

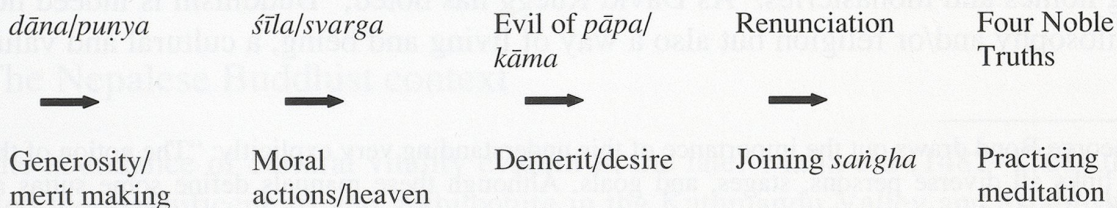
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## Ritual (Re-)Constructions of Personal Identity: Newar Buddhist Life-Cycle Rites and Identity among the Urāy of Kathmandu

### Introduction – Buddhist tradition and ritual

Among contemporary Buddhists in both the Euro-American world and Asia, the very notion that ritual is formative of Buddhist identity, or could engender a transformative spiritual experience, is seen as outdated or even absurd. What is worthy in this tradition, in this view, is the legacy of individual meditation practices passed down from its spiritual virtuosi and the fearless parsing of reality by its extraordinary sage-scholars. Most of the equally ancient daily and lifelong ritual practices in each regional formation of Buddhism are destined to fade away. In this “Protestant Buddhist” perspective (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988; Schopen 1991), there is little to mourn from the excision of superstitions, rituals, and habits that developed in previous centuries at Buddhist monasteries and temples, in towns and villages, and in families; since most people do not know the rationale of these religious acts, the exact meanings of the words they utter or have uttered on their behalf, this modernist reduction of Buddhist tradition to its “true essence” is positive, even necessary. If in the past being a Buddhist entailed much more than sitting in meditation and joining in discourse on the intricacies of doctrine, the modern Buddhist no longer needs to carry on this vestigial baggage.

As I have written elsewhere (Lewis 2002), this reduction of Buddhism to what its virtuosi do and think is a historical distortion; still common today is a fundamental failure to understand the fullness of the tradition’s spiritual reach and the richness of its pragmatic religious services to communities across Asia (Obeyesekere 1968; Tambiah 1973). Central to comprehending Buddhist tradition in history and contemporary Newar practice is *anupurvikatha*, the early and textually-located notion of “the gradual path”. For millennia, the specific progress of a typical Buddhist is charted as:





This gradual path doctrine envisions society as a multi-point hierarchy of beings who are different according to their *karma* and spiritual capacities.<sup>1</sup> In the “gradual path”, too, we find the central ideal of a Buddhist society that is interdependent and linked through ritual and patronage, connecting advanced practitioners with others moving up along the “gradual path.” It has been these relationships among unequal spiritual individuals that have shaped and sustained Buddhist communities for over two millennia. Such inclusivity applies to societies following Mahāyāna tradition, with the appreciation of teaching and ritual performance as *upāyas*, expressions of a Bodhisattva’s skillful assistance to the community.

Across pre-modern Buddhist Asia, the multitudes who have performed rituals, taking refuge in Buddha/*dharma*/*saṅgha* meant following a tradition that had demonstrated that the Buddha’s words and the faith’s saints could exert control over the powers of the universe that could resist disease and chaos while promoting worldly prosperity. As Yün-hua Jan has noted, the same strong focus on spiritual power can be found in the Chinese Buddhist storytelling traditions:

The claim of supernatural power of recitation may be disputable among scholars as well as sectarians, yet one point has clearly emerged. ... From an insider’s viewpoint, the power of recitation is extremely powerful, and in certain cases, it is claimed to be even more powerful and preferable than either a philosophical understanding or the excellence in moral disciplines (Jan, Yün-hua 1977: 239).

