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SUHKĀVATĪ TRADITIONS IN NEWAR BUDDHISM

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Introduction

In 1980, at the close of my second year of fieldwork, a vigorous middle-aged man — a leading merchant in the Kathmandu Buddhist community, beloved for his social activism and compassionate ways — began losing weight, and was diagnosed as having liver cancer. His death within two months was a blow to everyone who knew him. As we started out toward the ghālī in the procession behind the palanquin, stunned and saddened, a middle-age companion and neighbour paused, took off his hat, held up his hands in añjali, and said in Newari:

Sukhāvati bhūvanasy āśi ha maḥ.
May he be reborn in Sukhāvati.

This wish — that every Newar layman should express when a respected person dies — led me to seek other areas in which Sukhāvati belief and practice is found in the Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna traditions of the Kathmandu Valley.

Scholars of Buddhism (e.g. Chen 1973) have described the evolution of ‘Pure Land’ Mahāyāna Buddhism as a distinctive East Asian creation involving the transmission and domestication of Indic textual traditions, particularly those of the longer and short Sukhāvatīvyūha sūtras (Cowell 1969 ed.). These early texts outline a fundamental cosmology: through their extraordinary merit, highly advanced Bodhisattvas bring into existence distant heavenly rebirth realms throughout the universe, and become Buddhas presiding over them. Famous in the

1 I am pleased to acknowledge the generous support that I have received toward the completion of the research that informs this paper, especially a Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Fellowship and an American Academy of Religion Research Grant. An award from the Holy Cross Faculty Research programme also assisted in the analysis and writing. An early version of this paper was originally presented at the 1989 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting. Special thanks go to Gregory Schoepen and Brian Jorgensen who read the manuscript and made useful suggestions; to Joel Villa who expertly printed the plates; and to Roy Lewis who redrew the line drawing in Plate 4. The transliterated Newar terms in the text follow the conventions established by Gellner and Quigley 1995; I have also used Sanskrit spellings as they are typically employed in Nepal.

2 ‘Newari’ is a modern English neologism for the Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the Kathmandu Valley. There are two omic terms preferred by Newars: the colloquial Newar: Bhāy or the Sanskritised ‘Nepal Bhāṣā’ that also expresses the old pre-Shah (before 1769) indentity of Nepal as the Kathmandu Valley only.
early literature was the Abhirati paradise of Akṣobhya Buddha in the east and the Vaishāyana bhāṣa paradise (also in the east) of Bhaisajyaguru, the ‘Medicine Buddha’. However, it was the focus on Sukhāvatī (‘Land of Bliss’), the western paradise established by Amitābha (or Amitāyus) Buddha, that came to dominate East Asian Buddhism: by the T’ang era, this tradition, oriented toward Sukhāvatī, had become synonymous with ‘Pure Land Buddhism’.

The texts also describe how one can contemplate the Buddha’s image and repeat his name to secure rebirth in Sukhāvatī, where successful spiritual practices will lead without failure to the individual’s enlightenment (Kotatsu 1987; Zurcher 1987). Although surely an orientation shared by only a very small minority of Indic Buddhists, this line of development gained wide popularity in East Asia and has inspired a vast elaboration of ritual practice, doctrinal interpretation, and popular faith for the last 1500 years.

I did not expect to find any ‘Pure Land Buddhism’ when I set out for my research in Nepal, especially since scholars have long suggested that the Amitābha-Sukhāvatī school’s genesis was in northwest India or Central Asia (Kotatsu 1987: 90). But the aforementioned encounter at my friend’s funeral indicated that Newar Buddhism might perhaps offer insights into Indic Mahāyāna practices associated with Sukhāvatī. After introducing Newar Buddhism in its Himalayan context, this paper examines how Sukhāvatī traditions have become domesticated there. Surveying epigraphic records, art and local texts, and drawing upon ethnographic research on modern rituals and contemporary Buddhists, this study is intended as a contribution to the understanding of the role of faith, death ritual, and paradise rebirth aspiration in the pan-Asian history of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The Newars and Nepal

Any scholar who has worked with Indic Mahāyāna texts or 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 19th century was a landmark in modern Buddhist studies; sent out to Calcutta, Paris and London by the indefatigable collector Brian Hodgson, the British Resident from 1820-43, 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, scholars have only recently recognised the value of Sylvain Levi’s long-ago assertion (1905, I: 28) that other aspects of Buddhist culture there besides texts might provide insights into the faith’s later Indic history, particularly its material culture, rituals, festivals, and historical processes.

Despite Newar Buddhism’s slow decline, over three hundred Buddhist vihāras (monasteries) still exist (Locke 1985; Gellner 1987), as do vajra-carya ritualists, Bodhisattva temples, stūpas, Mahāyāna festivals, tantric meditation 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 1995). This rich cultural survival disproves the old assertion that Indic Buddhism completely died: the Newars in their small but vibrant oasis of tradition continue to practise Indic Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna Buddhism (Lienhard 1984).

Until the modern state’s formation in 1769 ‘Nepal’ referred only to a roughly 20-mile-diameter valley 4500 feet up in the central Himalayan foothills. Safe from military conquest but readily accessible to migrants, monks, and traders, Buddhism has existed there since Gupta times. Newar Buddhism is predominantly ‘Indic’, and through Nepal later Indic-Sanskritic Mahāyāna traditions were conveyed to Tibet: at times, too, Tibetan Buddhist influences have been strong (Lewis 1989b; Lewis and Jamspal 1988). In the last four centuries at least, Nepalese Buddhism has had much in common with the domesticated forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism in modern Tibet and Japan — notably, a householder sangha, a special emphasis on death ritualism, and, most pre-eminently, devotion to the celestial Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.

Geography shaped the formation of Nepal as an independent state and its predominantly Indicised civilisation. The fertility of valley soils allowed for intensive rice and other crop cultivation; more lucrative were the earnings from trans-Himalayan trade, as merchants centred in the Valley could control the movement of goods from the Gangetic plains to the Tibetan plateau using the Valley as an entrepot (Lewis 1993c). The wealth derived from trade allowed the people of the Kathmandu Valley to import, domesticate, and reproduce many Indic

3 ‘Newār’ derives from the place name ‘Nepal’. There has also been a Newar diaspora to market towns throughout Nepal, the eastern Himalayan hills, to Tibet, and across South Asia (Gellner 1986; Lewis and Shiakya 1988; Lewis 1993c).

