

PATTERNS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN A BUDDHIST MERCHANT COMMUNITY, NEPAL

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Introduction

Scholars of religion have used the questionnaire and opinion poll in Judeo-Christian societies to render richly nuanced portraits of religious belief. In studies of Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu contexts, however, such attempts have very rarely been attempted or reported.^[1] This is a curious and regrettable deficiency, as it has led to idealized or overly-textual representations of these faiths, while also neglecting an important field of information to scholars interested in the comparative study of belief patterns.

Few connections have been made between the disciplines that have addressed the subject of Buddhist belief. What has been written by historians of religion has been dominated by the concerns of monastic intellectuals. While sociological discussions of Buddhism have been concerned with the debate about the faith's alleged "atheism" and its place in definitions of religion,^[2] the few anthropological descriptions have been confined to small-scale village studies. The issue of syncretism is one common theme that has been treated by all three using different sources (e.g. Mus 1964, Pye 1971, Berling 1980, Bechert 1978).

Although this essay will illustrate why the issue of syncretism is a central issue in Buddhist settings, its central goal is to present a clear portrait of the belief patterns in a merchant community among the Newars, an ethnic group of Kathmandu, Nepal. The paper introduces Newar Buddhism and its context, outlines the research methodology, and discusses several problematic aspects of studying Buddhist belief; the bulk of the paper

summarizes central concepts that are shared by those studied, culminating in a series of representative individual portraits that illustrate the extent of variation among Buddhist devotees. Several conclusions pertinent to Buddhist studies and the sociology of religions follow.

Buddhist Studies, "Northern Buddhism," and Nepal

As refuge of intellectual freedom, Buddhism nurtured and enriched the civilizations of Asia. Over the centuries, its teachers articulated myriad alternative traditions of doctrinal analysis and practice regarding the Buddha's Dharma ("teachings"). Surveying these doctrinal lineages challenges both scholar and Buddhist believer with the sheer diversity of the literary record and the paradox of extracting systematic thought from a tradition that held the ultimate to be beyond conception. While early texts recount stories of the Buddha expressing dismay over those who would intellectualize his spiritual path, it is still true that systematic statement had its place in Buddhist history: right views are included in the eight-fold path, doctrinal formulæ abound, and royal court patronage debates required the mastery of doctrinal elucidation and argumentation. Compared to intellectual discourse in Christian history, few Buddhist thinkers were ever suppressed and the quantity of "inspired texts" became a vast literature.

The few studies of Buddhism and society that have been done in modern Asia have been conducted primarily in Therava-da countries, leaving the "Northern Tradition" minimally represented in the ethnographic literature. This is largely due to fact that as anthropology matured, the great Maha-ya-na-Vajraya-na societies of North Asia were quickly and radically transformed: Mongolia, China, and Tibet by communist revolutions, Japan and Korea by rapid industrialization. Only in the isolated Himalayan regions -- Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan -- do unbroken traditions of "northern Buddhism" endure.

"Nepal" originally referred to the Kathmandu Valley alone. But in 1769 this became the name of the much larger modern Hindu country unified by Hindu hill groups under the Shah dynasty from Gorkha who conquered the Newar city-states and other peoples across the mid-montane Himalayan region. From 1846 until 1951, the despotic Rana family that gained control over the state sought to undermine both Buddhism and Newar culture through legal sanctions, land seizures, and persecutions (Lewis 1995b). The Shahs and Ranas did keep the state independent from the British empire and (after 1947) India, virtually closing off Nepal from outsiders until 1951, when the Shah dynasty regained power (Rose 1970).

Though subjugated by the Gorkhali state and despite their Valley being inundated by ethnic migrations to the new dynasty's capital (Gallagher 1992), Newar culture has endured.

Although Newars speak a Tibeto-Burman language, their distinctive urban society is ordered according to caste principles and their culture preserves many other Indic traditions in art, music, literature, religions observance (Lienhard 1984). Numbering about one-half of the Kathmandu Valley's total population of roughly one million, Newars today are about equally split in their allegiance to Hinduism or Buddhism. With adherence to Buddhism a group boundary marker, Buddhist high castes have endured as separate endogamous patrilineages.

Among the Newar Buddhists, the number of discrete Therava-da and Maha-ya-na traditions preserved in the Newar community defies simple summary and the interested reader should consult recent publications that have begun to document the myriad temples, monasteries, rituals, festivals, and community organizations.^[3] I develop here only the details needed to introduce the study of belief in the merchant sector, especially the diversity of the Buddhist traditions that have shaped the views of individuals.

Unique to the modern Buddhist world is the Newar monastic community (*samgha*) defined by an endogamous caste, Mahāyāna Buddhist counterparts to the Hindu Brahman. Like a brahman caste, the Newar *samgha* has for centuries married, making the entire Buddhist community one of householders (Locke 1975; Gellner 1992). This two-section, endogamous caste with surnames Vajrācārya and Sākya maintains the monastic ritual traditions and many still inhabit residential compounds still referred to with the classical term *vihāra* ("monastery"). (Over three hundred viha-ras exist in the Valley today (Locke 1985).) The Vajrācāryas act as priests for all other Buddhists and they have developed a highly-evolved and intricately ritualized Mahāyāna lifestyle for their community (Lewis 1994a).

Most Newar Buddhists, including all lower castes, participate exclusively in the exoteric level of Mahāyāna devotionism. They direct their devotions to Buddhist shrines (*caityas*) and especially focus upon the great hilltop complex of monasteries and *stūpas* outside the city called Svayambhī. Most also make regular offerings at temples dedicated to the celestial bodhisattvas, especially Avalokiteśvara, as these are found throughout the town (Lewis 1995a). All Buddhist householders mark their major life-cycle events from birth to mourning with rituals performed by their traditional Vajrācārya priests. Indigenous Newar Buddhism also has a vajraya-na (or "tantric") elite: only the high-caste Vajrācāryas, Sākyas, Urāy (merchants) and select artisans are eligible for the initiations (*diksās*) that direct meditation and ritual to esoteric deities.

In addition to the already described "indigenous Newar" monastic lineages, there are also two other distinctive (and in some ways competing) Buddhist traditions in the Kathmandu Valley. The older is Tibetan Buddhism, which has been present in Nepal for at

least a millennium. Centered upon celibate monastic schools, Tibetan monasteries cluster around the regional sacred sites. Many for centuries were patronized by Newar merchants who traded in the Himalayan highlands. (Some Newars even became Tibetan monks.) Although not aggressive in missionizing the local society, the resident lamás have offered alternative festival, ritual, and meditation practices to the Newar laity.[4] The settlement of refugees from the Tibetan highlands after the Dalai Lama's escape in 1959 has accentuated the presence of Tibetan traditions in the Newar context.

More recent is the introduction of a Theravāda school. Its origins in Nepal are connected to Sri Lanka in the previous century, where Buddhist revival occurred in the context of Sinhalese anti-Christian and anti-colonialist struggle (Malalgoda 1976). As a result of the early encounters with confrontational Christian missionaries, Buddhist reform leaders emerged who adopted similiar proselytizing tactics and emphasized a return to the early (Pali) texts, education through printed materials, a simplified canon of belief, regular preaching by monks, communal services, and a key role for laymen. As a result, a new form of "export Theravada Buddhism" emerged, cleaned up of superstition and presented as compatible with science. Its leaders were drawn from the new middle class of the cities so that, later, the movement was directed toward Buddhists of similiar standing abroad. This movement reached Nepal by the nineteen twenties through urban Newars who were disaffected with their own Buddhist tradition. Despite Rana persecutions, Newars became monks and nuns (Kloppenbergr 1977), many others provided financial support, and by 1952 proper Theravada monasteries were established at Svayambhu- and across the Kathmandu Valley. These continue to attract modest numbers of Newars (Bechert and Hartmann 1988). Monks and nuns from these have energetically inserted their own agenda of ritual, festival, publication, and public sermonizing into the Newar Buddhist setting. Not all Newar Buddhists have appreciated their innovations, however, especially their early attacks on older Newar culture and the Mahāyāna path (Lewis 1984: 494-513)

Despite the anomaly of a caste-delimited, non-celibate *samgha* and because of the diversity of Buddhist traditions in their midst, the Newar Buddhist laity closely resemble co-religionists in other countries. They support the local *samghas* and perform rituals to gain worldly and spiritual benefits (merit, *punya*), while also acting as patrons for over one thousand Buddhist publications in Newari since 1951. These include translations of classical Mahāyāna texts, popular story texts, local myths, pilgrimage and ritual guidebooks, and discussions of scholastic philosophy.