Thus, I would argue that it was ritual practice that created and defined Buddhist identity and it was faith in the pragmatic powers of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas accessed via ritual that held the center of Buddhist tradition. Lofty moral values and blissful fruits of meditation, and beautiful *dharma* formulations certainly must have impressed and converted some; but the *dharma*’s control over the powers that insure health, wealth, progeny, peace—even overcoming bad *karma*—certainly would have had the widest appeal in securing the faith’s success in contexts as different as nomadic pasturelands, urban enclaves, or subsistence farming villages.

Thus, in every society where Buddhism flourished, it ritualized its spiritual ideals and incorporated pragmatic healing traditions. These are seen in monastic iconography and ritualism, in textual chanting and *stūpa* devotions; they are woven into the festival year, integrated into the life-cycle rites of specific communities, and the procedures for building homes and monasteries.<sup>2</sup> As David Ruegg has noted, “Buddhism is indeed not only philosophy and/or religion but also a way of living and being, a cultural and value

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1 As George Bond draws out the importance of this understanding very explicitly: “The notion of the path links all diverse persons, stages, and goals. Although these manuals define some suttas as mundane and others as supramundane, and though they identify some suttas as applying to ordinary persons and others applying to adepts, the manuals do not regard these as distinct religious paths; they do not separate the kammic from the nibbanic path. Though the path has many levels and applications, the Dhamma is one and the path one. This ... is the secret to understanding the logic and meaning of the Buddha’s teachings.” (1988: 42–3).

2 See, e.g. Tanemura 2004.



system permitting Buddhists in vast areas of the world to construct so much of their mundane as well as spiritual lives” (1995: 104).

The neglect of ritual in the understanding of Mahāyāna Buddhism (and Buddhists) has also obscured how Buddhist doctrinal constructs were applied to the events of “real life”, especially childhood, marriage, old age, after-death contingency. Buddhism in its pre-modern setting was adapted to the existential reality that most householders were illiterate. Since only very few individuals could read texts to learn the *dharma*, most had to learn through oral renderings of the text and their experiences in Buddhist ritual. Buddhist ritual, thus, was developed and sustained by those wishing to shape human experience consciously for the good of Buddhists in a community.

Far from being a “vulgarization” or a “concession” to the masses, ritual has been the fundamental means of applying *dharma* analysis to acculturate the young or, to use Buddhist terms, to shape consciously and beneficently (*kuśala*) the *skandhas*—body, sensations, perceptions, habit energies, consciousness—of individuals, ultimately pointing them toward spiritual maturity and awakening. As Martin Southworth has noted, “Buddhists themselves are very aware of this effect, and they stress that just as it is true that having a right or good state of mind leads to right or good conduct, so too does good conduct tend to produce good states of mind” (1983: 199).

To have studied a living Buddhist community is to know that children come to understand the teachings by questioning the meaning of rituals, through practical examples conveyed in stories, and by listening very intently to the doctrinal testimony that swirls around them when death rituals are being conducted in the family circle. What Newar monks and elders have done in Nepal for centuries is to perform Buddhist rituals that apply the *dharma* with compassion to help especially the young, the grieving, and the dead. To generate good *karma* and material blessings is the central goal.

Recognizing this in Nepal means to discern, again to use a Buddhist term, the *upāya* (“skillful means”) of the collective Mahāyāna tradition that its religious masters developed over the last millennium to benefit Buddhist householders. The examination of Mahāyāna life-cycle rites in the Newar community demonstrates how each rite was constructed to work on multiple levels, to impart meanings and secure blessings differentially for those all along Buddhism’s “gradual path”, from beginners to advanced tantric practitioners, from little children to elder adepts. Buddhist rituals in the Newar context also served other local interests, as well.

## The Nepalese Buddhist context

The abundance of cultural vitality evident in the later Malla era (1482–1768) that created the magnificent art and architecture in the Kathmandu Valley and established vast libraries of Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts was applied to other cultural domains as well. Hindu and Buddhist Newars—kings, priests, merchants, commoners—maintained an almost continuous yearly round of festival observances for their society. Likewise, their priests arranged complex rites to mark all significant events in an individual’s life-



time. From conception to long after death, in celebration and in mourning, rituals have long been integral to the Newar lifestyle. The elaboration of Buddhist ceremonies in this community is truly immense: a recent handbook on rituals lists over 125 “major” *pūjās* (Bajrācārya 1980). The vast orchestration of such performances shows the extent to which Buddhists in the Kathmandu Valley adopted and maintained traditions from earlier Indian civilization. Nowhere else in the Himalayas has so much of earlier Northern Indian Buddhist culture survived intact.

The Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition that grew in importance from the fifth century CE onward in India furthered these ritualistic tendencies, representing both a critique and a fulfillment of early Mahāyāna philosophy and praxis. The chief Tantra-path exponents and exemplars, the Siddhas, developed *sādhana* traditions outside of the scholarly monastic circles and rejected the prevalent multi-lifetime, slow approximation Bodhisattva approach to enlightenment. These *yogins* introduced the means to visualize and control *śūnyatā* by identifying with the Buddha’s three “secrets”: Body (*mudrā*), Speech (mantra) and Mind (*samādhi*) (Wayman 1971: 443). Through a host of innovative techniques, the Vajrayāna masters showed the immediate possibility of harnessing the experience of *śūnyatā* to attain enlightenment. As a corollary to their soteriological discoveries, the Siddhas also composed rituals that applied a master’s power to accomplish more mundane goals. The later scholars who eventually organized and domesticated the *sādhana* practices fashioned a Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna Buddhist culture that emphasized *pūjā* (ritual performance), *vrata* (devotional rites to a chosen deity<sup>3</sup>), and *abhiṣeka* (esoteric initiation). One definite record of a tantric master and ritual innovator active in Nepal around 1216 CE was Kuladatta, who is cited as the author of the *Kriyāsamgrahapañjikā*, a source-book still cited in for contemporary ritual guidebooks (Tanemura 2004: 10).

For the Newar *saṅgha*, the major areas of religious focus were preservation and manuscript copying and Nepal’s *vihāras* to this day preserve a massive corpus of Sanskrit Buddhist texts. Ritual priests in medieval Nepal also devoted themselves to adapting Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna religious understandings in ritual terms. This development explains why Newar Buddhist tradition seems to lack a strong philosophical/scholastic dimension. What is crafted in rituals are expressions and interjections of Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna world view into every conceivable juncture: for relating to deities, celebrating festivals, moving an individual through his lifetime, and seeking *nirvāṇa*. Lacking in philosophical inquiry, the “genius” of Newar Buddhism lies in its pervasive orchestration of Vajrayāna rituals and teachings which channel blessings, well-being, and—for those householders willing to practice—movement toward enlightenment.

This perspective on Newar Buddhist life-cycle rites is clearly visible in the modern compilation of life-cycle rites composed in 1962 by Badri Ratna Bajracarya and Ratna Kaji Bajracarya of Kathmandu City, the *Nepāl Jana Jīvan Kriyā Paddhati*.<sup>4</sup> From the first passages of this text, the application of core Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna concepts to con-

3 Lewis 1989.

4 Translated in Lewis (1994).



struct rituals is apparent. Conception is described in terms of tantric physiology and the priest's *sādhana* is often cited as the basis for the rituals performed. The Vajrācāryas' generation of *amṛta prasād* ("ambrosia") through their *pūjāris* became integral to a medical-religious system that linked priests to laymen (Stablein 1976).

There was also the force of historical influences that guided the expressions of ritual adaptation. It is possible, as a reading of the *Kriyāsaṃgrahapañjikā* would suggest, that the rites of vitalization designed to "give life" to Buddhist icons were adapted for Buddhist householders under the influences on society exerted under the Malla and Shah rulers, when the socio-cultural context of Newar Buddhism was also one of increasing Brahmanical dominance in the cultural environment and law.

The Newar Buddhist *saṃskāras* outlined in the *Jana Jīvan* manual closely follow the classical paradigms of Indian Brahmanical tradition, marking the key points in a person's life with Vajrayāna rituals that remove forces that threaten his passage, empower him, while eliminating any incurred pollution. These Buddhist *pūjāris* follow many ancient Brahmanical ritual procedures, but they have also transformed them with alternative Buddhist gestures (*mudrās*), incantations (mantras, *dhāraṇīs*) and symbolic meanings. In general, Newar Buddhist ritualists adopted many core components of Brahmanical ritualism (caste perceptions, rite organization, mantra belief, purity concerns) but maintained separate boundaries through transpositions of ritual implements, priestly vestments, mantra formulae, *mudrās*, theories of ritual empowerment.

