, street sellers, migrant workers, hustlers, beggars, tourists.

6. *Crumbling medieval buildings and modern concrete homes.*

. . . and those whose tea and sweets shops, bars, and basic restaurants seeking their own subsistence trying to provide for their sustenance.

On such a walk today, one encounters overwhelming smells that arise from the offal and discarded garbage that inevitably accumulate and decay. The sewer system in Kathmandu is barely functional and not

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feisty; young Newar children have traditionally been frightened by elders telling them to “be quiet, or the cat will come.”



fully or reliably connected across the city; and an operative water supply even in the nation's capital—or most anywhere else—is something that neither the Shah kings nor foreign aid providers could ever manage to accomplish.

Old wells and the remnants of a medieval aqueduct public tap system still must serve the needs of urban Newars today. Hence, every-



*7. Hundreds of wells still provide drinking water for the poor.*

thing that follows must be situated in the larger political context of Nepal as a semi-failed state that never achieved the basic public health innovation that separates pre-modern modes of urban living from modern standards: separating drinking water from human waste.

Kathmandu and other urban spaces have features not readily apparent to the tourist or casual visitor. Newars have long designated certain small side courtyards as garbage dumping spaces called *sāga*, places that were to be cleaned out once a year. There are also traditional cross-roads and small stones (*piku lukhu*)

outside the main entrance to each home, regularly used to discard offerings made in home rituals, especially foods. The Vishnumati River that flows along the western city boundary also receives specially designated religious discards, from major rituals as well as cremation ashes. Once used as the source of flowing water necessary for ritual purification (*ni la:*) in household rituals and to wash away death pollution, this river now, like all rivers in the Valley, has been so utterly polluted by garbage

dumping (domestic and industrial) that it is nearly biologically dead and dangerous to human health.<sup>4</sup>

Pre-modern Newar towns were served through the local caste system's imposition on sweepers (*chamkalis*) who were tasked with the duty of cleaning the streets, courtyards, and latrines. Cows and dogs until today also eat what is discarded on the streets, as animals in their



8. *The Vishnumati River. Once a source of ritually pure water, it is now dangerously polluted.*



9. *The market from the rooftop, refuges of quiet and ritual purity.*

way  
help

reduce the piles of refuse. The assumed human and animal presence, no doubt, shaped the habits of Newar citizens, who consider almost any upper-story window as a suitable opening out of which to throw out any kind of trash at any time, from peanut shells to paper waste, from spit to baby diapers.<sup>5</sup> To give a visual image, the primary living spaces in Newar urban households are defined—and defended from outsiders—in the house's topmost floors, above the highly polluted ground level streets. What

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g. Adhikari and Tamrakar 2006.

<sup>5</sup> The most dangerous time to walk the Kathmandu streets is the very late evening or very early morning, when some residents consider it best to empty kitchen waste or chamber pots right out their windows, even into the major lanes.

matters in Newar Buddhist (and Hindu) houses is ensuring the purity of spaces for eating, living, and ritual activity in the “*pūjā* room” that includes individual and priestly worship of the family’s gods, bodhisattvas, Buddhas, as well as a place for personal meditation.

As immigrants have crammed more people into the city, these practices continue and create omnipresent niches for germs and vermin to thrive. Residents in these cities suffer from endemic typhoid, hepatitis and TB; add to this the addition of one million motorcycles since 1997, plus the nearly unregulated and large-scale discharge of large particle air pollution, and it is easy to see why the World Health Organization ranks Kathmandu among the worst cities for public health in the world.<sup>6</sup> I know many families in Asan in which middle-age adults have died from cancer. Those of the rich and influential families with property in Asan Tol who were able have fled to homes away from the center city, citing as reasons the pollution and lack of functioning infrastructure. Immigrants now rent many of the old homes in the old city.