Modern Newar culture in the Kathmandu Valley has been an important research focus because it survives as the sole frontier area where Indic Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions endure, in contrast to its decline in its former hearth region by 1200 CE (Snellgrove 1987; Slusser 1982; Levi 1905-8). Studies on Newar rituals, festivals, shrines, socio-religious

accommodations, Buddhist pluralism etc. now need to be integrated into scholarly discourse on Buddhist history^[5] and the sociology of religions. This article is intended as a contribution to both disciplines.

Methodology

From 1979 until 1982, research was conducted to describe and analyze the Buddhist traditions observed in a community of high caste merchants in the markets of Kathmandu, Nepal.^[6] The group's caste name, Uṛāy, is thought to be derived from the Buddhist term *upa-saka* meaning "devout lay follower." The total size of this community is about 1100 households divided into eight named subcastes (Greenwold 1974). The Ura-y are almost universally literate and would clearly be designated as an educational, economic, and political elite in modern Nepal. The choice of studying merchants was made based upon the special affinity between Buddhism and merchants that dates back to the time of the Buddha onward (Lewis 1993b) and upon the Newar merchants' "maximal expression" of devotional traditions.

The ethnographic project proceeded from demographic, kinship, and caste inquiries (Lewis 1995a) to the mapping of the urban religious geography, and then to the documentation of the extensive ritual practices and festival observances that define Newar Buddhist identity. It was also necessary to survey the competing array of local Hindu practices as well as the other Buddhist traditions extant in the Kathmandu Valley. Specific inquiries on Buddhist belief were made at the end of a two-year fieldwork period, after the task of ethnographic documentation was in its last stages.

To investigate the merchant community's understanding of their religious observances and beliefs, I administered two questionnaires. In the tradition of John Collier (1986), the first research design employed black and white photographs. It was comprised of a sample of over 114 images from my files under seven categories: life cycle rites (12 photographs), rituals (15), festivals (15), religious officiants (14), deities (35), cultural media (11), and miscellaneous subjects (12). At this point and with the overall goals of the larger religious ethnography in view, I was capable of selecting important visual images under these subject headings. I also formulated key questions to accompany the pictures as presented. After pretesting, this large group of photographs then was shown to a representative sample of the Newar laity: thirty-five respondents, both male and female, whose ages ranged from nine to sixty-eight.^[7]

The second source of information was a standard interview questionnaire centered upon thirty-eight specific topics explored in more open-ended discussion. This was

administered as part of an in-depth survey of twenty merchant households and was designed to touch upon areas not amenable to the pictorial medium. The individuals featured as representative case studies below were interviewed using both questionnaires, with some revisited again for follow-up discussions.^[8]

The Nature of Buddhist "Religious Belief" in Context

Before considering the "belief patterns" among Newar merchants, it is important to be clear about the nature and context of belief. First, a simple definition: by "religious belief" is meant a set of intellectual tenets that individuals articulate, identify with, and act upon. A tenet

functions in shaping, ordering, interpreting experience; its function is as a 'landmark'... We should not be surprised that religious tenets ... sustain a variety of meanings." (Southwold 1979: 640)

As Martin Southwold has noted, "The tension between the normative interpretations of Buddhist doctrines and the symbolic meanings they bear in the context of actual life is ... an important dynamic in Buddhist societies (1979: 640)." This paper explores the Newar field of understanding, especially how individuals have assimilated competing classical Buddhist tenets with non-Buddhist modern ideologies.

Several specific points pertinent to Buddhism must frame the discussion of "Buddhist belief." The first must locate belief's significance and mode of acquisition for a typical Newar devotee. For most householders, belief in formal doctrines is not at the center of being "a good Buddhist" and there is no "profession of faith" tradition, public or private, involved beyond the universal "going for refuge" (in the Buddha, his teachings, and the monastic community). Newar tradition, like Buddhism elsewhere, is more a matter of ritual and festival performances carried on within kin or caste groups, and these are done without any overt articulation of religious tenets (Beyer 1973: xii; Gellner 1988: 753-4, 1992: 134). Beyond deriving insight from family rituals, individual Newars acquire knowledge about Buddhist doctrine on their own: from informal family discussions, public storytelling by *vajrācārya* pandits who usually recite and explain stories from the narrative literature (*jātakas*, *avadānas*), from shrine art work, and from private reading in vernacular religious publications (Lewis 1984: 637-638).

A second problem in the study of belief is one that Buddhist doctrine itself raises with the social scientific assumption of a self: Just how do we pin down an individual's central self that "adheres to" a belief? How to be faithful to the intellectual Buddhist's

view that the human mind's experience is always evolving and inherently impermanent ? How even to define a standard of orthodoxy given this tradition's acceptance of a hierarchy of legitimate, sometimes contradictory, doctrinal viewpoints ? This problem is one addressed by the early Mahāyāna philosopher, Nāgārjuna (1st century CE), who specifically speaks of relative truths that can be constructed in the mind's discursive language while positing an absolute truth lying beyond all such ego-constructed and assumption-dependent statements. His view, accepted as normative by later Maha-ya-na tradition (including those that dominated Newar and Tibetan interpretation), is that the highest truth can only be experienced in meditation; to communicate it in language is impossible, but one can point to it using silence or by labeling all semantic constructions with the term *śūnyā* ("emptiness") (Wayman 1984; Jackson 1990). Given that this doctrine is known in local intellectual culture and readily articulated by savant Newar priests and lay intelligentsia (see the case studies), one can see how problematic an inquiry is -- for both the Buddhists queried and the researcher.

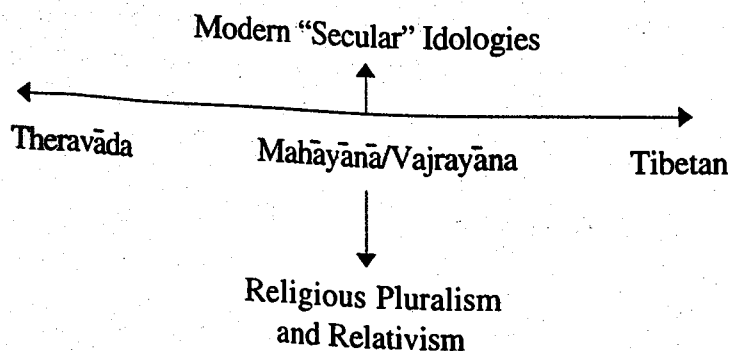
Related to this, it was also evident that most Buddhist merchants regard religious stories, explanations, and philosophical theories they have heard with some degree of personal detachment. If pressed, most place distance between their own profession of certainty and the pronouncements of tradition.^[9] Such skepticism also seems to explain the range of ostensibly paradoxical or inconsistent beliefs -- ancient, Buddhist, and modern -- that individuals hold. Again, the portrait constructed in the following pages can be, at best, a mapping of the shape of beliefs in the community rather than a fixed or exact delineation.

