The Sacred Hilltop

A Hermeneutical Case Study on the Svayambhū Site in Kathmandu

Master's thesis in Comparative Religion
Faculty of Theology
Sami Kivelä
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Tiivistelmä - Referat - Abstract

This is a study on Svayambhū, a Buddhist temple area in Kathmandu, Nepal. The purpose of the study is to examine the meanings that local religious practitioners give to the area. Of special interest are the Newar Buddhists. In this study, the network of symbolic meanings given to Svayambhū is analysed in order to understand the semantics of religious practices and beliefs in the setting of a case study. In spite of the focus on Newar Buddhism, the larger religio-cultural environment of the Kathmandu Valley is reflected as well.

The work belongs to the tradition of the anthropology of religion, but it connects to philosophical questions as well. The theoretical frame of reference combines philosophical hermeneutics with the cultural interpretation model based on 'thick description'. Furthermore, the use of western category concepts in anthropology is considered. The study favours unbounded categories that encourage a researcher to engage in fruitful interaction with a previously unfamiliar conceptual environment.

The primary material has been collected in the Kathmandu Valley with the means of ethnographic fieldwork. The material consists of interviews of lay people and religious specialists, observations and textual sources. Relevant studies serve as secondary material. Phenomenography and content analysis have been applied in order to analyse the material.

The popularisation of the Buddhist creation myth of the Kathmandu Valley has clearly influenced the popularity of Svayambhū. After the Buddhist myth supplanted the Hindu version, the importance of Svayambhū became fixed not only for Buddhists but for Hindus as well. Currently, Svayambhū possesses a considerable amount of cultural usage that connects to social and instrumental religion. On the other hand, the area is important soteriologically, especially for the castes of monks and priests at the top of the social hierarchy.

A special caste sub-group is responsible for the rites and the teaching of *dharma* in the area. The meanings given by religious specialists differ from those of lay people, which is likely due to the different roles that the social hierarchy determines. The higher in the hierarchy one is, the more important the religious identity of deities is likely to become. In part, the worlds of specialists and lay people interact, but only initiated ones are granted access to higher Tantric secrets.

The centre of the area, the Svayambhūcaitya, connects a variety of religious and cultural groups. The richness of its symbolic possibilities makes possible diverse forms of worship and veneration. The origin myth helped to relocate the centre of all Buddhism into a new environment. In this process, the Svayambhūcaitya became a site that legendary Buddhas of all world ages came to venerate as humble pilgrims. Furthermore, the relocation of the centre of Buddhism serves to strengthen national self-esteem.

Although there are conspicuous Hindu influences in the area, Svayambhū is clearly Buddhist on a deeper semantical level. External features typical of South Asian (Hindu) culture exist, but the inner religious meanings are thoroughly Buddhist. In the language of unbounded conceptual categories, there is *more* Buddhism than Hinduism at Svayambhū.

This case study helps to understand a central Newar Buddhist monument. The results have an indirect link with the wider study of Mahāyāna Buddhism, because there is evidence of the type of Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley having strong connections to Indian Buddhism before its disappearance there. The study shows a sacred site such as Svayambhū to conceal numerous shades of meaning, which can be easily misinterpreted if taken too superficially. Deeper meanings become revealed only when one engages in an active and empathetic dialogue with the local informants.

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Tiivistelmä - Referat - Abstract

Tutkielman kohde on Svayambhū, buddhalainen temppelialue Katmandussa, Nepalissa. Pyrkimyksenä on selvittää, millaisia merkityksiä paikalliset uskonnonharjoittajat, erityisesti newari-buddhalaiset, alueelle antavat. Työssä analysoidaan Svayambhūlle annettujen symbolisten merkitysten verkostoa tarkoituksena ymmärtää uskonnollisten käytäntöjen ja uskomusten semantiikkaa tapaustutkimuksen puitteissa. Vaikka newari-buddhalaisuus on pääasiallinen näkökulma, peilataan sitä laajempaan uskonnollis-kulttuurilliseen toimintaympäristöön Katmandun laaksossa.

Työ kuuluu uskontoantropologiseen perinteeseen sivuten myös uskontofilosofisia kysymyksenasetteluja. Teoreettisen viitekehyksen muodostavat filosofinen hermeneutiikka ja ns. tiheään kuvaukseen perustuva kulttuurien tulkintamalli. Lisäksi huomioidaan länsimaisten kategoriatermien käyttö antropologiassa kannattaen löyhärajaisia kategorioita, jotka kannustavat hedelmälliseen vuorovaikutukseen tutkijalle vieraan ympäristön ja sen käsitteiden kanssa.

Primaariaineisto on kerätty etnografisen kenttätyön avulla Katmandun laaksossa. Aineisto koostuu maallikoiden ja uskonnollisten spesialistien haastatteluista, havainnointimateriaalista sekä kirjallisista lähteistä. Sekundaariaineistona on käytetty alaan liittyviä tutkimuksia. Aineistoa on analysoitu fenomenografisesti ja sisällönanalyysin keinoin.

Svayambhūn suosioon on olennaisesti vaikuttanut Katmandun laakson buddhalaisen syntymyytin popularisoituminen. Buddhalaisen myytin syrjäytettyä hindulaisen version Svayambhūn tärkeä merkitys vakiintui paitsi buddhalaisten myös hindujen parissa. Svayambhūlla on laajaa kulttuurillista käyttöä, joka liittyy uskonnon yhteisölliseen ja instrumentaaliseen ulottuvuuteen. Toisaalta alue on soteriologisesti tärkeä, erityisesti sosiaalisessa hierarkiassa ylinnä oleville munkki- ja pappiskasteille.

Riiteistä ja *dharman* opetuksesta alueella vastaa erityinen kastin alaryhmä. Uskonnollisten spesialistien antamat merkitykset Svayambhūlle eroavat maallikoiden merkityksistä, mikä johtunee sosiaalisen hierarkian määräämistä erilaisista rooleista. Korkeammalla hierarkiassa alueen jumalhahmojen uskonnollinen identiteetti korostuu. Spesialistien ja maallikoiden maailmat ovat osin yhtenevät, mutta korkeimpiin tantrisiin salaisuuksiin on yksinoikeus vain niihin vihityillä.

Alueen keskus, Svayambhūcaitya, yhdistää laajasti eri uskonnollisia ja kulttuurisia ryhmiä. Sen symbolisten mahdollisuuksien rikkaus mahdollistaa monipuoliset palvonnan ja kunnioittamisen muodot. Syntymyytin avulla koko buddhalaisuuden keskus siirrettiin uuteen ympäristöön, jolloin Svayambhūcaityasta tuli kaikkien maailmanaikojen legendaaristen Buddhien kunnioittama pyhiinvaelluskohde. Buddhalaisuuden keskuksen siirtäminen vahvistaa myös kansallista itsetuntoa.

Vaikka alueella on huomiota herättäviä hinduvaikutteita, ovat Svayambhūn syvimmät merkitykset buddhalaisia. Ulkoisten muotojen tasolla alueella on eteläaasialaiselle (hindulaiselle) kulttuurille tyypillisiä piirteitä, mutta syvempien uskonnollisten merkitysten tasolla buddhalaiset tulkinnat hallitsevat. Rajattomien käsitekategorioiden kielellä ilmaistuna alue on *enemmän* buddhalainen kuin hindulainen.

Tapaustutkimus auttaa ymmärtämään newari-buddhalaisuuden keskeistä monumenttia. Tuloksilla on välillistä vaikutusta laajempaan mahāyāna-buddhalaisuuden tutkimukseen, koska Katmandun laakson buddhalaisuudella on osoitettu olevan kiinteä yhteys intialaiseen buddhalaisuuteen ennen sen katoamista synnyinmaastaan. Tutkimus osoittaa, että Svayambhūn kaltainen pyhä paikka kätkee lukuisia merkitysvivahteita, joiden pinnallinen tulkinta vie helposti harhaan. Vasta aktiivinen ja eläytyvä dialogisuhde paikallisten toimijoiden kanssa avaa ymmärtämään syvempiä merkityksiä.

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Professor René Gothóni has supervised this study from its inception. Those familiar with his work will undoubtedly notice his influence, as I see no reason for hiding the inspiration of his academic achievements. His constant encouragement reflects the virtues of compassion and wisdom. Mari Rahkala assisted our multicultural group throughout the seminar year. Tuula Juurikka has constantly shown interest towards the proceeding of the study.

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I also thank professor John Gray who was kind enough to show interest in my study while in Kathmandu. Professor Alexander von Rospatt provided a personal copy of his article that was difficult to acquire otherwise.

Finally, my informants at Svayambhū made this study possible. For ethical reasons I shall not reveal their real names, but I think ‘Gautam’, ‘Ramesh’ and ‘Prem’ will identify themselves in the pages of this work. I dedicate this modest work to them, hoping that they can accept my interpretations with fatherly patience and understanding.

SPELLING AND TRANSLITERATION

Nearly all South Asian technical terms in this study are in Sanskrit (Skt.), Nepali (Np.) or Newari (Nw.). I have attempted to follow the spelling in David Gellner's works based on the Oxford and Cambridge tradition. Where this has not been possible, other sources have been applied to the extent they have proven useful. I have omitted diacritics in some Newari words.

Some common words, such as 'mandala', are without diacritics due to their popularity in Western parlance. In general, other South Asian terms are written in italics and with diacritics.

I have used Newari and Nepali versions of words somewhat eclectically. When e.g. I have learned a Newari name of a rite, I have used that name. On the other hand, in city names like Patan (Lalitpur) I tend to use the former (Nepali) version instead of the latter (Newari) one.

LIST OF FIGURES, TABLES AND PLATES

Photographs and drawings by the author unless otherwise noted.

A. INTRODUCTION

1. The setting

The general Western public became aware of the Hindu kingdom of Nepal with the conquest of Mt Everest in 1953. For over a century before this accomplishment, a policy of seclusion had prohibited most foreigners from entering the country. Officially, Nepal opened its borders in 1951, after which a growing number of tourists, trekkers, hippies, missionaries, foreign aid workers and researchers have visited and in part adopted the Himalayan nation. Foreigners returning back home often tell legends of a country that has retained a forgotten, mediaeval-like atmosphere. On the other hand, the kingdom possesses outstanding cultural and geographical treasures.

However, the famous Sanskritist Sylvain Lévi showed already a century ago Nepal to have one particular feature that deserved the wider interest of scholars of Asian religions. In Nepal, there has survived a coexisting form of Hinduism and Buddhism similar to the situation in northern India at the end of the first millennium CE – before Buddhism died out in its homeland. The heart of Nepal, the Kathmandu Valley, offers a limited geographical space within which it is possible to study the only surviving remnant of Indian (Sanskrit) Buddhism in circumstances where the dominant Brahmanic Hinduism is gradually assimilating the Buddhist tradition into itself. This important notion has retained its relevance in scholarship up to the present day.[1]

The traditional form of Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley is known as *Newar Buddhism* after the indigenous ethnic group of the Valley, the Newars. The type of Buddhism they practise is Mahāyāna. However, a more precise social hierarchy places at the top a group of religious specialists who practise Tantric Vajrayāna Buddhism. The social structure reflects for the most part the Hindu-based caste system, while some of its aspects derive from the Tantric teaching itself.

The history of Newar Buddhism connects firmly to a certain sacred site in western Kathmandu. Its name is Svayambhū, or in popular parlance Svayambhūnāth. This ancient centre of devotional life has widespread cultural importance in and outside the Valley. Its most salient feature is a large *stūpa* (*caitya*), the symbolic heart of the area, which holds a prominent position in the very popular Buddhist myth of the birth of civi-

[1] See e.g. Gellner 2001, 73, 325.

lization in the Kathmandu Valley. Besides the *stūpa*, the Svayambhū area accommodates a dense conglomerate of sacred symbols and a rather unique community. In the present study, I will examine hermeneutically the forms of religious practice and belief in this limited area. My goal is to understand holistically the contemporary semantics, dynamics and tensions of this sacred site, especially from the viewpoint of Newar Buddhism. Although the perspective is mainly synchronic, a wider diachronic viewpoint is naturally necessary for comprehending contemporary questions, since phenomena of today are obviously a result of a long historical process.

2. Key terminology

Starting with the word 'Svayambhū', we must acknowledge a variety of uses for some common terms.[2] First, the Sanskrit adjective *svayambhū* means something that comes to exist by its own means – a *prima causa*. In this sense, it refers to the eternal nature of the ultimate reality and has a long history in Vedic religion. In the Newar Buddhist context, it refers first to the sacred site of Svayambhū itself, and second to the primordial Buddha, the *Ādibuddha*. The *Ādibuddha* can be seen as a non-corporeal universal principle of Buddhahood who is, however, sometimes depicted as a personal deity and called 'Śrī Svayambhūnāth(a)' with the honorific title *Śrī* (of which there can be several to denote more respect) and the postfix *–nāth(a)* ('Lord'). In this last usage, one can see how Svayambhū refers to a personified manifestation of a deity. It implies a tendency to exalt the monument itself, i.e. the *stūpa*, to the position of a deity.

In this study, I shall make the following distinction. When I speak of 'Svayambhū', I refer to the *sacred site*, unless otherwise noted. More precisely this means the immediate vicinity of the main *stūpa*, roughly 100 times 60 metres in area (the greater area includes another hilltop close-by with shrines and temples, but my focus is mainly on the 'heart' of the area next to the *caitya*).[3] When I speak of the 'Svayambhūcaitya', I mean the main *caitya* only. *Caitya* is another word for *stūpa,* like *chörten* in Tibet or *dāgäba* in Sri Lanka, and this word shall be used instead of *stūpa,* as

[2] There are or have been over a dozen ways to refer to roughly the same thing (Svayambhū) in Roman characters. Examples of spelling are Swayambhū, Swayambhūnāth, Svayambhūnāth, Samhegū, Shengū, Simbhū, Syeṃgū and Sumbhoo Nāth. I use the spelling proposed by von Rospatt (1999, n. 23), which I regard as the most accurate one.

[3] See the map of the area on p. 50.

it is more commonly used in Kathmandu and holds more symbolic and spiritual value than *stūpa*, especially in the case of the Svayambhūcaitya. *Caitya*, like *stūpa,* originally meant a Buddhist memorial mound used for hiding relics of saintly figures. However, the word also has other spiritual connotations: it represents the human body and the universe, and people often see it as a mandala and a visualization aid on the path towards enlightenment.

'Newar Buddhism' means the form of Buddhism practised by the ethnic group called the Newars. I will discuss its socio-religious structure in chapters nine and ten. Newar Buddhism is not the only type of Buddhism at the greater Svayambhū area. There are important Tibetan Buddhist monasteries as well as one Theravādin centre run by learned monks.[4] In the strict sense of the word, these do not represent Newar Buddhism, which is a caste-based, patrilineal system – although some individual monks may well be Newars by origin. For this reason, I will not deal with these traditions at length in this study, although I acknowledge their importance in the overall functionality of the Svayambhū complex.

'Tantrism', 'Tantric' and 'Tantra' are central terms in Newar religion. According to David N. Gellner, a specialist on Newar religion, the Tantric tradition combines gnostic teachings, ritual instructions, mantras and magic.[5] It relies on the *tantras*, sacred scriptures regarded as 'extensions' of other holy scriptures (viz. *sūtras*). They include secret and often reversed interpretations of earlier themes in both orthodox Hindu and Buddhist traditions. In Kathmandu, Tantric Buddhism is equivalent to Vajrayāna ('the diamond way'), which as a practice is in part common knowledge and in part available only to those initiated. Laymen can often be at least remotely aware of the identity of Tantric deities, but only a small group of people know the 'true' interpretations and proper mantras of these deities. The goal of Tantric Vajrayāna Buddhism is the same as in other *yānas* ('ways' or 'vehicles'), i.e. to reach enlightenment and liberation from the endless cycle of rebirths. With persistent meditation, complex rituals and exclusive knowledge the practitioner aims at reaching a higher state of consciousness. Religious specialists describe how the mind cuts through the veil of ignorance like a thunderbolt (*vajra*) to reveal the ultimate emptiness underlying all existence. Accomplished masters, *siddhas,* are believed to have reached this rare goal.

This study includes special South Asian terminology that is important to the understanding of the whole. A glossary found in the appendices will cover most key con-

[4] The Anandakuti Mahāvihār established in 1943. Affiliated with it nowadays is a college providing courses in management and science.
[5] Gellner 1992, 252.

cepts. I have also attempted to explain relevant terms when I use them. In general, the use of indigenous (emic) concepts is quite necessary for grasping the inner dynamics of Newar religion and culture.

3. Previous studies

Brian Hodgson, the British Resident in Nepal between 1833-42, was likely the first westerner to conduct a major systematic study on the Newars. Apart from his high position as the colonial Resident, he served in the Nepalese branch of the East India Company for decades. During his stay, he collected numerous Sanskrit Buddhist manuscripts, which were to have a deep impact on the field of Oriental studies. Hodgson sent back to the West a collection of texts that had a direct connection to the great Indian Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna centres of the past. The discovery of these ancient Sanskrit manuscripts properly initiated the scholarly study of Mahāyāna Buddhist texts.[6] In 1905, Sylvain Lévi, the French Indologist and Sanskritist, published his history of the country ('Le Népal'). As noted above, Lévi first brought forth the notion that studying the Newars in the Kathmandu Valley may greatly increase our understanding of how and why Buddhism disappeared in India at the end of the first millennium CE.

Systematic academic interest in Nepal and the Newars did not really begin until the 1950s. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf was a pioneer in the anthropology of Nepal, writing also about the Newars but especially the Sherpas of the northern Himalaya region. David Snellgrove and Giuseppe Tucci have introduced Tibeto-Nepalese Tantric Buddhism to Western audiences since the late 1950s. In 1970, Tucci's student Turrell Wylie published an important work on Nepalese sacred geography from the Tibetan Buddhist point of view. It also mentions Svayambhū as a Tibetan pilgrimage site.[7]

After the 1970s, a few salient works on Newar culture and religion have emerged. Gérard Toffin has written many significant studies on the Newars, the culmination being the exhaustive *Société et religion chez les Néwar du Népal* (1984). It presents Newar culture wonderfully but mainly in a village environment, which is rather different from the urban setting in my study. In the British Oxbridge tradition, David N. Gellner has risen to an authoritative position as a connoisseur of Newar Buddhism, es-

[6] See e.g. the introduction in Hodgson 1972. The core of Hodgson's research is in this essay collection.
[7] Wylie 1970. See also Snellgrove 1981 (based on his travels through Nepal in 1956) and Tucci 1956.

pecially after his *Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest* (1992). The book is the result of fieldwork in Patan (Lalitpur), the adjacent city to Kathmandu and the one with the largest Buddhist population in the Valley. Gellner shapes a three-level hierarchy of Newar Buddhist belief and practice, which provides a feasible background to my study. Although Gellner mainly worked in Patan and not Kathmandu, his insights on Newar Buddhism are resourceful and general enough to apply to Svayambhū as well.

There are, in fact, surprisingly few Western studies on Svayambhū itself considering its position. Many scholars mention it, but not many studies actually focus on the site. Of the studies that are available, most are German contributions.[8] Bernhard Kölver and Niels Gutschow have presented detailed architectural drawings on the *stūpa*.[9] Alexander von Rospatt and Hubert Decleer have researched the Svayambhūpurāṇa, the essential text describing the mythical past of the Valley. I will discuss this text in more detail later.