### **The Newar Urban Public Health Problem: Modern Development or Historic Continuity?**

Lest an observer conclude that this situation is only a recent public health development, one that is due solely to the breakdown of the caste cleaning system, the failures of the municipal governments, or even the German-sponsored garbage initiatives, there is evidence that this compromised urban living environment has its roots in venerable Newar cultural norms. In the early accounts of Western and Tibetan visitors to the Kathmandu Valley, we can discern conditions similar to those of today.

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<sup>6</sup> 2015 profile found in <http://www.who.int/countries/npl/en/> notes that public health factors incur about nine years of early mortality on aggregate across Nepal.

As in a walk today, there were lovely buildings, such as those commented upon in the journal of Giuseppe Rovato, a Capuchin Catholic monk:

I obtained a sight of the temple, and then passed by the great court which was in front; it is entirely marble, almost blue, but interspersed with large flowers of bronze well-disposed, to form the pavement of the great courtyard, the magnificence of which astonished me; and I do not believe there is another equal to it in Europe . . .  
(Rovato 1801: 313)

But one also finds comments about lovely architecture in the context of a contrasting the public health environment. As Hamilton noted in 1803:

Within, the houses are exceedingly mean and dirty, and swarm with vermin, which, added to all manner of filth, including the offals of the shambles, and the blood of sacrifices, that is allowed to corrupt in the streets, renders an abode in any of their towns utterly disgusting . . . (Hamilton 1980 Reprint: 39)

Daniel Wright, a British official who resided for ten years in the Valley, reported the same impressions around fifty years later:

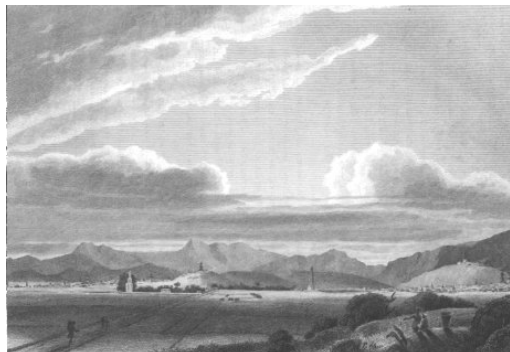
. . . at first glance, the town seems to consist of almost nothing but temples. . . . The streets of Kathmandu are very narrow, mere lanes in fact; and the whole town is very dirty. In every lane there is a stagnant ditch, full of putrid mud, and no attempt is every made to clean these thoroughly. The streets, it is true, are swept in the center, and part of the filth is carried off by the sellers of manure; but to clean the drains would not be possible without knocking down the entire city, as the whole is saturated with filth. The houses are generally built in the form of

hollow squares, opening off the streets. . . are too often receptacles for rubbish of every sort. In short, from a sanitary point of view, Kathmandu may be said to be built on a dunghill in the middle of latrines. . . (Wright 1980 ed., 11-12)

Europeans were not the only ones making public health observations. Visiting the Valley on pilgrimage in 1723, the notable Tibetan *tulku*, the scholar-saint Situ Panchen (1700–1772), noted the persistent hot season epidemics, which were probably cholera:

At this time in all Nepal, there was an epidemic which was occurring in the summer, but not in winter. Once stricken by this disease, most people died within thirty hours. The king reported that on a single night during the rainy season, over one hundred dead bodies had to be removed from town. The King added, “Such a thing has gone on for three years and perhaps two thirds of the population has perished . . . (Lewis and Jamspal 1988: 199)

What we can glean from these historical sources is that the Kathmandu Valley’s urban areas, like most cities of medieval Eurasia, were mired in public health problems.<sup>7</sup> A cultural historian must attribute the reason for this, at least in part, as due



10. *Sketch of the Kathmandu Valley in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century*

<sup>7</sup> On this aspect of premodern life, and its consequences, see for example McNeill 1977 and Berstein 2008: 59ff.

to culturally determined attitudes and behaviors. One is naturally drawn, thus, to the religious center of culture and to the exploration of the perceived and actual relationships between Hindu and Buddhist religious beliefs and everyday material culture practices in the Newar community.