A final complication in any analysis of Buddhist belief is the problem of individuals differing in the extent to which they are intellectually inclined. For any Western academic carrying out an inquiry of this kind, it is easy to overestimate how important philosophical ideas and intellectual categories are in the life of an average person. Beyond the basic notions that explain the most common cultic offerings and merit-making, most Newar laity rarely venture into the complexities of Buddhist philosophy. In common with Buddhists elsewhere, Newar householders are primarily concerned with making the *punya* ("merit") necessary to affect their destiny positively in this life and in future rebirths. This involves a relatively simple body of beliefs and practices. Only few individuals, especially those with esoteric Vajrayāna initiations or active in the Theravadin movement, have grander vistas beyond this framework. Even for these "virtuosi," the Buddhist texts consistently remind the practitioner that the Buddhist spiritual path should culminate in meditation practice and personal transformation rather than mere intellectualism.

The modern patterns of belief among Newar Buddhists can be presented in terms of two variables: the views imparted by competing cultural traditions and the impact of different modern ideologies. As Peter Berger (1980) has observed, modernity imposes a ever-

expanding menu of choices upon individuals; conveying this pluralism in modern Nepal is the central challenge taken on in this paper.

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



It is important to note that this presentation is simply heuristic, one of many possible formulations, using terms that I have found most significant and must define now.

Along the horizontal axis are the Buddhist traditions present in modern Kathmandu. Note that this schema does not imply a strict exclusivity toward one tradition that rejects the others as false.^[10] The criterion for locating an individual on this axis is a composite determination of opinion (expressed in interviews) and behavior (the life history record of rituals performed, patronage choices made, initiations taken).

Urāy merchants see themselves as uncompromisingly Buddhist, but do not necessarily restrict themselves to any one of the three lineages. It is therefore not uncommon for families to call their vajra-ca-rya priest, favorite monks, and/or lama for ritual services during the year. (In some cases, affluent Urāy may even call upon them all on the same day.) Thus, Newar laity view all groups within a single field of Buddhist specialists which meet their needs for pījā, merit-making, and doctrinal teaching. Beyond the vajrācārya dominance in life-cycle and festival ritualism, today all of these groups -- vajrācārya, Tibetan lama, modernist Theravadin monks -- compete for merchant patronage.

The vertical axis records new directions of intellectual orientation. This influence is a product of contact with the outside world, predominantly India (or mediated by India), but also including the countries of Southeast Asia and distant states such as China, Japan, the Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States. On this scale, there are two recurrent and, in

some ways, opposite orientations. The first extends the realm of possible religious affirmation to relativize Buddhism by admitting the truths of Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, etc. This ecumenism was most commonly expressed in the neo-Vedantin terms of modern Hinduism. The opposite standpoint is one embracing recent ideologies that could be labeled "secular" (Berger 1969: 107) and entertains skepticism toward all traditional claims of revelation. This includes ideologies such as materialism, positivism, and Marxism.^[11] The vertical zero point is one that places Buddhism at the center of truth and subjects modern thought to the Buddhist standard. The two scales locating Buddhist preference and modernity imply the interaction of viewpoints, with the vertical and horizontal crossing point indicating someone embracing Newar Mahāyāna tradition as the superior form of Buddhism and the dominant ideological orientation.

Patterns of Consensus in Buddhist Belief

Intellectual diversity and freedom of doctrinal expression has been common throughout Asian Buddhist history and this is evident in the modern Newar community as well. The extent of this variance is especially noteworthy across generations and between the sexes. The inquiries revealed that advancing age correlates with ready, detailed knowledge of Buddhist teachings; women know a great deal of the folklore but express less detailed formal doctrinal knowledge; literacy correlates with advanced awareness and understanding of the teachings; and that family traditions of activism and study can fully reverse all of these tendencies. We now summarize the content analysis of the chief notions utilized in discussions with Buddhist merchants.^[12]

Karma

While intellectuals have held the philosophical view that all doctrinal statements have merit as expressions of relative truth, most Newar Buddhists content themselves with simple faith in karma-rebirth doctrine. This core doctrine explains how all individuals possess karmically-determined differential capacities for spiritual understanding and practice and underlies the norm of Buddhists accepting pluralism of beliefs, as the *Dharma* is often described practically as itself having different medicines (= "Buddha discourses") that cure a host of different illnesses afflicting humanity.

Every informant in our study expressed belief in karma as a faculty that conditions individual destiny. Newar laity view karma as a physical presence: it is written on the forehead (some add that it is also in the palm of the hand) and deposited in the man, a faculty associated with the *a-tman* situated in the human heart.^[13] This *ātman* centers and

energizes individual consciousness, is the repository for karma, and after death becomes the vehicle that endures to the subsequent rebirth. Most Newar Buddhists have a vague sense of these mechanics, know that the *ātman* may hover around the house for a number of days after death, and so during the mourning period put out offerings to satisfy it (Lewis 1994a: 18).

For the Newar laity, the most important characteristic about karma is that one cannot know what one's own "karmic deposit" is. The ethos that follows from this is to face life with a commitment to make as much *punya* as possible and avoid making *pāp* ("demerit"). This is an orientation common to Buddhist laymen across Asia and also one shared with Hindu laity (e.g. Kolenda 1964, Sharma 1973).

Although one cannot know one's karma with any certainty, there are however certain moments when one can discern its general condition. The most important of these are the attributes the person is born with. In Newar society, the caste status into which one is born is a prime indicator. Although Newar merchants differed about the details of how the castes in Asan should be ranked[14], they were clear that they were near the top of the non-priestly rankings in the caste system and that untouchables were far below according to their karmic inheritance. Other indicators of a person's karmic state are wealth, the length of life, proclivity to sickness over a lifetime, and the circumstances at death. Merchants were well aware that individuals could fall quickly from states of high karmic standing due to *pāp*.

For the Newar laity, life conditioned by *karma* does not lead to a fatalistic attitude. Life is regarded as an ongoing, changeable phenomenon since *karma* retribution usually remains a subliminal presence. Newar laity understand that *punya* made in the present life can result in favorable effects both within the present lifetime and in future incarnations. Several informants stated that youth could make so much *pāp* in their youth that could, if uncountered, gravely affect their lives as adults.

Karma is not the sole factor conditioning an individual's existence, in the common view: chance, "luck", the influence of deities, planets, climate, and physical laws may also act independently of karmic law. (*Karma* may also block the effects of these as well.) Belief in astrology remains especially strong among merchants. Traditional charts made at birth are still consulted throughout life by the specialist, the *gyotis*. These individuals designate the correct moment (*seit*) for auspicious events (birth ceremonies, marriages, etc.) and use astrological analysis to seek resolutions to crisis situations (Lewis 1984: 151-3). Since *karma* theory can subsume all astrology and other systems of causal explanation, it remains the ultimate explanatory framework for Newar Buddhists.

Karmic influence is felt to be "contagious", or better, socially transmittable: one person's karmic destiny may affect others. Family members, for example, may suffer or prosper due to an elder's *karma*. This effect is especially recognized between husbands and wives (Lewis 1994b).

A large part of Newar Buddhist religious life is directed toward improving one's *karma* through *punya*-making. *Pūjās* ("rituals") make *punya* for the patron. Likewise, offerings to religious figures are made with the accrued *punya* clearly in mind. Unlike early modern Chinese Buddhists (Greenblatt 1975), Newar laity do not keep *punya* account books, but they are aware of the need to make as much *punya* as is possible given their economic means. Newar tradition specifies that individuals acquire vast stores of *punya* when they sponsor the great patronage rituals (*Samyak, Pañcadāna, All-Monastery Pilgrimage*, etc. (Gellner 1992)). It is clear that *punya* making and its rewards (i.e. wonderful rebirths) have been the central motivation of those interviewed who still sponsor these events.