Very valuable to the present study is von Rospatt's treatment of Svayambhū. According to him, Svayambhū is *paradoxical* in two ways. First, it is a personal shrine of a certain priestly lineage but simultaneously venerated by the whole population. Second, the sacredness of Svayambhū seems to owe, on the one hand, to its position as the seat of the metaphysical self-existent Buddha and, on the other hand, to the deities physically consecrated by religious specialists.[10] Von Rospatt shapes a theory about the conception of the Svayambhūcaitya as a mandala and how the popular origin myth relocates the centre of Buddhism to Nepal.[11] These notions are an important starting point in my study. However, von Rospatt deals less with the variety of everyday meanings given to Svayambhū –expressed by regular contemporary people instead of authoritative texts. In this respect, I hope to be able to complement his important studies.[12]

Trevor Sofield has carried out interviews at Svayambhū with an interest in the environmental sustainability of the area. I will refer to his findings in chapter 26. Jesuit Father John K. Locke, a long-time resident in Nepal, has written landmark studies on Newar Buddhism and conducted extensive surveys on monastic life in the Valley. He mentions the priestly lineage at Svayambhū the role of which I will attempt to elabo-

[8] The Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project (1970-2002) has played an important role in preserving the scriptural tradition of Nepal. Most of the relevant German scholars have participated in the project.
[9] Kölver 1992; Gutschow 1997.
[10] Von Rospatt 1998 & 1999. The former is a shorter web document that deals with the same issues that are elaborated in the latter.
[11] Von Rospatt 1999, 3.
[12] At the time of finishing this study, Prof. von Rospatt was working on a more detailed study on Svayambhū. It is possible that the work will deal with some of the issues treated here. However, my impression is that the focus will be more on the periodical renovations of the *caitya*.

rate.[13] Father Gregory Sharkey (Ph.D. in Oxford) has examined the daily ritual routines in Kathmandu Valley shrines. He mainly concentrates on the monasteries in Patan but observes the situation in Svayambhū as well. His survey is useful especially as regards the framework of Newar Buddhist ritual practice.

There are studies in local languages (Nepali and Newari) that would and should have deserved more attention were I more fluent in the languages. Since I am not yet comfortable with either of them, I have had no choice but to leave out all such studies – the most extensive one being Hemrāj Śākya's *Śrī Svayambhū Mahācaitya* (1978) written in Newari. I acknowledge the academic status of Nepalese institutions such as the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) at Tribhuvan University, and I have attempted to reach all relevant studies in English in the publication series of the centre.[14] However, I have not come across any studies that would deal with exactly the same subject matter as mine – or would render the present undertaking futile, for that matter. The same holds true for previous studies in general: although they acknowledge Svayambhū's position in Newar Buddhism, the site has not really received holistic contemporary attention. Hemrāj Śākya's above-mentioned work is a notable exception, but then, a lot has surely happened in the 27 years between its publication and the completion of my study. As a result, I feel there is need for a comprehensive religio-cultural treatment that focuses on this important sacred site; especially for one that takes into account the opinions of the actual people who currently work, live and practise their religion in the area.

4. Primary and secondary material

I have collected the primary material by means of fieldwork in Kathmandu. Primary sources divide into *oral sources*, *field observations* and *textual sources*. Secondary material includes previous studies on the Kathmandu Valley as well as others that examine the relevant religious traditions more generally. I have used secondary sources as background information in order to crosscheck facts and to build a more comprehensive picture of Newar Buddhism and Svayambhū.

[13] See e.g. Locke 1980 & 1985.
[14] *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* (the Journal of CNAS, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Nepal).

As regards the *oral sources*, I often discussed cultural, religious and political issues with numerous Nepalese people – both at Svayambhū as well as in and around the cities of Kathmandu and Patan (where I stayed most of the time). An important dialogue partner was a Newar shopkeeper at Svayambhū who gave me many ideas of how to approach the local religion. Furthermore, he contributed to the narration of the origin myth of Svayambhū. He also introduced me to another key informant, a learned and respected priest, who shared his insights on general issues concerning Newar Buddhism and Svayambhū. Upon one meeting, the priest supervised and to a considerable extent participated in the narration of the origin myth. The shopkeeper translated these discussions from Newari into English. Another key informant was a local priest presumably in his late thirties (not near relative to the older priest). As he spoke English, we could talk about many issues, e.g. rituals at Svayambhū, religious geography, local legends, wider cultural concerns, Hindu-Buddhist relations and the overall way he understands his religion. We talked non-formally for a couple of times and I interviewed him more extensively once.

Devotees and pilgrims shared their opinions in three shorter interviews. In the first case, the interviewees were two old musicians, and the same shopkeeper as before acted as translator. In the second interview, two other Nepalese research assistants interviewed a devotee based on my questions. Still another devotee shared her thoughts on ritual and worship. At her request, I did not record this interview on tape but only took notes. For a detailed description of oral sources and interview questions, see pages 114 and 122 at the end of the study.

Notes on personal *field observations* were taken in two notebooks, which I will call Field diary I and Field diary II. Observation has been participant observation when possible. I have attempted to carry out observations discreetly and without disturbing religious practitioners. I discussed many of my observations with my informants, and after the field period, I re-evaluated my observations with the help of previous academic ethnographies.

The primary *textual sources* are newspaper articles published in Nepalese newspapers before, during and after the fieldwork. They concern some contemporary issues in which Svayambhū is the object of political and religious debate. In them, some conflicts of interests that I did not or could not observe are well visible. The articles add to the cultural aspects of Svayambhū and bring the viewpoint of public opinion to the discussion. I will also refer to leaflets on Vipassanā meditation, a Buddhist meditation

technique I practised in order to try to understand what it is like to be a Buddhist. However, these leaflets are not proper sources in the sense of having been analysed.

Due to the subject matter of this study, I could obtain a considerable amount of *secondary material* dealing with the Kathmandu Valley only after arriving in Nepal. I will frequently refer to secondary sources, most of which were introduced in the previous chapter.

5. Purpose of the study

This is a qualitative case study focusing on the Svayambhū site. The sacred site is a system with visible geographical boundaries (its location on a hilltop), a distinctive social structure (the permanent community living and/or working there along with different kinds of visitors) and a prominent role in local mythology. Svayambhū is a uniquely formed conglomerate of shrines, temples and sacred symbols. Hence, it is identifiable as a particular unit, a functional complex of its own – in other words a case. Of course, it does not exist in a vacuum but in constant and vibrant interaction with the cultural and social complex surrounding it. The outside world influences it as much as it influences the world beyond its confines.

The aim of the present study is to analyse Svayambhū as a religio-cultural environment from especially the Newar Buddhist point of view. This means that I am chiefly interested in the *contemporary religious practices and beliefs* in the main Svayambhū area, i.e. the hilltop where the great *caitya* is located. More precisely, the focal points of the study are *religious symbolism, ritual practice* and the *meanings* people give to Svayambhū. In order to understand meanings holistically one needs to take into account cultural, social and personal factors. The frame of reference is mainly that of the Newars who live and/or work at Svayambhū as well as participate in lay devotional life there. I will also consider the impact of other parties that exist and operate in the area.

I will approach Svayambhū hermeneutically as a complex phenomenon. Ethnographic fieldwork has made a close contact with the local people possible. As described above, the primary material consists of interviews, observations and textual sources. Secondary sources, i.e. previous works relevant to the subject, supplement the picture.

Human beings give meanings to the phenomena they encounter in everyday life. They do this explicitly verbally or implicitly non-verbally – in actions, choices and preferences. I will investigate how devotees and religious specialists act in practice, how they conceive of the area and their religion and culture, and what underlying factors influence these beliefs and practices. This last part entails that also my own interpretations during the field period need to be reflected, since the research process has forced me to reconsider many of my initial conceptions about Svayambhū. It is useful to explicate this personal aspect as well, especially because my epistemological frame of reference necessitates the acceptance of any scholar being a subject, in which case his or her own prejudices affect the study. Another point is that I will attempt a thick description of Svayambhū. According to this view, the scholar interprets the variety of other people's interpretations in attempting to say something worthwhile about a complex cultural phenomenon.

B. UNDERSTANDING RELIGIO-CULTURAL PHENOMENA

6. Philosophical hermeneutics as an epistemological starting point

In the light of modern hermeneutics – especially the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer – the phenomenon of understanding touches the very roots of human experience. For Gadamer, understanding is more than a method or a scientific technique. Human sciences – the tradition Gadamer identifies himself with – do have a characteristic nature of their own; they possess a set of theories and methods that legitimises their validity as an academic enterprise. However, the real goal of human sciences lies beyond the limits of science *per se* – the model of which in fact originates in the natural sciences tradition.[15] Authentic hermeneutical understanding changes the ex-

[15] This division reflects the views of the German *Geisteswissenschaften* tradition and especially Wilhelm Dilthey, who attempted to develop a particular hermeneutic human sciences methodology as opposed to the prevailing ideals of the natural sciences (see Gadamer 1989, 3ff). Actually, when speaking of human sciences the concept of 'science' itself is etymologically dubious. It is preferred in this genre to speak of scholars instead of scientists. See Gothóni 2002b, 20-21.

istential experience of the human subject, compelling him or her to get involved personally in a process where "insights are acquired and truths known."[16]

According to this view, the world opens up for us through language. As Gadamer puts it: "Being that can be understood is language."[17] From early childhood, we learn and experience things through language in a particular speech community analogous to all other speech communities in the world.[18] Our whole consciousness is historical and builds on a tradition of norms, values, assumptions, preferences and beliefs. We have *preconceptions* or *prejudices* of the phenomena we encounter every day. They constitute our horizon of interpretation, i.e. the frame within which we are capable of conceiving of things. When we move beyond the confines of our familiar tradition and get in touch with another, e.g. a cultural sphere on another continent, our horizon becomes susceptible to change and expansion. We start to see the limits and relativity of our own culture.[19] Our awareness of our limitations should increase, and if the dialogue is sincere enough, the outcome should be *a fusion of horizons* – a situation where our own questions merge with the reconstructed original question to which a particular meaning is an answer.[20] In short, this is the process of understanding where we become aware of the world behind the other horizon. At the same time, we transcend this horizon – it is no longer alien to us but belongs now to our renewed consciousness. Quite likely, we start to see more and more such connections between 'the other' and ourselves that had not occurred to us before.

Gothóni has applied the hermeneutical approach of Gadamer to fieldwork in pilgrimage studies.[21] He has studied pilgrims at the holy Mt Athos in Greece, asking *what it means to be a pilgrim*. Gothóni's theoretical and methodological considerations can be applied to the present work quite well, since he has previously studied Buddhist monastic life in Sri Lanka, i.e. in a South Asian environment.[22] He has also advocated the notion of the family resemblance of religions, which I consider a useful notion in this study while dealing with etic category concepts in an emic environment.

For Gothóni, fieldwork is a prerequisite for understanding the object (or in this case, the subject) of research, viz. the pilgrim. He notes that the word 'understanding'

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[16] Gadamer 1989, xxi.
[17] Ibid., 474. Originally '*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache'*. I have used the English translation based on the fourth edition (1975) of the German original *Wahrheit und Methode*.
[18] Gothóni 2002a, 160.
[19] This happened to Gadamer when he started to see his own European tradition through an Asian perspective
(ibid., 159).
[20] Gadamer 1989, 306-307, 374.
[21] See e.g. Gothóni 2001, 2002a, 2002b and 2002c.
[22] Gothóni 1982.

derives from the German *Verstehen,* originally *davor stehen*, which literally means 'standing in front of'.[23] This implies an immediate physical encounter between the subject wishing to understand and the other whose world the scholar attempts to understand. Consequently, to be able to encounter and understand the nuances of a foreign culture is possible only through personal involvement in fieldwork. Fieldwork has of course been the paradigmatic way of doing anthropology since the times of Malinowski in the Trobriands. Nevertheless, the depth of personal involvement has really been acknowledged only after certain paradigm shifts in the last decades – the linguistic turn and the notion of the social construction of reality being among the salient ones. It has become inevitable in human studies that one needs to take into account the subjectivity of the scholar.[24]

It follows that in field research, "each scholar is his/her own empirical research instrument."[25] The epistemological boundaries of a study are the ones of the particular scholar in question and his or her historically conditioned mind. This subjective view of field research has epistemological and ontological implications: we cannot achieve absolute and final knowledge of an observable phenomenon and, furthermore, there is no such thing as reality outside the phenomenal world.[26] Instead of the classic ideal of explicitly looking for *truth,* we should reshape our scholarly ambitions and aim at a more conversational model, where the focus is on increased *understanding*.[27] Furthermore, perhaps the common metaphor of *depth* in understanding should be replaced by that of *breadth*. In other words, we should apply as many available descriptions as possible and find integrative ways to make use of them.[28] This is a basic strategy in the present study.

Gothóni and Gadamer both place a considerable emphasis on *language*: understanding is a linguistic event.[29] In fieldwork, then, the world of the other opens up for us through verbal expressions. Gadamer speaks of the *Sache* – the actual 'thing' in an expression – as a text. Clifford Geertz has also used the concept of text in the sense of cultures being read (i.e. interpreted) as one. I see 'text' in this wider sense. 'Text' does not

[23] Gothóni 2002a, 158.
[24] Cf. however post-positivist paradigms that advocate a natural science approach to the study of religions.
[25] Ibid., 157.
[26] Ibid., 164 (discussing Rorty 2000). The epistemological attitude in which reality as such cannot be reached beyond the limits of human reasoning can be traced to the Copernican Turn in Immanuel Kant's philosophy. As is well known, Kant refuted the possibility of knowledge of *das Ding an Sich*. We can only know of how things appear to us, not how they 'really' are.
[27] Ibid., 164-165.
[28] Rorty 2000, 24. I see this division mainly on a conceptual level; in typical ethnographic practice, both are important. For example to understand one person, we need to emphasize the depth aspect, whereas in order to learn from many people in a comparative manner we need to consider the breath aspect, too. This also has to do with the question of sample size.
[29] Gothóni 2002a, 158ff.

only point to written documents – although it does absolutely include them – but to *observable* and *experiential* social, cultural and religious events as well. Text is a contextual happening-in-the-world, an expression and a means of communication. A cultural text becomes a text because it is meaningful to the people studied and subsequently to the scholar who interprets it (see more in chapter 8).

A major task in the present study is to understand the semantic universe behind the concepts used by the local people at Svayambhū. Traces of this universe appear in written words and dialogues, but also in observable phenomena, to the extent that their meaning is understandable with the help of secondary sources and the opinions of informants. The main idea is to get as familiar as possible with the words and expressions that the local people use. Furthermore, there is another important viewpoint. The concept Svayambhū itself serves as a hermeneutical lens through which I interpret things. I have not directly asked my informants 'What does the concept Svayambhū mean?' since the answer would quite likely be, 'It means the self-existent one' or 'It means Lord Svayambhū'. It is in the broader discussion of Newar religion, its rites and customs, myths, symbolism, social issues and everything else relevant to the site that the answer to the question reveals itself. By talking about practice and belief, observing it and gathering additional textual data the semantic horizons of Svayambhū are likely to become gradually accessible.

7. The use of conceptual categories in cross-cultural research

I have set about examining a sacred site as both a *religious* and a *cultural* phenomenon. I do not attempt to define these opaque terms, but it should be explicated how they are understood in this study. The relationship between 'religion' and 'culture' is by no means self-evident. The two obviously have a lot in common, and human societies throughout history seem to have had a tendency for religious thinking; hence the coined term *homo religiosus.* The anthropology of religion in particular studies religious phenomena using the same anthropological methods as in the study of cultures. It is customary to take into account the levels of individual, society and culture.[30]

[30] Pentikäinen 1971, 45. I refer to 'anthropology' in the narrow sense. In this study, it only covers cultural and/or social anthropology.

In the present work, it is fruitful to think of religion and culture as *conceptual categories*. Religion, for instance, is a word with a rich semantic history, but as an individual analytical category, it is mainly the result of post-Enlightenment Western scholarship.[31] The two religious categories central to this study, Buddhism and Hinduism, do not represent any objective entities but are rather abstractions built for analytical purposes. 'Culture' likewise does not exist in any particular place in a pure form but is a similar category term.

Benson Saler has put forward a useful argument of how to deal with a category such as religion analytically. He applies Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances to the concept of religion.[32] According to this view, the phenomena we think of as religions do not necessarily share exact common features or have any unifying characteristics, unlike in the classic view of category terms. Still, something in religions is indeed so similar that we may say they resemble each other like members of a family; in other words, *they form a family*.[33] Saler says, "We can deal with religion in terms of a pool of elements that we deem *typical* of religion, without supposing that any one element is *necessary* for the existence of a religion."[34] Religion is an *unbounded category*, i.e. there are and should be no rigid boundaries that could define the category exhaustively. The same applies not only to 'religion' as a universal category but also to '*a* religion', i.e. individual religious traditions of the world and, moreover, to smaller units like denominations and sects within them.[35] We should not think of a tradition like Hinduism monolithically but rather as a pool of elements somehow resembling each other so much that it is reasonable in some cases to use an umbrella term such as Hinduism. Of course, it has been noted in South Asian scholarship that there are many 'Hinduisms' in practice, i.e. quite distant paradigms that differ soteriologically and doctrinally.[36]

Saler goes on to argue that some features in a given instance of a religion represent the religion in question better than others do. He borrows this notion from the *prototype theory* propounded in cognitive sciences.[37] If we think of the category 'bird', for many a robin or a sparrow is a better example than e.g. a penguin.[38] Robins and sparrows, more than penguins in this case, share some *prototype effects* – like the tendency

[31] However, the etymology of the term is more complex. See Saler 2000, 65ff.
[32] Saler 2000, 159ff.
[33] Ibid., 160; Cf. Gothóni 1996. Gothóni agrees that the family metaphor is suitable for religions but appears to see the *category* as more problematic than Saler. Saler, on the other hand, wants to retain the category for analytical purposes. In the present work, universal and particular categories are used as an aid for interpretation.
[34] Saler 2000, xi. Italics in the original.
[35] Ibid., xii.
[36] E.g. Gellner 1992, 98; Parpola 1999, 283-284.
[37] Saler 2000, 197ff.
[38] Ibid., xiii.

and ability to fly – that appear as gradational differences in our judgements. A bird that flies represents a bird better than one that cannot fly, although we normally agree that a non-flying penguin still is a bird. Saler suggests that we should think of religion similarly as a graded category: it is not a question of 'either – or' but a question of 'more – less'. In some cases, there is *more* evidence to think we are dealing with a certain religious tradition and in other cases inevitably *less* evidence. To take a Nepalese example, a *caitya* seems to represent architecture typical of Buddhism more clearly than a rectangular house made of bricks and wood. Alternatively, when we see a statue of the elephant-headed god Gaṇeś, we tend to think we are dealing with the Hindu tradition, since in legends he is the son of Śiva, a Hindu God. Where one category ends and another begins is very difficult to distinguish, and according to Saler, there is no need for such distinctions. It is plausible to operate with unbounded categories, look for prototypical evidence, and apply the 'more or less' thinking instead of dichotomies like 'yes or no' and 'either – or'. This will have significance later when we consider the impact of competing traditions on Svayambhū.

I suggest we can treat 'culture' in the same manner as Saler has treated 'religion'.[39] Culture, too, is for the most part a rather recent Western category.[40] We speak of culture universally and of a culture more precisely, we may study culture using the same methodology as religion and so on. 'Culture' is an unbounded category in the sense that it represents the general way of life in the Kathmandu Valley – along with its complex and at times competing religious interpretations. Some instances represent the culture of an ethnic group or religious tradition better than others do. We need not seek definitive answers to questions of cultural identity; flexibility is a more fruitful approach in an environment such as the Kathmandu Valley.