### **Urban Environment and Applied Religious Teachings**

The religious identity of the Newar cities is as complex as the urban populations. There is not sufficient space here to describe, analyze, and discuss with necessary nuance the similarities and differences between these two traditions among the Newars.

Given this constraint, I must underline three points about Hinduism and Buddhism. First, being Buddhist or Hindu is especially meaningful for most Newars. It is not true, as tourist brochures endlessly proclaim, that these traditions are all mixed together indistinguishably. (Among Newars, Buddhists and Hindus are roughly equal in number.)

Second, there are major points of doctrine and practice that overlap to various degrees: both traditions place high value on non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), regard it as meritorious to be kind to the living to earn good karma (*puṇya*), and do so to counteract any bad karma that accrues in other domains of life.

Third, Newar Buddhists and Hindus, especially those who occupy the highest rungs of the city's caste system, hold a strong belief in the importance of maintaining personal, family, and clan purity. They also sustain the caste system because one's current rebirth is viewed as the outcome of the law of karma, like a natural causality. In other words, both Hindu and Buddhist Newars today still live according to an ideology of caste and live their lives following traditional ways and means of maintaining their caste purity. There was for decades a reluctance of the

city elite, including both Hindu and Buddhist high caste politicians, to engage with cleanliness issues in theory or practice, and this attitude is connected to the residents' interpretations of the teachings of the religious traditions.

Most Newars, Hindu or Buddhist, subscribe to the belief that one should make good karma, or merit, by acts of kindness to living creatures, with the archetypal act of this sort being a gift of food. On the other side of the ledger, one should kill living beings as infrequently as possible to avoid adding demerit to one's own karma. With this perspective, when observing life in Kathmandu, it seems clear that this belief-driven practice of unrestrained feeding and not killing anything contributes to the degradation of the environment, undermining public health.

On the feeding side, the most common practice by Newar householders is to feed pigeons and do so prodigiously. In the central Buddhist temple of the city, Jana



11. *Pigeon on a Buddhist stupa, Jana Baha*



12. *Feeding pigeons in Jana Baha*

Bāhā, the buying of grain from vendors for feeding these birds in the large courtyard is part of the morning and evening ritual rounds, and these offerings are lavish. Many families also throw grain on their rooftops to feed them as part of the daily morning household ritual. New home construction still follows the old practice of leaving niches for bird roosts, and many people put up birdhouses on their outer walls. All this, in addition to the now declining hobby of keeping and breeding pigeons that live in the home rooftop nests, has allowed



the bird population in Kathmandu to grow extravagantly.

The result of this pigeon love is, as you might guess, inevitable: the birds have coated most sculptures of the open air temple with a thick layering of droppings; they roost and nest throughout the city in every conceivable wall niche and roof eave, where they add the same thick coating beneath their roosts. The great woodcarvings in Hanuman Dhoka palace are already very degraded by the heavy pigeon presence.

And in addition to the droppings, it is also the case that a variety of insects and other disease vectors live in this ubiquitous scat, including mites that bite and cause skin rashes. As a classic paper in the ornithology literature has reported:

Feral pigeons are not harmless birds. Many potential infections of humans silently exist . . . [with] the potential for transmission of over 30 diseases to humans, plus another 10 to domestic animals . . . Feral pigeons have been identified with mycotic, bacterial, protozoal, chlamydial, rickettsial, and parasitic diseases as well as dermatosis (Weber 1979: 1).<sup>8</sup>

So here, the push and press for individuals to make merit by feeding birds, results, in aggregate, in harm to the common good, degrading centuries-old cultural icons as well as the intricate woodwork of temple and home windows, roof struts, and entrances. Moreover, the droppings also support a variety of insects that directly, or indirectly (as supplying nutrients for vermin), also harm human health.

