Textual manifestations: the use and significance of Mahāyāna literature in Newar buddhism

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Abstract
This study concerns the worship and utilisation of Mahāyāna sūtra literature among Newar Buddhists of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. The study begins by considering the contents of the texts being worshipped and the historical development of this type of worship in Nepal. In elaborating the character of contemporary sūtra worship, the study considers the organisational structure of the worshippers of the sūtras, the sūtras’ popular significance in Nepal, and the manner in which their power is conceived of as related to the presence of life in the manuscripts, after which the practices of display (darsan yāyegu) and recitation (pā thyākegu) are explained. This study concludes that: sūtra worship among the Newars highlights the presence of the divine in texts; it is an example of localization; and features as a pivot point in ongoing renewal and reform.

Keywords: Nepal, Newar Buddhism, ritual, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna, sūtras

Introduction
One of the most commonly requested rituals in Newar Buddhism is the recitation of sacred texts, such as sūtras. This rite is called pāṭha yākegu, usually abbreviated to pā thyākegu or pāḥ thākegu, the commonly used Sanskrit term being sūtra pāṭha, meaning sūtra recitation.1 The texts recited are usually one of the Navagrantha or

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1 The Newar verb yākegu is the infinitive of the causative form of yāyegu, to do. Thus, pāṭha yākegu literally means to make recitation be done, emphasising the role of the sponsor. Multisyllabic Sanskrit terms are often abbreviated in Newar. Thus, pāṭha becomes pā or pāḥ, with the second syllable sometimes mistakenly being considered part of a verb: thyākegu or thākegu, neither of which are actual verbs.
Navasūtra texts, the nine most sacred Mahāyāna sūtras in Newar Buddhism. Other popular texts outside this small canon include the Pañcarakṣā Sūtras and avadāna literature. After examining the contents of these and other Mahāyāna sūtras, one may come away with the impression that the quintessential Mahāyāna ritual is the recitation, copying and worship of sūtras. It is regrettable that so little has been done to understand this rite. Previous studies have reflected on the sociological concerns of this practice (Gellner 1996), as well as on the reparation of manuscripts (Emmrich 2009) and the artistic concerns of the manuscripts used (Kim 2013: 271–286).

This paper therefore attempts to understand the practice of sūtra worship in Nepal as highlighted by three themes which underscore not only some interesting characteristics of Mahāyāna literature and practice (and thus may be found elsewhere throughout the Buddhist world) but also evolving facets of modern Newar Buddhism. The first theme is the embodiment of divine qualities in books: this is primarily seen through the identification of Mahāyāna sūtras with the buddhas and other deities, and through the identification of the text as alive and of practices related to the display of texts. The second theme is localisation, whereby the doctrines and practices of Buddhism are made to adapt to local environs. Localisation is not unique to Nepal and can be observed in other places where Buddhism has been introduced. However, Will Tuladhar-Douglas notes that prior to the thirteenth century Nepal ‘saw itself as an important locality within the greater Indian cultural area’, but that when the Indian ‘frame of reference’ was removed after the decline of Indian Buddhism, Nepalese Mahāyāna adopted its own ‘Sanskritising authority’ (Tuladhar-Douglas 2006: 117) and began composing and redacting texts independently, such as the Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra and the Svayambhūpurāṇa, which cast Mahāyāna narrative and doctrinal exposition within an explicitly Nepalese framework. This also applies, as we shall see, to Mahāyāna

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2 The form of Buddhism prevalent in the Himalayan region and in East Asia, which is distinct from the Theravāda tradition prevalent in South East Asia and Sri Lanka. For the purposes of this article, the division can be understood as based around the acceptance of the authority of the Mahāyāna sūtras and the practices and doctrines taught therein, which Theravāda practitioners would consider either legitimate, but unnecessary, or illegitimate apocrypha.
practice. The third theme is a trend towards either renewal or reform: this will be shown primarily in the discussion of the adaptation and adjustment of sūtra worship to perceived modern standards or in the tendency towards creating a perception of conserving or re-establishing old norms. This will be seen, most prominently, in our explication of sūtra recitation practice itself, as performed in Patan.

In order to explore these themes and to have a better understanding of Newar sūtra worship, this paper first considers the texts themselves, what may be understood about the history of book worship in Mahāyāna Buddhism and Nepal, the organisation of their worship, their popular significance in Nepal, the understanding of texts as alive, the practice of displaying them in public and finally, in brief, sūtra recitation practice itself.

**Textual Background**

When considering Mahāyāna literature, a persistent theme appears to be the great abundance of self-referential passages. Such passages are present in all of the most popular Mahāyāna literature in Newar Buddhism, with the greatest number of such passages being found in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā, Saddharmapuṇḍarīka, Suvarṇaprabhāsa, Samādhirāja, Pañcarākṣā sūtras, Vajracchedikā, Lalitavistara*, and the *Laṅkāvatara*.

These passages generally involve praise of the text itself and passages related to the spreading and teaching of the text. As an example of self-referential praise, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* claims that the text is ‘the mother of bodhisattva mahāsattvas’ (Wogihara 1932: 380), while underscoring the theme of the embodiment of divine qualities in the text. In passages related to spreading and teaching the sūtra, it is emphasised that the text should be recited, studied, and propagated (e.g., Dutt 1953: 233). It is often implied in these passages that Mahāyāna sūtras are a sufficient substitute for relics of the Buddha in the context of caitya (reliquary) worship (Harrison and Watanabe 2006: 122), and ideal ritual scenarios are indicated as being ones in which the sūtras are ‘set up’ and worshipped ‘with manifold pūjās’, and ‘with divine flags, bells, banners, parasols, robes, aromatic powder, perfume, fragrances, garlands, incense and flowers, and with rows of lamps on all sides’

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3 All translations are my own unless otherwise specified. Bodhisattvas are buddhas-to-be: mahāsattva simply denotes a ‘great being’.
O’Neill 39

(Wogihara 1932: 209). Actions for the preservation and maintenance of the texts are put forward (eg Nobel 1937: 103). As is often expressed in these self-referential passages, the ideal practitioner would copy the sūtra and, among many other possible actions, make it into a book for further worship (eg Wogihara 1932: 208, 990; Leifmann 1874: 440, 443). Moreover, it is said in self-referential passages that a person who does these things will receive a large boon, from worldly benefits such as protection from snakebites, lots of merit (puṇya) and ultimately buddhahood (eg Wogihara 1932: 302–323, Dutt 1941: 38–40). While other literature, such as some purāṇas, use self-referentiality in introductions, conclusions, or other paratexts, few works hardwire them into the body of the text itself, and none in such large quantities: the same can be said for non-Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, such as Pāli literature. While the Aṣṭasāhasrikā contains the greatest volume of self-referential passages, followed by the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka, some texts, such as the Aparamitāyus, are entirely self-referential – one might even say that it is a book about itself.