Saler has built his model especially with anthropologists in mind. He wants to provide tools for cross-cultural research where anthropologists use their own folk category 'religion' in studying other cultures. However, he also suggests that scholars should experiment with non-Western categories and use them as transcultural tools.[41] This is a question of finding emic categories, which as such has been a normal paradigm in anthropology for a long time. We have to know the local meanings in order to apply foreign conceptual frameworks to them. In section C of this study, I will present an outline of the religious and cultural sphere of the Kathmandu Valley based on previous

[39] Saler himself says he uses religion as a case study for a wider treatment of the problem of conceptualizing analytical categories, and that the approach might well apply to other categories (ibid., xvi).
[40] See e.g. Gadamer 1989, 9ff on the concept of Bildung (Culture) in continental philosophy. The etymology of the concept is older, but its use as we know it became fixed only after the Enlightenment.
[41] Saler 2000, 263.

ethnographic works. Since my main source (Gellner 1992) quite successfully proves that certain analytical Western categories correspond with local Newar Buddhist ones, a proper dialogue between emic and etic concepts and categories is very much possible and will be attempted throughout the present study.

8. The interpretive approach of Geertz

One of the most influential developers of recent anthropological theory has been Clifford Geertz. Although his interpretive approach to the study of cultures has faced criticism over the years,[42] the general view in his works – mainly *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) – has retained its usefulness after decades of progress in the discipline.[43] I shall complement the hermeneutic frame of reference discussed above with his suggestions on the study of cultures. However, one needs some caution while applying Geertz's theories, as will be discussed below.

Following Max Weber, Geertz sees culture as webs of significance man has spun for himself. The analysis of culture, then, is not about finding universal laws but about *interpretation of meanings*.[44] These meanings are public; they do not reside in the minds of individuals but manifest themselves in social interaction.[45] For Geertz, thinking as a property of man does not essentially consist of 'happenings in the head' but of a traffic in significant *symbols* – words, gestures, sounds, natural objects etc. – between people. Cultural patterns as organized systems of significant symbols are not a contingent trait of the human race but a necessity for our ability to govern emotions and experiences without succumbing to a shapeless chaos. Shared symbolic meanings are indigenous for our species, and culture is no less than an essential condition for human existence in the first place.[46]

Geertz is not very articulate about what he means by a symbol. Generally, he takes for a symbol "any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle

[42] E.g. by Asad, Shankman, Munson and Kuper (Gellner 2001, 81 n. 6). On Shankman's critique see below.
[43] *The Interpretation of Cultures* is a collection of essays mostly from the 1960s. Geertz has further developed his views in e.g. *Local Knowledge* (1983), but his best-known contributions to the field appear in the pages of the former work.
[44] Geertz 1973, 5.
[45] In Pyysiäinen 2001, this view is refuted on the grounds that it does not take into account the cognitive processes involved in human interaction.
[46] Geertz 1973, 45-46, 83.

for a conception – the conception is the symbol's 'meaning'".[47] To go a little further, one recalls that the word *symbol* originates from the Greek word *sumbolon*, which means a token, insignia or means of identification.[48] Often some distinction exists between a sign and a symbol, although they also share common features. For Charles Peirce a symbol is "constituted a sign […] by the fact that it is used and understood as such."[49] However, he distinguishes between the two, as does Susanne K. Langer, whose works have influenced Geertz.[50] For the present purposes, it is enough to recognize that a symbol signifies or stands for something else, usually something more abstract and general, and has *subjective* effects on the thoughts, emotions and habits of man.[51] Religious symbols in particular have the ability to generate very meaningful experiences and touch the very roots of human existence.

For Geertz, then, culture is a complex set of meanings that we learn, enact, transform and transfer in everyday interaction. The task of an anthropologist is to interpret these meanings. This is by no means easy, and Geertz even admits that "cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete"[52] – i.e., one should not entertain the false hope of getting to the bottom of cultural meanings exhaustively:

> Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape.[53]

Although meanings can be elusive, their legitimate scientific treatment is nevertheless very much possible. How an anthropologist arrives at the 'better guesses' is through an intellectual effort called thick description – a term borrowed from Gilbert Ryle – which for Geertz is what ethnography is ultimately about. In short, thick description means seeing cultural phenomena more thoroughly than by face value only. One has to dissect the various symbolic layers that constitute cultural meanings and make them understandable as authentically as possible.

Geertz's classic example of the difficulty of interpreting meanings is about boys who contract their eyelids but for very different purposes.[54] It illustrates how we may interpret everyday actions in various different ways. Often enough the true significance

[47] Ibid., 91.
[48] Heisig 1987, 204. The original meaning apparently was very practical as in an attempt to join two pieces together as a means of identification.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 203; Langer 2002.
[51] Ibid., 204.
[52] Geertz 1973, 29.
[53] Ibid., 20.
[54] Ibid., 6-7. The example is also from Ryle.

of an action remains concealed, if we are satisfied with a face value explanation – a 'thin description' of an event. Cultural analysis must take into account the underlying social assumptions, the subtle nuances and the untold self-evident truths of a community. Thick description is about acknowledging a "stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures" that constitutes the very essence of our existence as cultural beings.[55]

A practical example of thick description is Geertz's essay on cockfight in a Balinese village.[56] Geertz describes how the cockfight is a highly developed and extremely important communal act that reflects the social hierarchy of the village. The villagers reify cultural, economical, ethical, sexual and political issues in the midst of a series of bloody battles between affectionately kept fighting cocks. Bets for a favourite cock are often so high that there would be no sense in putting so much at stake unless it reflected deeper meanings such as social status, pride, masculinity etc. The symbolic significance of the cockfight extends beyond the cock owners' lives; it touches deep cultural layers of the whole community. The fight helps members of the community find their place in the social hierarchy and at the same time reconstruct that hierarchy. Geertz interprets the cockfight as a *cultural text*, which for him is a more informative interpretation than to treat the tradition merely as e.g. a common rite or a pastime. Both the community and the ethnographer read and interpret this cultural text. When the Balinese themselves read it, it is a "Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves."[57] Attending cockfights is learning about the culture's ethos and finding one's own identity repeatedly by participating in the collective reading of the text rich with symbolic structures.[58]

For an anthropologist, then, reading these cultural texts means reading them "over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong".[59] This is not the same as becoming native. Geertz is aware of the nature of anthropological writings: they are interpretations of other people's interpretations – of which there can be many layers to start with – and hence they are fictions in the sense of being "something made", "something fashioned".[60] This does not mean that they are false, but it does imply that the text an anthropologist produces is not – and can never be – the same as the text of local people. Ethnographies are constructions that take shape in the mind of the ethnographer. These conceptualized interpretations of symbolic structures of meanings, cultural pat-

[55] Ibid., 7.
[56] Ibid., 412-453. Originally published in *Daedalus* 101 (1972): 1-37. The essay rests upon his fieldwork in the late 1950s.
[57] Ibid., 448.
[58] Ibid., 449.
[59] Ibid., 452.
[60] Ibid., 15.

terns and social discourses are fictions in the sense of being 'something made'. However, this is what ethnography is essentially about. The extent to which the 'really real' of culture appears in these renditions determines the success of anthropology and cultural analysis.

Geertz sees religion as a cultural system – a system of meaningful symbols that refers to a non-symbolic reality.[61] What is unique in religious symbols is that they provide very general conceptions of the world. Geertz also regards the question of religion as connected to two concepts, *ethos* and *worldview,* that are inseparable like flipsides of a coin. By ethos Geertz means "the tone, character, and quality of [a people's] life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude towards themselves and their world that life reflects. Their world view is their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order."[62] These two aspects, the normative side of ethos and the factual side of worldview, are symbolically connected and in practice fused in religious ritual.[63] In ritual enactments, the real world and the ideal world merge. Here we may remember Geertz's distinction of cultural patterns as models *of* something and models *for* something.[64] Practically this means that people constantly attempt to understand what the world is like and how they should deal with it. This holds true for various cultural patterns in general, but the religious perspective especially is the realm where one asks deep existential questions and considers the way of the world. According to Geertz, religion establishes powerful and pervasive moods and motivations that seem uniquely realistic.[65]

Geertz's interpretive program has some dubious aspects that Shankman has pointed out. Reading other people's interpretations over their shoulders entails an increase in levels of interpretation, which makes it more difficult to justify the authenticity of the interpretation.[66] How can we assess the quality of our guesses or define the ambiguous 'really real'? By which criteria can we legitimise an interpretation? Shankman sees here problems of verification, since Geertz does not provide proper criteria for assessment.[67] The problem is more severe when one considers Geertz's theoretical contribution to anthropology and social sciences in general. Part of Geertz's problems arise from the vocabulary he uses; according to Shankman, he equates rather too loosely de-

[61] Ibid., 92.
[62] Ibid., 127 (cf. ibid., 89). Geertz uses a different spelling for worldview.
[63] Ibid., 113.
[64] Ibid., 93-94.
[65] Ibid., 90, 119-123.
[66] Shankman 1984, 262.
[67] Ibid., 263.

scription with analysis, analysis with explanation, explanation with description and theory with all of them.[68] It is true that at times Geertz's language is opaque and his rhetorical qualities seem to outshine analytical accuracy. Hence, one must be cautious as to what to include of his approach and how to modify it to suit each study (of course this holds true of any theoretical approach).

In addition, the notion of reading cultures as texts has received criticism. Mark Hobart has conducted seven years of fieldwork in Bali and has considerable insight on the ethnographic realities that Geertz's theories are in part based on. Hobart notes that seeing all historical human action and events as text has the risk of rendering the notion itself too universal and vapid. 'Text' becomes a substance of its own, a Transcendental Agent of a kind.[69] It becomes detached from history and allows for unethical behaviour, since human action no longer connects to physical human beings themselves but to an abstractly intellectual realm of 'Texts'. This post-modern danger of detachment is a serious one and has been a topic of debate in many disciplines – social ethics to start with. I have attempted to carry out the research as ethically and conscientiously as possible, acknowledging that my actions may affect people's lives in their own natural habitat. I regard the notion of text as a conceptual aid rather than an end in itself.

In spite of its difficulties, I think Geertz's approach is still quite useful in ethnographic work. It keeps expectations of an anthropological study on a realistic level, reminding us that the researcher does not need to persuade the academic community to believe his or her results to be the only right way to interpret phenomena. The approach is in line with philosophical hermeneutics as far as the inevitable subjectivity of the researcher is concerned. However, critics without a doubt have a point especially in questions of conceptual confusion and the problem of verification. Furthermore, scholars like John N. Gray have contested Geertz's theories in the Nepalese context itself.[70] Being aware of these problems, I hold that the notion of thick description suits for a holistic ethnographic study of a sacred site. The notion merely suggests one to take in earnest the complexity of possible interpretations, which in the context of the Kathmandu Valley is indeed a valid approach.

[68] Ibid., 264.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Prof. Gray, currently from the University of Adelaide, has conducted long-term fieldwork in Nepal and the Kathmandu Valley. According to him, the theoretical suggestions made by Talal Asad seem to fit into this context better than those of Geertz (personal communication in Kathmandu, 18 August 2003).

C. RELIGION AND CULTURE IN THE KATHMANDU VALLEY

9. An introduction to Newar culture and religion

The heart of Nepal is the Kathmandu Valley, a roughly circular bowl in the foothills of the Himalayas. It is located at an altitude of 1000 metres and has a diameter of about twenty-five kilometres (see Figs. 1 & 2). It consists of three major cities and smaller residential units. The largest of the cities with over a million inhabitants is Kathmandu, the nation's capital. The second largest is Patan (or Lalitpur) and the third largest Bhaktapur (Bhadgaon). These cities were formerly independent city-states ruled by their own kings. In 1768, Prithvi Narayan Shah, the ruler of the nearby Gorkha kingdom, invaded the Valley, united the three cities and created the modern state of Nepal. The Kathmandu Valley has traditionally been the semantic equivalent to Nepal, which is why it has been known as the Nepal Valley. Even today, people coming to Kathmandu from the distant hill areas may say they are 'going to Nepal'.[71]

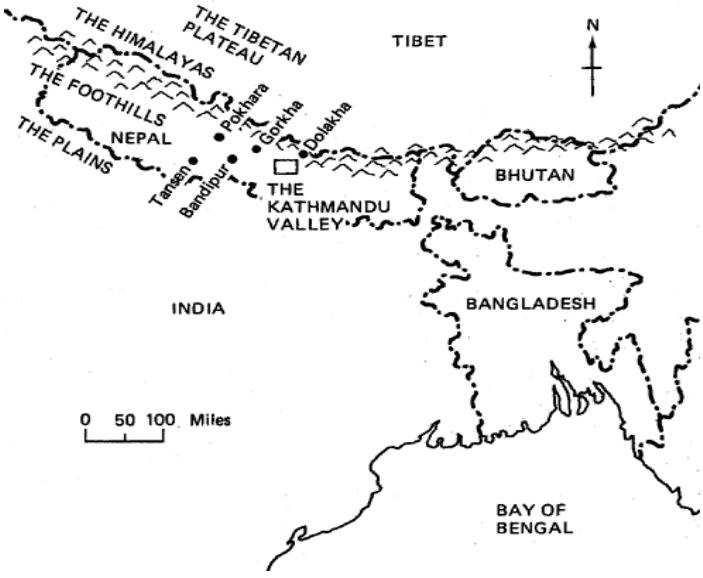

Figure 1. Map of Nepal and the location of the Kathmandu Valley.[72]

[71] Gellner 1992, 16.
[72] From Gellner 1992.

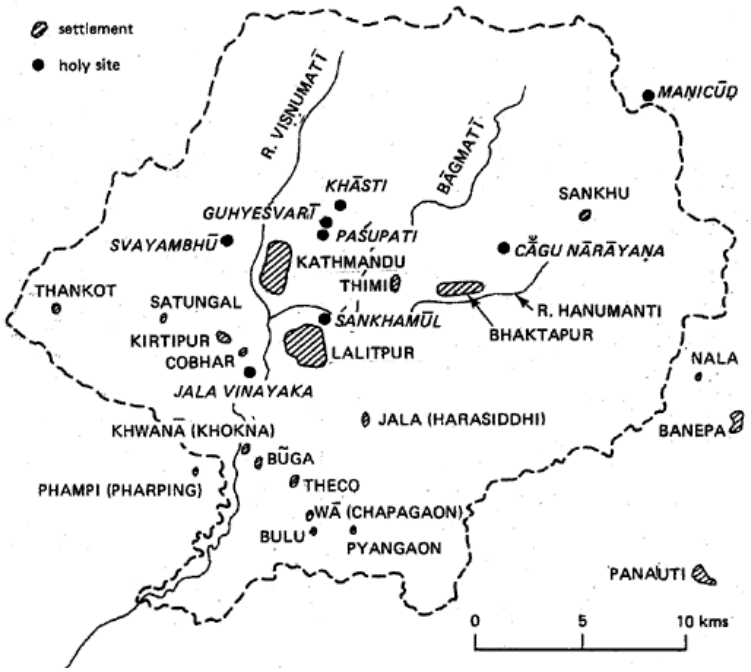

Figure 2. Map of the Kathmandu Valley.[73]

The Newars are the indigenous ethnic group residing in the Valley. Their long tradition as urban settlers has faced some changes since today about half of them live and work as traders and shopkeepers outside the densely populated cities of the Valley. The Newars have their own Tibeto-Burman language, Newari, which is still very much in use despite the rise of another language, Nepali, as the *lingua franca*. Nepali, an Indo-European language, was the language of the Parbatiyās (or Gorkhas), the dominant ethnic group in Nepal, who invaded the three kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley in 1768. The hereditary ruler of the country still comes from the Parbatiyā group. Today the Newars may have lost their majority position in the Valley, as constant migration from the middle-hills towards the capital has changed the ethnic base. An estimated half a million Newars still reside in the Valley.

Most Newars are endogamous and live in confined territorial units.[74] The foundation of their social structure is a strict caste system. This reflects Hindu dominance prevalent in the ruling class throughout the history of Nepal. If we set aside other ethnic groups such as the Parbatiyās – who are all Hindus – and concentrate on the Newars only, the following figure illustrates their socio-religious structure:

[73] From Gellner 1992.
[74] Toffin 1999, 33.

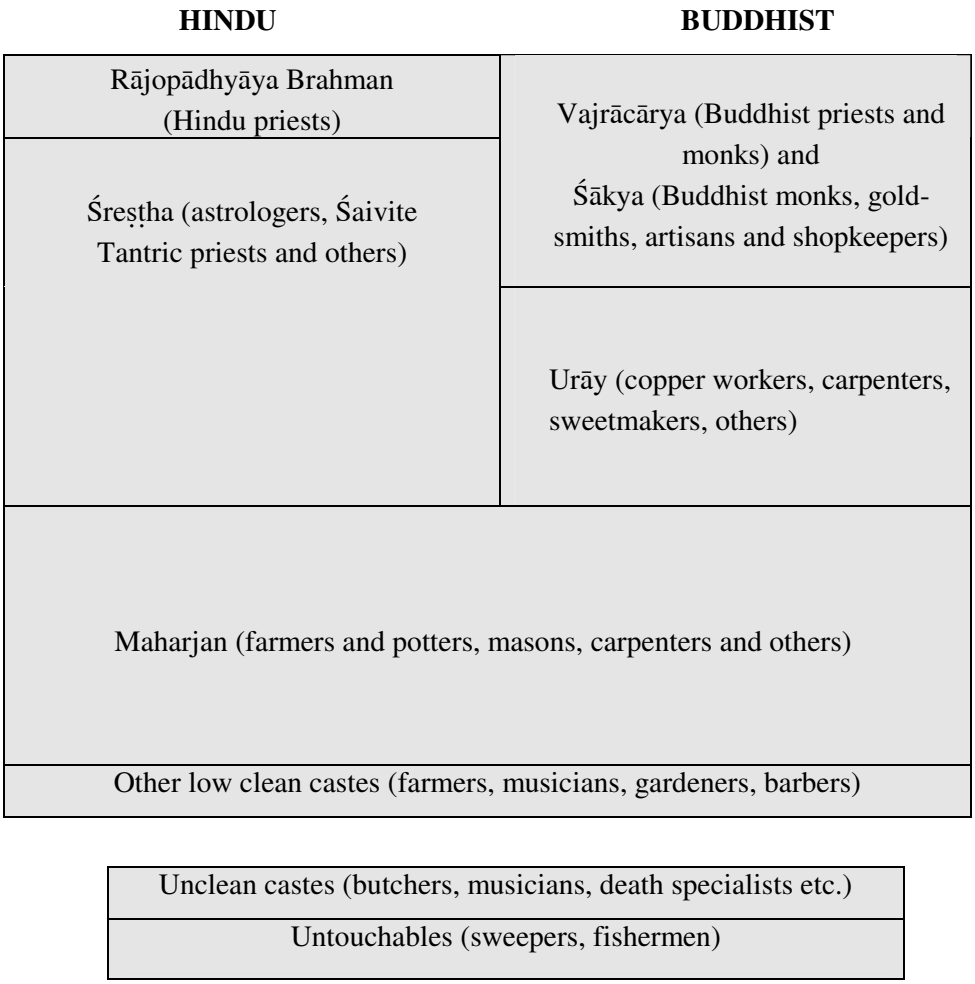

Figure 3. Outline of the Newar caste system.[75]

As Figure 3 shows, Hindu and Buddhist Newars alike have their own high priestly castes at the top of the hierarchy. They observe the respective ritual customs with the strictest of obedience and hold on to the purity of religion with most fervour. The Vajrācāryas but *not* the Śākyas are priests on the Buddhist side, although both share a previous initiation as monks.[76] Because of this initiation, together they form the Buddhist *sangha*. Ethnologically one can call the Vajrācāryas and Śākyas *caste sub-groups*.