4 Scholarly discourse in Buddhist studies should adopt ‘cultural area’ terminology and cease using ‘Indian’ as a scientific label for pre-modern phenomena. Projecting the modern state boundaries backwards falsifies historical representation since Buddhism endures continuously in South Asia outside the culture hearth zone up to the present: in the north in the Kathmandu Valley and Himalayas; in the far south, in Sri Lanka; to the east in Burma, Thailand, and at points along the Indian ocean. The tradition was also preserved long after the twelfth century in small communities lying in ‘inner frontiers’: e.g. Orissa (Das Gupta 1969) and in port town communities (Tucci 1931). The more heuristic geographical representation is that Buddhism did survive on the frontiers of the Indic core zone, a definition of the historical situation that opens up important questions. To say that ‘Indian Buddhism was extinguished’ is poor methodology and, in terms of literal geographical fact, false.
traditions in a distinctive urban civilisation organised on caste principles and around both Hinduism and Buddhism. There have been Sanskrit panditás in Nepal for over 1500 years; equally long-established were Hindu temples, Buddhist monasteries and stúpas, as well as wealthy aristocratic and merchant patrons.

The Newars also proved themselves exceptionally able artisans and craftsmen, adapting and domesticating Indic ideals into quite beautiful expressions of lost wax metal icons and stone sculpture, sacred architecture and painting. Over the past millennium they were employed in Tibet, and workshops in the Valley supplied the needs of the ‘devotional supplies market’ that went with the expansion of Buddhism across the Tibetan plateau (Lo Bue 1985, 1986; Vitali 1990). The literate élite of the Valley also found employment in the copying of Sanskrit manuscripts, for local patrons as well as for Tibetan scholars and their monastic libraries (Lo Bue 1988; Bajracarya 1980).

Three city-states — Bhaktapur, Kathmandu, Patan — came to dominate the Valley, although smaller towns and villages have given the polity a broad variation in settlement types (Gellner and Quigley 1995). After conquest by a Kṣatrya dynasty from Gorkha in 1769, state policies favouring Hinduism precipitated the decline of Buddhist traditions, although a great wealth of both devotional and cultural observance still survives. Today, with Kathmandu the capital of the modern state and a centre of contact with the outside world, this Valley is one of the most complex urban civilisations in Asia. A Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna Buddhist culture is among its most unusual features.

Newar Buddhism

A short introduction to Newar Buddhism is necessary to situate the discussion of Sukhāvati traditions, although more in-depth treatments are listed in the bibliography. Most Newar Buddhists practise exoteric Mahāyāna devotionalism, directing their devotions to caityas in their courtyards and neighbourhoods, and to the great stūpas such as Svayambhū (Locke 1986). They also express a strong devotion to the celestial Bodhisattvas and make regular offerings at temples and shrines dedicated to Avalokiteśvara, Mahākāla, and Tārā among others. Newar Buddhists participate periodically in special observances dedicated to these divinities — pījjas, jīrīs, and vrataș — which hold the promise of transforming their worldly and spiritual destinies (Locke 1987; Lewis 1989a). Most laity also worship other India deities: Gapeśa, Bhimsen, Śiva, Viṣṇu, Devi in many guises, nāgas, etc. One strong belief is that worshipping all local deities is the Mahāyāna ideal (Gellner 1992: 75, 82).

The Newar Buddhist sangha is one of ‘householder monks’ (Gellner 1992) now limited to only two endogamous groups having the surnames vajrācārya and śikṣya. These sanghas still dwell in courtyards referred to as vihāra (New. bāhē) and undergo first (in local parlance) śrāvaka-styled celibate ordination, then Mahāyāna-styled initiation into the bodhisattva sangha (Locke 1975; Gellner 1988). Like married Tibetan lamas of the Nyingmapa order, they serve the community’s ritual needs, with some among them specialising in textual study, medicine, astrology, and meditation. David Gellner has aptly characterised Newar Buddhism as a religion in which conformity to prescribed ritual practices dominates, as against any singular doctrinal formulation (Gellner 1992: 3, 134). The great lay majority understand basic Mahāyāna doctrines from the avadānas and jātaka stories about the Bodhisattvas and their spiritual virtues (pāramitās) (e.g. Lienhard 1963; Lewis 1993b). In addition to compiling many recensions of these tales and telling them in public sessions, the vajraśīrṣas perform for their community highly sophisticated Buddhist life-cycle rites and other rituals for festival and special observances (vratas and pilgrimages).

In terms of soteriological practice, the Newar Buddhist tradition also has an esoteric level: vajrāyana initiations (Skt: dikṣa or abhiṣekha; New: dōka) that direct meditation and ritual to tantric deities such as Šaivism, Hevajra, and their consorts (yoginis). It is the vajraśīra spiritual élite that pass on vajrayāna initiations to other high castes, including merchants and artisans; their training in Tantric meditation and ritual forms the authoritative basis of their ritual service for the community (Stablein 1976).

The Newar laity supports the local vajraśīra sangha, which helps them, in return, to look after their spiritual destiny in this world and beyond. In their maintenance of this exchange and in their concern for pujya, Newars closely resemble lay Buddhists in other countries. We now turn to examine how Sukhāvati traditions have been incorporated into the Mahāyāna culture of the Nepal Valley.

NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF SUKHĀVATI TRADITIONS IN NEPAL

II.a Lichchavi Epigraphy (464-900 CE)

Although one finds passing references to Nepal in earlier Indie literature, no epigraphic evidence has been found in Nepal before 464 CE when Sanskrit inscriptions attest to the Kathmandu Valley as a frontier zone ruled over by a rājāvamsa calling itself Lichchavi (Riccardi 1980; Slusser 1982). Alongside various Hindu and high-ranking Brahmins there existed diverse Buddhist traditions, with the most mentioned sangha that of the Mahāsanghikas. Among over 200 recorded inscriptions, there are references to land-owning vihāras, bhikṣus and bhikṣunis, and patronage by caravan leaders. A few hints of Vajrayāna practice are discernable, but Mahāyāna themes predominate: verses of praise are addressed to Śākyamuni and other Tathāgatas as well as to the Bodhisattvas Mahāsāga, Vajrapāṇi, Samantabhadra, and, most frequently, Ārya Avalokiteśvara.

Turning to the theme of Sukhāvati, we find an inscription dated 610 CE from Patan that is one of the earliest epigraphic references to Amitābha in South Asia
(D. Vajracarya 1973: 98). Among a series of four ślokas on each of the four directional sides of a caitya, the east side text reads as follows:5

I praise Amitābha, the best, dispeller of illusion by the
light of great Prajāpa;  
The light, victor who lives in Sukhāvati with Lokesvara,
The destroyer of the fear arising in the world, bearer
of the lotus, and
Mahāsthāmaprāpta, the affectionate-hearted one.