These passages allow us to see what early Mahāyānists may have seen as the range of sūtra worship – practices towards the text which are motivated by religious goals, be they apotropaic or soteriological. As far as materiality is concerned, we are looking at the copying and maintenance of sacred texts as well as the preparation of these texts for pūjā worship. Then we have the performance of practices such as pūjā worship, recitation, and teaching. On a more internal level, to memorise a sūtra (or even a few lines of a sūtra), to understand and to practise its teachings, is said in many sūtras to be the most fruitful deed from the perspective of attaining buddhahood or other achievements.

Historical Development
There are few sources to help determine how common sūtra worship was, or how it was conceived for practitioners of early Mahāyāna. While Mahāyāna sūtras themselves paint an idealised picture of what a worshipper should do towards the sūtras, it is difficult to determine the extent to which these depictions were carried out in practice. The merits claimed to accrue from upholding the sūtras, such as being protected from malevolent spirits (eg Wogihara 1932: 190) or being able, by merely practising and propagating a sūtra, to achieve benefits
equal to those obtained by making offerings to all buddhas (eg T14.475: 556a17) may have been sufficient motivating factors in the propagation and practice of Mahāyāna literature. As for accounts of what may have been done, according to, for instance, the Chinese pilgrims to India Yījing (T54.2125: 232a–c) and Xuánzàng, sūtra recitation was one of the commonest practices in South Asia during the middle of the first millennium of the common era (T51.2087: 882b, 896c) and it appears, at least from Xuánzàng’s perspective, that in some places such as Mathura, reciters of Mahāyāna texts and reciters of non-Mahāyāna Tripitaka (the term for a Buddhist canon) are differentiated from each other (T51.2089: 890b).

Today in Nepal, the core of Mahāyāna sūtra recitation centres on the recitation of the Prajñāpāramitā (which usually implies the Aṣṭasāhasrikā). By the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, the Prajñāpāramitā was clearly established as the centre of poṣadha rites (where precepts are taken on auspicious days, as in the rites of the Aṣṭamīvrata, Vasundharāvrata, Tāravrata, and so forth), wherein a nine-text dharma maṇḍala is necessary alongside a nine-element buddha and saṃgha maṇḍalas. While a justification for this small canon cannot be found in textual materials dating back to before the second millennium, today it is conceived of by my interlocutors as forming the core of Mahāyāna teachings. This is referred to as the Navagrantha or Navasūtra (Nine Sacred Texts). Alternative names in contemporary usage, according to Hemraj Shakya, include Navakhāṇḍa, Navavyākaraṇa, Navavaipulyasūtra and the Navamahāyāyasūtra (Shakya 1999: 38–49, 48).

Today, this consists of the Prajñāpāramitā (by which the Aṣṭasāhasrikā is usually implied), Gaṇḍavyūha, Daśabhūmikā, Samādhirāja, Laṅkāvatāra, Saddharmapuṇḍarika, Lalitaistara, Suvarṇaprabhāṣa, and the only tantra of the collection, the Tathāgataguhya – which is usually taken to refer to the Guhyasamāja, but which originally corresponded to a non-tantric sūtra about the Buddha’s qualities, which, besides some Sanskrit fragments, is now only fully extant in Chinese and Tibetan (Lamotte 2003: 122).

It is unclear what the origin of this set is. The earliest dharma maṇḍala

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4 Citation conventions for the Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō (1924–1934) allow abbreviations in the text to correspond to the following: Taishō, Volume 14, Text 475: Page 556, Row A, Line 17.
is attested to in the twelfth or thirteenth century *Kriyāsamucaya* of Jagaddarpaṇa (Chandra 1977: 318). This dharma maṇḍala features the *Yoginīniruttara* Tantras in the centre, with the other classes of tantra arranged around them. A sixteenth- or seventeenth-century *Poṣadhānuśaṃsā* manuscript features the first *Navasūtra* I could find as a part of the dharma maṇḍala in *poṣadha* rites, but it still differs from the contemporary list. Modern rites follow the set that would be found, for instance, in an *Āṣṭamīvrata* manuscript dating back to 1830 (Aṣa Saphu Kuthi DPN2167: 4v–5r). This set is believed by all my Newar interlocutors to be what it is because it encapsulates the core of exoteric and esoteric Mahāyāna teachings: the esoteric side being represented by the *Guhyasamāja*, which is the most important *Yogottaratantra* in Newar Vajrayāna and is considered essential to awakening.

The buddha, dharma and saṃgha maṇḍalas are essential to various rituals and are featured in different locations in Nepal. Here, at the doors of many bāhāḥ, or monasteries (from Skt. vihāra), are three lotus circles representing the buddha, dharma, and saṃgha maṇḍalas. Some doors, such as the entrance to Kvā Bāhāḥ in Patan, feature gold-plated bronze images of the Buddha (Aksobhya), dharma (Prajñāpāramitā), and saṃgha (Avalokiteśvara) (see Figure 1). During a pūjā, though the officiating *vajrācāryas* (a hereditary Buddhist caste of tantric priests) recites the names of the elements of the maṇḍalas while offering substances to each element, representations of the elements of the

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5 *Kriyācaryāyogayoginītantraparivṛtayoginīniruttaratranāyaṃ dharmamaṇḍalaḥ.*

6 [4v]οṃ ἀργαρναρηναρηνιναρηνινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινινι

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7 The Vajrayāna is a subset of Mahāyāna Buddhist belief and practice based on texts called tantras (such as the *Guhyasamāja*, which is part of the highest class of tantric genre called *Yogottaratantra*): these teach that through the use of mantras (sacred utterances), mudras (sacred hand gestures or poses) and forms of visualisation of deities (such as buddhas or bodhisattvas) and maṇḍalas (divine diagrams), one can attain buddhahood within one’s lifetime. The methods and texts are regarded as esoteric and thus confined to a subset of the Buddhist community (*saṅgha*) that has received initiation (*abhiṣeka*): in the case of Newar Vajrayāna, this is confined to a hereditary caste (the *vajrācāryas*) for historical and practical reasons, which it is not possible to explicate here.
manḍalas are not necessary. Thus, except in *Navagrantha pāṭhas* where all nine books are recited, the nine sūtras do not need to be present. During daily rites (*nityā pūjā*) at many *bāhāḥs*, the nine essential buddhas, sūtras, and bodhisattvas are therefore present in the form of bronze lotuses at the door to the main shrine of the Kvābāju (the main deity of the temple), and are honoured by the *bāphās*, two young initiated priests, who touch them with their forehead. The *bāphās* carry out daily worship, with this duty rotating on a monthly basis. Similarly, in every sūtra *pāṭha*, regardless of which sūtra is present, since the *Navagrantha* is always present in the dharma manḍala under which the sūtra being worshipped is read, one always worships the