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<sup>8</sup> The paper goes into the details of each disease, relentlessly describing how each spreads from pigeons and their waste, and the seriousness of the thirty illnesses that range from respiratory infections and food poisoning, to meningitis.

This range of illnesses is hardly just an issue of minor nuisance or aesthetic offense. Added to these is a rising concern regarding high populations of birds is bird flu. According to one bird science source:

Although avian influenza has been restricted, in the main, to the mass production of poultry, the feral pigeon has inevitably been identified as one species that has the potential to carry and pass the disease onto humans based on the birds' close association with man.<sup>9</sup>

Although pigeons seem to possess resistance to the H1N1 virus and in its current form, the microbe's ability to alter its makeup, and hence infection quotient, means that this threat will remain due to global vectors of transmission. But experts fear it will mutate into a new form that passes easily from person to person. For example, in early 2012, major incidents of pigeon die-off were reported in South Asia, in Meghalaya and Bhutan. At this same time in Indonesia, health officials reported that a 5-year-old girl died of bird flu in Jakarta—just days after her uncle succumbed to the virus.<sup>10</sup> As the always-mutating microbes continue to circulate regionally with the birds, this danger of bird flu jumping to human populations is not going to disappear. A wise public health policy would seem to be to discourage a large feral pigeon population lest it abet an epidemic afflicting the urban population.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.pigeoncontrolresourcecentre.org/html/pigeons-and-avian-influenza-bird-flu.html>, accessed 3/1/2013.

<sup>10</sup> The report continues, "The H5N1 virus also claimed the lives of a man in Vietnam and a toddler in Cambodia this week. It has ravaged poultry stocks across Asia since 2003. Indonesia's health ministry said Friday that several lab tests confirmed the girl had the virus. She and her 23-year-old uncle lived in the same house and are believed to have been infected by sick pigeons." <http://www.whatsonxiamen.com/news23368.html>, accessed 3/1/2013.

The consequence of aiding living beings to excess is the refusal to eliminate vermin such as rats, mice, or cockroaches in order to avoid making bad karma or demerit. The first of the five Buddhist precepts states: one should not kill. As with their Hindu neighbors, most Newar Buddhist urban householders will not kill anything. The upside to this Newar urban culture is that Kathmandu has traditionally been a safe place from murder and serious interpersonal violence. The downside is that this compassionate ethos extends to all life forms, including those that harm both children and adults. Some examples:



13. *Asan merchant with living trap containing a mouse, heading out to release it*

(1) Newar women sitting on the rooftops on sunny days after a bath enjoy grooming each other's hair. But, as a Newar friend once pointed out to me, when they find a louse, they do not kill it but instead just toss it on the roof to fall down onto the lane or courtyard, where it can land on the head of someone passing by.<sup>11</sup>In ef-

<sup>11</sup> A dialog in a children's textbook for learning Newari records the following exchange between a grandmother (GM) and granddaughter (Gdaughter), a mirror into a cross-generation, authoritarian enculturation moment in urban Newar moral reckoning:

Gdaughter: What a big louse it is! Just look at it grandma!

GM: Good heavens... It is fat like a pig!

*It has sucked so much blood. Put it in the water pot.*

Gdaughter: Grandma! How about I will just kill it?

GM: *Oh! You must not do that...*

fect, compassion to the louse supersedes causing suffering to the anonymous human stranger.

(2) Merchants in town are gentle with the rats and mice that infest their shops. If you are around when they first open in the morning, you can observe that many have “living traps” that confine but do no harm. When a rodent has been caught behind bars (in grain shops, this happens *nearly daily*), there is a routine solution: the *sauji* (or the assistant) takes their trap with a rat or mouse inside to an open space outside the old town walls, release it, and return home.<sup>12</sup> (Most Asan shopkeepers release them around the edge of the pond called Rani Pokhari.)

So it goes as well with cockroaches that are shooed but never molested, or with uncovered garbage on the streets and in back courtyards, nourishing a large variety of flies and gnats that cannot effectively be controlled by their natural predators, the swallows and other birds.<sup>13</sup> The

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*It is forbidden. Just throw it on the roof!*

Gdaughter: I just going to go ahead and kill it.