The directional location of Amitābha on the caitya’s eastern side (Pal 1974a: 5), of course, does not agree with the later common convention of the patacathāgaus (Macdonald and Stahl 1979), but it does accord with Chapter XXIII of the Sanskrit Saddharmapuṇḍarīka utilised by Hurvitz (1976: 407) that places Sukhāvati in the East. The two Sukhāvati-dwelling Bodhisattvas of the inscription, Lokesvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, are also mentioned in both versions of the Sukhāvatīvyāha.

II.b. Licchavi Art

Several extant images from the Licchavi period, which can still be found worshipped in the courtyards and temple precincts today, suggest that the aspiration for rebirth in Sukhāvati was one element in the Mahāyāna cultural environment of early Nepal. There are several examples of what seem to be an Indic ‘Sukhāvati Triad’ known from Kūsaṇa Mathura (Huntington 1980); a larger Buddha flanked by somewhat diminutive Bodhisattvas, all attended by lotus-born votive figures (Pal 1974a: 22) (see Plate 1). Images of Amitābha are common among the earliest Licchavi sculptures; his place on all four sides of early caityas (unlike the later patacathāgaush shrine with four directional Buddhas) could conceivably point to a patron devotee’s Sukhāvati aspiration (particularly in Dhvaka Bāhā; see Pal 1974b: 27-8, 177). Amitābha is found in Avalokiteśvara’s crown in Nepalese images from at least as early as 550 CE (Pal 1974b: Plate 8, 187-200).

Thus, from the earliest records of Nepal, we find art and inscriptive evidence of Mahāyāna Buddhists hoping for rebirth in Sukhāvati. While these sources sustain the conclusion of Sukhāvati orientation being one strand within early Mahāyāna Buddhism, it was by no means predominant, existing alongside other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the early Mahāyāna tradition.

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5 I follow Riccardi’s rendering (1980) of D. Vajracarya’s (1973) compilation, except for identifying the Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta and utilising Pal’s (1974a) additional information on the inscription’s context.

6 The Saddharmapuṇḍarīka, usually rendered in English as ‘Lotus Sūtra’, has been the most influential Mahāyāna Buddhist text throughout Asia. In Kern’s Sanskrit translation from a Nepalese recension of the text dated 1039 CE, Sukhāvati is consistently located in the west (1963 ed: xlviii, 178).
II.c Manuscripts in Newar Libraries

I have already alluded to the vast holdings of Sanskrit manuscripts copied and preserved by Newar Buddhists. A quick survey of manuscript lists reveals that among the most common Newar Buddhist sūtras preserved today are those that are prominent in featuring Sukhāvatī aspirations (Mitra 1971). The larger Sukhāvatīvyūha is in many vihāra libraries, as are other texts promising this rebirth destiny: the Aparamitāyur Mahāyāna Sūtra, the Saddharmapuṇḍarikā, the Gaṇḍavyūha, and the Samādhirajā Sūtra. There are also hundreds of dhāranī and vrata texts related to the delites of these sūtras (e.g. Takaoğlu 1981).

The question of how to define a Mahāyāna canon (Lancaster 1979) or relate the mere existence of texts in a particular place to the historical practices in that context remains a problem in Buddhist studies (Schopen 1993). From at least as early as the 15th century Newar Buddhism did define a canon called the Navadharmā:

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<tr>
<th>Prajñāparamitā</th>
<th>Saddharmapuṇḍarikā</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gaṇḍavyūha</td>
<td>Lalitavistāra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daśahūmi</td>
<td>Suvannaprabhāśa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Samādhirajā</td>
<td>Lankāvatāra</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tatbhiṭṭagūhyā</td>
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The compilation of these nine texts, which ostensibly suggests the active scholastic command of a rather comprehensive representation of Mahāyāna philosophy, may in fact have been based mainly on ritual use: nine sūtras are needed for placement on the dharma maṇḍala as part of the guru maṇḍala pājā, a ceremony that frames almost every Vajrayāna ritual (Gellner 1991). Among these nine texts are several already cited that mention the promise of Sukhāvatī rebirth.

Another influential text in Nepal, the Karapuṇḍavyūha, establishes a lineage connection between Śākyamuni, Sukhāvatī, and Amitābha, asserting that the paradise has endured with many names and Buddhas over myriad aeons (Mitra 1971 ed., 283–6). Finally, the still-later Svayambhū Purāṇa, a Sanskrit text of strictly local origin (although perhaps inspired by a Khotanese prototype (Brough 1948)), does not mention Sukhāvatī in its cosmological sections but does refer to it in its tenth chapter. Here, the text recounts the history of king Guṇakāma and his relationship to his siddha teacher Śāntaśīrī (also called Śāntikara). After the former renounced his throne for an ascetic life, ‘by constantly worshipping Svayambhū and Śāntikara, the king obtained, after death, through his austerities and grace, rebirth in the blissful region named Sukhāvatī’ (Svayambhū Purāṇa 10.197–8; my translation from Poussin 1893: 18). This text is often reedited in the subsequent Newari writings by Buddhist pādīṭhas up to the present (Kolvor 1985).

It is noteworthy that a common refrain in the Mahāyāna sūtras is that those who copy or expound upon a particular Mahāyāna text will be rewarded specifically with rebirth in Sukhāvatī (Schopen 1977: 182–88). Such promises passages are found in many of the sūtras and dhāranīs found in the Kathmandu
Valley, e.g. the Saddharma-pundarika, Karatavyaśāha, Samādhirāja, and the Bhaddeva-prajñādīnā. In Nepal, where for centuries such manuscripts (including these Sukhāvati passages) were saved, copied, and stored, this scribal industry may well have been influenced by the hope for Sukhāvati rebirth. Despite the fact that the era of such scribal occupation is over, modern Newar scholars still make reference to Sukhāvati in their printed writings and ritual handbooks. Thus, it seems a reasonable surmise that scribes, sangha scholars, and commoners alike had an interest in the promise of Sukhāvati. In Nepal, too, the Buddhist orientation toward ‘the western paradise’ cannot be reduced to a single text or to the ‘folk stratum’ in society.