For the majority of Newars, i.e. the lower castes, the line between Hinduism and Buddhism is not as strict as to the higher castes. In folk religion, many Hindu deities can have a Buddhist substitute (identified as a bodhisattva) or vice versa. This is par-

[75] Based on the models of Gellner (ibid., 44 & 71). Modifications are mainly due to notes in Gellner 2001 and Lewis 1996. The highest groups are Hindu and Buddhist priestly castes respectively. The Śreṣṭhas (left) are traditionally Hindus, but they sometimes use services of Buddhist priests. The Urāy (right) are an influential lay Buddhist caste. I have omitted details of lower castes, since the main purpose is to describe the twin-headedness of the system.

[76] See the glossary at the back for more information.

ticularly obvious in two examples. First, the annual chariot festival of Karuṇāmaya-Matsyendranāth is extremely popular throughout the Valley. The revered object of this cult is a deity often called Matsyendranāth, whom people identify as Śiva (although sometimes Kṛṣṇa). From the Buddhist point of view, however, his name is Karuṇāmaya, who is actually Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion.[77]

The second example concerns the living virgin goddess Kumārī – also the focus of a very popular cult. A committee chooses a little girl to act as a living goddess up until her first menstruation, loss of teeth or other occasion when she loses her ritual purity. Then another girl replaces her and the previous girl retains her life as a normal girl. Kumārī's Hindu identity is often a manifestation of feminine energy (*śakti*) in the Hindu pantheon (e.g. Lakṣmī, Durgā or Taleju, the patron deity of the Nepalese royal family), but on the Buddhist side, people often think of her as Vajradevī, a Tantric Buddhist deity.[78] Although the Royal Kumārī of Kathmandu always comes from the Buddhist Śākya caste sub-group, she is also the patron deity of the Hindu king of Nepal. These paradoxical examples show how in effect everything depends on the context, viz. the religious affiliation of the individual. Gellner has rightfully called this phenomenon a multivalency of symbols (to be discussed later).

An extremely important notion shared by Hindus and Buddhists alike is to see the Kathmandu Valley as a *sacred space*, more precisely a *mandala*.[79] The circular geographic area, referred to as 'Nepal mandala', is regarded as a natural power place endowed with an enormous amount of focal points of spiritual and divine energy, the prime examples being the Buddhist Svayambhūnāth and Bodhnāth *caityas* and the Hindu Paśupatināth and Caṅgu Nārāyaṇ temples.[80] The notion of sacred space applies for all sizes of spatial units. Each city, town or village has not only physical but also symbolic boundaries, and so does each locality, courtyard, house and temple. The interior represents purity whereas the exterior is considered impure.[81] Following the model of a mandala, every spatial unit has a sacred centre around which space is symbolically constructed. Toffin illustrates Newar spatial units as nested within each other like Russian boxes.[82] The conception of sacred space is by no means a dead letter in contempo-

[77] There is even a third identification when the deity is called Buṅgadyaḥ, after his home village called Buṅga. Locke (1980, 445) stresses how essentially Buddhist the cult ultimately is, but the fact remains that Hindus and Buddhists alike celebrate the deity and participate eagerly in the procession going through the Valley.
[78] For a comprehensive study on the cult of Kumārī, see Allen (1996)
[79] For Buddhists, the Valley is the mandala of Cakrasaṃvara, a Tantric deity with very secret aspects.
[80] I use here the long versions with the postfix *–nāth* ('lord') to express the popular way to refer to these places.
[81] Toffin 1999, 33.
[82] Ibid., 66.

rary life. On the contrary, it has to be constantly reinforced by periodic circumambulations, ritual pageants, festivals and visits in power places. Festivities often overlap, some lasting only for a day or two but others for weeks continuously.[83]

10. Types and forms of Newar religion

In this chapter, I will treat the religious life in the Kathmandu Valley more precisely, especially from the viewpoint of Buddhism. First, I will outline some feasible conceptual generalizations based on Gellner's *Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest*. Then follows a more detailed treatment of some key characteristics of the religious tradition. In spite of focusing on the Newar Buddhist point of view, I will also describe the larger religious environment.

Gellner has provided a neat typology (Fig 4) of different kinds of religion in the Newar context. It has many benefits: it is simple, it corresponds well to the emic distinctions of the Newars themselves, and it encompasses different ways in which the polysemic but essential concept of *dharma* is used.

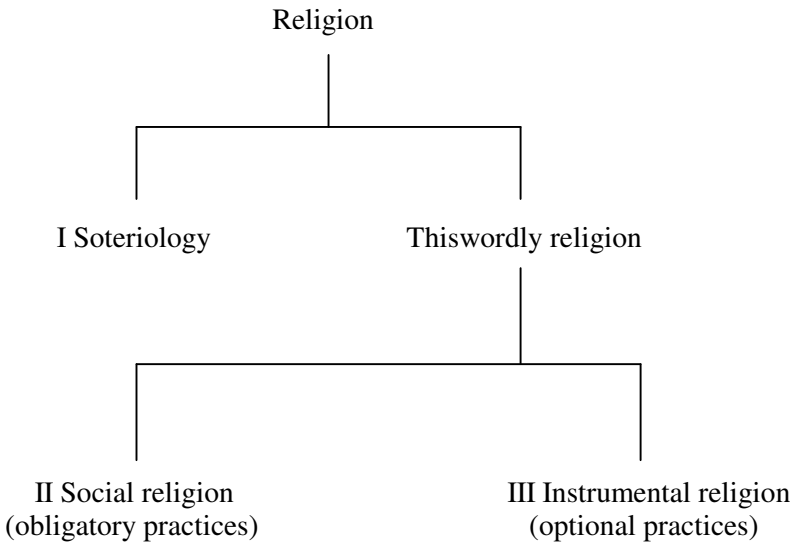

Figure 4. Gellner's functional typology of religions.[84]

[83] For an overview of Newar festivals, see e.g. Gellner 1992, 213ff (cf. Toffin 1984, 502).

This analytical framework derives from Max Weber's distinction between soteriology and other types of religion, which Gellner in his ethnographic work has seen as corresponding to the emic categories of the Newars.[85] First, Gellner distinguishes between soteriology, the transcendent goal of religion, and worldly religion, which consists of social and instrumental religion. Soteriology refers to "escape from all the ills of this world".[86] Thisworldly (non-soteriological) religion applies to mundane practices: those that are done because they have always been done and are socially sanctioned (social religion) as well as those that an individual chooses to perform in order to induce personal benefits in life (instrumental religion).

The first type of religion, soteriology, is optional because its goals are ultimately personal and not communal. Although Newar religious life is indeed social, an emic interpretive hierarchy places soteriology as the highest goal in life.[87] This is a worthwhile notion in analysing the relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism. It is perfectly acceptable for most Newars to participate in social customs of the religious tradition other than one's own, since this applies only to worldly religion and not to questions of salvation. One acknowledges and often respects the everyday presence of both Hindu and Buddhist divinities and customs, but salvation remains a private choice, characterized by the main deity worshipped as the ultimately highest form of the divine. On this level, there is no proper social sanctioning system as there is on the level of obligatory social religion (where certain rites need to be performed regardless of the situation).

Gellner uses an appropriate term, *multivalency of symbols,* to describe Newar religion.[88] He refers to the fact that there are competing explanations of deities, festivals and ritual practices. In some cases, the Hindu interpretation seems to be dominating the Buddhist one, whereas in other cases the opposite is true. Both traditions have tried to subordinate the symbolism of the other. Gellner welcomes a conceptual analysis by Siegfried Lienhard, according to whom Hinduism and Buddhism have interacted in the Kathmandu Valley through three historical processes.[89] The first one is *borrowing*, in which one tradition borrows elements (symbolic structures, pantheon etc.) from the other. The second one is *parallelism*, in which a tradition creates functional elements

[84] Based on Gellner 1992, 6, 137. The Newars themselves make a division between obligatory and optional practices, which the figure illustrates. Gellner shows that the emic (in parentheses) and etic divisions correspond to each other.
[85] On Weber's contribution, see Gellner 2001, 14, 95. This framework has retained its validity for Gellner throughout his decades of anthropological studies on the Newars; he still applies it in Gellner 2001.
[86] Gellner 1992, 6.
[87] Ibid., 7.
[88] Ibid., 80ff.
[89] Ibid., 101-102; Lienhard 1978, 151ff.

out of its own resources to correspond to those of another. The third one is *identification*, in which case a single cult receives multiple identifications (the same as Gellner's multivalency of symbols). These processes have existed simultaneously in both religions, but if one looks at the larger historical scale, Hinduism has had better means to encompass Buddhism into itself than vice versa. Following Lévi, Gellner wonders whether the half-complete historical process in the future will result in Hinduism assimilating even the most basic Buddhist elements into it.[90]

In the case of Newar Buddhism, some have indeed argued for a 'decline and fall' model on the premise that Buddhism should be egalitarian, ascetic and non-magical, as in some ideal views of monastic Buddhism.[91] Others have claimed the religion syncretistic and hence corrupted. However, on the highest soteriological level most Buddhist practitioners usually do have a strong sense of separation between the two traditions. Moreover, the Mahāyāna doctrine allows for many kinds of means for enlightenment and salvation, however retaining a thoroughly Buddhist character (see below). Pluralism does indeed exist, but in a controlled manner.

Newar Buddhism is Mahāyāna ('great way or vehicle') Buddhism. Most of its ideological and practical choices revolve around this form of Buddhism that arose around the turn of the Common Era in India.[92] As opposed to earlier Buddhist schools, of which Theravāda is a surviving example, Mahāyāna extends the scope of soteriology outside the monastic ideal. In Theravāda Buddhism, the aim of human life is to obtain relief from the cycle of rebirths and *dukkha* (Pāli for 'unease' or 'suffering') and finally attain *nibbāna* ('extinction of unease') by following the Noble Eightfold Path.[93] Laymen can acquire merit and increase their chance of a better rebirth by different means, but it is ideally through monkhood that the goal of enlightenment is obtainable.

Mahāyāna developed as an answer to this tendency. It applied the concept *bodhisattva* (Skt. 'enlightenment being') to stand for the ideal of all Buddhists, thus incorporating laymen into the immediate soteriological scheme. A bodhisattva is someone who strives for enlightenment or has already attained it, but postpones the passage to nirvana until all other sentient beings become likewise free. Bodhisattvas can use whatever skilful means possible to accomplish the task, and representing Hindu gods, saintly persons or attributes of the Buddha as bodhisattvas can all be considered such skilful means, intended to respond to personal life histories and needs.[94] Hence, the application

[90] Gellner 1992, 103.
[91] Ibid., 101.
[92] Harvey 1990, 89.
[93] Gothóni 1982, 30-33.
[94] Gellner 1992, 111.

of Hindu iconography in Buddhism becomes easier to understand. Although all kinds of deities may well exist, they are still subordinate to the ultimate Mahāyāna conception of reality as emptiness.

Gellner has presented an important notion of the indigenous hierarchy in which the three *yānas* in Newar Buddhism complement each other.[95] According to him, Newar Mahāyāna Buddhism in fact incorporates the earlier Theravāda form, which the Newars know as Śrāvakayāna ('the way of the disciples').[96] It is *the basis of ritual and ideology*, and Mahāyāna practices build upon this framework without abandoning it. On top of Mahāyāna is still another level, which is in part secret and revealed only to initiated individuals. This is Vajrayāna ('the diamond way' or 'the adamantine way'), the latest major development in the history of Buddhism. It holds authoritative the esoteric literature known as *tantras*, originally created in North India and equally influential in certain forms of Hinduism. In Tantric Buddhism, it is theoretically possible to attain enlightenment in one lifetime, not after several rebirths. It comes as no surprise that the path is even more demanding and, in many cases, aspects of the practice are deliberately frightening.

The Tantric logic is based on *controlled infractions of a taboo*, i.e. the rules of ritual and ideological purity are transcended or reversed, but not in a haphazard way.[97] Tantric teachings have both secret (esoteric) and non-secret (exoteric) interpretations. The secret aspects are open only to those initiated. Often this means actual physical access to the image of a deity. In the case of Newar Buddhism, the ones allowed access are the highest Buddhist sub-castes, partly the Śākyas and in the complete sense the Vajrācāryas (see Fig. 3). The Vajrācāryas are entitled to act as family priests to others, which ultimately gives them the supreme status comparable to Hindu Brahmin priests.

A distinctive feature in Newar Buddhist social organization is that the actual *sangha*, which means the Vajrācārya and Śākya caste sub-groups, consists not of celibate monks but householders. In pre-puberty, every boy of these groups undergoes a monastic initiation rite called *bare chuyegu* (Nw. 'making of a Bare'[98]), when he in fact spends four days as a monk. After the four days, the boy declares the life of a monk too difficult and asks permission to live the life of a householder. The initiation affirms the boy's status in the Buddhist community and obliges him to perform the ritual duties assigned for every member of the community in turn. He retains the status of a monk

[95] Ibid.
[96] It is common in Mahāyāna to call earlier Buddhist vehicles 'Hīnayāna', but since this is pejorative, in most cases I abstain from using the term.
[97] Ibid., 144.
[98] 'Bare' is a Newari term for Vajrācārya and/or Śākya.

without the usual commitments of full-time monkhood (e.g. celibacy) found in most other Buddhist traditions.

The *sangha* is a closed patrilineal descent group.[99] It is in close functional co-operation with local administrative units and religious associations or trusts known as *guthis*. They serve many different purposes, e.g. perform death rites or hold proprietary over land. Each Buddhist householder monk also belongs to a monastery (Skt. *vihāra*). A typical Newar Buddhist monastery consists of a courtyard enclosed by a two-storied, quadrangular building, with the main Buddha shrine opposite the entrance. Required elements are a *caitya*, a mandala, an exoteric Buddha shrine with usually the image of Śākyamuni Buddha, and a shrine for the secret Tantric deity. Monasteries are divided into two categories: the *bāhāḥ* (Nw.) are more common with Vajrācārya and/or Śākya members, whereas the *bahī* (Nw.) are nowadays less common and have Śākya members only. The Svayambhū area has a peculiar monastic community of its own, with both a *bāhāḥ* and a *bahī* (although only the former is active).

For lay Newars, the basic form of expressing religious commitment and devotion is worshipping deities and saintly figures in ritual.[100] According to Gellner, the three most common rituals in Newar Buddhism are the *guru maṇḍala* rite, flask worship (*kalaśa pūjā*) and fire sacrifice (*homa*).[101] These are the core of all other common ritual forms such as life-cycle rites, Tantric initiation and observances (*vrata*). Especially the *guru maṇḍala* rite belongs to almost every ritual occasion; the only notable exception is the daily worship of the main Buddha statue in monastic complexes.[102] For the correct performance of rites, each family has a family priest (*purohit*) who supervises the action and recites proper mantras. As noted above, the Vajrācāryas are the only ones permitted to do so (except at Svayambhū, where the special lineage of the Buddhācāryas is entitled to act as priests to their own family members). Worshippers direct devotion towards different facets of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, among which the most popular one, as in Tibet, is Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, in his different manifestations.[103]

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[99] Locke 1980, 13.
[100] Gellner 1992, 105-106, 135ff. Gellner defines ritual as "the combination of acts of worship of different sorts to form a whole" (ibid., 135).
[101] Ibid., 148.
[102] Gellner 2001, 74. In the *guru maṇḍala* rite, the guru in question is Vajrasattva, who has many other forms and symbolizes the Tantric Buddhist absolute. He is very important to the conception of Svayambhū.
[103] Usually 108 forms of Avalokiteśvara are identified (Locke 1980, 133). The bodhisattva is surprisingly enough an androgyne, since some of his manifestations are feminine. The popularity of Avalokiteśvara extends all over the Buddhist world, including India, Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan, Sri Lanka and Cambodia (ibid., 410-413). His traits of compassion and mercy appeal well to various worldly sorrows.

Some foreign observers have regarded Newar Buddhist ritual as Hindu in character. This, as Locke and Gellner point out, is a misconception.[104] Newar Buddhist ritual, especially in its higher Tantric forms, centres on the visualization (*sādhana*) or summoning of divinities who are very much Buddhist and by no means Hindu. As Locke observes, the masters who developed the rituals borrowed from the common Indian cultural heritage, but the *content* of the ritual is thoroughly Buddhist. One easily tends to interpret an aspect of Newar Buddhism as Hindu, because much of the cultural symbolism is in fact so similar. However, on a deeper level one should take notice of the identification of deities, since the visualized deity is the actual object of devotion.

So far, we have been concerned with Newar Buddhism only. What, then, is Newar Hinduism like? Gellner points out that the local terms for 'Hindu' and 'Buddhist' are *śivamārgī* and *buddhamārgī*.[105] This illustrates how the most common way of being 'Hindu' is to be a follower of Śiva. His emblems – such as the phallic *śivaliṅga* combined with the female counterpart *yoni,* his mount Nandi, a trident and so on – are widespread in the religious iconography of the Valley. His most commonly known form is the ascetic Paśupati, the 'Lord of the Animals',[106] but he also has many fierce Tantric forms (usually called Bhairavas). In the recent years, the Indian guru Sai Baba, who claims to be Śiva incarnate, has obtained a notable following in the Kathmandu Valley. Śiva's main shrine, the *Paśupatināth* temple, is an important pilgrimage site for Hindus all over South Asia; it is comparable on a smaller scale to Varanasi, the city of Śiva in India. Bathing in the waters of the holy Bāgmati river at Paśupatināth and having cremation there are especially auspicious events, which is why many Śaivites retire to live in its vicinity at the end of their lives. Gaṇeś, the elephant-headed son of Śiva, has statues all over the Valley. Devotees ask him to bring success to any new enterprise or to remove obstacles.

Viṣṇu, often depicted as Nārāyaṇa, is popular in the Valley and has many prominent shrines. Krṣṇa and Rāma are among his most popular incarnations. As in India, Newar Hindus consider Buddha the ninth incarnation of Viṣṇu and in this way subordinate the Buddhist doctrine to the religion of the Vedas. It is also notable that the king of Nepal is considered an incarnation of Viṣṇu. Of the traditional tripartite godhead in Hinduism (the *trimūrti* of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva), Brahmā is the one with the fewest iconographic representations.

[104] Ibid., 120-121; Gellner 1992, 159.
[105] Gellner 1992, 52. The postfix *–mārgī* denotes a follower of a particular path (*mārga*).
[106] The cult of Paśupati has originated in India during the reign of the Gupta dynasty (Parpola 1999, 291).

Feminine Hindu deities are popular in many forms. Pārvatī (the consort of Śiva), Durgā, Umā and Kālī as forms of Devī, Lakṣmi as the goddess of wealth and Sarasvatī as the goddess of wisdom and arts all receive widespread worship. Archaic female divinities have a very long history in the Valley. Power places of the Eight Mother Goddesses, the *aṣṭamātṛkās*, surround every city, and the cult of the living virgin goddess Kumārī is a unique feature of Newar religion.

Old Vedic gods like Indra and Agni are still important in the Nepalese pantheon. Of other archaic religious beliefs, central is the belief in *nāgas,* holy serpents that dwelled in the primordial lake that preceded the now inhabited Kathmandu Valley. Following Gellner, we may group the serpents along with fierce or capricious non-Sanskritic guardian deities (village or lineage deities), ancestors and the earth god.[107] In addition, shamanism still prevails in beliefs and practices, especially for healing purposes. Major areas of shamanism in Nepal are the northern hill areas where ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burmese origin widely apply shamanistic healing for various ailments. Many Nepalese also believe ghosts and demons to cause worldly trouble. In rituals, these receive conspicuously impure substances. Finally, ancestor worship is commonplace all over the country.