![Buddha (Akṣobhya, centre), dharma (Prajñāparamitā, left), and saṃgha (Avalokiteśvara, right) above the threshold to Kvā Bāhāḥ, on 17 February 2019. Photo by Alexander James O’Neill.](image)

*Navagrantha.*

The pūjā involved in the performance of *pā thākegu* is detailed below, but the core of *pā thākegu* is, as the term *pāṭha* implies, the reading of a sūtra. In Newar sūtra recitation, longer sūtras are typically not
read from cover to cover by one person but are split between multiple readers. Thus, a sūtra that would take ten hours to read cover to cover is read within about an hour by ten different readers. This is done with all the Navagrantha sūtras, and other shorter texts, such as the Nāmasamgīti, can easily be read or sung in about half an hour. Thus, in the case of a sūtra recitation where the manuscripts are divided between different readers, what appears to be of consequence is the utterance of akṣaras, or letters, rather than the understanding of the meaning of the text – which would not be possible for most readers anyway, as few understand enough Sanskrit to comprehend while reading at a steady pace. In fact, they function in pā thākegu in the same manner as dhāraṇīs and mantras: sacred utterances in which the syllables are sacred and powerful, and thus effective. The question of whether power comes only when the manuscript has been consecrated will be dealt with below in a discussion on the text as being ‘alive’.

Role of Guṭhis
Regarding the theme of localisation, though not unique to Nepal, as noted by Tuladhar-Douglas (2006), Nepalese Buddhists have been intentionally localising these practices since roughly the thirteenth century. In the case of sūtras and their worship, this is seen in the adaptation of Mahāyāna ritual injunctions to Newar culture, wherein for instance the regular performance of pā thākegu at bāhāḥs and at various other locations has been linked to the system of guṭhi organisations. Guṭhis are social and religious organised units in Nepal which, according to Quigley, ‘ensure that identity is not simply a matter of affiliation to lineage and caste’ but is ‘defined in terms of a ritual attachment to a locality’ (Quigley 1985: 11). The term derives from the Sanskrit goṣṭhī, meaning association, which tends to have a looser meaning than guṭhi in Nepal. These hereditary associations are therefore based on the rotation of ritual or public duties according to rules in a defined locality (such as a bāhāḥ) and have a defined structure of seniority (Regmi 1976: 63). Another important feature of guṭhis is the regular (at least annual) organisation of feasts, the preparation and expenses of which rotate among members (Gellner 1992: 232).

Let us take the organisation of the rites surrounding the Prajñāpāramitā at Kvā Bāhāḥ as an example of how guṭhi organisation
works in relation to pā thākegu. At Kvā Bāhāḥ there are two guṭhis, one made up of śākyas (a hereditary Buddhist caste that undergoes initiation into monasteries but not into tantric priesthood) and one made up of vajrācāryas. All participants, including the sponsors, are expected to fast until the rites have all been performed, after which a ritual feast usually takes place, along with an optional samay bāji snack. The śākya guṭhi are responsible for safeguarding the manuscript, and the member whose duty it is, is referred to as sāphupāḥlāḥ, or book guardian. The role of sāphupāḥlāḥ rotates between two branches of a family from Nāg Bāḥāḥ to the west of Kvā Bāhāḥ. Two members of this guṭhi serve at the same time and, as Gellner reports on the basis of research conducted in 1985–6, they change over during the Newar month of Guṃlā (Gellner 1996: 227) – though a substitute may be sent from the same family. The sāphupāḥlāḥs remove and return the book to its storeroom and open and close its box. When the sāphupāḥlāḥ – called the breaker of the seal (ciṃ chāyemha) – has placed the book on its golden ‘lion throne’ (siṃhāsana), he applies three wax seals (lachāp), without using any wax, one representing the Buddha, another the dharma, and the last one the saṃgha – and only after this may the book be opened. Each of these seals bears an impression: one a vajra (a pestle-like symbolic weapon) to represent the Buddha; another a sūtra to represent the dharma; and the third a lotus to represent the saṃgha. They are each decorated with an ornamental pattern and the word buddha or dharma or saṃgha in reverse impression (see Figure 2). Similarly, the second sāphupāḥlāḥ,
who has to remain for the whole duration of the pūjā, while the first is free to leave, must reapply the seal at the end and is referred to as the applier of the seal (*ciṃ dīmha*). The money that is placed on the throne or manuscript and is part of the stipend given by the rite's sponsor goes to this sākya guṭhi. This guṭhi organises five feasts a year for its members, which are discussed by Gellner (1996: 228).

The vajrācārya guṭhi consists of those with a hereditary right to read the text. Seven families hold this right and, according to Gellner (1996: 225), are referred to as the 'Seven Tathāgatas'. Members of these families take turns to fulfil this duty every month. However, in families where only one member benefiting from this entitlement remains, that member has a permanent right to read the text. Three other vajrācāryas from outside this guṭhi may be invited to participate – but the main priest, or mūlaguru, who performs the main pūjā to worship the text is expected to be a member of Kvā Bāhāḥ. While each participating vajrācārya receives one stipend (which is explained in the section on the pūjā below), the mūlaguru receives a stipend as priest, as reader and for the ritual utensils (*thāpaṃ*). His wife usually acts as assistant and is referred to as gurumāṃ: she also receives a stipend. As with the sākya guṭhi, substitutes may be sent – and not always from the same family. While Gellner describes substitutes in Kvā Bāhāḥ pā thākegu as typically dividing their stipends between themselves and the right holders (226), in other guṭhis and places alternative arrangements are possible. For instance, members of Vajrācārya Pūjāvidhi Adhyayan Samiti (an association of vajrācārya trainees based in Lalitpur) came to an agreement to donate all their earnings from pā thākegu to build a temple for their association near Nākha Bāhāḥ.