The rather eclectic contents of the ‘Newar canon’ and the widespread text-copying traditions confirm the impression given by art and inscriptions: for Nepalese Buddhists adhering to Indic Mahāyāna-vajrayāna traditions, the orientation for rebirth in Sukhāvati was but one among many other interests represented in the later tradition. This characterisation is supported by the modern data of Buddhist practice in the Newar community — to which we now turn.

III

SUKHĀVATI IN MODERN NEWAR BUDDHIST PRACTICES

III.a Stūpa Veneration

Thousands of stūpas (or caityas7) mark the urban environment of Newar settlements (Lewis 1994b). Most modern shrines show the later pañcatathāgata symbolism and place each Buddha according to a consistent directional orientation. Medieval and modern caityas invariably show Amitābha in the west (see Plate 2).

As elsewhere in the Buddhist world, a prominent hilltop stupa dominates the local Buddhist landscape. Extant since Licchavi times, the ‘Swayambhū Mahācāitya’ to the west of Kathmandu city has been the focus of praxis for Buddhist devotees from throughout the Valley as well as the central Himalayan mid-bills and Tibet (Shakya 1978, Lewis 1989b). Hemraj Sikya has also recorded an oral tradition regarding the consecration of Swayambhū by Śāntikāra, the legendary siddha and original Newar vaṇrācārya: it says ‘Aparunita Tathāgata, dwelling in Sukhāvati, came to put into place the Mahācāitya’s topmost gold umbrella and its vajrā crest jewel (vājanāpi)’ (Shakya 1980: 526).

Swayambhū has remained a regular destination for pilgrimage and for making offerings at the many associated shrines and vihāras. Today, its ambulatory has niches for the four Buddhas, their consorts, and for Vairocana, symbolic of the Âdi Buddha. Most Newar patronage at the great stūpa, and most pījās conducted on the hilltop, are done before the Amitābha niche on the west side of the stūpa.

7 From antiquity, stūpa and caitya were used in Buddhist inscriptions and literature as synonyms. They are also used this way in this article.

Sukhāvati Traditions in Newar Buddhism

This same preference pattern is clear in the morning pījā offerings that every Buddhist household makes at neighbourhood caityas: if devotees leave offerings, these are set down before Amitābha, and rarely given to any other Tathāgata. For most Newar laity, this is ‘just our custom’; several commentators have also given the reason for this preference: Amitābha is the Tathāgata of the current era, the Kali Yuga. This is a point to which we will return.

III.b The Avalokiteśvara Cultus

Besides caitya veneration, Newar Buddhism today is focused upon devotion to Avalokiteśvara, affectionately called Karūṇāmaya (‘Compassionate-Hearted’), a celestial Bodhisattva who has been integrated into Nepal’s devotional life in a variety of ways (Locke 1980). Most Newar images of Avalokiteśvara feature the classical Indic iconographic placement of Amitābha affixed on the crown. Close to images of Avalokiteśvara at major temples there are shrines for Tārā, reflecting the view, also known in Tibet, that both are emanations, from the right and left eyes, respectively, of Amitābha in Sukhāvati (Meisels 1967: 461).

Daily veneration of Avalokiteśvara is the most common devotional focus of Newar Buddhists. For most devotees the centre of Buddhist activity inside the old city of Kathmandu is the temple in the courtyard of Kanakakuti Mahāvihāra, called Jana Bāhā in popular parlance. (For this reason, the colloquial term for the Bodhisattva is Jana Bāhā Dyah, ‘Deity of Jana Bāhā.’) Several important Sukhāvati traditions are articulated through rituals, icons, and texts associated with this shrine complex.

The ratha jāraṣ of Avalokiteśvara are the most important festivals in the Valley, the greatest overall being in Patan-Bungamati, and the greatest in Kathmandu City the one orchestrated for Jana Bāhā Dyah. As will be noted below in a local myth, one reason for assembling a five-storey ratha and pulling it through the narrow city streets in spectacular fashion is to provide the house-bound and sick a chance for veneration that will enable them to be reborn in Sukhāvati.

III.c Sukhāvati Lokeśvara8

The veneration of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in Kathmandu has led sangha members to elaborate upon the nature of the divinity and develop myriad devotional practices. Most prominent are the traditions that specify 108 or 360 Avalokiteśvara manifestations. In Nepal this led to the articulation of an ‘Avalokiteśvara cosmology’, a theory that the whole of the Buddhist pantheon is in fact an emanation of Avalokiteśvara.9 The 108 images have been rendered in

8 These include Śrīṣṭikāṅtha Lokesvara, Ādi-Buddha Lokesvara, Amītabha Lokesvara, Amoghapāśa Lokesvara, Maitreya Lokesvara, Santatadvātra Lokesvara, Vajrāpati Lokesvara, Manjūśrī Lokesvara, Kāśita Lokesvara, etc. This totalising construction has also been noted for Tibetan devotional thought about Tārā (Beyer 1973). In effect, such Buddhist cosmologies mirror the Viṣṇu avatāra theology (Mü 1964).
devotional art often through sculpture, paintings, illustrated manuscripts, and in modern printed form. Common hand-copied texts used by both lay and sangha devotees are the Lokeshvara Nāma 108 Stotra or the Avalokitesvara Nāma 360 Stotra, in which each of the names is listed for chanting in order. A printed book with line drawings of the 108 forms and stories associated with 35 of these emanations was published in 1979 by A. Vajracarya.

In each of these Lokeshvara Nāma Stotras, a 'Sukhāvati Lokeshvara' has been drawn and listed as part of the tradition (Shakya 1991: 31, 48). The rendition from the 1979 publication, a form which shows Lokeshvara seated with Tārā, is given in Plate 3 (see the discussion of the Tārā vratas below). This is a form that is not specified in the Pala-era iconographic sourcebook, the Śāhānamāla (Malleme 1948: 55) but is found in the Newari Dharmakosasamgraha. Another iconographic form of Sukhāvati Lokeshvara from Nepal is described as 'solitary' (Bhattacharyya 1968b: 404), as reproduced in Plate 4. No specific Newar vratas that I have encountered is dedicated specifically to Sukhāvati Lokeshvara, although his inclusion in paintings associated with the Bhima Ratha Jājakvā (see IIIe.3, below) may indicate a connection with this ritual.