It is a geologically proven fact that the Kathmandu Valley was in fact a Pleistocine lake some 30 000 years ago.[108] How and when the lake dried out and human civilization was able to settle in is not exactly known, but the Newars have two myths that offer an explanation. The Hindu version accords credit for the drainage of the lake to Kṛṣṇa and his son Pradyumna.[109] The Buddhist version – the more popular one – claims that the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī cut open a gorge in order to help the water run out of the Valley. The reason why Mañjuśrī came to Nepal Valley in the first place was not plainly to establish civilization but to enable people to approach something especially sacred and venerable. This was the *Svayambhū jyotirūpa*, the self-existing light of Buddhahood, which emanated from a thousand-petalled lotus thrown into the lake by Vipaśvī Buddha[110] in the past. After Mañjuśrī had drained the lake, a *caitya* was needed to cover and protect the self-existing light now situated on top of a hill. The construction of the *caitya* was overseen by a king-turned-into-monk called Śantikarācārya, whom the highest-ranking Newar Buddhists claim as their forefather. This is an outline of the legendary beginning of the Svayambhūcaitya and its link to today's Newar religion.

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[107] Gellner 1992, 73.
[108] Brinkhaus 1987, 1.
[109] Ibid., 29.
[110] The first one of the seven human Buddhas dealt with later in the study.

D. FIELD RESEARCH

11. Description of the fieldwork

My first contact with Nepal – before the actual field research – was between 19 August and 4 December 2001, lasting three and a half months. I went to do voluntary work with my fiancée and stayed in Kathmandu the whole time, thus becoming fairly well acquainted with the surroundings of the city. We visited Svayambhū once and its aesthetics impressed us, but it did not yet occur to me that I would actually return to study it some day. During this trip, I also visited most other famous Hindu and Buddhist sites in the Valley, keenly learning to know the stories surrounding them. However, I remained rather perplexed by the paradoxes that seemed to characterise Newar religion. This first trip gave me an impression of Nepalese culture, but in retrospect, I cannot really say I understood much of what I saw. On the same trip, we spent another three and a half months travelling all over India. These seven months in South Asia served to expand my cross-cultural perspective and changed my preconceptions about South Asian people and their customs and beliefs.

After choosing comparative religion as my main subject in January 2003, I soon decided that the Master's thesis would be about Nepal. Fieldwork seemed like an exciting option, and since my single longest experience abroad had been in Kathmandu, I decided it was time to return there – only this time with more detailed scholarly ambitions. At this point, I had chosen as the subject of study the cult of the Living Goddess Kumārī, which is another quite central feature in local religion. To be on the safe side, I chose a second option before leaving, as I had heard of sudden problems one might encounter in the field. This option was the sacred hilltop of Svayambū.

The proper field period was between 29 July and 21 September 2003. The period was somewhat short, but the surroundings and the culture were already quite familiar to me. Therefore, it was possible to start working immediately without an extensive cultural shock. For most of the time, I stayed at the private guesthouse owned by FELM (the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission) in Patan, which was in an agreeable distance to Svayambhū. In the beginning, I contacted the director of the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) at Tribhuvan University, the best-known institution of higher education in Nepal. He appointed to me a research assistant, a local student of sociology, who could translate my questions into Newari, the language of most local

inhabitants. The assistant helped me with the interviews at first but unfortunately could not continue for long due to her other commitments.

As regards my own language skills, I had obtained some proficiency in reading the devanāgarī script of the Nepali language, but my conversational skills were still minimal. During fieldwork, I took Nepali lessons from a certified teacher, and although my skills did improve, there was not enough time to really get confident with the language. Furthermore, I learned that to really converse with the locals one should preferably speak Newari, which many consider more difficult to learn than Nepali. Being painfully aware of the importance of local language skills in anthropology and the deficiencies in interpretive accuracy when these skills are limited, I still had to admit that the only option would be to rely on translators while interviewing informants. Interpretation of verbatim statements is, of course, a great deal more uncertain when one has to rely on the interpretation of others. One can only hope that going through the material repeatedly will increase assurance of the informants' intended message. Fortunately, I could carry out some of the most important dialogues in English.

My field research started at the house of the Living Goddess Kumārī, where my assistant and me performed seven interviews of devotees in two separate rounds. However, at the end of the second day of interviews a major setback followed. The Kumārī is a young girl taken care of by a certain renowned family. For some reason the head of the family had arrived at the notion that I was working for the media and/or the interviews would bring me personal monetary profit (the very opposite being the truth). His son who sold refreshments in the inner courtyard came to tell this to my assistant and me quite angrily, which was a surprise since I thought he had already approved of my plans. My assistant tried to explain the real situation in vain, and it became clear that the interviews would have to end there and then. I tried to reconcile the caretakers with the help of a mutual friend, but the arriving big festival time kept them busy and they gave no answer.

At this point, two weeks had passed and I had to decide quickly how to proceed with the fieldwork. I had visited the Svayambhū site a few days earlier and had met a shopkeeper called Prem Śreṣṭha there. First, I had treated him cautiously, but he turned out to provide outstanding help with the proceedings of the study.[111] Mainly because of his generosity and contacts, I was able to make up for lost time quickly and concentrate

[111] I use pseudonyms of my informants for ethical reasons. Perhaps this would not be necessary, since e.g. some of David Gellner's Nepalese informants would insist on being called by their real names. Using pseudonyms may seem impolite or deceitful (Gellner 1992, xix). However, since I have obtained permission from only one of my key informants to use his name, I consider it even-handed to use pseudonyms throughout the study.

on this new subject. Moreover, he would help me with interviews conducted at Svayambhū, since he was a Newar but spoke also fluent English.[112]

The following weeks were spent in typical 'in the field' activities. On most days, I went to Svayambhū, sometimes before sunrise, sometimes later, observing the activity and discussing it all with my new friend, the shopkeeper. He introduced me to a local priest, another main informant. Occasionally I visited other temples, shrines and buildings in Kathmandu and Patan, sometimes with a tourist guide who had become my acquaintance, but quite often alone. Most of the hours back at my residence, I spent reading studies purchased in Kathmandu, writing diaries and other fieldnotes or socializing with the other Finns living in the Valley.

As I was studying Buddhism, it seemed a good idea to know what it is like to *be* a Buddhist in Nepal. At Svayambhū I was accepted as someone who respects the local religion, and during one discussion it was hinted that a certain Vipassanā meditation course would be just the proper thing to do. Instead of an expensive and popular monastery meant for westerners it would be in a place where the locals would go. The 10-day course would be demanding but valuable for my understanding of Buddhism. It would allow me to 'walk a mile in the moccasins of Nepalese Buddhists', so to say.[113] After a few days, I decided to take the course starting on 1 September. I partly spent the last few weeks in the field in personal practice of Vipassanā meditation on the outskirts of the Kathmandu Valley. Upon returning from the course, I discussed the results with my informants, gaining insight into what they thought of it. At this point, I only had a week left in Nepal, which was characterised by political turmoil, uncertainty and confusion. The government issued curfews, and the Maoists rebels declared a general strike in Kathmandu just when I was preparing to leave back home. In this time of political unrest, I concentrated on ensuring my return to Europe and worked on the material I had obtained so far.

[112] Unjust suspicion is of course not new in fieldwork, cf. Gothóni 1982, 116-117. During the incident at the Kumārī house I very much shared Gothóni's notion of becoming a *case* myself, since I thought I was being very conscious about the nonchalance and exploitative attitude of some westerners towards Nepal, but suddenly I had become a threat and an outsider – exactly what I wanted to avoid. Luckily, at Svayambhū none of these problems existed and I was well received.

[113] A reference to the American Indian saying 'Never judge a man till you've walked a mile in his moccasins.' As Gothóni (2000, 31) notes, Ninian Smart has uses this saying to express his attitude of informed empathy, with which the scholar attempts to "bring out what religious acts mean to the actors." (Smart 1996, 2.)

12. Methods of collecting material

In qualitative research, the collected primary material is usually the result of interviews, questionnaires, observation and the use of different documents that are available.[114] In the present study, I have applied all of these except questionnaires.[115] To begin with, interviews are best suited for receiving personal opinions, i.e. when the informants' own verbatim statements play the crucial role. The scale of different types of interviews is wide, ranging from questionnaire-like highly structured ones to thematic semi-structured ones, and finally to nearly free conversations with the minimum amount of structure (open-ended or depth interviews).[116] In addition, *dialogue* counts as a particular interview method in which the researcher participates in an experience as much as the informants allow him or her to.[117] Dialogue in a way transcends being a mere method, since it entails personal involvement and participating in a mutual sharing of an experience between the researcher and the informant. This implies Gadamer and Gothóni's hermeneutical and empathetic attitude, which I have attempted to apply.

To an extent, my interviews with the two Buddhācārya priests were indeed dialogues. However, I did my best to keep the situations as structured as possible in order to receive the information I was looking for. The numerous non-formal discussions I had with the shopkeeper, Prem Śreṣṭha, were other examples of situations that could be best characterised as dialogues. This reflects the fact that we had become familiar to each other and even friends. All other interviewees were less or not at all familiar to me, in which case it was more natural to use semi-structured or structured interviews. I did have a set of questions and topics for every interview; also with the Buddhācāryas.[118] However, the dialogue model seemed to work better with the priests.

The golden rule was always to adjust flexibly to different field situations. The basic set of topics used for interviews was not necessarily always in the same order, and I sometimes omitted or included questions depending on the context. The questions that seemed to matter for the interviewees and to which they were willing to give lengthy

[114] Tuomi *et al*. 2002, 73.
[115] I did make a questionnaire of 20 questions intended for westerners visiting Svayambhū. The purpose was to see how they feel about the place, what they know about it and why they have come. It turned out after a few tryouts that westerners were less keen on being asked things than locals, since they usually only came to the site for a short time and wanted to experience it in peace – or were in a hurry. It seemed both ethically ungrounded and unnecessary to carry on these rounds, especially since I was mainly interested in the viewpoint of the locals.
[116] Ibid., 76-80.
[117] Ibid., 80.
[118] See the questions in appendix II.

answers, received more space and attention. For example, I prepared set questions about the history of Svayambhū for Gautam Buddhācārya, but his way of answering was by narrating the origin myth of Svayambhū, the interruption of which would have been very impolite. After the narration was finished, I had received so much new information that I simply could not continue monotonously with my initial questions – they seemed to be totally out of context. I tried to check certain facts whenever there was a chance but could not always proceed with the questions in the planned way. Therefore, certain intuitiveness characterized the proceeding of the fieldwork. I recorded all interviews but one (by the interviewee's request), took notes of each interview, rewrote the origin myth narrative in the field diary and transliterated the interview of Ramesh Buddhācārya. For the others, exact transliterations were not very feasible because they were originally in Newari. For this reason, I always discussed the outcome of the interview situation afterwards with my translator, making notes and checking facts concerning my initial questions.

Observation is another basic field method.[119] It suits well for situations where the researcher does not yet have much information of a phenomenon. Naturally, it also extends outside these first moments and continues throughout the fieldwork. It is beneficial when e.g. religious practices ought to be observed in the way they actually happen, not through the lenses of informants, who in some cases may wish to embellish the meanings of these practices.[120] Observation thus reveals contradictions in the way things are done and how they are wished to be done (cf. Geertz's notion of ethos and worldview simultaneously effecting interpretations).

There are different types of observation depending on the level of participation.[121] In the case of Newar Buddhism, it is practically impossible for a foreigner to participate in all the nuances of the religious system because of caste regulations. David Gellner has noted in his influential study that in the Newar cultural and religious context, it seems impossible to participate *and* observe. Either one participates or observes but one cannot do both.[122] However, if participant observation means in the wide sense going to the field, *interacting* with people, getting to know them and sharing some parts of their daily life together, my fieldwork at Svayambhū indeed consisted of participant

[119] Ibid., 83ff; Grönfors 1982.
[120] For the Nepalese it is often more important to answer questions in a satisfying way, not necessarily by giving a 'correct' answer. A long-time resident gave an example of a trekking guide being asked the name of a near-by village in the countryside. His answer to the foreigners was *sāno gāŭ*, which literally means simply 'small village'. It was more important to invent an answer than to say 'I don't know' (Field diary I, 1). In my fieldwork, I often felt I was not getting the 'simple' answer I had hoped for, but as the conversation continued, eventually the answer came, often is a surprising way though.
[121] Tuomi *et al*. 2002, 84.
[122] Gellner 1992, 7.

observation. I became somewhat acquainted with the community – the souvenir vendors, the priests, the café owners etc. Nevertheless, since the area is an open-to-all place instead of a closed community, there was no real need for intense participation in daily routines, as is the case e.g. when one studies more secluded religious communities. The locals accepted that I was simply a student of Svayambhū, wishing to learn about the place and Nepalese religion and culture in general. Thus, I often merely walked around observing what happened – naturally in a quiet and pious manner so as not to cause unnecessary attention. Sometimes my local informants joined in these observation walks and we discussed religious iconography, sociocultural life and other relevant issues. When appropriate, I recorded sounds of worship sitting quietly in a corner somewhere. When it started to become too dark outside or I had other reasons for leaving Svayambhū and returning to my residence, there was no need to report to anyone (except I usually said goodbye to the shopkeeper before leaving). Hence, my ties with the community were ultimately rather loose.

Because field observations need to be written down, a notebook was present wherever I went. Clifford argues for three different processes in which note taking actually takes place.[123] The first one is *inscription*, in which the participant-observer immediately writes down important remarks in the middle of social discourse. These notes are sometimes called scratch notes.[124] The second process is *transcription*, in which the researcher asks questions in a more structured manner. The third and final process is *description*, the making of a more or less coherent and systematic representation of field observations.[125] I used my two notebooks for all of these purposes. The notebooks contain inscriptions of immediate social situations, organized transcriptions, a proper daily diary, and some broader religious and cultural reflections. They also include illustrations, tables, remarks and quotations from research literature in local libraries[126]. The overall tone of each day's accomplishments is in the diary, which served as a safety valve in frustrating and stressful situations. Keeping a diary is important in fieldwork, because the spelling-out of difficulties is apt for freeing psychic energy, which in turn may open up new and exciting vistas of interpretation.

In addition to written fieldnotes, I took three rolls of pictures, collected newspaper articles and bought books and religious objects.[127] I obtained insight into daily

[123] Clifford 1990.
[124] Sanjek 1990, 95-97. Naturally, the technique itself does not define inscription – in some cases, a dictating machine may replace the notebook, and modern ethnographers consider using other tools such as laptops.
[125] Clifford 1990, 51.
[126] The library of CNAS at Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur and the Lotus Research Centre library in Patan.
[127] E.g. a *vajra*, an old *thangka* painting and scrolls in Newari, Sanskrit and Tibetan.

events from discussions with my Finnish landlady and other Finnish people, by reading local newspapers and browsing the Internet. The web proved a useful source of archived newspaper articles on Svayambhū and other subjects.

13. Evaluation of the material and methods

A scholarly study should meet certain standard criteria concerning validity and reliability.[128] *Validity* can be inner validity, which means that the theoretical and conceptual framework is itself logical and coherent, or outer validity, in which case the possible hypotheses, the material and the conclusions should form a coherent whole.[129] In other words, the theoretical background ought to be meaningful as far as the research question is concerned, and the material must likewise 'fit in'. The researcher must study what he or she has promised to study.

One way of increasing the validity of a study is *triangulation,* which practically means combining different methods, researchers, sources or theories.[130] Triangulation may relate to the research material, the number of researchers, theoretical viewpoints or methods of collecting and analysing material. I have used this kind of an approach in my material (by choosing different kinds of informants instead of only one specific group) and in the methods (by combining interviews, observation and textual sources in collecting material and by using rather flexible analysis methods). I hope this to increase the breadth of the investigation and take it to a more holistic direction, which I think the idea of thick description also suggests. To interview only priests would be convenient were one to study *only* them, but in order to understand the religious and cultural sphere of Svayambhū in general, more viewpoints need consideration. In part, my initial problems in fieldwork necessitated this approach, as after having to choose another subject I had to abandon many initial strategies and tack together new ones rather quickly. Consequently, in the field I could sometimes feel time running out, which may have affected the coherence of the material. However, I have attempted to acknowledge this problem as much as possible in the later stages of the work process.

[128] These traditional standard criteria are sometimes contested in newer qualitative study guidebooks. See Tuomi *et al*. 2002, 134.
[129] Grönfors 1982, 174.
[130] Ibid., 140-146.

A study should also be *reliable*, i.e. testable, congruent, objective and to an extent repeatable (especially in quantitative studies).[131] In qualitative studies, repeatability is usually less important than inner coherence and logic; all parts of the material should primarily speak of the same thing. This coherence of the whole is a good standard for evaluating a qualitative study, where one examines meanings instead of attempting to find eternal laws.[132] My study process is not repeatable as such, but it is rather a unique case where I have collected material based on my own preconceptions and goals. A holistic study where different types of material are collected is always a result of personal choices, of which some are perhaps more generally approvable than others. It is an inherent trait of the art of qualitative research to find new and integrative ways of making sense of the world. In this study, I have attempted to make sense of the world of Svayambhū to an outsider such as myself, with the theoretical ambition to understand and interpret the symbolism, ritual life, mythology and sociocultural setting of the place. I have intuitively endorsed a holistic approach to acquiring the material, which renders the material admittedly quite diverse. Although at times I have wondered whether it would have been better to concentrate on a more limited body of material, eventually I consider the material quite coherent. I have been able to compare the statements of the informants with my own observations and textual sources, and during the latter detachment phase, I have found many connections in the material that were not seen in the field. Therefore, a considerably clearer picture of the whole has emerged in the end.

Especially in case studies one should also consider the representativeness of the case, i.e. how well it connects with the bigger whole.[133] On the one hand, I regard Svayambhū as a tremendously good representative of Newar Buddhism, since the Svayambhūcaitya is *the* exemplary Newar *caitya.* On the other hand, it is a rather problematic example exactly due to its prototypical position. The tension needs to be acknowledged. However, instead of seeing this as a problem I consider it an important reason to study Svayambhū as something with a unique character.

[131] Ibid., 175. Strict repeatability is normally not required in qualitative studies due to the nature of the subject matter. See e.g. Gothóni 2002a, 156.
[132] Tuomi *et al*. 2002, 135.
[133] Gothóni 1982, 125.

E. CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF SVAYAMBHŪ

14. On analysing the material

What we commonly call analysis actually means two things. First, in the proper sense of the word *analysis*, the material is separated and broken down into conceptual segments or more abstract units. Second, the latter part consists of *synthesis*, i.e. rebuilding or connecting these findings into conclusions – the actual end result of a study.[134] Analysis – in the broad sense – already begins in the field. The researcher builds initial hypotheses and models based on the data received there, attempting to place small pieces of information into larger ethnographic and theoretical contexts. More systematic analysis only takes place after the fieldwork, i.e. when one is detached from the involvements that were necessary in the first place.

To analyse the material, I have applied a methodological combination of phenomenography and content analysis. *Phenomenography* is a method of analysis that focuses on the conceptions people have of the phenomena they encounter. The purpose is to discern qualitative variations in people's conceptions and experiences, i.e. how they understand things. According to Marton, a conception in this sense is "a way of being aware of something."[135] There is an internal relation between the subject who experiences and the object, viz. that which is experienced. The phenomenographic approach is very useful in discerning the *meanings* people give to phenomena in interviews and dialogues. I have gone through the interview material repeatedly; underlining expressions, categorizing them, and reflecting the outcome against the information found in secondary sources. It became apparent during the field period that different sociocultural groups give rather different types of meanings. This theme will appear in the chapters concerning opinions of lay informants and the Buddhācārya priests.