Greater flexibility is allowed in different places for the right to recite a text. At Oku Bāhāḥ, for instance, according to Ratnajyoti Shakya, it is customary to finish reciting the copy of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* within the month of Guṇīlā (the Newar month that roughly corresponds to August). No strict rule governs how much text has to be recited each day – only that the recitation begins on the first day of Guṇīlā, and that it must be finished before the end of the month. Moreover, no rule exists that specifies guṭhi membership as a requirement for reciting the text: in practice, almost all members of Oku Bāhāḥ end up reciting the text. Ratnajyoti Shakya told me that anyone is allowed to
take part. One *guṭhi* commitment does exist with regards to this text, however, and that is that every day the opening and concluding pūjā must be performed by a *vajrācārya* member of Bhimchem Bāhāḥ. Oku Bāhāḥ has no *vajrācāryas* of its own, and thus this role is performed by priests from outside – this also means that almost every reciter of the Prajñāpāramitā is of the śākya caste (Figure 3). This adaptation of the ritual to localities, even within the relatively small former city-states of the Kathmandu Valley, is another way in which sūtra worship in Nepal highlights the theme of localisation.

Figure 3: Pā Thākegu at Oku Bāhāḥ, 11 August 2018. Photo by Alexander James O’Neill

**Popular Significance in Nepal**

As previously discussed, worship of Mahāyāna sūtras is localised and popularised in Nepal and its landscape. Various Sanskrit verses exist and appear to be of Nepalese origin, eulogising the sūtras and their worship. For instance, Hemraj Shakya quotes the following verse (Skt. gātha) as being a eulogy to the *Navasūtra* in a context where faithful devotees keep sūtras in their homes in order to bless the latter:
This is the king of all that is well spoken
Given by all Tathāgatas.
The Tathāgata dwells in the house
Where just this jewel of the Nine Sūtras would always be found.
(Shakya 1990: 42)

This verse is found at the end of both the *Lalitavistara Sūtra* (Vaidya 1958: 319) and the *Daśabhūmikasūtra Gāthāvibhāga* (Vaidya 1967: 110) where the last line reads ‘Where just this jewel of a sūtra’ would always be found, making it, with its adjustments, a Nepalese adaptation thereof. While some gāthas are adaptations from Mahāyāna literature, others, such as Ākāś Dhātu which is used in pā thākegu, appear to be entirely Nepalese creations. In Lalitpur the Ākāś Dhātu gātha typically contains four stanzas, whereas in Kathmandu it has two stanzas. For various reasons, it appears that the two stanzas used in Kathmandu are older, whereas the two additional ones in the Lalitpur version are newer additions.

In Hemraj Shakya’s introduction to the *Nava Sūtra Saṃgraha*, a summarised form of the *Navasūtra* written by Divyavajra Vajracharya, he notes a sort of geographical localisation with the recitation of the Navagrantha at sacred pilgrimage sites (tīrthas) during the first six days of the Newar month of Guṁlā. The duty of reciting these sūtras is founded on guṭhi membership. Hemraj Shakya lists these sites as follows,

1. Gokarṇa Puṇya Tīrtha – Prajñāpāramitā
2. Guhyeśvarī Śānta Tīrtha – Gaṇḍavyūha
3. Śaṅkhamūla Śaṅkara Tīrtha – Daśabhūmika
4. Dhaṁtila Rāja Tīrtha – Samādhirāja
5. Khusikhela Manoratha Tīrtha – Laṅkāvatāra
6. Vijeśvarī Nirmala Tīrtha – Saddharmapuṇḍarīka
7. Kaṅkeśvarī Jñāna Tīrtha – Tathāgataguhyāka
8. Kandokhu Jñāna Tīrtha – Lalitavistara

Based on my conversations with priests at these different sites, it seems that there is no widespread knowledge of this practice. At most of these
sites there is a combination of active Buddhist and Hindu worship and, while some were aware that something was recited during Guṁlā, nobody except those involved knew what was being recited. This too is in keeping with the theme of localisation. While not forming a perfect maṇḍala arrangement, the placement of these sites in a sense sacralises the valley as a kind of large dharma maṇḍala.

In response to a perception, among Buddhist intellectuals, of widespread ignorance about the details of the Buddhist doctrine, one more recent form of localisation among Newar Buddhist scholars has been the practice of translating these Sanskrit sūtras into Newar and Nepali. This practice began in 1914 with Niṣṭhānanda Vajrācarya’s translation into Newar of the Lalitavistara Sūtra, which was one of the first printed books in Nepal. This translation is not very literal and in many places is presented in a summarised form. In order to provide the sūtra with a sense of completeness (which in the Sanskrit version ends with the Buddha’s first sermon at the beginning of his career), Nisthananda Vajracharya incorporated extracts from various other texts that serve to complete the narrative of the Buddha’s life. This translation also inspired the performance of a public play based on the life of the Buddha as depicted in the Lalitavistara in 1924, which in turn inspired many Newars to become monks according to the Theravāda tradition (Shakya 1978: i), and of the popular Newar epic poem, Sugata Saurabha, written by Chittadhar Hridaya (Lewis 2010: 11).

The first translation into Newar of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā was published by Jogmuni Vajracharya in 1965. This translation features clarificatory notes that are given in parentheses. The two earlier translations were printed on paper shaped like palm-leaf manuscripts, whereas most of the later translations were published in codex format. One of the first of these was Ashakaji Vajracharya’s 1988 translation of the Suvarṇaprabhāsa. This work features the root Sanskrit text from Vaidya’s edition, followed by its translation. Subsequent translations followed, the large bulk of which were prepared and published by the Lotus Research Centre in Lalitpur. These literal and full translations feature the Sanskrit of Vaidya’s Mithila editions, with the Newar translation given below them. These sometimes include commentaries, such as Divyavajra Vajracharya’s Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, which was posthumously completed by
Herakaji Vajracharya and published in 2003. The latter contains a full translation of Haribhadra’s commentary, and his translation of the esoteric Guhyasamājatantra features the commentary by Candrakīrti whose highly interpretative approach may be seen as toning down some of the text’s antinomian and sensitive content. Other Newar texts of note are educational summaries, which are useful in light of the ‘extensiveness’ of these sūtras (hence their being referred to as vaipulya, or extensive, in some of their titles). These include, for example, the summary of the entire Nava-granthā in Newar by Divyavajra Vajracharya in his Nava Sūtra Saṃgraha or Anandamuni Vajracharya’s Nepali Saṃkṣipta [summarised] Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, which outlines the unwieldy text in just 30 pages.