Plate 3: Sukhāvati Lokeshvara-Tārā (based on A. Vajracarya 1979)
Plate 4: Sukhāvati Lokeshvara (based on Bhattacharyya 1968: 404)

III.d A Local Text: Janabābhdāyāḥ Bākham

The Janabābhdāyāḥ Bākham, a Kathmandu-centred Newari-language text that was probably derived from an early modern vaṇṇāvall, is a story (bākham) told occasionally by public vajraclīrya or sākya storytellers. The narrative explains the origin of Kathmandu’s greatest Buddhist temple and jātis at the time of Avalokitesvara’s manifestation from Sukhāvati. It also positions other sites in the local sacred landscape as having royal origins while ordaining specific Mahāyāna practices with Sukhāvati rebirth as the reward for devout observance.

Maitreyas Bodhāsutta asked the Buddha, ‘How did Avalokitesvara, also called Janabābhdāyaḥ, who resides in Kathmandu, arise?’...

Sākyasimha Buddha replied, ‘Once there was a King Yakṣa Mallā and through the efforts of that king’s family, Śrī Karuṇāyāya came down from Sukhāvati bhūvana to help the people of Kathmandu... to build a vihāra at Kālmochan gāthas...

[He said:] ‘If those who are born in Nepal observe the Guna Dharma, if they show devotion to Śvāṣambhū, if they play five traditional instruments at the jātis, if they revere the pañcātāhāgatas, if they perform the proper worship of Śrī Jyotirūpa Śvāṣambhū Bhagavān... they will get the four fruits: dhārma, artha, kama, mokṣa, and be freed from all pāpa. When they die they will be free from the fear of Yamarāja and go for rebirth in Sukhāvati bhūvana.

Having legitimized the monsoon-season, month-long Buddhist festival called Guna Dharma, a time for myriad devotional observances (Lewis 1993a), the Janabābhdāyāḥ Bākham then recounts a testimonial story describing how in the past local Buddhists did show such devotion and how Yama, Lord of Death, was ‘cheated’ by their devotional fidelity:

‘Once Yamarāja sent his messengers to Nepal but found that as soon as the people stopped breathing they disappeared and went immediately to Sukhāvati by the favour of Avalokiteśvara. As a result, Yamarāja himself went to Kathmandu ... the King invited him to the palace where he was seated on the King’s throne and worshipped... The King then summoned Vajrapāṇi who bound Yamarāja with a mantra after which the King presented a petition that he make the people of the country ever young, never to grow old, never afflicted by diseases, having long life. Yamarāja replied that this was not in his power to give, that the people suffered due to their karma which could not be erased.

9 The text is excerpted from John Locke’s paraphrase translation (1980: 149-154). I have restored a few Sanskrit forms and made minor corrections to keep usages consistent with those in the article.

10 The modernist Theravādins in Nepal have spoken out against this practice, and most of the merchants I studied had given up all but egg sacrifices. The practice of vajraclīryas performing these rites is still found in Kathmandu’s festivals (e.g. Annapūrṇā Jāja and in Nārada’s Pañcarāja rituals (Lewis 1984: 394) and, as noted, in Patan. Some lāty also derided the old and widely-heard vajraclīrya apology: as one cynical middle-aged man once commented, ‘If such ritual sacrifice leads to Sukhāvati rebirth, then why don’t I sacrifice my mother and father?’
The King replied that until the request was granted, he would not release Yamārajī. The latter said, ‘Nobody can grant this request, except for my guru Śrī Karuṇāmaya who lives in Sukhāvati.’ The King commanded Yamārajī to summon his guru and so Avalokiteśvara appeared out of the water at a local pond. With Amīśāśa on his head, one hand in abhaya mudrā, the other holding a lotus...

‘King Yaśa Malla then built... a vihāra for Karuṇāmaya. When the vihāra was inaugurated, Karuṇāmaya then vowed, ‘Whoever comes to this vihāra and does pūjā to me will be free from disease and have a full life. The sick who come to read a dhāraṇī...will be cured. In the next life they will come to reside with me in Sukhāvati bhūvāna... Hence you should also establish a ṛhadūṭa.*’ (Locke 1980: 151-3)

Linking Avalokiteśvara to this paradise, the story informs devotees that conformity to established Newar Buddhist customs, especially the extensive practices during the monolithic Guṇḍā festival (Lewis 1993a), can ensure their rebirth in Sukhāvati.

III.e Newar Lay Buddhist Rituals

The enduring practices in Kathmandu Valley households contain numerous references to Sukhāvati.

III.e.1 Pañca Dīna

Each year during Guṇḍā, one day is dedicated for each household to make donations directly to members of the saṃgha who visit their homes on a ‘begging round’. One common motive articulated by the donor householders is ‘to be reborn in Sukhāvati’ (Lewis 1984: 368).

III.e.2 Tantric Buddhist Animal Sacrifice

Another reference to Sukhāvati was made by scattered Newar vajrācārya priests and laity with regard to animal sacrifice. Newar Buddhists have long made blood offerings to certain members of their local pantheon and there are prescribed pūjā guidelines for the vajrācāryas who perform them. (They do not actually wield the knife, however (Gellner 1992: 124-5; Owens 1993).) What does Sukhāvati have to do with the taking of animal life, a practice that contravenes many early Hinayāna and Mahāyāna texts? It is found in the local vajrācārya-derived explanation for their ritual efficacy: before the animal is dispatched, the vajrācārya whispers a mantra into its ear so that, as one of my informants noted, ‘It can go to Sukhāvati’. The same priest also commented that, in Buddhist terms, it was a service to liberate animals from their rebirth state, and noted that the wick lamp placed on the animal’s severed head laid before the deity is also said to symbolise this Sukhāvati destiny. (Bruce Owens (1994) has noted the same comment made at the sacrifices that take place during the Patan-Bungamati festival.) This practice and justification has been much disputed in recent decades (e.g. R. K. Vajracarya 1981: p. 9).

III.c.3. Būrī/Buri Jāṅkwa or the Bhūma Rātha Jāṅkwa

This optional Newar rite for elders (būrī/buri), performed since at least the fifteenth century, is done to mark the occasion of reaching the age of seventy-seven years, seven months, and seven days, etc. The rituals elevate the individual to a new, divine status, as expressed in the dramatic performance of children and grandchildren pulling the elder through the city in a decorated chariot. From this point onward, the elder is also relieved of adult religious responsibilities until death.