GM: *I just insisted that you not kill it, but you paid no attention and still did so! Be off... you need not look any more for head lice.*

Gdaughter: I only killed a louse, a trifling thing. You need not be so upset.

GM: *What usually happens is that it will die on the roof...*

Gdaughter: But to kill it all at once is better [for it) than to kill it having it suffer on the roof.

GM: Oho. You alone know what is good or bad for it.

*What is forbidden is forbidden.*

*Why do you argue and think too much for yourself.*

<sup>12</sup> So familiar is the presence of mice in the Newar experience that one wedding delicacy is called *chum ki mari*, “Mouse droppings sweetbread.”

<sup>13</sup> Even the Dalai Lama recognized the problem. In the text of a photo book devoted to celebrate the Dalai Lama’s 56<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1991, photographer Raghu Rai recounts a conversation with the Dalai Lama regarding his gardening in his exile residence in

result is that human parasites such as rats, cockroaches, flies, and lice are free to infest the living spaces and multiply to their greatest numbers.

### **Buddhist Teachings and Public Health in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In the final part of this paper, I would like to speak as an engaged scholar of religion on how it is possible to apply Buddhist moral teachings to public health problems differently to address the common good.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Religious tradition as doctrinal source*

Buddhist teachings are multi-vocalic and contain a bewildering variety of philosophical perspectives. Buddhism's moral injunctions are less complex, but there is still a need to apply the teachings skillfully, especially regarding norms for monastics or householders.

Regarding killing, a more nuanced and less simplistic position for householders can be drawn using a popular Mahāyāna text extant in Nepal, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.<sup>15</sup> From its Chapter V, one can make an argu-

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Dharamsala. Regarding the butterflies, the Dalai Lama reportedly observed, "Once the eggs are laid, I have to protect them . . . Then they become small defenseless caterpillars. I cannot destroy them, so then they destroy my flowers" (Reynolds and Rai, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> The basic points made here were originally published in a Newari yearly magazine *Nhasala* in 1987, causing considerable discussion.

<sup>15</sup> Fredrik Liland (2009: 21-29) has shown that since the one-year visit of Atiśa to Nepal in 1040, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* has been copied in Sanskrit numerous times, with local Buddhist pandits also making abbreviated copies and writing/copying commentaries on it. This text was translated into vernacular Newari in a modern edition by pandit Dibyabajra Bajracarya (1986).

ment to shift the prevalent Newar interpretation of what following the Buddha's Dharma entails. One can suggest that, in fact, complete *ahiṃsā* is not the best means to realize the least *duḥkha* (suffering) in Newar society. This text provides another calculus of interpersonal good and karmic reckoning for householders wishing to follow and implement the skillful service of a bodhisattva. Here, the author Śāntideva (c. 685-763 CE) makes it clear that ethical action requires attention to those who suffer, and that living compassionately requires awareness of acting for the common good as well as one's own, sometimes subordinating the latter:

[81] Great good arises from continuous devotion towards the fertile fields that are the Virtuous and our benefactors, and from the application of an antidote in the case of ones who suffer. . .

[84] Realizing this, one should always be striving for others' well-being. Even what is proscribed is permitted for a compassionate person who sees it will be of benefit. . . (Crosby and Skilton (1995: 41)

He then makes several specific remarks about a bodhisattva's personal and public health behavior,<sup>16</sup> then turns to advice on coping with new problems, Śāntideva urges the altruistic bodhisattva to analyze the situation and adopt a "situational ethics" that favors acting for the greatest good for living beings:

[99] One should apply oneself industriously to the trainings appropriate to the various situations in which one finds oneself. . .

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<sup>16</sup> This is an exhortation, "It is not desirable to spit out tooth-cleaning sticks and phlegm in public, and it is also forbidden to urinate, etc. on land or into water that is usable" (V.91).