Particularly striking is the acceptance of caste categories in ritual reckoning. The *Jana Jīvan* text states that birth into a Śākya caste family is a necessary prerequisite for entry into the Newar *saṅgha*. Because Buddhism existed for at least 1700 years in India, this attention to caste should not be surprising. Nonetheless, the Newars' use of strict endogamous lineages to define *saṅgha* membership and categories of practice available to laity is a unique and heterodox feature of the modern tradition.

It is significant to note that approximately one half of this guidebook is devoted to the rituals associated with death. All Vajrayāna ritual activity seeks to avert bad destiny and make *punya* to insure a good future for the sponsor(s), but the rituals surrounding death are the most prominent. In prescribing year-long *śrāddha* offerings to the departed person for the first year after death, the Newar tradition is different from Tibetan and East Asian Buddhist practice, where 49 days is usually recognized as the limit of possible linkage and thereby effective ritual action.<sup>5</sup> This seems highly unorthodox: despite espousing the doctrine of *karma* and rebirth, Newar Vajrācāryas simultaneously maintain the necessity of these monthly *śrāddha* rituals throughout the first year. Even more Brahmanical in content, this text gives repeated assurances that the departed will reach the Vedic afterlife in "*pitṛloka*" if all of the rituals are done well and the requisite offerings are made by a suitable priest; but it does not specify how this cosmology meshes with alternative Buddhist textual notions.

In pursuit of this Brahmanical desideratum, Newars spend vast time and resources on their *śrāddha* rituals. Thus, this Buddhist tradition plays to both sides of the Indian

5 Subsequent yearly rites on the death anniversary are consistent across the entire Buddhist world.



question of whether one's destiny is based strictly upon the individual's own *karma* from past and present lifetimes, or whether rituals done before and after death can overrule this and manipulate rebirth destiny (Edgerton 1927). Like most Indic religious systems founded on the doctrine that the cosmos is governed by karmic law, Newar tradition naturally looks to death as the critical time when causal mechanisms operate. It is not surprising that the very highly ritualized Buddhism of the Newars' has applied Vajrayāna ritual expertise to this time as well.

This example represents the Newar *saṅgha*'s economic adaptation in parallel with the patterns of Newar Brahman ritualists who subsist mainly through death time gift-giving. It is important to note that *śrāddha* rituals are one of the chief occasions for laymen presenting *dāna* to the Vajrācārya *saṅgha*. So proficient were they in these rituals that until recent times even otherwise Hindu high caste Newar laymen regularly called Vajrācāryas to perform their death rites.<sup>6</sup>

### Newar Buddhist *saṃskāras* as initiations

The great masterpiece of Newar Buddhism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chittadhar Hridaya's *Sugata Saurabha*, recounts the Buddha's life from birth to death in a book-length poem of 19 chapters.<sup>7</sup> The author follows the classical textual sources carefully where they exist, but where these are silent—predominantly in Siddhārtha's youth and home setting—he contextualizes and humanizes Siddhārtha's life by having him follow the often complex and detailed cultural traditions of modern Newars. *Sugata Saurabha* unself-consciously conveys the Newar Buddhist perspective that performing life-cycle rites are an important part of life, natural to the future Buddha's formative experiences. The text contains descriptions of many of still-observed life-cycle rites, with an especially detailed account of Siddhārtha's marriage to Yaśodharā.<sup>8</sup>

While the exact historical factors that led Newar Buddhists to develop a set of *saṃskāras* in concordance with those in the Brahmanical Dharmaśāstras remain uncer-

6 Dependence on after death ritual service for income also shows the Newar form of Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna Buddhism similar to modern Japanese traditions, where such rituals are the predominant area where Buddhist tradition endures (Reader 1991).