Newar laity are also very aware of the need to avoid making bad *karma*. The *pañcaśīla* ("five moral principles": not to kill, steal, lie, indulge in sexual misconduct, take intoxicants) are known by almost all adults. The first four are significant guidelines for individuals; the last rule in popular view is not accepted as absolute since alcohol is essential to the *Maḥāyānā Vajrayāna* rituals that households utilize. (Although the tradition is Theravādin, the same acceptance of alcohol consumption is found in Sri Lanka (Southwold 1979: 639) .) The merchant community defines itself in moral terms in not practicing any of the classical "Five Forbidden Professions" declared by the Buddha: butcher, poison dealer, weapons seller, alcohol seller, slave trader (Tambiah 1970: 92). The Newar Buddhist ideal is someone who is compassionate, generous, and honest. (There were many such people in my fieldwork experience.)

Two of the moral precepts with quite salient effects on *karma* deserve special comment. Newars are known in their own community and by outsiders for eschewing violence (Lewis 1995b). This has affected the history of interpersonal relations and one of the reasons that Kathmandu has been renowned as a peaceful city. The Buddhist merchants themselves see this pacifism as a character trait that led to the overthrow of their independent civilization in 1769. (I could discover only two recollections of murders in Kathmandu over the past fifty years.) Most Newar laity extend their non-violence to animals as well. Although this has not led to widespread vegetarianism, most Newar laity do not sacrifice animals for *pūjā* or kill the rats they trap in their shops.^[15]

The precept not to lie, say many Newar laity, is impossible to observe. To do business in present day Nepal and to bargain effectively requires, they say, *makugu kham*.

("untrue statements"). About 30% disagreed, saying that this view is a recent one and untrue according to Buddhist teachings. One articulate young layman noted that the karmic weight of "business *pāp*" could be seen in the way Buddhist farmers view their tilling the soil (and killing insects): a necessity that requires making *punya* in other activities to offset the negative karmic burden.

Beyond the belief in this life-long cause and effect *karma* relationship, I could discover no single pattern in the understanding of how *karma* "adds up". Most had no in-depth idea and were content to rely on the assurance that making *punya* and avoiding *pāp* was their proper religious response.

Newar laity differ over the relationship between *punya* and *pūjā*. Merchants view offerings to deities as *punya* producing and most felt that there was no difference in the karmic benefit derived from worshipping the Hindu deity Siva as opposed to the celestial bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. The notion of this latter divinity's exerting karmic influence on behalf of individuals is covered in the next sections.

Deities

Only slightly less ubiquitous than *karma* tenet acceptance is the belief in the existence of deities. Most point out their view of the divine hierarchy of Buddhas above bodhisattvas who, in turn, preside over all cosmic and regional deities. Among these are the Hindu deities, a statement communicated iconographically in the image of Sristikantha Avalokiteśvara in which all deities emerge from his body. (This image was used in the questionnaire.) All who receive *pūjā* offerings--Ganesa, Siva, Padmapāni, even *stūpas* shrines -- referred to as deity ("*dyah*").

Most of the older laity view the world as everywhere populated by deities of various sorts. Although there is an undercurrent of considerable (younger) skepticism in the community, even the doubtful still believe in spirits called *khyāh*. (Some attribute the current lack of sightings to the introduction of widespread electric lighting which have caused the *khyāh* to flee the old settlements.)

Deities are present in this world, available for *pūjā* offerings, and are regarded as powers embodied with personalities that can affect the world according to their divine desires. Newar laity vary considerably in their choice of devotional involvement with the vast pantheon of deities in their tradition but there is still widespread belief in their ontological reality. Both deities and spirits can also possess people and speak through them

and this is vividly shown in the mediums ("*dyah va:mha*") that are common in the healing sector of Newar society (Gellner And Shrestha 1993).

Bodhisattvas

Bodhisattvas are ideal beings in the Mahāyāna tradition who simultaneously pursue their own enlightenment while being of spiritual benefit to all beings (Wayman 1973: 398). Bodhisattvas may assume deity or human status (Basham 1981; Robinson 1966). The most revered celestial bodhisattva is *Avalokiteśvara*. Described in local stories (as in the classical literature) as a powerful being who acts on petitioners' prayers, brings the rains, and subdues lesser deities, *Avalokiteśvara* resides in the local temples and can also assist human beings in reaching *Amiṅbha's* paradise, *Sukhāvati*, where attaining Enlightenment is guaranteed. (This was not felt a plausible destiny for most individuals today.)

Newars may also consider themselves as bodhisattvas by trying to fulfill the ten perfections (*pāramitās*, Wayman 1973: 409) after taking a vow to work for *bodhicitta* ("an enlightened mind") and to help all beings achieve that goal. In every *Vajrāyāna* ritual a Newar individual sponsors, the *vajrācārya* priest generates *bodhicitta* and repeats (albeit in Sanskrit) the *bodhisattva* vow (Stablein 1978; Gellner 1991).

We have noted that *Avalokiteśvara* is by far the most popular deity among Kathmandu Valley Buddhists. Interestingly, only half of the laity recognized this deity as a bodhisattva, but all knew that the deity was distinctively Buddhist. Some say that their last hope for avoiding hell is the intervention of this deity; all the laity are especially aware of *Avalokiteśvara's* capacity of acting out of compassion for and granting assistance to suffering humanity, as its familiar name *Karunāmāya* ("The Compassionate") suggests. But the textual ideal of sharing merit with devotees was articulated only by several respondents. Most were aware of the fact that *Avalokiteśvara* is both male and female, as some cited as evidence the yearly dual gender rituals of the god's temple image restoration (Locke 1980: 208-221).

Few Newar laity know the identity of *Vajrapani*, the bodhisattva who protects all Buddhist shrines in the Kathmandu Valley. Fewer still know that *Maitreya*, the next Buddha, is now a bodhisattva.

Most merchants know the basic teachings describing the bodhisattva ideal, with the typical definition being someone who works unselfishly for the good of other people. Today a person suffering ill-treatment with patience may be referred to, half-jokingly, as a bodhisattva, but at present most individuals do not think of it as a relevant ideal for human beings. In the present time, the Newar laity say that human bodhisattvas are very rare; some

felt there were none in this degenerate stage of cosmic evolution called the Kāli Yuga (Nattier 1991).

Svarga and Narak ("Heaven and Hell")

The Buddhist merchants strongly believe in spheres of rebirth outside of the human realm and outside of "this earth." Visnu's paradise Vaikuntha was recognized by most. We have discussed the widespread recognition of Sukhāvati, the Mahāyāna paradise ruled by Amitābha; most informants know of it only as a Buddhist paradise and were not aware of the textual doctrine that Avalokiteśvara is the reigning bodhisattva there. Because one needs vast quantities of *punya* to be reborn there, most merchants aware of the concept did not think of it as a serious possibility for themselves. Several said that one had to perform the special rituals (*vrata*^[16]), even to have the possibility of gaining rebirth in Sukhāvati and others mentioned tantric initiation as a prerequisite.

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

Nirvāna

Newar merchants understand *nirvāna* as a state to be reached in a distant rebirth after many lifetimes devoted to attaining spiritual perfection. Most identified *nirvāna* as an attribute of a Buddha. Given the exalted manner in which Newar laity view the bodhisattvas and Buddhas, only one man took attaining *nirvāna* as his own immediate pursuit. Those informants inclined toward the *Theravāda* movement said that this attainment was a common subject of the monks' and nuns' sermons. Despite this, most recognized that *nirvāna* was the ultimate goal of all Buddhists, something that made them different from Hindus. The latter's highest goal, they said, was merely *svarga* ("heaven") in contrast to the Buddhist *nirvāna*. Newar laity who knew of the two knew that their paradise, as a theater for enlightenment, was quite different.