Būrī Jāṅkwa rites generate blessings to assure both longevity (‘strengthening the āyu’) and excellent rebirth destiny (‘pañca cut’) (Lewis 1984: 299-307, Gellner 1992: 198). The exorcisms highlighted below ultimately seek to provide sufficient merit so that the elder will be capable of rebirth in Sukhāvati. Although this is not proclaimed explicitly in the formal chants or rituals, it does find expression by participating priests and patrons: Sukhāvati rebirth for the elder is usually cited in the inscriptions on the art commissioned to commemorate the rites, and is an especially common motif in local Buddhist painting (e.g. Pal 1977: 186).11

Būrī Jāṅkwa rites include a repetition of all earlier life-cycle rites, the gift of a cow to a brahman (go dāna), and offerings to almost every beneficent being in the cosmos as laid out on a series of manḍalas (the graha manḍala and pātika buddha or duso/manḍalas (R. Vajracarya 1981: 48-9)). The rituals take more than two days to perform and there are many kinds of offerings.12

The required founding of a caitya in the name of the elder(s) is the rite’s final connection with Sukhāvati. This is one of the most meritorious actions that a layman can perform, as recorded in classical Mahāyāna sūtras and in local texts (Lewis 1994b), and here it is done on behalf of the elder. (The caitya in modern practice can also be depicted in a painting or pressed as a repousse metal plaque (see Plate 5).) In public or private representation, the proper installation of any Newar stūpa involves vajrayāna ritual including the reciting of the maṇḍāhā jāhā rātā. Classified as an emanation of Vairocana ‘who resides in the womb of the

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11Having performed the Jāṅkwa, men (but not women) are entitled to special cremation rites, with the body burned in a seated position. They are conveyed to the ghaṭ seated in a palanquin that resembles the bhūma rātha (Lewis 1984: 307). It is also expected that their cremation ashes will be moulded into sand stūpas and left at auspicious places by the family in the Śrīḍhāra rites performed throughout the year of mourning.

12The extent and detail of this life cycle observance is far too vast to be described here. An overview description is found in Lewis 1984: 299-307. Note that a man or woman who has ‘completed all the life-cycle rites’ has taken those for both men and women, becoming both genders like the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. In the yearly rites done at the major temples of the Valley, the Bodhisattva’s androgynous nature is evident to those who know about the renewal ceremonies that include washing, repainting, and recreation of ritual icons that include both genders’ entire life cycle ceremonies (Locke 1980: 208-221). While the identification is clear through such symbolic analysis, I am not aware that any informant or text has ever developed this parallelism.
the goddess Uṣṇiṣavijayā who personifies the dhāraṇī must be established inside the new burā jaṅkwa stūpa.

Both the textual and iconographic traditions associated with the goddess are linked to Sukhāvatī. The Sanskrit Uṣṇiṣavijayā dhāraṇī text notes that its origins were in Sukhāvatī: the dhāraṇī is revealed by Amitābha there (Mitra (ed.) 1971: 263-4). The Newar iconography of the Uṣṇiṣavijayā image located within a caitya has not been found in India, but the goddess’s solitary iconographic depiction goes back a millennium at least, as it is found in the Sudhanamalla three times (Bhattacaryya 1968b).13

The upper right hand of an eight-armed Newar sculpture shown in Plate 6 holds a lotus bearing Amitābha (Foucher 1905, II: 86). This form has been noted across the Mahāyāna Buddhist world (Chandra 1979). With reference to the Bhārmatī saṅgha rites, Lokesch Chandra cites a Tibetan text, the ‘Rinbhyun album’, that may explain the origins of the Newar practice: it identifies Uṣṇiṣavijayā as one of the ‘āyurvedhina deities...for prolonging life’ (Chandra 1979: 14).

Given its role in Newar ritual and a reference from another Tibetan literary source about Svayambhū,14 I suggest that this image and its contextual dhāraṇī practice point back to an old death-time or after-death dhāraṇī recitation tradition that connected Sukhāvatī rebirth to the Uṣṇiṣavijayā dhāraṇī practice that was begun (or renewed) through the bhāmaraṇa ceremonies. Chandra’s terse summary of the Tibetan Rgyud-sde kun-btsas, a minor Tantra, identifies Uṣṇiṣavijayā as one of three long-life deities ‘who are auspicious at the end’ (Chandra 1979: 1979: 15). This supports this hypothesis and suggests that the subject requires further investigation.

III.6.4. Death and After-death Rituals

We began this study by citing the proper Newar Buddhist pronunciation as cremation processions pass on their way to the ghāṭī. While the respectful, ‘Sukhāvatī bhāvanay lāṅ he mā’ is perhaps the context in which layfolk most commonly invoke Sukhāvatī, it is but one of many other afterlife paradigms that Newar Buddhist tradition applies to the crisis of death. It is noteworthy that Sukhāvatī is not specifically cited in the manḍala or dhāraṇīs associated with the

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13 There is one example of Uṣṇiṣavijayā within a stūpa at the Biyun temple outside Beijing. The five-stūpa monument was built in 1748 (Anon 1993).
14 This is my speculative suggestion, as earlier treatments of Uṣṇiṣavijayā as art motif or in a textual passage have never been related to actual death-time Buddhist usage. At least in the Tibetan literature, a connection between Uṣṇiṣavijayā and death ritual is found: Taranatha records that the sage Vasubandhu died in Nepal, ‘After reciting the Uṣṇiṣavijaya dhāraṇī backwards and forwards twice’. (This point was made by Pal 1977: 180). In modern practice, it is the Dungṣtīparīkṣodhāna recitation and manḍala that are now the norm. This is so much so that one leading Kathmandu vajrācārya ritualist does not even mention Uṣṇiṣavijayā or Sukhāvatī in his book’s long discussion of karma and Newar death rites (Lewis 1994a).

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Plate 5: An Urāy family’s private Buda Jaṅkwa repoussé plaque with an Uṣṇiṣavijayā Caitya

For the mourning period, Newar Buddhists have retained but generally reinterpreted Brahmanical śrāddha practices, making pīṇḍa dāna offerings to the dead. Across the Newar towns and cities and among different castes, this practice varies rather widely (Gellner 1992: 210-213). The Kathmandu high castes make pīṇḍa offerings at the gḥāṭ before cremation, and in the weeks and months following, even performing śrāddha on the kinsman’s death anniversary for years afterwards (Lewis 1984: 314-336).

The Newars’ assimilation of the Indic śrāddha emphasises Sukhāvatī
Lokāñāra’s witnessing of the ritual: the celestial Bodhisattva is asked to sit on kusa grass and placed directly in front of the vajrācārya priest, as shown in Plate 7 (this is reproduced from a ritual guidebook, the Piṇḍa Vidhiṇānama (A. Vajracarya 1973)). In the laukikapinda ceremony, Sukhāvatī Lokāñāra witnesses the guru mandala pājā, receives offerings, and remains for the Durgatipariso dhana chārṇya recitations on behalf of the deceased. For the ‘Sixteen Piṇḍa Rite’, performed by riverside śīrhas, Sukhāvatī Lokāñāra is similarly honoured (A. Vajracarya 1973). The śīrṇaśa rite’s instrumental orchestration is quite explicit: it seeks the Bodhisattva’s compassionate, salvific actions on behalf of the deceased.