[100] For there is nothing from which the sons of the Conqueror cannot learn. There is nothing which is not an act of merit for the good person who conducts himself in this way.

[101] One should do nothing other than what is either directly or indirectly of benefit to living beings, and for the benefit of living beings alone one should dedicate everything....(Crosby and Skilton (1995: 43)

Many other Buddhist texts—the Pāli *suttas*, Mahāyāna *sūtras*, and Vajrayāna *tantras*—also explain that karma is something that must be evaluated in relationship to the entire existential situation. So yes, it is surely bad karma to kill, but to live as a householder always means making choices. With karma, there can be greater good results and lesser good ones, just as there can be good actions that outweigh bad actions. The true mark of any person’s moral development is the insight (*prajñā*) that informs this choice. Śāntideva in his exposition of a bodhisattva’s practicing Mahayana utilitarian ethics “by which actions are approved or disapproved depending on whether they contribute to or diminish the happiness of sentient beings . . .” (Clayton 2006: 104). For him, the perfection of *upāya* implies being aware that at times a bodhisattva can and should weigh the greater good and consider taking on demerit for it to make the world a better place.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> A few verses after the ones cited above, Śāntideva gives counsel for a person considering sacrificing his own life for another’s, a moral possibility. But what is clear is that a person should not “throw his life away” for just anyone. He states the need for critical judgment: “Therefore one should not relinquish one’s life for someone whose disposition to compassion is not as pure. But for someone whose disposition is comparable, one may relinquish it. That way, there is no overall loss” (IV.87). Thus, a bodhisattva can and must view killing (oneself, and presumably others) in terms of the net effect on the common good. In the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, Śāntideva cites in approval a text allowing “the slaying of a man who



The second doctrinal point of relevance here is that human beings occupy a special place in *saṃsāra*, the world of life and rebirth: the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and many earlier Buddhist texts point out how human birth is exceeding rare, that being a human allows a special religious opportunity, and that only humans—not even the gods—can reach *nirvāṇa*.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, when looking at the many beings existing in a city, the proper Buddhist attitude should be compassion for all, with special compassion for those who are humans. To live with skillful means (*upāya kaushalya*), a bodhisattva must move through life aware of suffering, use the precepts (*śīla*-s) as guidelines, but still be alert to the fact that there are times when one must choose between lesser and greater *pāp*, *demerit* or *bad karma*. Cutting down on the town's rats and flies and the feces and parasites in the lanes would involve killing; but it is also arguable that rats and flies make bad karma for themselves because they harm many others by transmitting debilitating and deadly diseases. So it is then a question of calculus:

1. To kill them adds to the human killer's bad karma.
2. But it will also stop parasites from making bad karma, a source of merit.

So in the end, this Buddhist situationalist moral approach would therefore result in a net increase the person's good karma by aiding all living

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was intending to commit a deadly sin . . ." (Bendall and Rouse 1981: 165). Their gloss as "deadly sin" refers to the five *ānantarakarma* that lead to immediate retribution: patricide, matricide, killing an *arhat*, injuring a buddha, creating schism in the *saṅgha*.

<sup>18</sup> See Clayton 2006: 110 for Pāli and Sanskrit sources stating the supremacy of human beings in moral reckoning.

beings who suffer from the harmful actions of parasites, and assist in the course of the latter's onward journey in *saṃsāra*.

Parasites are a hellish incarnation in *saṃsāra*, and their victims are especially the very young and very old; a responsible gesture can be to eliminate them, just as the Bodhisattva Śākayamuni's previous births as kings acted to drive away enemies from their kingdoms. In the modern urban world, for householders to have infinite compassion for rats, pigeons, and insects means that they show too little compassion for humans.