Content analysis is a general method for organizing the content of a material. However, its applicability does not extend to making conclusions proper; they remain the intellectual and hermeneutical effort of the researcher.[136] Content analysis is especially useful for structuring the general mass of material into meaningful wholes. If

[134] Grönfors 1982, 145.
[135] Marton 1994, 4426.
[136] Tuomi *et al.* 2002, 105; Grönfors 1982, 161.

phenomenography suits the interview material particularly well (although not only that), content analysis is applicable as a more general tool for a wide range of material – including field observations and texts.

In content analysis, as in phenomenography, the researcher builds reduced segments from the material corpus. There are three basic approaches of choosing the more abstract conceptual units in qualitative research. In the first approach, they are shaped on the basis of the material itself; hence it is said that the units or themes 'arise from the material'. The second approach is theory-oriented, which means that a certain theoretical framework guides the choice of analytical units, although they are still chosen from the material itself. In the third approach, the units are explicitly derived from the theoretical frame of reference, fashioned as answers to the already known theoretical questions.

I do not think that analytical unit simply 'arise from the material', if this means denying the role of the researcher, who indeed makes the choices, no matter how self-evident they may seem. On the other hand, the abstractized units should correspond to the actual 'moods' in the field and not be rendered eclectically, based on the rhetoric ambitions of the researcher. Ethnographic evidence ought to be transparently visible. Furthermore, the researcher should throughout the study be aware of the theoretical conditions that define the general standpoint in the work. Of the three approaches described above I have arrived at the middle one, the theory-oriented approach. In choosing the analytical themes, I have attempted to remain as loyal as possible to the verbatim statements and observations in the material. Nonetheless, the explicated theoretical orientation and previous ethnographic studies have guided the choice of units.

Deciding the actual units has been a rather difficult and time-consuming process. At first I was to build the analytical framework on a three-level model, where the levels of individual, organization and society would be considered.[137] Then I reshaped my approach and considered a central theme of 'elements of religious practice and belief at Svayambhū' to define the enterprise better. Now the order of the above-mentioned three levels changed. Next I applied Ninian Smart's idea of dimensionality. Smart has distinguished between nine (originally seven) dimensions of the sacred, which he claims are and have been common themes in religious life all over the world and help to understand the phenomenological variety of religions. The dimensions in question are: 1) the ritual/practical, 2) the doctrinal/philosophical, 3) the mythic/narrative, 4) the experien-

[137] Cf. Gothóni 1982. There would have been seven sub-chapters in all three main chapters.

tial/emotional, 5) the ethical/legal, 6) the organizational/social, 7) the material/artistic, 8) the political and 9) the economical dimension.[138]

Dimensional thinking provides a useful tool for attempting to understand a sacred site as holistically as possible. However, closer scrutiny of the material revealed that these dimensions would not correspond well enough to the themes I considered central in this particular material. Ironically, Smart's all-encompassing framework seemed too rigid for the needs of the study. The analytical units were rebuilt once more, and thus we arrive at the present form. I would like to call the following chapters contexts. According to Dilley, a plausible way to think of context (and interpretation, for that matter) is in terms of *connections*.[139] To place things in a context is to find relevant connections, i.e. to link different parts together.[140] The etymology of the Latin word *contexere* suggests this ('to weave together', 'to interweave', 'to join together').[141] I have built contexts as analytical units through a series of decisions on focal points – the names of the respective chapters. They have been formed primarily so as to represent salient themes in the field material, but in some cases certain observations of previous scholars have also influenced them (e.g. chapters 16 and 17). The aim has been to build a conversational model between the primary and the secondary material – however so that the reader does not have to guess which one I am referring to.

I have not abstained from interpreting the findings in the course of the analysis. On the contrary, I have attempted to draw some initial concluding remarks at the end of each chapter. As a whole, I hope that the themes will present Svayambhū with richness of detail, depth, breadth and complexity.

The next chapter is a general description of the area. This is not yet analysis proper but helps the reader to become acquainted with the surroundings. Then the central feature of the area, the Svayambhūcaitya, is analyzed with an emphasis on its rich religious symbolism. The next context concerns ritual life and opinions of lay devotees. After that the focus will be on the religious specialists, the Buddhācāryas, and their social role, religious duties and elements of their worldview and ethos. This is to show the ideological and culturally determined frame of reference through which they operate as custodians of Svayambhū. Next, the creation myth that plays an important part in defining Svayambhū is examined. Then Svayambhū's significance to non-Newar Buddhists is reflected with a focus on one Tibetan monastery. The next theme is the nationally inclined religious identification process, followed by certain contemporary conflicts that

[138] Smart 1996, 10-11.
[139] Dilley 1999, 2.
[140] Ibid., 37.
[141] Ibid., 4.

reflect religious and cultural dilemmas. Finally, the important theme of how to interpret religious symbolism at Svayambhū will be discussed. As different semantic possibilities exist, I have chosen a rather controversial topic, 'Is Svayambhū Hindu in disguise?'

15. Description of the area

The Svayambhūcaitya stands on a hilltop on the western outskirts of the city of Kathmandu (see Fig. 5 and Plates 1 & 2 on the following page). The greater Svayambhūnāth area includes two hills: the eastern peak with the actual *caitya* itself and the western peak called Mañjuśrī Hill. Seen from afar the twin peaks seem to form a figure of an oxtail; hence their common name Oxtail Mountain (*Gopuccha parvat*).[142] The greater Svayambhūnāth area forms a large circumambulation route for devotees, and lines of prayer wheels surround the area. Brown rhesus monkeys live on the densely forested hills. Hence, tourists often get to know the Svayambhūcaitya as the Monkey Temple.

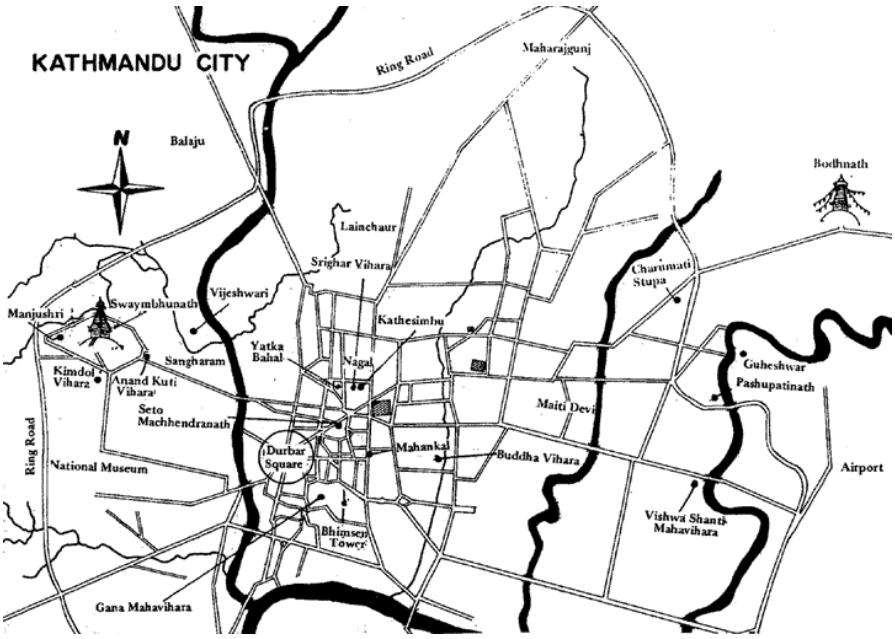

Figure 5. Map of Kathmandu showing Svayambhū ('Swaymbhunath') on the left.[143]

[142] E.g. Shakya 2001, 33. This is the name in the present world age (Kaliyuga). Different names were used in the previous three world ages (Padmagiri in Satyayuga, Vajrakūṭa in Tretāyuga and Gośṛṅga in Dvāparayuga).
[143] From Majupuria *et al.* 1987.

Plate 1. Sunset in Svayambhū. On a clear day, the distant Himalayas are visible. Photo © Dilip B. Ali.

Plate 2. The Hanuman Dhoka (old royal palace) at Kathmandu Durbar Square with the Svayambhū hilltop seen between the roofs in the distance.

If one approaches the Svayambhūcaitya from the west, there are paths along gentle slopes that will eventually lead to a bus park in the saddle between the two peaks. From there, one can continue up towards the western hill and a *caitya* built for Mañjuśrī, along with many other smaller votive *caityas*. Near the bus park, there is a Bhutanese Buddhist monastery. This is where several hawkers, tourist guides and souvenir vendors welcome the visitor. At the time of the fieldwork, western visitors were to pay a nominal entrance fee of 50 rupees to the main peak.

The *focal area* in this study is the eastern hilltop where the centre of attention, the Svayambhūcaitya, is located (see Fig. 6 on the following page). This area forms a distinguishable geographical unit. It attracts the most visitors (devotees and tourists) and has an extremely dense accumulation of religious symbolism. The area can be approached either from the bus park mentioned above, when one climbs a short flight of stairs and arrives at the north-west corner, or by climbing the steep eastern stairway, which diverges so that one entrance to the area is on the northern side of the main *caitya* and another on the eastern side. This last entrance is by far the most popular one. Officials collect a fee of 50 rupees from foreigners just before the top of these stairs (see Plate 3).

Plate 3. A ticket to Svayambhū with a view on the upper end of the eastern stairs. Photo credits unknown.

Figure 6. Map of the main Svayambhū area.

The journey begins from the bottom of the auspicious eastern stairway, where you can pay attention to the religious symbolism while climbing towards the hilltop. First, you pass through a large ornamented gate and a set of prayer wheels, all containing the mantra of Avalokiteśvara, *Om mani padme hum*. Next, there are small *caityas*, two guardian lions and three large statues of Akṣobhya Buddha in the earth-touching gesture. You then arrive at the first platform where there are four *caityas* and four statues of the Five Buddhas (*pañcabuddhas)* in two groups. Next up, you see a *caitya*, statues of Kumār and Gaṇeś (sons of Śiva), stone carvings, souvenir stalls along the stairs,

Plate 4. The final approach along the eastern stairway towards the hilltop.

more small *caityas*, an embedded statue of Śri Māyādevī, another row of *caityas* and two more statues with the Five Buddhas on sides.You arrive at another wide platform where there are two statues of Akṣobhya, one of Ratnasambhava, and some 20 votive *caityas*. Near the top the stairs get steeper (see Plate 4), and they are lined with icons of the mounts of the Five Buddhas (one on each side): Garuḍas with serpents (*nāgas*), peacocks, horses, elephants, lions and finally, on the summit level, a pair of guardian lions.

At the top, you first face a large thunderbolt (*vajra*) resting on a pedestal with figures of the 12 animals of the Tibetan calendar. In the pedestal, there is a large Dharmadhātuvāgīśvara-maṇḍala (to be discussed later). Nearby are the legendary and venerated footprints of the Buddha.[144] You now face the Svayambhūcaitya from the east. On each side of the *caitya,* there are two cone-shaped temples (*śikaras*): Anantapur to the south and Pratappur to the north.[145]

[144] This is a common way throughout the Buddhist world to show him having actually visited a holy site. The tradition goes back to the early tales of the Buddha and his travels. See e.g. Strong 2001, 177-179.
[145] The Pratappur *śikara* caught fire in August 2003 and collapsed in September before renovations were completed. I will discuss this incident later. As for now, I present the area how it was when I first arrived.

Before continuing, it is worthwhile to perceive the overall structure of the area. Apart from the dominating Svayambhūcaitya, other pieces divide into *temples and shrines*, *monasteries* and *other elements.* A very popular *pagoda*-shaped temple of Hārītī, the goddess of smallpox and other diseases, lies to the northwest of the main *caitya*. Scattered around the area, there are five very old shrines dedicated to the five elements of sky, air, fire, earth and water. Adjacent to the sky element is Śantipur, one of the most legendary shrines in the area. Vasupur (earth) in the south attracts many devotees as well. Of the remaining three elements, Vayupur (air) is a separate building like the previous two, whereas Agnipur (fire) and Nāgpur (water) are plainly small fenced stone structures.

There are two monasteries close to the Svayambhūcaitya: the Tibetan Buddhist Karmarāj Mahāvihār to the north and the Bhutanese Deva Dharma Mahāvihār to the west. The main Newar Buddhist monastery, Samhyeṅgu Mahāvihār (the lineage *bāhāḥ* of the Buddhācārya priests), is located a little further on the western side of the area. Nearby is the Samhyeṅgu *bahī,* an old monastery of the Śākya clan. It does not currently accommodate an active *sangha,* although an extended family still lives there.[146] The *bāhāḥ* of the Buddhācāryas is active, and it houses their personal secret Tantric shrine.

Other elements in the area are many. There is a modest museum of Buddhist iconography in the southwest corner. Next to it, there is a covered open area for recitals of holy texts (also a pilgrims' shelter). Statues of Buddhas and bodhisattvas are scattered around the area, and a so-called *caitya park* with 34 smaller *caityas* lies near the Hārītī temple. Tibetan, Bhutanese and Newar Buddhist monks each have their own living quarters. Other elements include a terrace in the southeast with fine views over Kathmandu (see Plate 5 on the following page), two restaurants and a Tibetan teahouse. Finally, there are over a dozen shops and souvenir stalls, the product range including everything from CDs and photography accessories to incense, maps, books, posters, Tibetan prayer flags, statues, masks and *thangka* paintings. The most revered religious objects lie right in the midst of the bustle of the tourist trade.

[146] Sharkey 2001, 233.

Plate 5. Prayer flags with the city of Kathmandu in the background. Taken on the viewing terrace at Svayambhū.

16. The Svayambhūcaitya – its physical parts and symbolism

The main *caitya* is the focal point of the area. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine its parts, their symbolic interpretation and the relevant deities in the Buddhist pantheon.[147] I shall not consider the construction process of the *caitya* in detail, since extensive studies on this subject are available elsewhere.

The Svayambhūcaitya dates from the fifth century CE.[148] Throughout the centuries, it has gone through numerous renovations, some sponsored by local Hindu rulers, others by Tibetan lamas and still others by affluent merchants. It has been destroyed by natural disasters and reconstructed again. According to my knowledge, no illustrations

[147] A comprehensive analysis of these symbolic elements would need much more space than is available in this study. It would entail a detailed description of the Hindu cosmologic system, its application to the Buddhist context, manifestations of dozens of deities in different aspects etc. A good overview of the symbolism of the *caitya* (*stūpa*) in general is Snodgrass 1992.
[148] Gutschow 1997, 28-29. The dating relies on the first inscriptions that mention the *caitya*. Legends claim it to be considerably older.

Plate 6. The Svayambhūcaitya and the author.

of its original form have been preserved. Today it is 27 metres high and its circumference is ca. 20 metres, which makes it one of the largest *caityas* in Nepal. Bigger still is the Tibetan Buddhist Bodhnāth *caitya* in eastern Kathmandu, which is some 15 metres higher and has a circumference of at least 30 metres. Both *caityas* were constructed approximately at the same time, and they are among the oldest ones in the Kathmandu Valley. Older still are the so-called Aśokan *stūpas*, which presumably date from the third or fourth century CE.

The parts of the Svayambhūcaitya are shown in Fig. 7 on the following page. The whole structure rests on a pedestal or plinth, which itself lies symbolically in the primordial ocean. Above the pedestal is the white hemispherical dome made of clay and stones. It is referred to as a womb (*garbha*) or an egg (*aṇḍa*), symbolically representing the container of the universe or the innermost centre of the cosmos.[149] Above the dome rises the gilded square block (*harmikā*) with the staring pair of eyes and a nose-like figure facing all four cardinal directions. Some interpreters call the eyes simply those of the Buddha, but a more precise interpretation links them to Vairocana, one of the Five

[149] Snodgrass 1992, 189. The following symbolic interpretations are from secondary sources (Shrestha 2002, Snodgrass 1992 and Gutschow's descriptions at the Patan museum exhibition of religious art).

Celestial Buddhas located in the middle of the *caitya* and representing wisdom and compassion.[150] The nose-like figure also resembles a question mark or the Nepali number *ek* (one). It can be seen as a symbol of unity or light that the dot between the eyes emits. The dot (*urna*) resembles a third-eye, a sign of an auspicious person. Above the square block, also facing each direction, are tympana (*torana*) with metal cast images of the Five Buddhas. Continuing further up, we see the thirteen gilded spires that I will return to shortly. Above the spires, there is a myrobalan[151], the crest jewel, and finally the pinnacle. Lines with Tibetan prayer flags of different colours ornament the structure.

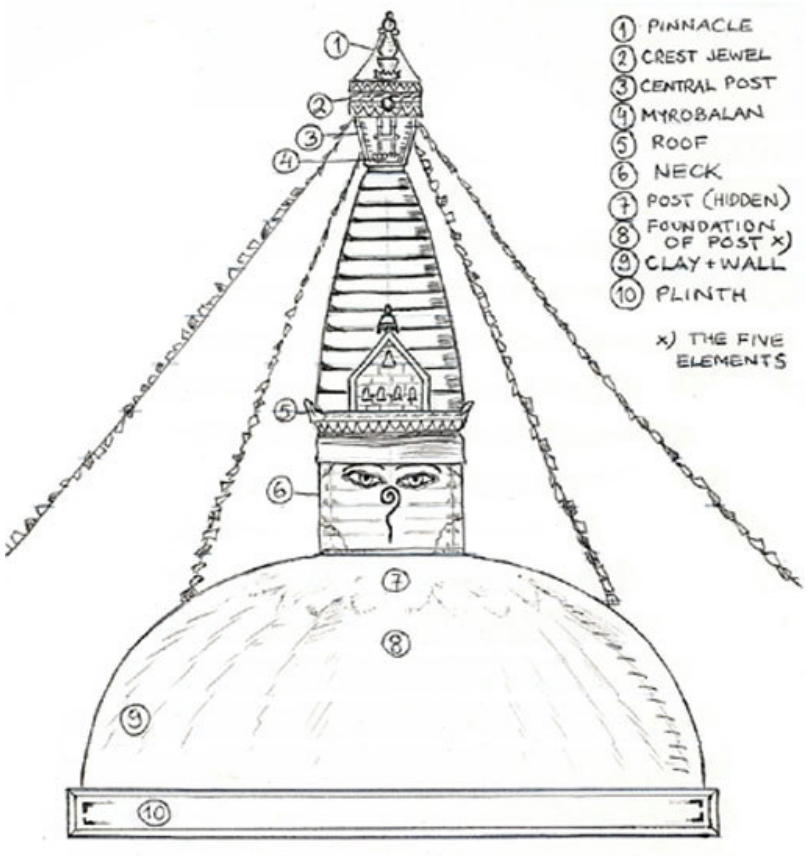

Figure 7. Parts of the Svayambhūcaitya.[152]

[150] K.M. Shrestha 2002, 16. One informant said eyes in a *caitya* represent compassion and peace, but the former division between wisdom (prajñā) and compassion (karuṇā) has more doctrinal grounds.
[151] (Lat.) f*ructus chebulae.* A dried fruit resembling a prune, believed to increase the creative powers of thought. It is associated with the Buddha as his 'chosen herb'.
[152] The original version of the drawing is found in Gutschow 1997. Shrines of the Five Buddhas and their consorts are omitted.