Reaching *nirvāna* also was commonly given an operational definition: one reaches *nirvāna* when Yama *Ra-ja*, the Lord of Death, does not see the person immediately after death because there is no longer any karma left.

Almost every merchant stated that no contemporary religious in their midst -- monk, lama, Vajracārya, Brahman, or Hindu renunciant -- capable of reaching *nirvāna*.

Other Topics In Buddhist Philosophy

From a topic analysis of terminology used by informants, we can point to a number of other concepts that are especially emphasized in modern religious discourse.

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

Karunā is a compassionate capacity associated with celestial bodhisattva Padmapāni Avalokiteśvara, a fact encoded in this deity's epithet, "Karunāmāya". Many spoke of this empathetic quality as an ideal they should cultivate as followers of Buddha Dharma.

Pāramitā is a term that about half of our informants know as a quality of a bodhisattva. Several could name the "Six Pāramitās".

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

The term *ekacitta* is used very commonly for describing the ideal state reached through meditation. Most Newar laity say that the different methods prescribed by the Theravadin *vipassana*, the Newar Mahāyāna meditations, and Tibetan disciplines all lead, if properly practiced, to *ekacitta*. To reach *nirvāna*, they said, it is necessary to realize this state.

Definitions of *śūnya* led to a range of responses. The word *śūnya* is known by almost everyone, for it is used to designate zero. As a Buddhist term, some Newar laity understand *śūnya* in the classical definition as a quality that all phenomenal existence has. As such, explained several informants, it is the basis for saying that *nirvāna* and *samsāra* are the same, a classical Mahāyāna teaching. Several stated that *śūnya* is the source from which the myriad Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities are manifested. As one middle-age woman said, "There is only one deity (*dyah*) and his name is *śūnya*."

As a final note in this section, one must note that the Buddhist merchants are especially unaware of the Vajrayāna symbols that pervade the religious geography and are employed in the rituals. Most could not explain the meaning of their *vajrācārya* priests' *vajra* (ritual thunderbolt) and *ghanta* ("bell"). They did not make any Buddhist association of the Srī Devī Yantra (∧) as almost everyone said it was "Sarasvatī's heart." The well-known eyes that mark the *harmikā* (cube above the mound on almost every Newar *stūpa* (and almost every Nepal tourist brochure!) were likewise a source of confusion. Just as few

identified these eyes, few knew anything precise about the central Mahāyāna theory of cosmic Buddha emanation.

Attitudes on Newar Traditions

Most Buddhist merchants still hold the view that their traditions are unique and of value. This is partially due to their great antiquity, for the Newar Mahāyāna tradition, according to the *Svayambhū Purāna*, even predates Śākyamuni Buddha. According to this same source, the Kathmandu Valley was one site where the forces of the Buddhist cosmos were uniquely manifested in their home domain; the proximity to the hilltop *stūpa* called Svayambhū, the relic of that hierophony, is regarded as a special blessing for Newar Buddhists.

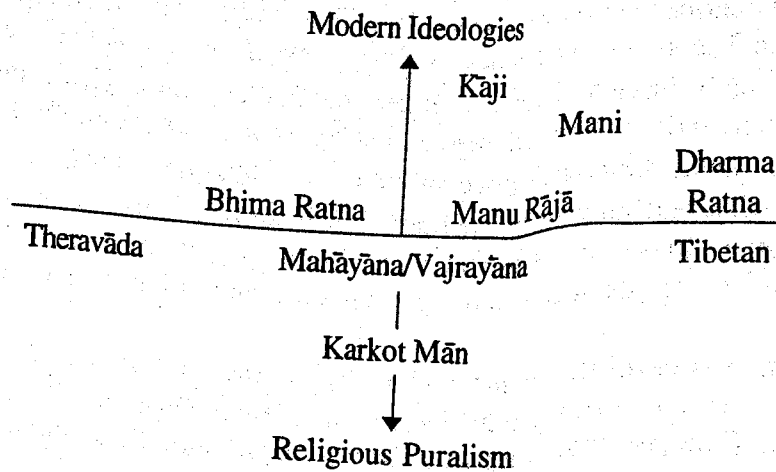
All respondents mentioned the decline of their older traditions, a fact of life that everyone has seen in many ways. Many believe that the beginning of Newar Buddhist traditions' decline began with the loss of monasticism and the imposition of caste order, both of which popular sentiment dates to the reign of the Newar king Jaya Sthiti Malla (1382-1395). The decline of their priests' competency as teachers and ritualists is the subject of many family conversations. In the right mood, almost all could be cynical about all religious practitioners in their midst.

Newar Buddhists see these developments as part of the general decline of civilization that is predicted in their texts and by pan-Indic tradition in the *kāli* yuga. A few said that only with the coming of Maitreya, after millennia, will this decline be reversed.

Although Newar laity are, to varying degrees, now disenchanted with their ancestral priests and moving away from practicing Buddhism solely through their own inherited forms, as individuals still insist that they remain firmly grounded in "Buddha Dharma". Even in families surrounded by Western luxury goods and connected to all the latest in mass media (Lewis 1995b), the belief in deities, karma, and the efficacy of *pūjā* and meditation has not declined very significantly. In Kathmandu, the light of the older Mahāyāna Vajrayāna tradition has dimmed considerably and most individuals have lost a clear sense of its doctrines. Nonetheless, just as the long-established religious geography still provides the focal objects of mass devotion, so the most elementary Buddhist teachings persist to inform the merchants' understanding of self, life, death, spiritual destiny.

Portraits in Individual Belief

The religious life histories presented here are selected to provide a representative sample of the spectrum of Buddhist belief in the merchant community. To help visualize individuals within this complex matrix, I have located them on a grid model of the belief patterning arranged along two different axes: the nature of predominant Buddhist belief--*vajrācārya*, Theravādin, Tibetan -- juxtaposed with a second spectrum indicating the extent to which the individual accepts either modern "secular" ideologies or non-Buddhist religious sympathies. The general shape of belief with our sample of individual portraits is given here (and with each case) in the following figure:[17]



Manu Raja

Born in 1926, Manu Raja has seen the transition from the Rana Period to democratic Nepal. As a ready-made clothing manufacturer and merchant, he has adapted well to the changing times so that his large family is quite prosperous.

Manu Raja (hereafter MR) grew up in a family that followed energetically the practices of the older Newar Mahāyāna tradition. He has performed all of the major *vratas*, attended several years of *tīrtha pūjās* ("river confluence rituals"), and led an all-monastery pilgrimage that was sponsored by his family. He has learned a great deal of the lore and legend of his tradition and can refer to both local texts like the *Svayambhū Purāna* and great pan-asian texts including the *Lalitavistara* and *jātaka* ("former birth stories") to discuss his understandings. He also knows much of the oral tradition associated with recent events such as *vajrācāryas* returning from meditation retreats (New. *puraścaran. cwanegu*), secret lore on tantric initiations, etc.. MR still participates actively in several religious organizations

(*guthis*), does his daily meditation, and calls his family priest for many special *pūjās* and for the daily reading of the family's *Pañcaraksā* text during the month of *Gumla* (Lewis 1993a). He is dissatisfied with the present generation of *vajrācāryas*, but still calls them for all major rituals.

MR expresses admiration for the great lamas who still study and meditate, but he has only called them once, for a *nāga* ("snake deity") *pūjā* many years ago. He has seen the Theravāda movement develop, but he has, for the most part, kept his distance. As he says, "Although Gurumā- [the nun Dhammavati] is persuasive, the monks bicker and compete with one another," and adds, "The Theravāda stories are good, but sometimes they are not mature enough for me." He did consent to allowing his daughters to spend their premenstrual ritual confinement (Lewis 1984: 276-280) with the nuns of Dharmakirti Vihāra. MR refers to the Theravādins in classical Mahāyāna terms as *śrāvakas* ("mere listeners") and asserts that the bodhisattva ideal is a higher goal and teaching. He disagrees with the secrecy that the *vajrācāryas* insist on maintaining for their tantric initiation and teachings. MR sees this as another destructive aspect of the present situation: "This secrecy will result in the death of these teachings in our tradition." MR already knows many aspects of the "inside" Vajrayāna philosophy, something he has picked up from conversations with friends. He hopes to take the tantric initiation sometime soon if it can be arranged.