7 This work has been recently published in a bi-lingual translation as *Sugata Saurabha: A Poem on the Life of the Buddha by Chittadhar Hridaya of Nepal*. [with Subarna Man Tuladhar] by Harvard University Press in 2008; a popular edition will be published by Oxford University Press in late 2009.

8 *Sugata Saurabha*'s life-cycle rituals are 1) Mother's release from birth pollution; 2) Infant rice feeding and presenting objects to predict child's career; 3) *kaytāpūjā*, departure to study with *guru*; 4) The vast inventory of Newar marriage rites: Areca nuts and gifts sent to finalize proposal; Pastry gifts (*lakha*) sent to fix wedding date, bride opening *lakha* bowl, men's procession to fetch bride back home, bride's ritual farewell, offering betel, procession fetches bride in palanquin, bride's family priest's oration, groom's priest's oration, dowry recounted, bride's first entry to new home, areca nut greeting to groom's kin, bride/groom eat from common plate/cups, groom applying make-up, hair part *tikā* to bride, pair worships at Gaṇeś temple, bride's kin visit to "see her face"; 5) Death wailing and procession; 6) Cremation of Buddha's mother and father.



tain, the succession of rites performed by Newar householders function simultaneously to define their high caste status as well as their Buddhist identity. Malla-era ritual Vajrācārya masters created Buddhist transpositions of standard Brahmanical rites but in a Buddhist modality, for Buddhist laymen, using Buddhist ritual objects, performed by members of the Buddhist *saṅgha*. Aligning their community in outward conformity with the ideal Brahmanical life marked by *saṃskāras*, they skillfully created an alternative identity using ritual, one that was not Hindu and one that generated world benefits and good *karma*. While the term “Buddhist Brahmins” coined long ago by Stephen Greenwold (1974) for their modern successors neglects some portions of their identity, when considering Newar Buddhist rituals, their service today is indeed Brahman-like.

<i>Ṣaṃskāra</i>	Practical Religious Meaning(s)	Vajrayāna Meaning(s)
<i>Macābū byēkegu</i>	Release from birth pollution Protection of the baby	Ajimā/Hārītī converted by the Buddha
<i>Macā jākva</i>	Name given Personhood established Career determined	Vajrayāna methods of marshaling the powers of the <i>dharma</i>
<i>Ihi</i>	Purification Partial ritual maturity	Symbolism of <i>bodhicitta</i> ; girl becomes vessel of <i>prajñā</i> , symbolized by <i>bel</i> fruit
<i>Bārhā tayegu</i>	Full ritual maturity Protection and purification Prevents painful menstrual periods	Sun identified as a Bodhisattva
<i>Kaytāpūjā</i>	Ritual adulthood	Re-enacting Śākyamuni’s departure from home Vajrayāna powers of protection
Marriage	Protection rituals Woman’s entrance to marriage	Buddhist deities witness communal relations Worship of Yoginī seals family bond
<i>Nikhan</i>	Mahāyāna initiation Foundation for tantric initiation ( <i>dekhā</i> )	Taking 3 refuges and 5 refuges; taking Bodhisattva vow chanting mantra to strengthen moral practice
<i>Burā jākva</i>	Protection, vitality Freedom from ritual rules	Making <i>puṇya</i> for elder Averts inauspicious moment of 77 years/7 months/7 days Assistance in state between births
<i>Śrāddha</i>	Protection from evil spirit Purification of house Purification of the <i>phukī</i>	Averts a bad destiny Rebirth in <i>sukhāvātī</i>

Table 1: Urāy *saṃskāras* and meanings in Vajrācārya tradition



The maximum development of such Buddhist rituals was accomplished for the Urāy,<sup>9</sup> a grouping of Buddhist castes in Kathmandu whose mercantile activities brought them in regular contact with royal families. In both the Malla and Shah eras, rulers of the Valley claimed their devotion to orthoprax Brahmanical practices. For sustaining their social connections with these rulers, protecting their wealth, and expressing their high social status the Urāy depended, in part, on demonstrations of ritual purity in an Indic framework, but in a Buddhist mode. Table 1 provides a summary of the Buddhist life-cycle rites performed by the Urāy, given with information on their interpretation by their Vajrācārya ritualist informants.