*Religion and ethos, or spirit of engagement with the world*

Scholars of Buddhism have found no textual basis to assert that there is something like collective or group karma as part of the doctrine of moral cause and effect. *Karma vikalpa* teaching in theory and practice has been individual and individuating. But what is clear in the early texts, as I have explored in another study (Lewis 2003a), is a view that the actions of a king are of the greatest scale in affecting human collectives.

The relevance of this fact today is large: one of the difficulties that modern Buddhists have faced in adapting to colonial and post-colonial socio-political challenges is the extinction of their royal rulers. This has meant the loss of focus on the collective good as imagined in the textual sources. As H. L. Seneviratne astutely noted for Buddhists in Sri Lanka, it is householders who now must take up what was formerly "the work of kings." To promote health and address the common good using

their Buddhist cultural capital, Newar Buddhist leaders, householders and sangha members, can now take up this vacated leadership role.<sup>19</sup>

### *Religious Institutions*

A final observation on how to alter the city of Kathmandu's public health status quo relates to the Newar *saṅgha*. It is comprised of two castes, Śākya and Vajrācāryas, who have for centuries been a married, patrilineal order organized in age-based hierarchy; among the latter it is the elders among the Vajrācāryas, each situated in one of 18 main *bāhā*-s, who ascends to leadership authority. Especially in recent decades with improving medical care, this has left Kathmandu's Buddhist leadership in the Vajrācārya's central institution, the *De Acārya Guthi*, in the hands of mostly geriatric representatives. Some are, to be sure, venerable religious figures, but most are not capable of engaging with modern community problems. Thus, for Buddhists in Kathmandu to utilize the Dharma to improve public health and raise the common good in everyday life, its leaders must invent a new institution so that the young, educated, and altruistic activists can draw upon the altruistic voices from their tradition, and take action. Since the philosophical texts at the pinnacle of the tradition speak of the necessity of non-attachment, and

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<sup>19</sup> This example of individual and group well-being shaping the public domain in Nepal, while simultaneously stultifying society's "common good," can be connected to wider South Asian discourse on why Hindu Indian leaders have failed in many realms in promoting the fundamental reforms necessary for a modern polity. Indian intellectuals have for over a decade been arguing about why, in comparison to China, that Indian elites cannot affect the pan-society common good, unable to even begin to reform the evils of caste discrimination, and alleviate abject poverty. (See, for example, Sen 2011.) Some in this discourse have suggested that Indic culture focuses loyalty and attention on individual, family, caste, with the larger more abstract "society" commanding no loyalty or committed action.

teach that any distinction between purity and impurity is ultimately unreal, young Newar Buddhist leaders might well be willing “to get their hands dirty” in this compassionate work of improving their community’s public health environment.

## Conclusions

### *Comparative Historiography.*

The decisive turning point in the global public health revolution in large-scale human settlements has always been the establishment of an infrastructure of sewers and plumbing to separate waste water from water used for human consumption, and the creation of institutions that decisively isolated waste from vermin. Of course, modern antibiotics and medical interventions have been significant in improving general health and ending given populations’ vulnerability to epidemic diseases, but these scientific breakthroughs are not even of the same order of magnitude in importance as the effects brought by building a modern water supply and waste infrastructure.

Buddhists concerned with the endemic suffering in Nepal’s cities should be aware of the primary axis of intervention and change in the urban environment: adequate infrastructure and lifestyles that actively minimize the flourishing of vermin. Nepal has seen a plethora of unsuccessful at-



tempts to change the equilibrium of urban practices (an example from Hanuman Dhoka at right), from those paid for by

14. Public health exhortation poster, Hanuman Dhoka 2012

international organizations based on Western precedents, to local government or NGO initiatives.<sup>20</sup> None have worked sustainably; and none have tried to reach the bedrock cultural norms connected to religious definitions of moral practice.

### *The work of Buddhist culture*

Culture is a powerful force in human life, shaping the young from the beginning of life onwards; with its metaphysical teachings and strong ties to morality, religion's centrality to culture exerts one of the most powerful forces in human lives and collective human history.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, if an individual or movement wishes to change social behavior, religious traditions are potent resources capable of altering a community's actions.

