

On the Revival of Newar Mahayana Buddhism: One Scholar's Reflections

**Prof. Todd T. Lewis
Professor of Asian Religions
College of the Holy Cross
Worcester, Massachusetts 01610, USA**

Introduction

An American scholar of Buddhism, I have written many articles about Newar history and its contemporary traditions, including the contributions of modern vajracharya panditas. In studies directed to Buddhists in other nations and international scholars who concentrate on Buddhism, I often point out how surviving Newar culture is a great and important treasure. But I sometimes wonder if Newar Buddhists, especially those in the younger generations, understand this. The paintings, sculptures, and buildings in the Kathmandu Valley have taught historians a great deal about the development of Buddhist art in South Asia and in Tibet. Even more precious have been the texts copied by earlier generations of Newar scholars and preserved in Newar Viharas; these have provided one of the great collections of ancient Sanskrit Buddhist (and Hindu) literature left in the world. Along with other scholars such as John Locke and David Gellner, I have also sought to show how the surviving traditional practices of Newar Buddhists contribute to understanding the history of Mahayana doctrine, rituals, and festivals.

Having done research within the Kathmandu Valley for the last 15 years, I have also seen the continuing decline of the older Mahayana tradition and noted that Newars who regret this seem unable to change it. My paper seeks to draw upon my long friendship with Kathmandu traditions and studies of Buddhism in other societies to 'think out loud' on how Newar Mahayana Buddhism can find new life, adapt to the modern world, and even contribute to the world's betterment.

Is reform a correct Buddhist attitude ? Does the Dharma Support Blindly Following the Past ?

In many modern Buddhist communities [Burma, Thailand, Japan] individuals have adapted their traditions to the changing modern world, sometimes in ways not foreseen in the ancient texts. Such an adaptive attitude, while it might not be reverent to "time-worn tradition", can still find strong support on two points drawn from the sutras:

Since life is inherently impermanent (anitya), every community must inevitably change and not "live in the past"; and

There is very high value placed upon preserving the Dharma as a vibrant force in the world.

Newar Buddhists should carefully consider whether it is better to blindly hold

on to their old traditions or to make the changes needed so that their grand children will still have a living culture of Mahayana Buddhism to guide their lives. Or is it the case that the middle-age generation of today will be the one to lose the faith of their grandfathers ?

Revival represents a great challenge. One hopeful point is that other Buddhists have acted successfully elsewhere in the world and some faced circumstances no more difficult than Newars do today. The difficulty, in my view, is that some very fundamental principles of Newar culture must be challenged and changed for there to be new life breathed into the tradition for revival.

Many of the problems within the Newar Sangh are rooted in the householder ideology that dominates the Sakya and Vajracarya castes, especially the practice of allowing the most elderly men to be group leaders. However much we owe respect of elders, we must also admit the truth that today the oldest are not usually the best informed or the most highly motivated individuals to make changes for the long-term betterment of the Dharma. Thus, while preserving a sincere regard and ceremonial veneration for elders, it is the younger generations of Buddhist householders who must make both wise and decisive changes.

In the remainder of this essay, I will discuss a two-fold strategy to address the problem: the first is to look to elsewhere in the world to learn how Buddhists and non-Buddhists have responded successfully to the modern situation; the second is to begin by defining exactly what resources Newar Buddhists possess today and how to draw upon them.

How Have Other World Traditions Been Revitalized ? Answer: New Institutions

Religious people have always found it most effective to attempt change by acting together, not as isolated individuals. The global record is clear that it is only effective new institutions that have revived the traditions of Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists. Undoubtedly, the Mahayana Buddhists of Kathmandu must create a new institution (we'll call it a vihara) that will focus the energy of reform, devotional practice, patronage and learning. While this institution must find widespread support in the community and attract its funds, this does not exclude the need for a few devoted upasaka and upasika-s to get it started. The need for institutional innovation, then, is the first point to learn from the outside world; I'll add other specifics below and outline a possible structure.