Several comments pertinent to the consideration of initiation can be made. First, each Newar Buddhist life-cycle ritual performed always has the priest administer a vow to the family (*saṃkalpa*) to begin the rite. Although this formality is not recognized by all as such, it nonetheless marks entrance into a sacred Buddhist time interval and the formal intention to move into the next stage of life. Second, moving ahead in life to take the optional and explicitly religious initiations (*nikhan* and *dekhā*) requires that the individual complete the normal sequence of these Buddhist *saṃskāras*. In this sense, all the earlier rites are part of a chain of the preliminary preparations for the religious initiations of adulthood.

Third, there are times when the *saṃskāras* may be done more for the extended family and less for the individual. A family may perform the girl's *ihi* more for the merit earned by parents doing *kanyādāna*, than for the spiritual benefit of the children involved.<sup>10</sup> It is also true that in some Urāy families the old age ritual, *Burā jākva*, is done more to express its own status and less to provide a religious experience for the elder. Fourth, and related to the former, is the acceptance of a whole range of possible attitudes of engagement from those taking part in the complex Vajrayāna rituals. Newar Buddhists generally, like Tibetans, feel that mere exposure to the mantras, images, and rites, that is, simply the experiences of listening and *darśana* themselves exerts a beneficent effect on key individual as well as the other witnesses. To take part, even if not much is understood, is meritorious while exerting a positive influence on the person's character. Here is where the term *saṃskāra*'s two meanings meet: a rite that shapes an individual's character.

The explicitly Buddhist practice of initiation into a meditative tradition is common among the Urāy. Consistent with the Vajrayāna ethos, the Vajrācārya teacher and his wife instruct the recipients on the practices involved. He also asks all to not share the details with others. It is expected that every young person, either before or right after marriage, will take the first meditation initiation, called *nikhan*. While there may be

9 See extensive treatment in Lewis (1995).

10 My own experience in this phenomenon illustrates this point. In the winter of 1998, my daughter Melissa, then five years old, became the first non-Newar to do *ihi* with a group of Newar friends' daughters. On the second day, as I was following the Vajrācārya's ritual guide, he came to a point in the liturgy when the text called for "preach about the meaning of the ritual," the priest did not do so, despite the deployment of a large microphone and sound system in the courtyard. When I asked him about this omission, he replied, "It doesn't mean anything."



variations in the precise practices bestowed by Kathmandu Vajrācāryas, all Urāy *nikhan* initiations introduce meditation involving mantra recitation that focus on Karuṇāmaya-Avalokiteśvara.<sup>11</sup>

Only members of the Vajrācārya, Śākya, Urāy and Citrakār castes are deemed eligible for the second Newar Buddhist initiation, *dekhā*. And only those with this initiation can enter the family tantric shrine room, the *āgāchē*, to see the paintings of the esoteric Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The warnings about secrecy are stern, and teachers require a talking vow to uphold it, citing serious dangers (illness, derangement, death) to the initiate and any outsider who breaches the circle of secrecy. To take *dekhā* is a highly personal decision, ideally taken with one's spouse to receive the full tradition. Due to the required daily practice that can take one hour, the cost of gifts to the teacher at initiation, and the expectation that one will join in subsequent rituals with co-initiates at the tantric shrines, the number of Urāy taking *dekhā* has been in sharp decline over the last half century. Certain notable Vajrācārya masters in Kathmandu periodically offer these initiations and the word spreads; at times individuals approach the master, usually with interested friends lined up to join them. In Kathmandu there are three Vajrayāna initiations that are bestowed to Urāy by the tantric master Vajrācāryas, those focused on Cakrasaṃvara, Vajravārāhī, and Acala.

A final note is that for the Urāy, the entire Kathmandu Valley religious field—including Tibetans, Theravādins, and others—offers possibilities for initiation if one is so inclined. There are records of Newars taking initiations with Tibetan masters going back at least 500 years (Lewis & Jamspal 1988), as well as Urāy who have been strong drawn into serious engagement with Theravādin *vipassanā* (Skt. *vipaśyanā*) practices.