II.5 Mahāyāna Vratas
The vṛata is another example of an Indic religious practice that has been adapted into later Mahāyāna Buddhism. That vṛata dates back many centuries in the Newar tradition is attested by the antiquity of manuscripts describing the proper forms of observance (Malla 1981). Vṛatas are special forms of vajrācārya-led worship services that focus devotional attention on an individual deity. Groups of individuals devote one or more days to making offerings, while remaining chaste, fasting, abstaining from certain foods, and maintaining a high state of ritual purity. All earn great amounts of puṇya and Newar tradition specifies a series of boons for each.

It is somewhat surprising that Sukhāvatī is not mentioned in the most popular Newar vṛata of Amoghapāśa Lokāñāra (Locke 1987). But in the appendix story (vratakāthā) of another Newar vṛata, the promise of Sukhāvatī is made as a reward for devotional acts dedicated to Tārā. The story closes with this resolution, as the heroine follows the advice of a sage who proposes that she perform a vṛata to gain divine aid:

Hearing this from the sage, the female Brāhmaṇa climbed up the hill with enthusiasm to have a darsan of Ugra Tārā Vajrajogini and thereafter went to the Tārā Tīrtha. On reaching the tīrtha, she bathed and offered pājā, and said heartfelt prayers.

In answer to her prayers, the goddess Ārya Tārā took pity on the female Brāhmaṇa and appeared before her in green complexion and in abhaya mudra holding a flower in one of her hands. The female Brāhmaṇa fell prostrate on the ground before the goddess and offered her pājā while chanting devotional songs. The goddess blessed her and vanished out of sight. The female Brāhmaṇa spent the rest of her life at this Tārā tīrtha living upon fruits and water nearby, meditating and observing the Ārya Tārā vṛata and offering prayers to the Tīrṇaṇa. When she finally died she was transported to Sukhāvatī bhuuvana.

(Bajracarya 1980, translated in Lewis 1989a: 129)

This popular ritual thus asserts that devotion to the green Tārā, too, can secure rebirth in Sukhāvatī.16

III.5 Sukhāvatī in Religious Folksongs
The rich Newar cultural environment includes many song genres, including devotional hymns and compositions for the different instruments-grouping, the older baḷās and more recent baḷās (Lewis 1995). In the former, there are a few compositions that refer to Sukhāvatī. In one old song that was until very recently sung by pilgrims while venerating Svayambhū (Lienhard 1984: 23), the verses connect veneration of Svayambhū to rebirth in Sukhāvatī. It involves several themes developed in this study (old age, veneration of stūpas, the hour of death, and injunctions from the Janaśīraya Bākhaṇa):

Oh people, pay homage to the feet of the three jewels and show your devotion.

Days are never the same as long as life lasts for man.

Life flows on, impermanent. One who does not think of dharma in this life will afterwards go to hell.

Being subject to illusion, veiled by mâyā, one’s eyes do not see the dharma. Not thinking of the next world, not doing good to others, the hour of death approaches.

As a boy he plays; when middle-aged he does not reflect.

In old age, laziness enters. Separated from everything, he must leave. Love, friends, and wealth do not follow.

Svayambhū, the Light and Dharmadātu, have consecrated to come to the wonderful hill called Gopuchchā. If you pay homage to this revered one, you will not need to endure hardships. He will lead his people to Sukhāvatī...

Note that here the devotional practices at the Svayambhū stūpa are interpreted as expressions of non-attachment and insight, with homage to the stūpa decisive for Sukhāvatī rebirth.

Another shorter song still sung during the Patan Avalokiteśvara festival provides an example of a disciple begging for the Bodhisattva’s grace to help him reach Aitīhāsikā’s paradise:

Oh Lokaśāha, do save me soon!

15 The highest goal in the version presented by Locke cites the goal of the vṛata as anuttara sanyās sambodhī (“complete enlightenment”) (Locke 1987: 174). The stories in this tradition even cite Lokāñāra ‘coming from Tushita heaven’ (p. 170).

16 Note that the Teutric goddess Ugra Tārā Vajrayogini directs the heroine to continue her devotion to Ārya Tārā.

17 My guess is that it is in the various song traditions praising Lokāñārā in Sukhāvatī that modern Newar laymen most encounter this conception of paradise.

18 The old name of the hillock where the Svayambhū Mahāśāla is located.
To you whose colour is like the dawn's, who bears Amitābha on your forehead, who give gestures of security and of granting a boon, who are Protector of the unprotected and hold in your hand the unslaying sword, to you I, a poor man, have come, full of hope...

O lord of the land Sukhāvatī, glorious and endowed with beautiful auspicious marks! Behold, oh Lord! I bid you cast a kind look upon me and take me to Sukhāvatī at that time [of death]!

(Leinhard 1984: 24)

Imported from India in this century, the bhajan style group has inspired Newar devotees to compose hundreds of Buddhist hymns to be sung with the harmonium, tabla, and cymbal orchestra. In surveying this still quite popular devotional area—which has induced many of the different groups that meet regularly to publish songbooks for their members (e.g. Shakya 1980; Kasa 1967)—the paucity of references to Sukhāvatī is striking. Most of these simply refer to Avalokitēśvara as Sukhāvatīnātha ("Lord of Sukhāvatī"), although several do praise the Bodhisattva for 'leading living beings to Sukhāvatī' (e.g. Kasa 1967: 26). The rarity of bhajan references is no doubt due, in part, to the strong influence of the Theravādin modernist movement (Kloppenberg 1977; Gellner 1992: 321-8; Lewis 1984: 494-513); but it also conforms to the basic pattern evident elsewhere in modern Newar practice: Sukhāvatī rebirth remains an unsystematically articulated goal, one of many associations linked to venerating the stūpas and Bodhisattvas of the country.

IV SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

From this survey of Nepalese Buddhist inscriptions, art, texts, and modern rituals, several summary observations can be made about the role of Sukhāvatī traditions in the history of Indic Buddhism.