Although he believes that all meditations lead to the same goal, MR still insists that there is a firm contrast between Buddha Dharma and Hindu Dharma. The highest goal of Hindus is heaven ("*swarga*"); for Buddhists, the goal is *nirvāna*, the attainment of which is much more difficult.

Bhima Ratna

When Bhima Ratna was a youth, he wanted to study in school in order to pursue his interest in music and religion. But his father said that as the oldest son he had to carry on the family grain business, and so this is the calling Bhima Ratna has followed throughout his 66 years.

Throughout his life, Bhima Ratna (hereafter BR) has done many *vratas* and confluence pilgrimages. About 15 years ago he visited all the different monasteries and other religious shrines around the Kathmandu Valley in a two year program led by a prominent *vajrācārya* who told stories from the Newar tradition about each place. From this, BR says, he learned most of what he knows of his tradition. BR is one of the regulars in the caste's devotional music group and one of the best musicians. He has also worked hard to maintain his family's activity in seven other religious organizations.

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

BR maintains the traditional ties to Newar Vajrayāna rituals and *guthis*, but these have not satisfied him. Although he sometimes attends Tibetan and *vajrācārya* programs, BR now leans heavily toward the Theravādin movement. From childhood onward, he attended the earliest programs at the first monastery. Having read their publications and attended many sermons by the monks, BR's intellectual understanding of Buddhist teachings seem largely derived principally from them.

Perhaps BR would say that describing him as a follower of the Theravādins is too strong. He emphasizes the continuities between the different Buddhist traditions, noting that karma is the chief factor involved in religious life and that whatever program of meditation is followed, the goal is the same. He hesitates to take a final position on devotion to any one approach, a relativism that he, unlike Karkot Man (below), will not extend to Hindu Dharma. Still, he does point out several differences between Vajrayāna and Theravāda Buddhism that are important to him. They reveal a viewpoint that comes from the Theravādin critique of Vajrayāna Buddhism: Mahāyāna Buddhism leads laymen to seek rebirth in *Sukhāvātī* whereas the Theravādins teach that *nirvāna* is possible in this lifetime. His second criticism is that the Vajrayanists emphasize worshipping deities far too much: "Buddha Dharma should be first of all concerned with improving an individual's mind and karma, centered in meditation and not with worshipping deities."

Sujātā Kumāri

For the past 10 years, Sujātā Kumāri (hereafter SK) has been one of the most active young women who organize and orchestrate activities at the Theravādin Dharmakirti Vihāra activities. Although she was married several years ago (at 25) and moved into her husband's house, SK continues to enjoy the freedom of a full-time job in a government institute.

With an M.A. and a distinguished record of achievement, she is one of the top young women in the ranks of government service in Nepal.

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

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

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

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

Mani

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

Although he is only 35, Mani recalls their family's especially beloved (now deceased) former *vajrācārya* priest Suklānanda. Suklānanda could teach with clarity, imbue the rituals with special meaning, and above all else, was devoted to living according to Buddha Dharma. Mani also criticizes the modern *vajrācāryas* severely, but knows that their fallen status does not mean that the Vajrayāna tradition is similarly degraded.

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Mani runs a new and successful shop selling clothes and cottage industry products to tourists. He is well-read and aware of the many "new winds of change" from the outside world. Dissatisfied with all of the religious movements around him, he constructs his own religious views from many sources. The gods, he says, are all just manifestations of one superior deity. They are merely incarnations who act as "policemen" of the world and enforce the karmic destiny of individuals. They are all inferior to buddhas and bodhisattvas whose actions can also affect human life.

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

Dharma Ratna

Dharma Ratna (hereafter DR) has been a master carpenter most of his 55 years, an occupation not very common any more among the merchants. From his youth, DR was drawn by an interest in Buddha Dharma: very early he participated in traditional observances such as a year-long *vrata* and his caste's music group. (He remained one of Asan's finest senior musicians.) However, only when he took an initiation from a Tibetan lama at 15 (into the worship-meditation on the celestial bodhisattva Amoghapāśa Lokeśvara) did his doctrinal understanding begin to mature. Soon after this experience, he studied the *Nāmasaṃgīti* text with a local *vajrācārya* teacher and began to read other philosophically-oriented works. By the time he was thirty, DR had taken another initiation, to *Apāramitā*, given by another Tibetan lama living in the town of Patan. He has worshipped and meditated according to these initiations every day since.

Throughout his life, DR has studied Buddhist texts. He can quote from the *Satasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* and discuss the concept of *śūnyatā* ("emptiness") in the style of a learned teacher. On his own, he learned the priest's central rite, the *guru mandalā pūjā* (Gellner 1991) and can chant all of the verses from it; he also knows the longer formulae (*dhāraṇī*) for the worship of many deities. DR can explain the philosophical foundations of all of the major Vajrayāna rituals and has even written his own commentaries on what he has learned over the years, a collection which now runs to over 1,000 pages in three volumes. I am sure that in other circumstances (e.g. in Tibet), DR would have become a monastic teacher of the highest caliber.

DR criticizes the Theravādins from the classical standpoint of the Mahāyāna: the monks are just *śrāvakas*; they don't know *śūnyatā*; their teachings are not sufficient to lead the way to *nirvāna*. S'a-kyamuni Buddha, he says, taught less public doctrines and the Theravādins have only the most simple, least developed of his teachings.

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

The essence of Buddhism, says DR, is found through meditation that leads to the realization of *śūnyatā*. For this, "initiation and teachings" (*dikṣā and sikṣā*) are necessary. Buddhist ethics, he says, are founded on the realization that all beings are related to us and should be treated as our mothers and fathers. DR sees the western world as a morally bankrupt realm in which people become cruder and less capable of cultivating insight. "Despite all of the material comforts, your country [United States] moves further away from *śānti* ("inner peace"). And so, when our children here learn English, they lose their inclination toward Dharma.

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

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

Karkot Man

Karkot Man (hereafter KM) was one of the most loved men in the northeastern city market called Asan. When he died of cancer in 1980, at the age of 56, the Uṛāy community

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was deeply shaken. KM represents a complex believer who embraced a diverse range of beliefs and did so with a distinctly modern attitude.

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

KM's religious biography begins in Benares, where was sent for a year to complete his SLC (high school) diploma. After returning from there, his family noted the change in him toward spiritual matters. Soon after his return, he met Sivapuribaba, a Hindu holy man who had gained a considerable Newar following and who organized a small *aśram* ("commune") near the national Hindu temple complex, Pas'upati.^[18] Until this saint's death in 1965, (at the age, say his devotees, of 136) KM visited him as frequently as possible, studied his teachings, and made donations. Sivapuribaba taught a version of Vedantic Hinduism that values all religious traditions, east and west, as partial revelations of ultimate truth. He also taught vegetarianism, a practice KM followed the rest of his life.

This attachment to Sivapuribaba did not lead KM to limit the breadth of his religious activity, however. He patronized most of the religious movements in Kathmandu and was always doing something "for Dharma." Karkot Man was renowned by his friends (and not infrequently scolded by his family !) for his seemingly limitless energy in these matters. At home, KM insisted that his own family adhere to their own Newar Buddhist traditions: he was active in all the Buddhist musical groups, had all of his children take their traditional Mahāyāna initiations, and gave special attention to the *vajrācāryas'* ritual performances when done in his home. He was never interested in tantric initiation.