Translation highlights two themes: one is localisation, where a text whose language belongs to another time or place is localised in a language understood here and now; and the second theme is renewal and reform, because translation itself is a manifestation of a modern perception of the use of texts (ie that they are for reading and study) which may not have been shared by pre-modern practitioners for whom they were ritually efficacious items for use. This may be a response to the influence of modern scholarship. One example would be the inclusion of explanatory notes and interpretative word choices in translations, such as in Nistananda Vajracharya’s Lalitavistara translation, or the later tendency towards more literal translations, as seen in Lotus Research Centre translations. In addition, the incorporation of embedded commentaries in some of the more difficult translations, serving to paratextualise and also rationalise (as in the case of Candrakirti’s commentary) what might be taken as a rather antinomian tantric text in the case of the Guhyasamājatantra – a tendency observed in the rational explanation of difficult concepts and the justification of apparently baroque ritual elements by gurus such as Deepak Bajracharya. Moreover, the perceived need for educational summaries in a ritually rich environment also shows the influence of what Emmrich (2011: 301–303) characterises as the power of technical and uncharismatic variants of texts (such as academic editions or manuals) on highly charismatic ritual actions and objects, such as the Aṣṭasāhasrikā in Kvā Bāhāḥ. The restoration of this text – he argues – is imbued with greater charisma through renewal from
the uncharismatic academic Vaidya edition, and its practice has been influenced by renewed perceptions of what makes the Mahāyāna ritual proper.

The Text as Alive

According to Deepak Bajracharya, a text that does not have life (jīva) is not to be worshipped or ritually recited. This was explained to me in response to a question about why manuscripts are recited but not printed. Printed texts, such as Vaidya’s editions which are so popular in Nepal, were described as ‘nirjīva’, lifeless. In order to be alive, a manuscript must have undergone consecration, pratiṣṭhā, in the same way in which an image undergoes consecration. In the past, for most manuscripts, this consisted of the daśakarma or ten life-cycle rites, from the jātakarma birth rite to the wedding rite (Locke 1980: 473–476). These rites are roughly analogous to the life-cycle rites that a vajrācārya has to undergo as a child, including tantric consecrations which are figurative deaths and rebirths. However, in recent centuries up until the present day, pratiṣṭhā for new manuscripts appears to have fallen out of favour and has been replaced with a shorter rite. According to Deepak Bajracharya, this shorter rite consists of visualising the text as being imbued with the Buddha, dharma, and saṅgha maṇḍalas, reciting verses (stotras) for the Buddha, dharma, and saṅgha, and then visualising the text as simply Mañjuśrī while reciting Mañjuśrī’s stotra. Following this, the visualisation is made to dissolve and the manuscript may be offered pānicopacāra consisting of the five oblations of flowers (puṣpa), incense (dhūpa), light (dīpa), red and/or yellow ṭīkā paste (sinhaḥ), and food (naivedya). With regard to new cases of pratiṣṭhā involving daśakarma rites, as far as all my interlocutors knew, this is now only done for statues and paintings.

The question arises, however, as to how one would consecrate a sūtra fully according to daśakarma rites. According to my vajrācārya informants, this would have been done according to the instructions for consecration described in Kuladatta’s Kriyāsamgrahapaññikā (Tanemura 2004), which is the reference for contemporary manuals for image consecration in Nepal. According to Kuladatta’s instructions, all rites are identical for texts, just as they would be for images. Nevertheless, some alterations are made. For instance, in the first
rite – ‘purification of the womb’ (yoniśodhanam) –, before creating the manuscript, the scribe must first purify his body, hands, the folios on which he writes and the ink with which he writes by means of various visualisations and mantras (Tanemura 2004: 158–160). It is also here that the vajrācārya would ensure the presence of the deity in the sūtra (dṛḍhīkuryāt) by means of the hundred-syllable Vajrasattva Dhāraṇī. With regards the identity of the deity, Kuladatta gives no indication. According to Deepak Bajracharya, this is never one particular deity, even when the manuscript is Prajñāpāramitā, but the jīva of the pañcabuddha (the five buddhas).  

8 However, for images, the jīva is the one of the deities depicted in the image (eg a Vasundharā jīva is made to dwell in a Vasundharā image). After the nine subsequent rites which are largely the same, when the text is essentially fully adult, the next procedure would be a series of abhiṣekas, or empowerments, whereby the deity is made to enter maṇḍalas and become an ācārya in the manner in which a vajrācārya would be empowered. However, for name empowerment (nāmābhiṣeka) (Tanemura 2004: 202–203), the text must be given a name in accordance with the tathāgata family to which it belongs. While deities, in the case of images, may clearly belong to one tathāgata family or another depending on whose maṇḍala they are in, Kuladatta does not specify how one knows which tathāgata family a text belongs to. According to Deepak Bajracharya, texts generally belong to the tathāgata family of Amitābha, but if the text is a Prajñāpāramitā sūtra, since Prajñāpāramitā Devī belongs to Vajrasattva’s tathāgata family, it would be empowered in Vajrasattva’s tathāgata family. This family relationship is expressed during the first ten days of Guṃlā, when the Prajñāpāramitā belonging to Kvā Bāhāḥ may not be recited but is placed in front of the Vajrasattva statue on the ground floor. At that time, as if it were an image of the devī, the text would only be worshipped using pañcopacara offerings. Here, we see the theme of identifying the text with the divine, wherein most

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8 The names of these five buddhas vary from one text to another and from one inscription to another, but in Nepal, according to their representation in the Guhyasamāja Tantra they are Akṣobhya, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi. These represent many things, such as elements, types of wisdom, and so forth, but are most well known in Nepal through their association with the four directions, the centre being represented by Akṣobhya.
manuscripts are, ritually speaking, conceived of as embodiments of the pañcabuddha.

While the practice of producing manuscripts no longer exists and this rite can no longer be observed in its entirety, one can observe part of the pratiṣṭhā rites that are performed for a sūtra during the time of reparation (jīrṇoddhāra) as discussed by Emmrich (2011: 295), where the jīva of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā manuscript at Kvā Bāhāḥ is removed and then returned to the text through pratiṣṭhā jīvanyāsa rites. Jīvanyāsa literally refers to the ‘placement of life’. This is a unique case in that it involves de-consecration rites, allowing the text to be restored before life is put back into it – similar de-consecration rites are discussed by von Rospatt (2013) regarding Svayambhū Mahācaitya’s renovation, a similarity also noted by Emmrich. (2011: 295) In the case of the manuscript at Kvā Bāhāḥ, it allows the text to be repaired at a time that is considered inauspicious for recitation, namely, the occasional leap month (New. analā; Skt. adhikamāsa). This pratiṣṭhā jīvanyāsa involves the connection of a pañcasūtra (a set of five threads representing the five buddhas (pañcabuddha) to a vase or kalaśa. The officiating priest then recites a pratiṣṭhā mantra 1,008 times with his japamāla (rosary) hidden under a cloth for ritual secrecy: however, when time is limited, it is usually permitted to perform 108 recitations. This transfers the jīva from the manuscript to the kalaśa. It is worth noting that, according to Emmrich (2011: 295), when the jīva has been removed from the manuscript, devotees still honour it by touching it with their heads or with offerings of money. While, from a certain perspective, this may be a less effective act of dāna (ritual offering) than if the jīva were within the text, this does not deter those who may know or may not know about this.