1. This study supports the conclusion of Gregory Schopen (1977) that there was no 'Sukhāvatī cult' evident in Indic Buddhism and that 'hope for rebirth in Sukhāvatī' had become by the fifth century CE a 'generalised religious goal'. Rebirth there did not become a universally-shared paradigm for understanding death in the Newar tradition, nor did it find consistent association with Avalokiteśvara or Amitābha in Newar dhāraṇī practice or in other rituals. Nor is Sukhāvatī rebirth associated with these divinities alone.

2. Sukhāvatī is mentioned in local texts that explain the origins of Svayambhū Mahācārya as well as the largest Buddhist festival in Kathmandu and other central Buddhist rituals performed by the lay community. Sukhāvatī aspiration is found in scattered devotional songs, and articulated as the reward for rituals that are performed faithfully and directed to Lokesvara, Tārā, Svayambhū, and Uṣṇīṣavijayā. Sukhāvatī rebirth provides a motive for making stūpas and a rationale for Buddhists performing animal sacrifice. Finally, Sukhāvatī rebirth supports the Newar performance of old-age and after-death rituals for kin elders. Coupled with the view of Amitābha as the Buddha who is the best refuge in the Kali Yuga, all these domesticated elements explain the overwhelmingly singular focus on Amitābha in the common gestures of stūpa veneration usually visible at Svayambhū and at the Valley towns' myriad votive stūpas.19

3. While there is no evidence of a separate 'Sukhāvatī cult' in the history of Nepalese Buddhism, Sukhāvatī as a rebirth aspiration may have motivated the copying and veneration of Sanskrit stūras, although this surmise should find confirmation in the colophons of or passages from other medieval Nepalese documents. The Sukhāvatī rebirth paradigm certainly cannot be described in any sense as a Newar 'folk tradition'; in fact it is quite the opposite in that it is the literate and ritual-performing Newar Buddhist élite that articulates it most often.

4. The nature of Sukhāvatī belief and practice among the modern laity must be considered as part of the Newar case study in late Mahāyāna/Vajrayāna culture. Many Newars today regard the present era as a retrograde spiritual time: some use the Indic and originally non-Buddhist concept Kali Yuga. In my surveys of Buddhist merchants in Kathmandu, their most commonly reported view was that Sukhāvatī rebirth is a distant and unrealistic possibility for most to hope for. As one man said to me, 'I cannot imagine that anyone living now has such a store of punya'. Is the rebirth destiny a place called Sukhāvatī, or just a place characterised by sukhā, 'happiness'? In my experience, as in Gellner's (1992: 131-2), Newar Buddhists gave disparate answers about how nirvāṇa and Sukhāvatī differed. Despite references having been built into many enduring Buddhist traditions, Sukhāvatī for most Buddhists today is a vaguely understood, distant hope and for many hardly more than a cliché.

5. The Newar traditions suggest that the emphasis on salvation through faith was always limited and ambiguous for Buddhist communities (cf. Dutt 1970; Gokhale 1980). Some ritualists and monk-story-tellers certainly did emphasise this path, as they did in China and Japan (Prusek 1938); but many others apparently ignored (or reinterpreted) it as envisioned in the 'Pure Land stūras', especially those who regarded true Buddhist realisation as bodhi on earth as well as those focused upon more Tantric paradigms (cf. Chappell 1977).

6. The Newar tradition suggests that one focal point for Sukhāvatī belief has always been the crisis of death. We have noted narratives from the Janabhāhyād Bhākaṃ and in the Tārā vratakāthā in which the Lord of Death, Yama, yields to the authority and grace of the Bodhisattvas (Avalokiteśvara, Tārā) for those who

19 Jan Nattier has noted that the Kali Yuga framework appeared only sporadically in later Buddhist Sanskrit literature, beginning with the Lankāvataṭra Sūtra in the Gupta era and one of the most common usage in later Tantric literature (1991: 280-3). As noted above, this text and these Tantras are represented extensively in the Newar tradition.

20 A description of the research methodology is found in Greenway and Lewis (forthcoming, 1996). An article summarizing the patterns of Mahāyāna/Vajrayāna belief in the Kathmandu merchant community is in press (Lewis 1997, forthcoming).
practise. Several popular songs also express this hope for grace as do the śūtrika rituals that compel Sukhāvatī Lokeśvara to witness and act upon rituals performed on behalf of the dead. In this area the Newar tradition provides another example of how Indic Buddhism developed ritual practices for all individuals, including monks and nuns, who wanted to exert maximal effort in order to ensure the best possible rebirth destiny for their departed kinsmen (Schopen 1984). This concern for aiding kin in their rebirth destiny seems to have been an enduring area of Buddhist concern and ritual innovation.

7. Finally, Newar Buddhists also adopted Vajrayāna traditions that coexisted with the Sukhāvatī-related rituals described above. More specifically, a Vajrayāna paradigm and praxis gained supremacy over a more esoteric Mahāyāna orientation. The ‘Sukhāvatī paradigm’ provides another example of the incorporation-subordination process that Gellner has so clearly explicated (.992), in this case by the traditions of the Durgatiparasodhana tantra: these now dominate in the rituals performed by Newar vajrācāryas in the days, weeks, and months after death. In the history of Newar Buddhism, faith in the powers of freely-acting bodhisattvas or devotion to Svayambhū Mahācārya to pull one through to Sukhāvatī was overlaid with a greater faith in the destiny-determining power of Tantric dhārāṇī. Just as Sukhāvatī Lokeśvara in the Indo-Newari piṭṭha-dāna rites is installed as an onlooker for the chanting of the dhārāṇī from the Durgatiparasodhana tantra, the explicit ritual manipulation of death passage detailed in the later Vajrayāna traditions displaced earlier Mahāyāna solutions.

21 There is a relationship between Tantric death ritual traditions in China/Japan (Teiser 1988: 107-112) and the unprecedented Buddhist innovations of East Asia that led monks and laity to retain the ‘Sukhāvatī paradigm’ and develop death-time ritualism? Charles Orzech (1989) has indeed pointed out that the legacy of the vajrayāna in medieval China was rites for the salvation of prešas; these rituals employ dhārāṇī recitations, some of the texts state that they were revealed in Avalokiteśvara’s Pure Land (p. 105), and the practices became central to the east Asian avahāna festival and the patronage economics of Chinese Buddhist monasticism: ‘These rites for the dead became the principal source of income for small hereditary temples, the most numerous kind of monastic institution’ (p. 103).

22 Does the nenbutsu belief and practice of later Japanese Pure Land (Dobbins 1989) represent a later confluence of these two: dhārāṇī practice within a Pure Land paradigm?