## Buddhist initiation in Urāy life – further topics

### 1 Initiation and social group boundaries

Despite many influences of modernity in Kathmandu's Urāy communities, caste and sub-caste as boundaries of significant concern and maintenance endure. Among the Tulādharas, the largest Urāy group, membership in male lineage descent groups is recognized from three specific localities—Asan, Naradevī, and Jhvā Bāhā—and status is legitimated according to membership in units that perform rituals of Buddhist devotion. The most critical, if least often performed, ritual unit is that associated with the 12-year Samyak festival, a complex series of events organized by the Samyak Guthi. Asan and Naradevī Tulādhar groups have clearly specified duties of food offering preparation in this *guthi*; the Jhvā Bāhā group does not and so is perceived as having lower status. The same opinion is reinforced due to Jhvā Bāhā Tulādharas lacking their own *gumlābājan* group. The *gumlābājan* unites men for Buddhist ritual processions, and to play drums in this group is a skill that must be learned from one's locality caste elders; boys in the

11 The practice once also involved visualization of the celestial Bodhisattva; now it consists only of mantras chanted using as rosary.



Asan and Naradevī communities are still eager to learn, attending classes to master a variety of beats and tunes. But unless their family has clear patrilineal descent in either of these two groups, they are not allowed to learn or play.

It is precisely here where we can see an instance of Newar Buddhists using caste membership in a merit-making, ritual group to maintain caste exclusivity, and ignore the contending ideal of Buddhist universalism: sharing the teachings and acting compassionately towards all beings, not just one's own kin.

This tendency is not true in all areas of collective Buddhist life, however. Another ritual tradition, the Buddhist *vrata*, provides a case study that begins with a vow and a short-term initiation into a Bodhisattva's ritual cosmos. It is likely that the formation of dozens of Buddhist *vratas*—dedicated to Avalokiteśvara (the *aṣṭamī* or *uposatha vrata*), Vasundharā, Tārā, Mahākālā, among others—was part of the same historical movement that led to the formation of Buddhist *saṃskāras*: Vajrācārya ritual masters adopting ancient Brahmanical practices to unite devotees to worship, under their direction, major Mahāyāna divinities. For these one or two-day events, Buddhist householders fast, perform rituals on a *maṇḍala*, and hear testimonial stories about the deity and past blessings garnered in the past by those performing the rite. The ephemeral *vrata* participants meet only once, or more rarely, on the same lunar day each month for a year. These groups form along many affinity lines: caste, kin, neighbors, uniting Buddhist householders regardless of caste or subcaste. There are also devotional *guthis*, especially those associated with the Newar Buddhist holy month of Gumlā, that unite householders of different castes and subcastes to recite sacred texts (*stotras*). In *vratas* and religious performance *guthis*, the ideal of Buddhist universalism ranks supreme.

## 2 Limited access to tantric mantras and initiation

The textual history of Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition in South Asia recounts that esoteric Buddhism began on the periphery of society and settlement, among ascetics and others who ignored the caste system and Dharmaśāstra norms of gender, and whose spiritual explorations took place in society's periphery, in wilderness or cremation grounds. This movement that crossed or blurred the lines of Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist traditions, probably began as early as classical India (500 CE), affecting in subsequent centuries all traditions in many dimensions of belief and practice. By 1000 CE, when Buddhism was in decline in many regions, tantric Buddhism dominated in a new formation of the tradition in Pala-Sena north India, Orissa, and Nepal and with strong resonance and further development in Tibet (Davidson 2003). By the time Muslim rulers came to power in the Gangetic plain (1200 CE), tantric Buddhism in Nepal had begun a process of reformation and domestication, the Indic version of which survives in Newar Buddhism and Hinduism.

What is clear by the time we reach the early modern era in the Kathmandu Valley is that tantric tradition had long-ago ceased to be peripheral or the possession of the low castes. In fact, tantric initiation had become, as it is today, the carefully guarded possession of the elite groups in society: kings, priests (Brahman and Vajrācārya), merchants, and virtuoso artists. This extraordinary inversion requires analysis.