Defining the Wealth of the Buddhist Community

Let us now make an assessment of what resources the Newar Buddhist community possesses today and how new initiatives can utilize them. First, we can say that the Mahayana sangha still has a group of learned men who know a vast repertoire of rituals, meditation practices, and literature. These include older vajracarya men but also young ones who have studied with them and who want to continue their traditions. Moreover, the city's sangha still possess many courtyards and shrines that contain beautiful icons, elegant ciba: dyahs, and wood carvings. Second, there is also a great deal of faith in the community at large. Many people still enjoy the bhajanas,

reciting Dharanis, reading avadanas, talking about points of Buddhist Philosophy. Third, there is a great deal of business acumen, management wisdom, and wealth in the lay community. These must be harnessed to figure out how to move into the future on firm financial and institutional grounds. Back to the time of the Buddha, up to modern Japan, Thailand and even recently in mainland China, it has been wise and generous merchants who have acted to insure the modernization of the Dharma. The success of the Digu Khyah Samiti among the Uray of Kathmandu is an example of what modern merchants can accomplish working together to create an institution that has insured the continuity of an important religious practice. Fourth, the Kathmandu community regularly finds itself in the midst of several Lakhs of tourists who each year pass through the city streets and temple courtyards. There are several thousand resident foreigners, many of whom are interested in Newar Buddhism. The Asian tourist arrivals include many Buddhists and many westerners are interested in local Buddhism. Wealthy foreigners come to Nepal depending upon local travel agents who must entertain them. But despite tourist interest and proximity, the local tradition benefits little from them. What to do? I suggest that the Newar Buddhist community must become less shy and reach out to offer the Dharma to these visitors: this is needed both out of a Buddhist respect for them as other beings who come from far away to have contact with the Newar Triratna and also based upon the need to elicit their financial support as patrons.

Fifth, there are other foreign connections that Newars can draw upon. These include new international foundations that are dedicated to the survival of the world's spiritual traditions; moreover, there are western scholars and Buddhist devotees who are "friends of Newar culture" and who would welcome a chance to support well-conceived community initiatives; and there is the population of Newar Buddhists who are now residents in the United States, Europe etc. who have almost no connection with the faith back 'home' in Nepal.

The remaining discussion will describe more specifically how to draw on these resources. To emphasize how reform can still serve traditional spiritual goals, it is organized with reference to the triratna.

Buddha

Visitors, like Newars, find the Buddha in the bahas, at Svayambhu, and in the caityas. Almost everywhere in the world, tourists expect to give some dana to support the sacred places they enjoy seeing, as making donations is part of all world religions. Newar Buddhists must adopt this world standard, and use it to benefit the Mahayana tradition. The community should organize a system of entrance dana fees to these sites, with a large enough charge to pay for entrance monitors. This is what Buddhists from Thailand to Kyoto (Japan) have done to maintain their viharas.

In addition to Svayambhu, there should be a series of bahas (the 18 Mu Bahas?) which foreigners can enter with a pass that could be purchased and dispensed by travel agents and by the monitors at the bahas. Of course, each local samgha must receive a portion of the fee to keep its courtyard clean, restore images periodically, etc. There would initially need to be a good map drawn showing the location of the each

baha in the group, and this would also provide some historical information and iconographic identifications, and indicate the opening and closing times.

Dharma

One of the most curious features of Newar Mahayana Buddhism is how the samgha has almost entirely abandoned its classical duty of preaching the Dharma. But today there are fewer and fewer public sessions devoted to this activity; furthermore, in the vratas and samskaras that many layfolk still observe, the Guruju will usually not render the story (vratokatha) clearly or engage the intellect of the participants by connecting the Dharma with the rituals. It is this failure to touch the minds of the young that especially weakens the tradition today; in all other aspects of their lives, the young must place great emphasis on education and mastering the intricacies of scientific knowledge. When carefully explained, Mahayana doctrine elsewhere (Asia, Europe, and in America) has shown that it has a powerful attraction for the young and educated. Making the Dharma alive again, the modern vajracarya guruju must take the "guru" in their title seriously. I would like to make a further proposition on Newar teachers spreading the Dharma. Again, it is based upon modernizing by returning to the roots of the faith: all the sutras indicate that the Buddha preached his Dharma for the good of all human beings, sending his first disciples in the four directions to preach in local dialects. I am not sure when, perhaps it was when caste laws were introduced by the Malla kings, but how strange it seems that the Newar samgha would stop acting for the benefit of all humanity, but just for Newars alone. My suggestion is that learn from the Tibetans and the great global revival of their faith: by extending the Dharma to all humans in the world, Tibetan Buddhism has benefitted greatly. Tibetan Lamas now lead a global tradition with viharas in nearly every country of the world. As there is no one nation, ethnic group, or caste who "owns" the Dharma, the Newar samgha should not keep their faith to itself anymore. I suggest that Newar Buddhists seek connections with sincere non-Newars who wish to learn about their mahayana tradition.

The wonderful ritual tradition of Mahayana Buddhism are found nowhere else in the world. There are many Buddhists, including Japanese and westerners, who would be eager to learn about Newar ritual practices, go on meditation retreats and local pilgrimages with learned vajracharyas, and study religious art. In addition, there are also those of other faiths, including hundreds of college exchange students who study in Nepal each year, who would find their own spiritual understanding deepened by exploring Newar Mahayana buddhist beliefs and practices. And again, all these foreigners would expect to be patrons, contributing needed funds and energy to help revive the Newar Mahayana tradition.