When restoration is complete, the same procedure is carried out, except that jasmine flowers are placed in the kalaśa and 108 petals are picked from these and placed on the manuscript. When this has been done, the jiva is placed back into the manuscript (Figure 4). Then, on the occasion recorded by Emmrich (2011: 306), the donor of the reparation rite lays out eleven ritual plates (kislī) containing offerings before the manuscript on the throne – one of these is for the manuscript, and the other ten are for the readers of the text who recite it once life has been put back into it.
My interlocutors insisted that printed texts are not consecrated or used for these ritual purposes. There appears to be a form of power or great merit that results from having a text that is valuable not only spiritually but also in terms of labour hours, as one may find with handwritten manuscripts. As far as I could observe, there is one curious exception to this rule, which was pointed out to me by Kashinath Tamot: the Newar rendition of the Lalitavistara Sūtra composed by Nistananda Vajracharya in 1914. As mentioned before, this was among the first books in Nepal to be printed with movable type and was prepared in the traditional pothi format. Thirty-five copies of this text were made, and the first printed copy is currently housed in the Aśa Archives in Kathmandu. While all the manuscripts have 460 printed pages, the first copy features one last additional handwritten page which indicates that Gadyaguru Vajracharya consecrated the text (‘pratiṣṭhāna dayeka’). While I cannot confirm the details and it was not stated in the handwritten colophon, Kashinath Tamot reported that for about four years after its consecration it underwent pā thākegu every month of Śravaṇa.
The Displaying of Texts

Many bāhāhs in Nepal display their precious possessions according to a special programme during the lunar month of Guṃlā, which roughly corresponds to August and September. During this period of time, if a monastery possesses manuscripts, it is expected to bring them out for viewing. Kashinath Tamot, for instance, described the procedure at Thaṃ Bahī in Kathmandu in 2006, where a Prajñāpāramitā manuscript dating back to 1224 CE is displayed every Guṃlā (August to September). The manuscript was brought out in an ornate golden box for public viewing. When the box was opened and the manuscript removed, which is standard practice when opening sacred manuscripts to the public in bāhās and bahīs (monasteries or vihāras with no vajrācāryas), the manuscript was offered khāḍās (offering scarves) and red paste by the devotees gathered there, who were mainly Kashmiri and Ladakhi. Then a vajrācārya took out a few folios and, after lining them up and reading from them in front of the crowd, he proceeded to invite devotees to watch as he leafed through each page of the folio one by one, until all 1,016 folios had been displayed. After this, the manuscript is said to have been offered money by some devotees, while others placed their japamālas (rosaries) on it to have them blessed or for them to simply touch the manuscript. Afterwards, everyone gathered there received prasād (food or other offerings that may be eaten by worshippers after a ritual) and a ṭīkā on their foreheads (Tamot 2016: 62).

Another manner in which the Thaṃ Bahī manuscript highlights important facets of the nature of Mahāyāna book worship in Nepal is that during the full-moon day of the lunar month of Cillā (roughly corresponding to February and March), during Cakaṃdyah Jātra (jātra being a procession) (whose deity corresponds to Siṃhasārtha from the Siṃhasārthabāhu Avadāna), the Prajñāpāramitā manuscript is placed in the chariot and carried in a procession. In the past, this procession consisted of a circumambulation of the city but today it is confined to the bahī courtyard (Tamot 2016: 62). What this highlights is that a sacred manuscript may take the place of a Buddhist deity in the very manner described in the texts. As the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā claims, the text is ‘in a true sense, the relic of the tathāgatas’, because it is the ‘dharma-kāya’ or dharma-body, of the Buddha (Wogihara
This doctrine would lead us to believe that manuscripts would also be placed in caityas instead of relics of the Buddha, which, according to Hemraj Shakya, is regular practice for establishing caityas in the Kathmandu Valley (Shakya 1990: 43).

The effect of parading a deity in a chariot procession – in this case the deity is embodied in a manuscript – is that the entire city is able to engage in darśan (ritual viewing, regarded by both Buddhists and Hindus as sufficient to receive a deity’s blessing) of the text and to benefit from the merit thereby accrued. The fact that a manuscript that has the power of the Buddha’s dharmakāya can travel through the city or even within a courtyard, is, in this sense, a blessing to the entire area. This also seems to be the reason why, in many places, an image of the Prajñāpāramitā goddess is not required for the goddess to be considered present if the text is there. For instance, a photograph which is above where the text is recited at Kvā Bāhah, with the caption ‘Prajñāpāramitā’, shows simply the manuscript that belongs to the temple, not the goddess. One place where an image is present during pā thākegu is Oku Bāhah (Figure 5). However, according to Ratnajyoti Shakya, this is not necessary because the text is enough to symbolise

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Dharmakāya can refer both to the true non-dual body of the Buddha, as distinct from the body with which he manifests in the world (called nirmānakāya), or as the body (ie corpus) of the Buddha’s teachings (ie dharma). In Prajñāpāramitā literature the two meanings are conflated, such that the true body of the Buddha is defined as being equivalent to the sūtra itself.
her presence – but since the temple owns the image, it is placed there for this rite regardless.

Gellner (1996: 223–4) comments regarding the Prajñāpāramitā manuscript at Kvā Bāhāḥ that ‘unlike other monasteries, which just have the text, in Kwā Bahā, they say, the goddess herself is present. Both as a physical object displayed in the monastery, and as a goddess in the minds of her devotees’. Though the renown of the Kvā Bāhāḥ manuscript may make it seem a unique case, conversations with vajrācāryas at other monasteries have yielded similar answers. If consecration has taken place in the manner discussed in the previous section, jīva may be considered to be in the text. When I asked Deepak Bajracharya why the Kvā Bāhāḥ manuscript is so widely worshipped, he answered that it was simply due to its having such a beautiful case and gold lettering rather than for any overtly divine reason.