It is certain that mantras and *dhāraṇīs* are believed capable of giving extraordinary abilities to individuals by giving them access to great cosmic powers. The stories of the Siddhas and Yoginīs in the Tantras recount how individuals seeking the experience of enlightenment also gain a host of supernormal powers (*siddhis*), from telekinesis to clairvoyance, from harming enemies at a distance to aiding others. It is natural that those with political power eventually sought to control who could obtain and use this exceptionally potent “classified” knowledge to access worldly powers. Initiation into Vajrayāna practices in later centuries served to guard access to this spiritual resource and came to exclude the lower class members of society. So while there is a rhetoric of philosophical belief in Vajrayāna Buddhism, directed to *nirvāṇa*-seeking individuals, tantric Buddhist traditions in Newar society became an attribute of high social status and a means by which the Kathmandu Valley’s elite, Hindu and Buddhist, perpetuated its status.

One case study illustrating high caste control over mantra practices in the Newar community came to me in 1987, having met a group of Jyapunis, lower class farmer women from Kathmandu city, sitting in a circle at Svayambhu making clay *caityas* using small moulds. Making *stūpas* in this manner is one of the earliest Buddhist rituals; ancient and medieval texts promise extraordinary merit for construction of replicas of the shrines in which the Buddha’s relics, and those of other saints, were consigned. Having documented the Urāy tradition of clay *caitya* construction, called *cibadyah dayekegu* in Newari, I asked one of the elder ladies what mantras they were reciting as they went through the process. I had assumed that they were making them as the Urāy were, with twelve steps in the process—from picking up the clay to depositing the small conical shrine—each done with the recitation of a short mantra. The Jyapuni women were completely dumfounded by my question, as they insisted that they had never even heard of this being part of the ritual, much less as part of their own tradition of practice. While from the perspective of Buddhist universalism and compassion, the *dharma* and Buddhist rituals should be shared with everyone for the greatest good, in practice the most advanced spiritual technology, like society’s wealth, remains concentrated among the top ten percent of society.

This example points to what is a larger insight from the practice of Newar Vajrayāna initiation. In noting how tantric tradition migrated from society’s margins to its center, we can discern the arc of religious history begun in pre-Islamic north India. Traditionally, anyone deemed qualified in the judgment of the tantric master—who stands in the traditional descent of *sādhana* teaching (*paramparā*) from *guru* to living master—is deemed eligible to receive initiation (*dekhā*). What we see in modern Nepal is that only those born into the highest castes can be considered for tantric initiation. A similar exclusivity was documented by Robert Levy (1991) for Hindu Brahmins in Bhaktapur, indicating how powerful the press of caste prestige and boundary maintenance was in Malla Nepal.



### 3 Shifting boundaries – modernity and Buddhist initiation

A final concluding observation must note that access to initiation occupies a central place in the modernization of Newar Buddhism since 1990. Two young Newar Buddhist modernizers in contemporary Nepal, Naresh Bajracarya of Kathmandu and Min Bahadur Shakya of Patan, have sought to change to powerful force of caste in their communities. Both extensively studied their own traditions from elders, and both have taken degrees in the academic study of Buddhism; both have also traveled to other Buddhist countries, witnessing how the Mahāyāna tradition had evolved elsewhere. Shakya has sought to break down the caste-based prejudice against Tibetan teachers by promoting Newar connections with leading Lamas who offer initiations and *dharma* teachings. He has also highlighted the study of traditional Mahāyāna texts. Bajracarya for over ten years has performed initiations into the Newar *saṅgha* for boys of mixed Śākya and Vajrācārya parentage, who would otherwise be excluded from attaining *saṅgha* member status; he has also offered *nikhan*-style meditation initiations (devoted to Avalokiteśvara) to large assemblies of householders, regardless of ethnic or caste identity. Bajracarya has also widened the circle of eligibility for tantric initiation to anyone deemed spiritually prepared for taking the vows for practice. While both have been severely criticized by traditionalist elders in the Newar *saṅgha*, they aver that their innovations respond to the democratic changes underway in Nepal, while simultaneously defending their reforms by invoking the norms of Vinaya and Sanskrit tantric texts. Here again, the boundaries of initiation point to fundamental issues of religious and ethnic identity, and how historical context has shaped religious change.

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