Sangha

Given the current state of the older tradition and the new initiatives needed to revitalize Mahayana belief and practice, it is clear that only a new institution do what is necessary. I recommend that a new vihara be created that is dedicated to reviving learning both within the traditional Mahayana Samgha and that reaches out to the wider community. Funded by local and outside wealth, the new vihara will support a

core of devout and learned young gurus to study, practice and connect their tradition with the modern world. Its mission could include the following: The new vihara must offer incentives for practicing vajracharyas to retain and extend their learning about both Dharma and ritual so as to regain the lay community's respect. It could promote the laymen's acceptance of paying sufficient dana to certified experts, and even develop a system of subsidies to support gifted younger vajracharya ritualists.

Perhaps a new earned title must be created by the learned Newar samgha elders, a kind of "Ph. D." akin to the Tibetan "Geshe" that would announce an individual's status as master of major rituals, meditation and the Navadharmic texts. These individuals would then earn their livelihood by training other students in the samgha and sustain the intellectual revival of Mahayana teaching for the years ahead.

The new vihara must convince existing groups of traditional Newar Buddhism - local samghas, the De Acharya Guthi, officials at svayambhu - that some practices simply must be changed, the pass system of contributions for entrance at major sites must win

tion instruction, this guru as representative of the new vihara would also raise dana funds for the institution in Kathmandu. The internet could be used to locate these individuals, who number in the thousands.

support on every level, including finding agreement on how to implement it with the local government and tourist authorities.

I recommend that families offering Pancha Dana should be direct their dana to the new vihara and deserving scholars, not merely rewarding the first persons in line.

The new vihara could also begin a publication in Newari and english to publicize its work.

The new vihara could organize an yearly tour by certified vajracharya master(s) who would visit Newar Buddhist families across the United States. These expatriot Newars have no way to fulfill their traditional Buddhist ritual duties samskaras, vratas etc., especially for their children, and they could sponsor the tour. While meeting the need for these rituals, and giving meditation instruction, this guru as representative of the new vihara would also raise dana funds for the institution in Kathmandu. The internet could be used to locate these individuals, who number in the thousands.

through this vihara, connections should be established with outside devotees, as discussed above. As the vihara proved its worthiness and expanded its programming, it would undoubtedly attract resident foreigners and others who would come to Nepal to participate in its programs. Their dana, along Buddhist families across the United States. These expatriot Newars have no way to fulfill their traditional support on every level, including finding agreement on how to implement it with the local government and tourist authorities.

I recommend that families offering Pancha Dana should be direct their dana to the new vihara and deserving scholars, not merely rewarding the first persons in line.

The new vihara could also begin a publication in Newari and english to publicize its work.

The new vihara could organize an yearly tour by certified vajracharya master(s) who

would visit Newar Buddhist families across the United States. These expatriot Newars have no way to fulfill their traditional Buddhist ritual duties samskaras, vratas etc., especially for their children, and they could sponsor the tour. While meeting the need for these rituals, and giving meditation instruction needed to revive mahayana Buddhism, Newars need to study the modern world and make changes with the dana of local devotees, would build up an endowment that would support the vihara's growth.

How then to begin? First, there must be a committee of respected founding directors who will design its first programs, raise funds locally, communicate with the prominent traditional organizations (De Acharya Guthi, etc.), and keep strict accounts of activities and finances. In addition to respected Vajracharya and Shakya panditas, another key figure on the founding board of directors should include an administrative manager. To facilitate the relationships outside the circle of Kathmandu Newars, a foreign board of advisors, including Newars living outside Nepal, should also be appointed who would help establish connections with devotees in other countries, advise on organizational matters, and raise funds.

* * *

In a spirit of friendship and concern, I have raised many suggestions on the revival of Newar Buddhism, subjects I have discussed informally with friends in Kathmandu over the years. To make the support on every level, including finding agreement on how to implement it with the local government and tourist authorities.

I recommend that families offering Pancha Dana should be direct their dana to the new vihara and deserving scholars, not merely support on every level, including finding agreement on how to implement it with the local government and tourist authorities.

I recommend that families offering Pancha Dana should be direct their dana to the new vihara and deserving scholars, not merely rewarding the first persons in line.

The new vihara could also begin a publication in Newari and English to publicize its work.