It is fruitful to think of the symbolism of *caityas* in analogical terms, viz. so that the referent of a given part is not understandable empirically or rationally but on a supra-empirical level.[153] As Snodgrass observes, the Indian (and *mutatis mutandis* Nepalese) way of perceiving symbols is anagogic (Gk. *anagō*, 'to lead up to'), "leading the understanding upward to a metaphysical meaning."[154] A *caitya* serves many purposes besides its practical function as container of relics or other holy objects. On the deeper soteriological level, it assists a devotee in the perpetual task to strive towards nirvana, serving as a reminder of the essential Buddhist principles.

In both Hindu and Buddhist thinking, there is a strict analogy between the *macrocosm* and the *microcosm*.[155] The Svayambhūcaitya, like all *caityas* and other vertical three-dimensional mandalic structures, is a clear representation of both. It is a model of the universe, the central pole acting as Mt Meru, the *axis mundi* in South Asian cosmology.[156] Likewise, it is a model of the human body, the central pole now representing the spinal column and parts of the *caitya* corresponding to the cyclical centres (*cakras*) in the body. The Svayambhūcaitya is the interlocking element between the universes both within and beyond the body. It represents primordial cosmic reality and establishes the centre of the universe, but it also stands as an example and inspiration for a Buddhist practitioner whose task it is to govern the physical body and the subtle body.[157] In this sense, the whole *caitya* very concretely and visually represents the ascent towards ultimate enlightenment.

The thirteen gilded spires have a similar function in a condensed form. These rings are symbols of meditative stages one is to reach on the way to nirvana. They have different names that derive from various Buddhist textual sources (e.g. the *Ācārya Kriyā Sangraha,* a local Tantric ritual guide). Gautam Buddhācārya, the local priest initiated as a Tantric master, revealed to me a set of names supposedly given in Tantric initiation. Various features such as seed syllables, donors, bodhisattva worlds (*bhūmi*) and perfections (*pāramitā*) connect symbolically to each spire.[158] The rings are thus laden with complex meanings. This wide-ranging system derives both from the early ideals of Mahāyāna (of which examples are the bodhisattva worlds and perfections) and later Vajrayāna formulations (the Tantric ritual guidelines).

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[153] Analogies were used systematically throughout the Vedic literature tradition and continued to be applied in the Buddhist Tantras; see Wayman 1995, 30ff.
[154] Snodgrass 1992, 3.
[155] Snodgrass 1992, 360.
[156] The symbolic centre in fact represents both the cosmic mountain and the cosmic tree (Brauen 1997, 27).
[157] The Mahāyāna doctrine of the three bodies (*kāyas*) sees the *dharmakāya* as the highest one. The *caitya* is also a representation of this formless body and as such an ethereal manifestation of the Ultimate.
[158] Gutschow 1997, 87.

In fact, the symbolism goes back even further in Buddhist history, as the spire in a *caitya* bears resemblance to the parasol, another central Buddhist emblem since pre-Mahāyānist times.[159] An ancient token of a king, the parasol has referred to the supreme cosmic status of the Buddha, and similar regal undertones are not very far-fetched when one looks at the Svayambhūcaitya. It does not require much imagination to see the painted eyes below the gilded spire (a crown) as standing for a human character. The Svayambhūcaitya is commonly deified and worshipped in Newar Buddhist rituals, e.g. in the reading of the Mahāyānist text *prajñāpāramitā* (The Perfection of Wisdom).[160] Moreover, the looks of the *caitya* and a Vajrācārya priest wearing a ritual crown (with the Five Buddhas on the sides) offer many points of resemblance. Identification with Vajrasattva, the prime guru in Vajrayāna, is the combining element that links the human organic realm and the supra-organic realm.[161]

The human-like character of the Svayambhūcaitya is not surprising, as the *caitya* form in itself is a three-dimensional representation of the human body. The painted eyes on the *harmikā* are not widely found in *caityas* around the Buddhist world, but in Nepalese *caityas* they are a commonly used element. In a strictly material sense, the Svayambhūcaitya is perhaps a beautiful example but by no means exceptional among the Nepalese *caityas*. In one locality in central Kathmandu, there is a smaller replica of the Svayambhūcaitya. Nevertheless, the symbolic meanings the *caitya* has as the prototype amongst all others are without a doubt unique, as the discussion in the following chapters will show.

17. Deities of the Svayambhūcaitya and seeing the *caitya* as a mandala

An essential feature in interpreting the symbolism of the Svayambhūcaitya is seeing it as a mandala. As von Rospatt has clearly illustrated, mandalic thinking exists from the very inception of any Vajrayāna *caitya*.[162] The construction process includes an initial ritual consecration (*sūtrapātana*) of the ground upon which the *caitya* will be erected. A rectangular layout of 81 fields is traced with a yellow thread, after which 40 pegs are

[159] Snodgrass 1992, 324.
[160] Gellner 1996, 226.
[161] Vajrasattva is the most often worshipped guru in Newar Buddhist rituals; cf. n. 102.
[162] Von Rospatt 1999, 3-11.

stuck on the sides. This complex of fields and pegs forms a mandala with 121 deities.[163] The most important deities are the Five Buddhas (*pañcabuddhas*), whose shrines are located around the Svayambhūcaitya along with the four shrines of their consorts (*tārās*). Fig. 8 illustrates their positions:

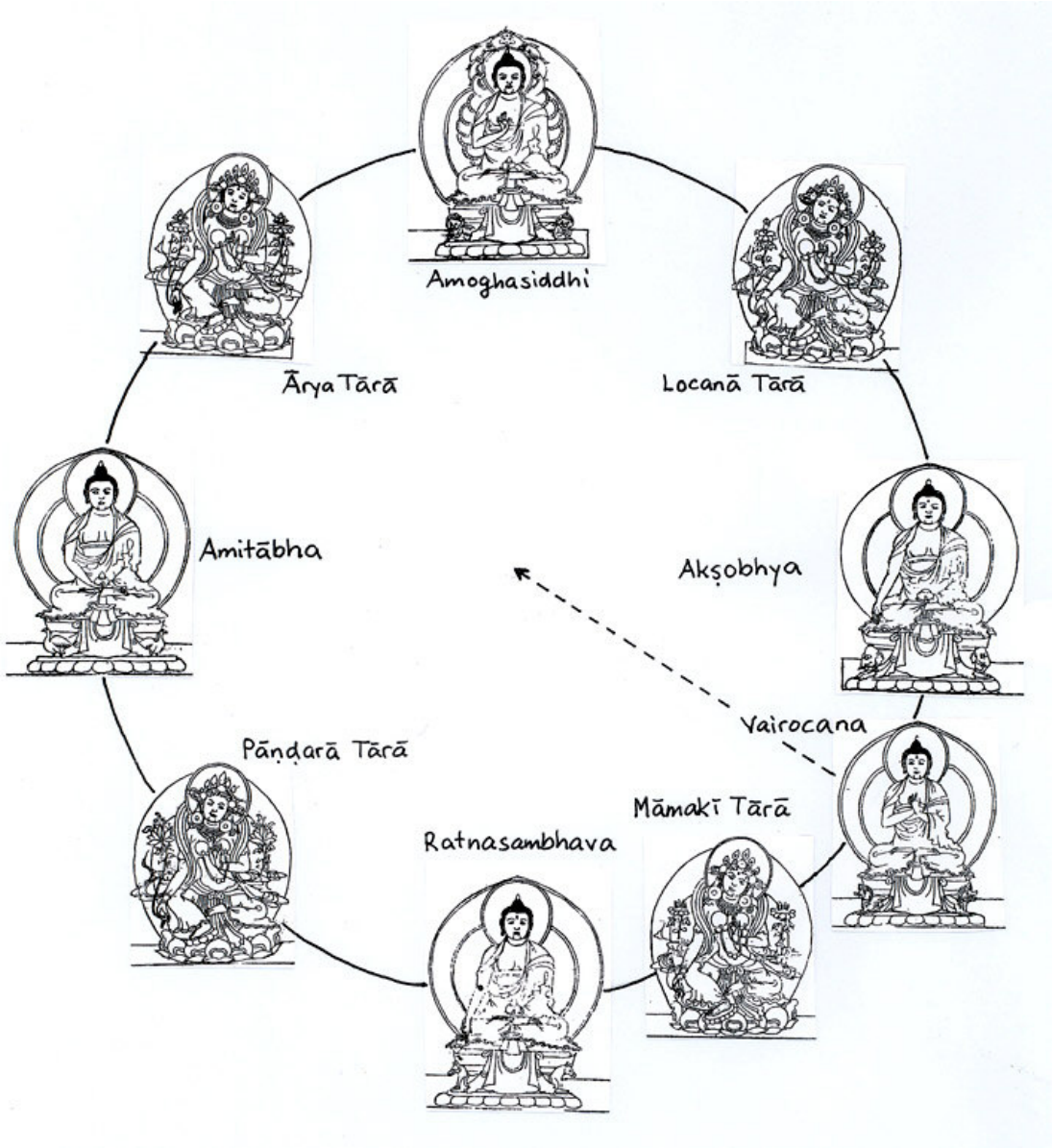

Figure 8. The Five Buddhas and their consorts around the *caitya*.[164]

The Five Buddhas (or Tathāgatas) have a central role in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhist pantheons. They are embodiments of the five aspects or wisdoms of an

[163] Ibid., 3.
[164] Individual pictures, which I have combined, are from Hodgson 1972. Vairocana often resides invisibly in the centre, which the arrow indicates. In this case, he has been built a visible shrine.

enlightened consciousness.[165] At first, in early Mahāyāna, only two of them (Akṣobhya and Amitābha) existed independently, the other three being later additions of the early Vajrayāna period.[166] All Five Buddhas have celestial consorts called Tārās around the *caitya*. The only exception is the consort of Vairocana who has no human form or shape and is not identifiable in the same manner. Tārā ('the Saviouress') is the general identification of the feminine aspect in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism, her most common forms being Green and White Tārā.[167] In the Svayambhūcaitya, Green Tārā (a.k.a. Ārya Tārā) has a place next to her consort Amoghasiddhi.

The theory of the Five Buddhas is very elaborate. It results from numerous correlations that derive from different stages of development in South Asian thought.[168] The following table illustrates the Five Buddhas and what they represent:[169]

	Vairocana	**Akṣobhya**	**Ratnasambhava**	**Amitābha**	**Amoghasiddhi**
direction	Centre	East	South	West	North
consort	Vajradhateśvori	Locanā Tārā	Māmakī Tārā	Pāṇḍarā Tārā	Ārya Tārā
bodhisattva	Ghantapāṇi	Samantabhadra	Ratnapāṇi	Padmapāṇi	Viswapāṇi
family	tathāgata	vajra	ratna	padma	karma
mount	lion	elephant	horse	peacock	Garuḍa
colour	white	blue	yellow	red	green
human Buddha	Krakucchanda	Kanakamuni	Kāśyapa	Śākyamuni	Maitreya
element	water	sky / space	earth	fire	air
mudrā	teaching (dharmacakra)	earth touching (bhūmisparśa)	gift bestowing (varada)	meditation (dhyāna)	fearlessness (abhaya)
symbol	cakra	vajra	ratna	padma	viśvavajra
taste	sweet	pungent	saline	acidic	bitter
syllable	oṃ	hūṃ	traṃ	hrīḥ	āḥ

Table 1. The Five Buddhas, their family members, characteristics and associations.

[165] Gothóni & Māhapañña 1990, 102. They can be seen as embodiments of the different stages in the enlightenment of the Buddha, which e.g. their hand gestures (*mudrās*) symbolize.
[166] Gellner 1992, 252.
[167] Harvey 1990, 137. At least Yellow Tārā is also known in Nepal. In higher Tantric rituals the sexual-symbolic union of the male and female counterparts is what distinguishes the rites and their relevant doctrines from more common lay rituals, where the consorts are venerated asexually and on the basis of their individual characteristics.
[168] However, the Buddhist Guhyasamāja Tantra is likely to be the most essential text in formulating the doctrine (Locke 1980, 127).
[169] The list is a combination of Gothóni & Māhapañña 1990, 103; Shrestha 2002, 11ff, and my own previous list in Field diary I, 45.

The Five Buddhas are heads of so-called Buddha families. They are also associated with e.g. particular wisdoms, mind pollutants, seasons and times of day. They reflect teachings of the Buddhist universe (the macrocosm) and the respective traits of sentient beings (the microcosm). As such, these features represent different aspects of the religious universe symbolically associated with Svayambhū. The Svayambhūcaitya as a physical object provides aesthetic pleasure and devotional security, but on a soteriological level, it is a meditative aid and treated as a mandala.[170]

What kind of a mandala is it, then? There are two plausible alternatives in the Vajrayāna tradition: 1) the Vajradhātu-maṇḍala (later referred to as the VD-mandala) and 2) the Dharmadhātuvāgīśvara-maṇḍala (later the DDVV-mandala).[171] The VD-mandala is a more common model for *caityas* in the Kathmandu Valley, but in the case of the Svayambhūcaitya, it is indeed the more elaborate DDVV-mandala that the *caitya* constitutes, as will be argued in the next paragraph. The large mandala symbolically erected right at the top of the eastern stairway is widely known to be a DDVV-mandala. Devotees reaching the top of the stairs have thus arrived at the *dharma* realm of the true and eternal law of all existence, which *dharmadhātu* literarily means and the Svayambhūcaitya symbolizes.

Von Rospatt has investigated the notion of the Svayambhūcaitya as a DDVV-mandala.[172] According to him, the DDVV-mandala is an extended form of the VD-mandala. As discussed above, the traditional construction of a *caitya* in Vajrayāna begins with a ritual orientation of the ground. This takes place first in the form of a VD-mandala, where the Five Buddhas reside in their respective directions. Vairocana is in his usual position in the centre. However, in the DDVV-mandala, the central deity is not Vairocana but Mañjughoṣa, another form of Mañjuśrī. On the grounds of textual sources, von Rospatt argues that *Mañjuśrī is* in fact *the central deity* of the Svayambhūcaitya. Nagano and Musashi have also studied the deities of the DDVV-mandala. They affirm that Mañjughoṣa's other name is Dharmadhātuvāgīśvara and he is the central deity of this mandala.[173] Moreover, as Von Rospatt argues, Mañjuśrī really has an important role in the origin myth of Svayambhū, in which he drained the primordial lake covering the Kathmandu Valley and established civilization in the Valley. If von Rospatt is

[170] Cf. Gellner 1992, Gutschow 1997, Rospatt 1999, Snodgrass 1992 and Shrestha 2002.
[171] Rospatt 1999, 1. The page numbers referring to this article are from a personal electronic copy Prof. von Rospatt sent me by email. The page numbers in the bibliography refer to the journal in which the article was originally published.
[172] Ibid, 5ff.
[173] Nagano & Musashi 1989, 48. According to this source, the DDVV-mandala consists of 220 deities.

right – as I think he is – his argument not only is a contribution to symbolic interpretations of the Svayambhūcaitya, but it also confirms the fact that Tibetan and Chinese cultural influence in the central shrine of Newar Buddhism is indeed great. Mañjuśrī not only arrived from the Wu Tai Shan Mountain in China to the Kathmandu Valley, but he still resides in the heart of the *caitya* and influences the culture according to this line of thought.

However, von Rospatt shows that the symbolic core of the Svayambhūcaitya is more complex. Of the Five Tathāgatas presented above, Vairocana is usually depicted in the middle. In and around him, encompassing all the Five Buddhas and acting as the sixth Buddha, is often seen a deity called Vajradhara - another form of Vajrasattva. Vajrasattva is considered the main guru in Vajrayāna and his worship is both esoteric and exoteric. He may be explicitly worshipped as Ādibuddha Svayambhū.[174] This brings us to the heart of the various Tantric interpretations, of which the following is very important. The central deity in the *caitya* can also be identified as Akṣobhya, who in exoteric interpretations is located in the east. The latest Tantric scriptures – most notably the Guhyasamāja Tantra – give him a central position. These scriptures are the basis of the highest Tantric forms in Newar Buddhism.[175] It appears that inside the Svayambhūcaitya, there is not only the DDVV-mandala but also another, a Piṇḍikā-maṇḍala, in which Akṣobhya is in the centre.[176] Akṣobhya is by far the most common exoteric deity in Newar Buddhist shrines, and he has indeed symbolic connections with many esoteric Tantric deities as well.[177] Hence, von Rospatt observes that it is not far-fetched to see him as the deity that connects the Svayambhūcaitya to the highest and most secret forms of Tantra.

The outcome is a flexible situation where the Svayambhūcaitya can be seen in two ways.[178] It is either open to all and an emblem of Mahāyāna, when the roles of Mañjuśrī, the Five Buddhas and their consorts and the DDVV-mandala are emphasised and Svayambhū is the common property of all Buddhists. Alternatively, it can get a more esoteric interpretation, with Akṣobhya in the symbolic and actual centre of the *caitya,* thus connecting it to the highest Tantra classes used only by religious profes-

[174] Gellner 1992, 253-255.
[175] Von Rospatt 1999, 9. The highest class of Tantric literature is the Anuttarayogatantra into which belong e.g. Kālacakra and Hevajra Tantra.
[176] Ibid., 9-10.
[177] Ibid., Sharkey 2001, 40.
[178] Actually more than that, since also Śrāvakayāna (Theravāda) interpretations exist. I have not collected field material of them, which is why I abstain from discussing them directly in this work. However, as Gellner and others have shown, the Śrāvakayāna level exists inherently in all Newar Buddhism. In everyday practice, it is rather close to Mahāyāna, since the most important dividing line exists between secret and non-secret practices.

sionals.[179] This multiplicity of interpretations ensures the *caitya*'s capability of being venerated by many kinds of practitioners. In this process, it consolidates the hierarchy of Newar Buddhism with the Tantric priests at the top, since they can resort to secret interpretations when needed and still perform their duties with lay devotees on an exoteric level.

18. Observations on the lay ritual life

I will now leave the treatment of the symbolic possibilities of the Svayambhūcaitya and its deities and focus on the structure and semantics of ritual activity from the lay point of view. My continuous observations during the field research made it clear that ritual life centred on a rather small area between the Hārītī temple and the shrine of Amitābha Buddha, the westernmost shrine in the Svayambhūcaitya. I will concentrate on my observations around these two shrines, where the most active worshipping takes place.

The most basic form of ritual practice is the clockwise circumambulation of the Svayambhūcaitya, during which Tibetan prayer wheels are turned. The idea of circumambulation is to keep the venerated object on one's right side as a sign of respect.[180] When a devotee reaches one of the shrines around the *caitya* or a statue of a deity, he or she usually touches the object first and then a part of the body – usually the forehead. Alternatively, one may touch one's own forehead and chest a few times. This can be done with fingers loosely together – somewhat like a Christian making the sign of the cross – or using the South Asian gesture of veneration and/or greeting by putting the palms together. These acts are usually very automatic and the devotee continues the round swiftly. An expression of special veneration is e.g. to lie prone on the ground for a while.

At the above-mentioned Hārītī temple and the shrine of Amitābha Buddha, the worship takes various forms. I shall use Gellner's typology of ritual acts as a back-

[179] Interestingly, Cakrasaṃvara who is very popular as the primary deity in 'Nepal Mandala', i.e. the mandala of the whole Valley, and who belongs to the highest Anuttarayogatantra class, is not at least in the open identified as the central deity of the Svayambhūcaitya. However, he *is* the main deity of the Pratappur temple next door, which caught fire and was rebuilt only recently. Therefore, in a sense he presides over the area and connects Svayambhū to the wider Vajrayāna tradition of the Valley.