The display of an empowered Mahāyāna sūtra and the power attributed to it clearly highlights the theme of the embodiment of the divine in the text. The fact that devotees are offered prasād and ṭīkā afterwards indicates that the viewing of the manuscript in this manner was considered a ritually effective act. Other power may be associated with the presence of the manuscript, as discussed by Gellner who reports being told that during the festival of Daśaiṃ (generally around October) it is taken out to witness the sword festival (khaḍgajatrā) wherein Pradhān (Buddhist Kṣatriya) members of the bahī are possessed by a goddess and hack a pumpkin to pieces with a sword. It is unclear, however, whether it is Prajñāpāramitā Devī who does the possessing or whether she merely witnesses the event (Gellner 1996: 237). Power of presence is also emphasised by the way the procession carries the powerful presence of the manuscript throughout the city.

Sūtra Pāṭha Proper

The practice of pā thākegu differs from Patan to Kathmandu: a difference which brings to light the theme of renewal or reform. Although a longer rite is common in Patan, in Kathmandu the opening pūjā generally only lasts about ten minutes. Both the longer rite and the shorter rite appear to be the result of attempts at modernisation: the Patan rite tending towards conformity with an ideal of completeness,
thus remedying a perceived decline in the twentieth century. The Kathmandu rite appears to be oriented towards accessibility, both for sponsors and attendees, and for vajrācāryas: the number of baroque complexities, as in the multiple saṃkalpas of the Patan rite, has been reduced and feasts marking the end of the pūjās may include aspects that would previously have been considered sacrilegious, such as eating cooked rice, which has traditionally been seen as causing ritual pollution. The push for modernisation or reform in Patan has come from the Vajrācārya Pūjāvidhi Adhyayan Samiti, an association of vajrācāryas based in Nyākhācukaḥ, Lalitpur, whereas in Kathmandu the drive over recent years has come from the prolific scholar-priest Naresh Man Bajracharya. What is happening today is undoubtedly what happened in the past, yet somewhat different. This form of renewal or reform lies behind the trend towards the routinisation of ritual, which Gellner (1992: 300–304) observed, where for instance gaṇacakra (mentioned later), which originally implied highly antinomian feasts, is a simple breakfast today. Routinisation in this sense is the process whereby a previously revolutionary or antinomian act is reinterpreted and incorporated into mainstream society.

A full analysis of all the aspects of sūtra pāṭha, particularly as performed in Lalitpur, deserves its own paper, but here a brief account is given based on the observation of dozens of performances of pāṭha kegu in Kathmandu and Lalitpur in 2016, 2018 and 2019. As far as the setting for the pūjā is concerned, though bāhāḥs are standard sites, it is also common for pūjās to be performed in the homes of sponsors or priests, particularly when bāhāḥs are occupied for the celebration of other rites. As for the subject of recitation, this is usually the Navagrantha or other Mahāyāna sūtras, in addition to the Guhyasamājatantra which is the only truly esoteric text that seems to be read on the sole occasion of Navagrantha pāṭhas or at Kāṅkeśvarī during Guṃlā, as mentioned

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10 This perception of decline was characterised by Naresh Shakya as a situation wherein the rite was not treated with enough respect in the late twentieth century at least, with vajrācāryas smoking and, according to Milan Shakya, sometimes mispronouncing words.

11 For clarifications and explanations of these pūjās, my thanks mainly go to Naresh Man Bajracharya, and Deepak Bajracharya of the Vajrācārya Pūjāvidhi Adhyayan Samiti. The clarification of many terms was given by Satyamohan Joshi’s Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajnāpāramitā Mhasīkegu Lidhaṃsā (2005).
in the section on the ‘popular significance in Nepal’. A Navagrantha pāṭha is rare and calls for a sponsor who is capable of supporting 108 reciting vajrācāryas. A Navagrantha pāṭha calls for not only the nine main texts of the Navagrantha but also the recitation of the Pañcarakṣā text, consisting of five short sūtras on protective goddesses and their dhāranīs, and the Pratyāṅgirā text, another protective goddess text derived from the Dhāranīsāngraha. Similarly, longer sūtras, such as the Śatasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, are recited only a few times a year or every few years in some places (such as at Kvā Bāhāḥ). Triple-gem maṇḍalas are placed on the table in the form of rice circles before the main priest or mūlaguru and the manuscript is laid on top of these. At various times during the recitation, the mūlaguru and sponsor, or jajmān (Newar form of the Sanskrit yajamāna), worship these. Thus, in any pā thākegu, even when not actually present, all nine sūtra of the Navagrantha are worshipped, as discussed earlier with regard to other rites.

To explain briefly how the elaborate pūjā is carried out in Lalitpur, let us begin by mentioning that four saṃkalpas are performed. A saṃkalpa is a solemn declaration by the jajmān or by the mūlaguru on behalf of the jajmān in the presence of a divinity, whereby they both intend to perform a ritual action. The saṃkalpas state the time and location, essentially setting the latter aside as a sacred space for the duration of the ritual. Saṃkalpas also involve ritualised formulae and gestures made by the participants who support the ritualised intention. A saṃkalpa thus serves to transform what would be profane actions into sacred actions in what Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994: 88ff) characterise as the ‘ritual commitment’. Moreover, according to Milan Shakya, if one takes a saṃkalpa, one formally commits to sponsoring and being present to witness the entire pūjā. Since the time, location, and participants are noted down, this is one of the most immediate and specific levels of localisation.

The first saṃkalpa, the sūryārgha pūjā, is a declaration to the gods Sūrya and Gaṇeṣa, represented by the sukundā lamp – according to Deepak Bajracharya, Gaṇeṣa protects the beginning of rites and Sūrya watches over them to stop the intervention of harmful deities. The second saṃkalpa, the gurupādārgha, is an offering of a maṇḍala to the deity Vajrasattva who empowers the pūjā and ensures its efficacy,
as well as forgiving any mistakes made during the ritual. The third saṃkalpa, the pūjā plate or pūjābhaḥ, involves the full declaration. During this saṃkalpa the jajmān and other participants present touch the pūjābhaḥ containing goods used for offerings during the pūjā, while the mūlaguru recites the jajmān’s written statement of intent. During these saṃkalpas the mūlaguru appears to be able to recite the lengthy Saṃkalpa Vākya, also known as Adya Mahādāna and the Mahādāna Vākya, which gives the location and time of the pūjā, as well as the deities present.\(^{12}\) I have, however, witnessed truncated or omitted versions of this in some saṃkalpas: in Lalitpur it nevertheless generally appears to always be recited in full at the final pūjābhaḥ saṃkalpa.