The new vihara could organize an yearly tour by certified vajracharya master(s) who would visit Newar Buddhist families across the United States. These expatriot Newars have no way to fulfill their traditional Buddhist ritual duties samskaras, vratas etc., especially for their children, and they could sponsor the tour. While meeting the need for these rituals, and giving meditation instruction, this guruju as representative of the new vihara would also raise dana funds for the institution in Kathmandu. The internet could be used to locate these individuals, who number in the thousands.

through this vihara, connections should be established with outside devotees, as discussed above. As the vihara proved its worthiness and expanded its programming, it would undoubtedly attract resident foreigners and others who would come to Nepal to participate in its programs. Their dana, along with the dana of local devotees, would build up an endowment that would support the vihara's growth.

How then to begin? First, there must be a committee of respected founding directors who will design its first programs, raise funds locally, communicate with the prominent traditional organizations (De Acharya Guthi, etc.), and keep strict accounts

of activities and finances. In addition to respected Vajracharya and Shakya panditas, another key figure on the founding board of directors should include an arewarding the first persons in line.

The new vihara could also begin a publication in Newari and english to publicize its work.

The new vihara could organize an yearly tour by certified vajracharya master(s) who would visit Newar Buddhist families across the United States. These expatriot Newars have no way to fulfill their traditional Buddhist ritual duties samskaras, vratas etc., especially for their children, and they could sponsor the tour. While meeting the need for these rituals, and giving meditation instruction, this guruju as representative of the new vihara would also raise dana funds for the institution in Kathmandu. The internet could be used to locate these individuals, who number in the thousands.

through this vihara, connections should be established with outside devotees, as discussed above. As the vihara proved its worthiness and expanded its programming, it would undoubtedly attract resident foreigners and others who would come to Nepal to participate in its programs. Their dana, along with the dana of local devotees, would build up an wndowment that would support the vihara's growth.

How then to begin ? First, there must be a committee of respected founding directors who will design its first programs, raise funds locally, communicatedministrative manager. To facilitate the relationships outside the circle of Kathmandu Newars, a foreign board of advisors, including Newars living outside Nepal, should also be appointed who would help establish connetions with devotees in other countries, advise on organizational matters, and raise funds.

* * *

In a spirit of frienship and concern, I have raised many suggestions on the revival of Newar buddhism, subjects I have discussed informally with friends in Kathmandu over the years. To make the changes needed to revive mahayana Buddhism, Newars need to study the modern world and make changes in some of the older practices. For Newar buddhists, to reach outward offers the punya reward of making the compassionate doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism

support on every level, including finding agreement on how to implement it with the local government and tourist authorities.

I recommend that families offering Pancha Dana should be direct their dana to the new vihara and deserving scholars, not merely rewarding the first persons in line.

The new vihara could also begin a publication in Newari and english to publicize its work.

The new vihara could organize an yearly tour by certified vajracharya master(s) who would visit Newary alive in modern Nepal, and the additional punya of enriching others across the world with the enduring wisdom of Newrpractice. In the Mahayana sutras, it is often stated by the Buddha that only by striving to save others energetically can a bodhisattva attain samyaksambodhi. For the Newar Mahayana community, the same challenge is there: only by looking outward and connecting with the outside

world beyond the Himalayas can they revive their Mahayana faith. Elsewhere mahayana Buddhists have generated compassion (karuna), skill-in-means (upaya), and insight (prajna) to adapt and save the Dharma: can Newar buddhists unite to do so ?

With the prominent traditional organizations (De Acharya guthi, etc.), and keep strict accounts of activities and finances. In addition to respected Vajracharya and Shakya panditas, another key figure on the founding board of directors should include an administrative manager. To facilitate the relationships outside the circle of Kathmandu Newars, a foreign board of advisors, including Newars living outside Nepal, should also be appointed who would help establish connections with devotees in other countries, advise on organizational matters, and raise funds.

* * *

In a spirit of friendship and concern, I have raised many suggestions on the revival of Newar buddhism, subjects I have discussed informally with friends in Kathmandu over the years. To make the changes needed to revive mahayana Buddhism, Newars need to study the modern world and make changes in some of the older practices. For Newar buddhists, to reach outward offers the punya reward of making the compassionate doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism newly alive in modern Nepal, and the additional punya of enriching others across the world with the enduring wisdom of Newrpractice. In the Mahayana sutras, it is often stated by the Buddha that only by striving to save others energetically can a bodhisattva attain samyaksambodhi. For the Newar Mahayana community, the same challenge is there: only by looking outward and connecting with the outside world beyond the Himalayas can they revive their Mahayana faith. Elsewhere mahayana Buddhists have generated compassion (karuna), skill-in-means (upaya), and insight (prajna) to adapt and save the Dharma: can Newar buddhists unite to do so ?