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<sup>20</sup> The history of international development organizations in Nepal and elsewhere shows an inconsistent commitment to basing their work on this model, or following through on project plans that ostensibly are founded on it. The as-yet unwritten history of development in Nepal will reveal that many projects were conceived to do what is easy, and superficial; those recognizing this foundation for community public health work in many instances were, over time, less concerned with implementation or sustainability. For example, there are uncountable drinking water systems paid for and noted on project reports that were never built at all or as planned. In the Newar context, the Germany-funded Bhaktapur Development Project in the 1970s and 1980s infamously failed to engage with local culture or design for adequate capacity, and then allowed its sewer/water system infrastructure construction be subverted without acknowledging it (Lewis 1986).

<sup>21</sup> What remains beyond the scope of this essay is how to scale the power of religion against other forces, especially in the modern world such as the power of industrial and other economic forces and the power of political actors. Consider the case of the Ganges River's environmental degradation in the face of its extremely potent sacrality in the beliefs and practices of Hinduism.

The great world religions like Hinduism and Buddhism preserve vast archives of texts, and—often surprising and paradoxical to observers—a very broad spectrum of positions on many issues. They “speak with many voices,” contain “many rooms of belief and practice,” to use an image from chapter three of one of Buddhism’s central Mahāyāna texts, the *Lotus Sūtra* (Hurvitz 1976). An historian of religion sees in faiths that endure for millennia a necessary flexibility in its archive of various opinions on key issues enabling their successful adaptation to different places, circumstances, and times.<sup>22</sup> Taking life, human or animal, is one that all the world religions treat with nuance, contextual interpretation, and multiple voices.

This essay calls upon Buddhist philosophers and activists to draw upon Buddhism’s own doctrinal resources to shift the prevailing interpretation in Nepal (and elsewhere) to reinterpret doctrines regarding the life of parasites, vermin, and feral creatures to rightly, if humbly, stand for human primacy. Just as the Buddha approved of farming by householders, despite the acknowledged fact that plowing and harvest entailed taking many forms of life on the ground and in the air (Horner 1967: 17ff), the same moral calculus can be extended to “cultivating” the ground of urban life. Vermin, parasites, and excess filth due to human habits must be limited for urban life to flourish, just as the living beings in the soil must be lost to grow the crops that sustain life. In the essays and public story recitations that are common in Newar urban life, Buddhist leaders can (re-)read and (re-)interpret the texts, such as the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* which was discussed above, to use their great religious herit-

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<sup>22</sup> Over the last 30 years, Buddhist scholars and activists have gathered the textual resources to articulate one branch of “socially-engaged Buddhist” oriented to environmentalism and human health. See, for example, Tucker and Williams (1998) and King (2009).

age to reduce the persistent suffering that comes to those living under pre-modern urban environments.

As in the *Lotus Sūtra*'s parable of the burning house, the highest moral standpoint a Buddhist should adopt is skillfully applying mind, body, and teaching to avert suffering and get everyone out of danger. One can imagine Buddhist leaders using their tradition's cultural resources to build community solidarity and design initiatives to make cities more functional and livable.

#### *The role of Newar identity*

A final recommendation on inspiring change in religious practices in the Newar context would entail linking this innovation to the goal of preserving Newar material culture. Whatever their religious inclination, Newars are united in their abiding respect for their cultural history and their accomplishments in art and architecture. Many channel this sentiment into campaigns to have their calendar become the national standard; others are concerned with the project of cultural preservation, focusing on Newar language and in sustaining the monuments created by their ancestors. What is clear, and distressing to many, is the widespread deterioration of temples, rest houses, and monasteries due to a variety of causes, from art theft to natural factors, including the effects of birds, termites, and other vermin. A skillful Buddhist activist could link the ethos of cultural pride to the project promoting the common good in the old cities.



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