The fourth saṃkalpa is performed in the direction of the book, but this is usually preceded by a few shorter pūjās. The first is the honouring of the conch, or laḥthala, which is taken to symbolise the protection of nāgas because, according to Deepak Bajracharya, it is associated with the water where they dwell. The second short pūjā essentially appears to be morning rites of daily worship or nityā pūjā, which is offered to deities in shrines. This involves pouring water onto a leaf that represents the ritual mirror (jvalā-nhāykā), which is then waved in a circle before the text as is done with the ritual mirror, after which the mūlaguru invites deities to the place where the rite is taking place to witness the pūjā using aṣṭalāsya nyāsa, the visualised placing of syllables on the body along with dance-like gestures. Then the mūlaguru has to perform gurumaṇḍala pūjā, offering his maṇḍala to his own guru, which involves inviting various esoteric deities to the pūjā – the mantras of which are recited while the mūlaguru hides his japamāla, rosary, which many informants say is to prevent evil spirits from stealing the mantras for evil purposes. Finally, the ṭīkā pot, or kāyabhaḥ, is used by the jajmān to honour the text by offering six ṭīkās up and down the text: this is mirrored by the mūlaguru who performs kuṇḍalinī yoga up and down the six cakras of his central channel – according to Deepak Bajracharya, this unites the guru’s mind with the text. Finally, the saṃkalpa of the book involves the jajmān first offering water to and then touching the book, while the mūlaguru again recites the jajmān’s solemn statement of intent. After this, the text is opened.

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\(^{12}\) For the Sanskrit text of Jana Bāhāḥ’s Saṃkalpa Vākya, see Sharkey (2001: 302–303) and for a translation of Kvā Bāhāḥ’s, see Gellner (1992: 191).
Generally speaking, enough vajrācāryas are invited so that, when evenly divided, the text can be read in its entirety within two hours (usually five for short sūtras, ten for long ones, and one hundred and eight for texts like the Śatasāhasrikā). Thus, the text, when divided into enough sections, is handed out by the jajmān to whom the vajrācāryas receiving the folios offer blessings. After reciting a homage to the triple gem, the vajrācāryas recite or sing the Ākāś Dhātu verse (see the section on the ‘popular significance in Nepal’) and occasionally the Ye Dharma Hetu verse before reading from the manuscript.

After the recitation has started, the mūlaguru continues to perform some pūjās. The first of these is the performance of an esoteric (rahasya) maṇḍala offering and samādhi, wherein, according to Deepak Bajracharya, the mūlaguru engages in esoteric meditation involving his lineage deity. The jajmān is invited to perform a pañcopacara pūjā towards this maṇḍala which, according to Deepak Bajracharya, unites the jajmān’s mind with the guru’s, after which the triple-gem maṇḍalas are honoured once again. After this, the jajmān is asked to offer the ritual possessions involved in the pañcopacara pūjā to all the shrines around the temple or, if in a house, all the shrines around the city from the rooftop. This rite is called the circle or cākah pūjā. The plate used for this is then returned to the main sacred site of the pūjā, where all the deities who were invited to protect the pūjā are thanked with an offering of a maṇḍala and bali, called the offering to the spirit-gods, or digabali bii.

After the recitation, the vajrācāryas usually recite the Ye Dharma Hetu verse, the Vajrasattva Dhāraṇī, and occasionally the Ākāś Dhātu verse once again. The folios are collected together to re-form the manuscript. Then the jajmān and other participants are invited to offer rice to the various deities who protected the pūjā embodied in ritual objects, or in the case of Sūrya and Ākāśa (space) to the sky, a rite called kigaḥtine which, according to Deepak Bajracharya, allows the deities to leave. After this, merit is dedicated according to the list in the statement provided by the jajmān and read during the saṃkalpa. The jajmān forms one last maṇḍala out of rice and then offers it by pushing it along the floor: a rite called kīmaṇḍala visarjana pūjā, which finally allows the deities to leave. Thereupon dakṣiṇa, ritual payment, is offered in the form of uncooked rice, a coin, and other goods –
money is offered in envelopes. The jajmān offers ṭīkā to each vajrācārya and the mūlaguru offers ṭīkā to all the participants in turn. Everyone generally receives a protective red thread, *hyāṃ kokhākāpaḥ*, and a *pañcasūtra*, a five-coloured thread symbolising the five buddhas. After this, the *Vajrasattva Dhāraṇī* is often recited once again to forgive any last mistakes that may have been made.

Then the ritual feast, *ganacakra*, commences. Up until then, participants are expected to have fasted. According to Milan Shakya, this rite involves an offering to the deities of the monastery and thus not only satisfies participants but also the deities who protect the pūjā and make it possible. While *ganacakra* historically refers to tantric feasts involving alcohol, tantric songs and antinomian acts, today it essentially consists of the sacramental meal, *samay baji*, which generally includes beaten rice (*baji*), buffalo meat, black soybeans, black-eyed beans, ginger, puffed rice, and a vegetable. Many variations on this exist but the meal is expected to be ritually pure. I have also witnessed many such feasts where the sponsor asked for vegetarian food, therefore no buffalo meat. Traditionally, alcohol in the form of Newar liquors, *aylā* or *thvaṃ*, is enjoyed with the feast, but this is also occasionally left out these days.

**Conclusion**

While the embodiment of the divine in a text, localisation and trends towards renewal and reform are seen to exist in modern Newar Buddhist practice regarding Mahāyāna literature, these characteristics do indeed feature in Mahāyāna literature itself. Besides encouraging the reader to think of themselves as divine and as an embodiment of the Buddha, Mahāyāna literature also encourages localisation in characterising the spot on which its sūtras are placed as being a true caitya, or *caityabhūtaḥ*. The Mahāyāna sūtras’ self-referentiality tends to speak directly to the reader, encouraging them to think of themselves as the idealised practitioner, and as having by necessity encountered the Mahāyāna sūtras in question and the buddhas in a previous existence (eg Wogihara 1932: 459–460, 468, 803–804, Karashima 2013: 191). Finally, the Mahāyāna doctrine of *upāyakauśalya* (skilful means) allows for a variation in methods and teachings so long as the ultimate goal remains the same: buddhahood. Thus, while
ritual form may change throughout the years, the methods adapt to the perceived or actual needs of the audience at the time, be these conscious or unconscious attempts at adaptation and adjustment. From both a popular and textual perspective, ritual and spiritual realisation are two approaches to awakening.

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References


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