KM was also very active in the Theravādin movement. He supported the first monastery from its earliest days and was a leader in introducing Newar merchants to the reformist school's activities. The Sri Lankan monk Narada Thera, who visited Nepal intermittently at the time of the Rana persecution in 1945 (and intermittently thereafter), was another influential figure throughout KM's life. Right before his death, KM made a pilgrimage to Burma and Thailand with a Theravādin group.

Despite this involvement, KM would not abandon Sivapuribaba's "Vedantic" position or concede that his ultimate religious identity was Theravādin. He was not impressed by the local monks, but he still supported them. As he said, "They are not enlightened, but they must be respected for they are the mouthpiece for spreading Buddha Dharma at this time." Unlike many of his merchant contemporaries who make invidious comparisons between the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, KM argued for admitting the spiritual vitality of the Hindu path. He would always insist to the Theravādins and to Mahāyāna adherents that they had not grasped the spirituality of Hindu Dharma. He constantly made donations to Hindu renunciants who would stop in his shop and even offered them lodging in his house.

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

Given this vast range of interests and activities, and his love for his own traditional Buddhism, Karkot Man still did not follow any one Dharma. As he said, "My Dharma is not from any one tradition."

Kaji

From childhood onward, Kaji's life has been unusual. His mother was mentally disturbed and died when Kaji was 10 and his father was not able to support his family adequately. After the latter was struck by typhoid, at nineteen Kaji had to take on the responsibility for family subsistence himself. He did not attend school and throughout his life he has tried his hand at many money-making schemes: sewing cloth shoes, making chupples and kites, selling used military clothing, and book selling. Only the latter proved workable and until recently the family barely scraped by, often with the help of generous friends and his wife's modest teacher's salary.

As a youth, Kaji became involved in Newar political protests against the Government's dissolution of parliamentary democracy in 1961. This led Kaji into circles interested in communist teachings so that he began reading (a skill he taught himself) the writings of Marx, Mao, and Lenin (from books translated into Nepali). When Kaji's father was delirious with typhoid fever at this time and claimed to be possessed by various gods,

Kaji did not believe it. Today Kaji recalls how his philosophical outlook crystallized at that time: "I realized that anything I cannot see with my eyes and verify I would not believe in. From this year I refused to bow to any image and refused to do *pūjās*, something I haven't done to this day (1982)." This "conversion" followed several years of active interest that touched upon the Bahai faith, and later, Christianity, both of which had been introduced into the market by Newar friends with ties to Darjeeling. He ultimately rejected both and chose politics.

In 1965, when the Government banned Newari language radio broadcasts, Kaji became a leader who organized groups to protest this policy. Risking arrest, he made speeches all over the Kathmandu Valley and made friends in many circles. He also started a bookstore in the small resthouse outside the entrance to the courtyard where he lives.

Kaji still maintains this business. The majority of his inventory of over 500 publications is in Newari, but he also carries Chinese, Russian, Korean, and Cuban selections. Kaji's resthouse bookstore is one of the landmarks in the Asan Tol market and a chief center for Newar intellectuals of Kathmandu so that hundreds of people stop in for a chat every day. It is the place to glean the latest news and find out what is really happening. In addition to his being a source of up-to-date information, Kaji also lends a sympathetic ear to many problems. During the unrest that swept Nepal in 1979 and after the reforms that expanded the democratic participation in elections during 1980 and 1981, Kaji's stall once again became a center of political organizing and campaigning.

Kaji's religious views are founded on his commitment to positivism and modern science. He likes to look for rational interpretations to what he considers ostensibly unfounded beliefs. For example, he says that, "All of the deities, all 33 hundred thousand of them, exist nowhere else but in the body." Kaji does believe in karmic retribution and says that the *ātman* is a psychological assumption necessary to explain the fact of consciousness and the operation of karma. He remains agnostic on the question of rebirth.

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

Despite his rejection of traditional belief and in seeming contradiction to his personal stance refusing to take up his role as a priest, Kaji is fervent in his love of Newar tradition and in his efforts to preserve Newar language and culture. In 1981, for example, he

organized and assisted on the work that completely restored the main *vihāra* shrine. His identity as a Newar is very important to him and he speaks often about the task of not losing the things that make Newar culture unique and great. Kaji resolves his religious agnosticism, activism, and Marxism through his notion of the bodhisattva: "In these times, the good communist is the greatest bodhisattva."

Conclusions

The data presented in this paper represents the first attempt to survey the belief patterns in a Mahāyāna Buddhist community. Confined to high class and caste group boundaries, however, it utilizes a limited sample within the Newar context; a study of belief patterns in a lower caste (e.g. among farmers, the largest Newar caste) would doubtless yield somewhat different results, particularly in terms of greater Hindu-Buddhist syncretism and an absence of esoteric doctrinal awareness in community discourse. Despite this limitation, several concluding observations can be made regarding scholarly representations of Buddhism, method in the study of religious belief, and regarding modernization in Buddhist contexts.

The Domestication of Maḥa-ya-na Relativity Doctrine

Observing the textures of belief among individual merchants and the widespread acceptance of many paths to spiritual realization, it is plausible to see in this matrix the successful domestication of classical Mahāyāna Buddhist relativity doctrine. Along with a critique of all utterances is the corollary acceptance of varying belief understandings. Newar Buddhists legitimately formulate spiritual paths and views differently. The common ethos noted of intellectual tentativeness, even among those who are quite skilled at "talking about the Dharma," also supports this conclusion.^[19]

Community Belief and the Writing of Buddhist History

The findings also undermine any analysis centering the historical dynamics of Buddhism on the interplay of abstruse doctrines located within the literary canon. Buddhist pluralism in modern Nepal, while admittedly complex, likely mirrors the state of Buddhism in north India after the Gupta era (500-1200), with Theravādin, Mahāyāna, and tantric lineages all present. The Newar case suggests that lay patrons and monastic institutions have always sought to provide support for all precept-observing Buddhist monks, ritualists, and scholars. To use texts of the literary elite's pursuits to center an understanding of

Buddhist religion -- synchronically or historically -- is to ignore the wider, more pervasive Buddhist culture of assimilation. The few intellectuals that did explore doctrinal possibilities did so unimpeded, and this long-standing efflorescence of human thought is inspiring; but Buddhist communities cohered far less around philosophers than around the shared ideology and rituals of merit-making.^[20] As Lawson and McCauley have noted:

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

Belief and Non-Belief

Through this fieldwork, data analysis, and through teaching world religions, I have seen the necessity of exploring the dialectical discipline of simultaneously investigating disbelief in any exploration of belief. Robert Murphy's description of this process has special force in framing the sociological study of belief:

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

Since being skeptical about all assertions is actually a trait encouraged in some Buddhist texts^[21], it was at times difficult to separate "traditional" doubt from the corrosive effects of modern thought in the Newar context. If studies of belief identify the content and scope of local traditions of skepticism, they can give an important indication of the community's pattern true depth of belief^[22] and help assess the force of cognitive dissonance among believers.

Buddhism and Modernity

Finally, one must acknowledge the clear, ongoing success of Newar devotees in merging Buddhist belief with the modern insights of science and Marxism. Contrary to modernity theorists who predicted otherwise^[23], Newar Buddhists have continued to express loyalty to traditional beliefs, perform time-consuming rituals, and draw upon Buddhist ethics for guidance as they have absorbed new technologies and adapted to rapidly-changing

circumstances. The traditions of Buddhist doctrine and ritual performance in Asia remain an enduring refuge for individuals and communities, proven resources for those contending with the chaotic choices, crises, and new questions raised by modern change.

Notes

In the paper, I use "Newar laity", "Buddhist merchants" and the caste name "Uāy" as synonyms unless qualified. Technical terms from Sanskrit or Newari are defined in their first use and transliterated according to the system specified in Gellner and Quigley (1995). The author would like to express his gratitude for funding assistance from the Fulbright Fellowship program for supporting the fieldwork in Nepal (1979-1982) and a Holy Cross Bachelor-Ford grant that supported subsequent analysis and writing.

1. Except for a study of male Iranians in a rural village (Loeffler 1988) and surveys conducted by Spiro in Burma (1970) and Gombrich in Sri Lanka (1971), there is little evidence of this type of study in Islamic, Buddhist, or Hindu settings. Sociologists of religion who have tried to make belief pattern connections with non-Judeo-Christian faiths have had to rely on early, biased representations, or generalize from the limited information ethnographers have provided on the subject. (This is a problem that extends from Weber and Durkheim onward (Tambiah 1973; Gellner 1982) .) As Geertz (1966: 24-5) noted long ago, "Just what does 'belief' mean in a religious context ? Of all the problems surrounding attempts to conduct anthropological analyses of religion, this is one that has perhaps been most troublesome and therefore the most often avoided..." Loeffler in his important monograph echoes his dismay at this subject's neglect (1988: 247), rightly criticizing Geertz's own practice of bracketing off pluralism in his methodology that "puts aside at once the tone of the village atheist and that of the village preacher (Geertz 1966: 39)."
2. Much discussion by sociologists on Buddhism remains flawed by a lack of understanding of Buddhism's diversity and the assumption that texts alone can be used to construct a consensus belief pattern (e.g. Orru and Wang 1992), a point scholars on both sides of the field of Buddhology have made (e.g. Tambiah 1970; Southwold 1978; Herbrechtsmeier 1993).
3. These also include the work of Siegfried Lienhard, Michael Allen, Gerard Toffin, John Locke, and David Gellner.
4. I have emphasized Newar-Tibetan relationships as an element in the history of regional Buddhism (Lewis and Jamspal 1988, Lewis 1989a, Lewis 1993b, and Lewis 1993c).
5. Just as the Sanskrit texts found in the Kathmandu Valley in the nineteenth century were the landmark discovery that informed modern scholars of other extant Indic Buddhist texts outside the Southern or Theravādin (Mitra 1971), so, too, do the

- multitude of Mahāyānā Vajrayana traditions still observed there point to an alternative pattern of Buddhist socio-cultural adaptation once found across India and Central Asia.
6. The first research is reported in a religious ethnography (Lewis 1984). Subsequent visits were made in 1987, 1991, 1993, and 1994.
 7. In a forthcoming article on the uses of photography in religious studies research (Greenway and Lewis 1995b), I have outlined the methodology more extensively, including photograph and note page examples from this questionnaire. The 112 pictures proved to be excellent stimuli for eliciting responses. In some cases, recognition of a photograph's subject matter was the main question; for example, the deity picture set determined an individual's recognition of the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon using the images from local temples, monasteries, and resthouses. Another approach was to choose pictures to accompany more abstract inquiries. The concrete images heightened the sense of the specific issues for informants in ways superior to merely asking questions: instead of asking respondents to, "Tell me what you think of untouchability...", I simply showed them a picture of untouchable sweepers at work in a local courtyard. Associated questions were keyed to certain images (to continue the example): "Does karma really determine rebirth in this caste?"
 8. Since the questionnaires were administered in 1981-2, the findings of this article have by now (1994) become somewhat dated. A generational shift has occurred (two of the old men and one old woman have died); modernization has hastened in pace and in scope, including the revolution of 1990 that established a multi-party democracy and relegated the king to a constitutional monarch. I have attempted to discuss the impact of these factors briefly in a forthcoming article (Lewis 1995b).
 9. It was very common for individuals to recite a story or explain what they had heard from a teacher in response to a concept I would raise. When I would then ask them if they really believed this explanation, their response would be "Well, how can I be sure?... This is what I have heard [or read]... how to know for certain?" When pressed or in offhand comments, some would add that all accounts from ancient tradition were just human ideas and unproven. This ethos agrees with my conclusions on intellectual culture among the Newar Buddhist intelligensia: there is no textual basis nor doctrinal press to reach a common philosophical center.
 10. For example, almost every Uṇṇy family has retained the services of their traditional *vajrācārya* purohit for performing life-cycle rituals and yearly festival observances. Only a few of the staunch Theravādin devotees view the issue in terms of choosing an exclusive Buddhist identity.
 11. Living in the capital city of modern Nepal, the Buddhist merchants have had contact with many of the modern socio-intellectual movements in the world. But it is also easy to assume a false depth to an individual's awareness, since outside intellectual ideas are known only in foreign languages or through often-problematic translations.

A prominent example of individuals holding incongruous world views has been modern communist leaders (and supporters) continuing to perform traditional Hindu or Buddhist rituals.

12. My goal in constructing this cumulative portrait of consensus has been well articulated in the recent essay by Lawson and McCauley:

Our principal theoretical object is the knowledge that participants share about both the relevant system of ritual acts and the accompanying conceptual scheme -- on the assumption that an account of this shared system of knowledge will go a long way toward explaining many of the behaviors of the participants that it inspires. (1993: 218)
13. Those familiar with Buddhism through its scholastic literature (and in typical college coursework) will find this discussion of souls in stark contrast to the classical notion of "non-soul." By contrast, scholars familiar with the modern study of Buddhist practice across Asia will be well aware that the "soul notion" is common everywhere, as in the Burmese *leikpya* ("butterfly soul", Spiro 1970: 85), the Thai *khwan* ("spirit", Tambiah 1970: 58) or the Chinese *hun/p'o* (Teiser 1988). How karma operates without a soul medium of next-lifetime transmission has been a central issue in Buddhist scholastic debate from the earliest discourses (e.g. Thomas 1933: 93-106; Spiro 1970: 84-91).
14. Only 40% of my informants believed that the *vajrācāryas* should be ranked above the Brahmans, 50% said Brahmans should be considered first, and only 10% said that among Buddhist castes all were equal.
15. Instead, they release them every morning outside the town boundaries.
16. See Locke (1987) and Lewis (1989a).
17. I have used pseudonyms in this chapter.
18. This teacher also gained the interest of Westerners who have written on his life (Bennett 1976).
19. Southwold draws a similar conclusion from his study of Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka:

The tenets of Buddhism can be broadly ordered along a continuum ranging from the most basic and indispensable to the most accessory and optional; as I have remarked, such distinctions are reflected in the cognitive attitudes of at least some Buddhists. For example, it is basic to hold that rebirth, determined by karma, is real; that Nirvāna is a real state attainable by human beings; that the Buddha and others have attained it; that the Buddha's teaching provides efficacious directions for attaining it. But it is optional to hold, e.g. that participation in rites is conducive to attainment; that the services of Buddhist clergy are essential at funeral and mortuary ceremonies. (1979: 932).
20. As Pelikan has noted regarding Christian history, "The authentic tradition of orthodoxy was not a matter to be decided by an intellectually formulated rule of faith

- set forth by scholars and theologians, but by the rule of prayer of the thousands of silent believers who worshipped in the spirit of truth." (1984:30)
21. Faith in the Buddha's path guiding the devotee's attempts to escape the darkness of craving and ignorance is also encouraged in other texts (Dutt 1940).
 22. I would echo the anthropologist's usual critique of "hit-and-run opinion surveys," as these encourage believer-positive responses; such research methodology also does not dwell long enough with individuals to sample the ambiguities and expressions of disbelief.
 23. "If cognitive desires, for example, are satisfied by science; if substantive desires are satisfied by technology; or if expressive desires are satisfied by politics or art or magic, religion should, by that extent, be less important ... In short, the importance of religion would be expected to vary inversely with the importance of other, projective and realistic, institutions." (Spiro 1966: 116)

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