[180] This principle applies more generally. There are small clay *caityas* or shrines of deities standing in the middle of roads all over the city. People automatically pass them on the left hand side, even if one needs to change the walking route a little.

ground aid.[181] According to him, there are two basic types of elements in Newar Buddhist rituals: offering (*pūjā*) and 'prayer' (*binti*). In the first type, the devotee offers a substance (e.g. rice grains, water or vermilion) to the officiating priest, who recites verses or mantras and sometimes displays a hand gesture (*mudrā*). In the second type, the devotee sits quietly with palms together, holding rice grains between them and listening to the verses recited by the priest. At the end, the worshipper offers the rice. This 'prayer' is, according to Gellner, often quite blank in nature, i.e. no profound dialogue between the worshipper and a transcendental being appears to be taking place.

The gilded shrine of Amitābha has many decorated elements, which makes it the aesthetically dominant one among the shrines of the Five Buddhas and their consorts surrounding the Svayambhūcaitya. In the upper part of each shrine there are cupolas, of which Amitābha has in three layers whereas all the other Buddhas and Tārās have only two. In principle, the Five Buddhas' shrines are larger than those of their consorts. The actual Amitābha figure – as all others – is inside a chamber that can be locked with a chain and a padlock when worship has ended (see Plate 7).

Plate 7. The shrine of Amitābha Buddha with a monkey eating leftover food.

[181] Gellner 1992, 146-148.

In the case of this shrine, both types of ritual acts in Gellner's typology – offering and prayer – are performed. During my observations, there was nearly always someone worshipping at the shrine, and when the hour was quiet, there was room for a few devotional words to the deity or for reciting praises (*stotras*). At other times, the situation could be radically different. During more popular worship times the front of the shrine was absolutely packed with worshippers; pushing and shoving, throwing rice grains, flowers and water furiously to the officiating priest who sat in the small niche inside the shrine. In this particular case, it was indeed a matter of competition; everyone wanted his or her own offering to reach the deity and to come back as *prasād*.

The worship at the nearby Hārītī temple was somewhat different because the temple was larger and devotees could go inside a small room to worship the deities. Similarly to the previous shrine, a priest received the offerings and acted as a mediator between the deity and the worshipper. The deities inside include powerful Tantric divinities that accept blood sacrifice (materials like meat and alcohol). There is a restriction to take photos inside the temple, which according to my lay informant is exactly because "the goddesses inside are so powerful".[182] Around the temple, there are holders for butter lamps to be lit; prayer wheels are constantly turned and a bell is rang while visiting the temple or circumambulating it.

Plate 8. Women at the entrance to the residence of the healer lady Ajimā.

[182] Field diary I, 44. A more precise explanation may be that the local preservation and development committee has wanted to reorganize public space in the area and restrain tourists from disturbing the most sacral spaces.

In Nepal, Hārītī, the goddess of smallpox and other diseases, is often called Ajimā ('grandmother'). Across the courtyard to the north is a building where a 70-year-old healer woman, who is called Ajimā as well, resides. Her second-floor residence was opposite the shop where I frequently sat and observed the area. I often saw women clad in red or yellow saris to go in for a *darshan*, i.e. to get a view of the deity incarnated in the healer lady, or simply to be in her physical presence (see Plate 8). Unfortunately, I could not go inside, but according to what I heard from the locals, the worship of Ajimā resembled that of the Living Goddess Kumārī, whose devotees I had observed and interviewed earlier.[183] I will now present some of the material I collected at the house of the Royal Kumārī of Kathmandu. This helps in putting the worship of Hārītī into a larger context of female deities and their worship in Kathmandu.

The residence of the Royal Kumārī is at the Kathmandu Durbar (Royal) Square. The house has three storeys and a courtyard in the middle. As I witnessed it, the devotees of Kumārī went upstairs to her residence through a small door in the back corner (foreigners were not allowed). My Newar research assistant, who had permission to go inside, told me that the devotees usually touched the feet of the deity with their forehead as a sign of respect. Female devotees, who were clad in red saris, regularly brought with them *pūjā* plates with offerings whereas men did not. Materials used in the worship included different items. Newars could offer soy beans, ginger, meat and flattened rice – in other words 'impure' food accepted by Tantric deities – but a Chettri woman (a Nepalese equivalent to the Kṣatriya caste) said she does not offer what the Newars do, but purer substances, such as red vermilion, rice, fruit, flowers and sweets, instead.[184] Devotees offer Kumārī orthodox pure substances or Tantric impure substances depending on the way they identify her and what kinds of things they expect from her.

The reasons for going to see the Royal Kumārī are various but usually quite worldly. Hence, they correspond to 'thisworldly religion' in Gellner's typology and especially instrumental religion (see p. 29). Women usually go to seek help in health-related problems and men in power-related ones – the supreme example being the king of Nepal who ritually legitimises his sovereignty each year by worshipping the Goddess.[185] My interviewees also worshipped the deity for instrumental reasons. One woman said, "If Kumārī is angry, [devotees] will cough blood". Another, a mother of three, plainly explained she came "for physical well-being".[186] Her astrologer had told

[183] When I speak of the Living Goddess Kumārī, I refer to the Royal Kumārī of Kathmandu only. There are several others in the Kathmandu Valley cities and towns, both royal and non-royal (see Allen 1996).
[184] Field diary II, 21.
[185] Allen 1996, 11.
[186] Field diary II, 20-21.

her to visit Devī (whom Kumārī personifies) in order to get relief from her illnesses. One male interviewee recited a book "to remove misfortunes".[187] Other reasons for worshipping the deity were "the well-being of the country" and "misfortunes that one cannot get rid of in life".[188] An older female devotee associated Kumārī explicitly with "Hārītīmā" (*-mā*, 'mother'), thus linking her with the goddess at Svayambhū.[189]

At Svayambhū, I heard quite similar reasons for people to visit Hārītī (Ajimā).[190] She was likewise a helper in illnesses, both in the case of the actual temple with statues inside and in the case of the elder healer lady, a living embodiment of the female deity. It is quite understandable that most devotees were women, since they are usually the ones bearing a bigger responsibility in children's health matters – and Ajimā is explicitly believed to be the helper of children under twelve.[191] The religious identity of the deity Hārītī is an interesting case of its own, as her temple is Hindu in design but she is still regarded as an essentially Buddhist deity. She represents one of the most obvious paradoxes between Hindu and Buddhist faith in the religious setting at Svayambhū, which I will discuss in chapter 27. As for now, suffice it to say that if Hārītī is worshipped mainly for instrumental reasons – as I suggest – the fact that her temple is the most visible example of Hindu architecture at the otherwise Buddhist-looking Svayambhū complex does *not* really imply that there are strong soteriological Hindu undertones lying hidden in the midst of Svayambhū. It was long my impression as a newcomer that the reverse would be the case. We will return to this question later.

The practical aspects of lay worship rely on certain key elements common to South Asian religious traditions. *Pūjās* require physical offering materials that appeal to all sense organs. Butter lamps create light (visual sensation), fruit, meat and other edible things nourish the body (gustatory sensation), incense brings an auspicious smell (olfactory sensation), bells are rang and hymns are sung (auditory sensation) and vermilion powder is placed on the forehead as *tika* mark (tactile sensation). Of the colour symbolism in *pūjā* materials, one informant explained that red colour symbolizes "success, progress, prosperity and victory", and yellow represents "peace and wisdom".[192] Many materials can be bought near the temples, but some rare ones must be brought from

[187] Field diary II, 20.
[188] Field diary I, 7.
[189] Some also associated her directly with Hindu gods Gaṇeś and Bhairab (Śiva), which is not surprising because they along with Kumārī form a triad ideologically and ritually. The three are annually taken in chariots around the city during the Indra Jātrā festival. I witnessed this in September 2001.
[190] Told by Prem Śreṣṭha and some of his friends visiting the shop.
[191] The precise age limit is interesting. Does the age connect to life-cycle rites in pre-puberty and the notion of regarding the age of 12 as a transition to full caste responsibilities? This remains to be answered, but certain implicit connections to the social structure and transitional rites seem likely.
[192] Field diary I, 46.

afar.[193] The basic idea in giving offerings is reciprocal: the devotee gives to the deity (or in practice the officiating priest) the gift (*dān*), e.g. food, to venerate this particular deity – and usually to get help in worldly matters – and receives back a portion of the offering as *prasād*, i.e. the divinity's blessed food with sacral qualities. However, it is not the idea of getting something in return that should be emphasised. *Pūjā* is about honour, respect and service, and it permeates the whole society, being performed regularly at homes. There is an analogy of seeing God as a respected guest, and vice versa, every guest to a household as God.[194] Nepalese Hindus and Buddhists alike share these ritual customs.

The use of food exemplifies the significance of religiousness in a country where physical resources are indeed scarce. Rice is offered to a deity simply because *it is important to the people themselves*. To be economically dependent on rice implies that the offering is something that the deity must truly appreciate and thus answer benevolently to the devotee's requests. It is common to divide any portion of food so that only one part is eaten; another part goes to the community and yet another to the gods. This shows respect towards food and prevents from taking it for granted. For the same reason my shopkeeper informant always threw a tiny bit of noodles to the soil outside his shop while we were eating together and suggested I should do the same. The question is not of wasting food but of being grateful for having it.

Lay worship at Svayambhū is in general very ritualistic and based on performed acts. This holds particularly true for the Buddhist holy month of Gūṃlā, when Svayambhū is part of a pilgrimage route around the Valley. Nevertheless, ritual acts are not performed indifferently. Ramesh Buddhācārya, my informant, reminded me of the importance of devotion in Mahāyāna Buddhism:

> In Mahāyāna Buddhism they have, the first priority is devoted, must be devoted. If you are devoted, so you will get to God. Even in meditation way, even in praying way, […] if you're offering something to god, by *ekacitta*. *Ekacitta* means true, devoted, really devoted, nothing in mind, only that god who you're praying. So god will eat those things that they are offering.[195]

John Newman's translation of *ekacitta* as 'a unified mind' illustrates the meaning that I think Ramesh was putting forward.[196] A correct state of mind helps manipulate the deity to interact benevolently in the process. Mere observation at Svayambhū may eas-

[193] For certain rituals, slightly intoxicating materials like betel nuts are used. In addition, cannabis leaves were sold for ritual purposes openly in the street at the centre of Kathmandu, which was surprising.
[194] Gellner 1992, 106. An Indian friend of mine made a similar remark: "To us a guest is God. You can never really know whether the guest is in fact God in disguise, which is why we respect him or her as such." (Personal communication.)
[195] Field diary I, 67.
[196] Newman 1987, 37.

ily deceive an untrained eye to see most religious practice as repeated performance only – this happened to me at first – but there is considerably more to it. Mental effort is in apparent correlation with the success of the act. However, one needs to remember that the caste-based social hierarchy defines the social boundaries within which different forms of religious practice are possible. A Newar Buddhist not entitled to monastic initiation by hereditary rights does not easily question his or her position because it is connected to the traditions of the family, which itself is very highly esteemed. Everyone has prescribed duties, e.g. giving alms to monks at certain times, attending festivals, going on pilgrimage, worshipping lineage deities, performing life-cycle rites and so on.[197] The secured framework makes religious rituals a frequent part of everyday life. Although some modernists consider it a nuisance, a sense of devotion still prevails as a natural attitude for the majority.

19. Thoughts of devotees

My fieldwork fell on the holy Buddhist month of Gūṃlā, during which Svayambhū is especially popular for local pilgrimage. The Kathmandu Valley itself is a large pilgrimage complex, and during the holy month Svayambhū becomes one of the most important places to visit. One distinctive group going round the holy sites are musicians – drummers, singers and others – whose existence was hardly left unnoticed. The musical processions called *Gūṃlā bājan* visit the Svayambhū site each day during the holy month.[198] On the last day of Gūṃlā, I talked to two musicians with the help of my shopkeeper friend.[199]

The more talkative of the two musicians was a 72-year-old Newar man. He was a musician by caste and his lineage had performed for over 150 years. His instrument was a self-made flute. The players had arrived at Svayambhū at 3 am and had already played four hours in the morning (the interview took place at noon). During the holy month, it was customary to come as early as possible, and on regular days, the morning performance would last from two to three hours. On the final day, it had taken longer.

[197] These imply the Śrāvakayāna form underlying Mahāyāna in the hierarchical structure of Newar Buddhism (cf. Gellner 1992).
[198] Lewis 1998, 310.
[199] Field diary I, 52-53; Field diary II, 76-77. The date is 28 August.

Another two-hour performance (parts of which I recorded) took place later in the afternoon.

The musician's round contained both Hindu and Buddhist sites. He had played in the Hindu temples of Paśupati and Guhyeśvarī as well as in Lumbini, the birthplace of Śākyamuni Buddha in southern Nepal. During a popular Hindu festival, he goes to play at Hanuman Dhoka, the old royal palace of Kathmandu. Once a year he must stand as guard for seven days at the palace of Gorkha outside Kathmandu. In addition, he must perform during royal visits to other sites. Hence, he has many distinctively Hindu (i.e. Parbatiyā ruling class) obligations, but he does not want to differentiate between Hinduism and Buddhism as soteriological systems. To him "all gods and goddesses in the world are equal".[200]

The old man recounted parts of the origin myth of Svayambhū, which I was already familiar with at the time. An interesting nationalistic feature came up when he told me about Hārītī, the goddess discussed above. The popular story goes that Hārītī was first a female demon (*yakṣiṇī*) that killed children mercilessly, until Lord Buddha wanted to teach her a lesson by kidnapping the dearest one of her 500 children, thus making her realize how the loss of a child feels like. Consequently, the terrible demon converted into Buddhism. As the musician recounted how Hārītī was a terrible ghost who killed children, he made a startling addition: "Actually she killed Indian people who came here." In addition, her colour was black because the skin colour of Indians was black (or dark). How should one interpret this message? Since the old man did not differentiate between Hindu and Buddhist deities, he was not likely to have been criticizing Hinduism as such (as is the case in some local Buddhist myths). On the contrary, he had strong ties with the politically dominant Parbatiyā Hindus, as many of his playing duties suggest. Hence, the remark sounds more like nationalism – the voice of a small country next to a mighty and at times oppressive neighbour. We will return to this question in chapter 25.

The men saw playing as a kind of worship. The musicians accumulate good karma by playing or, in the words of my translator, "they have to reject the sin whatsoever they did before in the present life."[201] The devotional nature of the music and the object of devotion are manifested in the songs they play. In the afternoon session that I witnessed, 15 men were playing a tune of Amitābha – all wearing a red flower behind the ear. My translator Prem explained the meaning of the song to be to "apologise to the

[200] Field diary I, 52.
[201] Ibid.

Buddha in case we have been criminal or acted criminally."[202] According to him, the song addressed all localities to wake up to learn about the Buddha's ways. The atmosphere during the playing was easy-going and relaxed – not least because of the rice beer and strong wine that was offered to the players and the audience. The old musician had in fact boldly informed me earlier that in the afternoon they would all be tipsy! It was, after all, the celebration of the ending of the holy month.

Another interviewed devotee was a young man from the neighbouring city of Patan.[203] He was a Śākya by caste and had an MBA degree. He usually came to Svayambhū for worship once a year, which apparently meant during the popular pilgrimage time of Gūṃlā that was taking place. His motivation for coming relied in part on tradition, since he would come "regularly according to caste [obligations], from generation to generation". He would most often come with his family, because "they wish to provide continuity to the worship system [i.e. keep the tradition alive]." His family usually goes to worship Hārītī, who we discussed earlier. The *pūjā* materials consist of home made alcohol, fruits, soybeans, beaten rice, fish and flowers (note how the choice of materials points towards Tantric worship). The devotees direct the offerings to the officiating priest who takes care of the rest of the *pūjā*. The family then gives money to the goddess and some to the priests as well (an act of merit-making by giving gifts to monks).[204] Usually morning time is the best time for coming, because the materials and the mind are *pure* and *fresh*.[205] Starting the day in an auspicious way makes the whole day better.

A housewife from Patan was also briefly interviewed.[206] She had likewise arrived with her family. There was no fixed time for worship; she usually came with her friends or family and preferably in the morning time. She encourages her whole family to come to worship. Their *pūjā* materials included buff meat, fish, alcohol and flowers, which they gave to the officiating priest (note again the use of substances like meat and alcohol pointing towards Tantric worship). The place of worship is usually the Hārītī temple.

Outer forms of worship in these examples follow a common pattern. However, the devotees had some interesting opinions on the significance of Svayambhū. When the

[202] Prem often uses the word 'criminal' to refer to negative deeds and thoughts. The word has to be seen in a wider context than jurisdictional; it reflects a Buddhist worldview and Buddhist ethics.
[203] Field diary I, 57-58. The date is 31 August.
[204] This is interesting, since being a Śākya, he should have been and apparently was a Newar Buddhist monk as well. I only realized this after the interview and could not ask him to tell me more about his obligations.
[205] Purity of substances is highly esteemed. It reflects an attitude of respect as well as purity of the mind.
[206] Field diary I, 58. The date is 31 August.

first male devotee (with an MBA degree) was asked why he thought the place was important, he said the importance is not only historical but also national, because the site attracts a lot of tourists and hence increases the GDP and net income. The female devotee gave a similar answer by saying that the place is "good for economy because it is a tourist area and therefore well taken care of." It is good to remember that although the majority of people at Svayambhū are Nepalese devotees doing their various forms of worship, there is also an almost continuous flow of tourists. Furthermore, being a UNESCO World Heritage Site it is indeed well taken care of by Nepalese standards and resources.

The female devotee made another particularly noteworthy remark. Among her reasons to come to Svayambhū were, first of all, "to get satisfaction in life", but also explicitly "*entertainment*."[207] This expression startled me at first. Was her coming here not part of the local pilgrimage process, in which different holy sites in the Valley are circumambulated and seen as forming a mandala? Was she not the pilgrim I had assumed her to be? I think she indeed was, but my preconceptions of local pilgrimage apparently needed some refining. What kind of pilgrimage are we talking about here? Is the Newar pilgrim a *peregrinus* who travels 'through the fields' to reach a distant goal (like Jerusalem, Mecca or Bodh Gaya)? Alternatively, is he or she a *proskinitis* who visits shrines in order to revere holy objects (and in the case of Buddhism gives alms and meditates)?[208] Local pilgrimage to Svayambhū is clearly at least the *proskinitis* type. Holy objects (statues of gods, goddesses and bodhisattvas, *caityas* etc.) are revered, officiating priests (who are simultaneously monks) receive money,[209] and the *pūjā* materials given to deities return as *prasād*, carrying the holy qualities of the deity. However, to an extent the pilgrim is also *peregrinus.* While the distances are relatively short (it takes less than an hour to get to Svayambhū from Patan) and the journey does not necessarily entail a deep spiritual change,[210] it is nevertheless a purifying and demanding task to climb the eastern 365 stairs to the top. For many, the hilltop is a special sacred site, something apart from the ordinary and worth the effort of climbing. Some claim that a prayer at Svayambhū is worth 13 billion times more than any other prayer. The transformative effects of a single journey are likely to be greater to devotees coming from outside the Kathmandu Valley, but also the local pilgrims very much acknowledge the spiritual effects of the journey.[211]

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[207] Ibid.
[208] Gothóni 1999, 468, 475.
[209] All members of the *sangha* periodically receive alms during the Pañcadān festival (Gellner 1992, 180).
[210] Cf. Gothóni 1999, 473-474.
[211] Also discussed by Gellner 1992, 189ff.

Still, why call the journey entertainment? Perhaps the expression is not very startling after all. Local pilgrimage belongs to social religion (i.e. obligatory rites) in Gellner's typology, especially for a housewife who has the practical responsibility to look after her children. I observed how many families came to spend time and have a snack on the lower parts of the stairway before going up. During my fieldwork, there were also numerous other examples of behaviour that did not fit into any rigid pattern of ritual activity (viz. having *pūjā* plates and materials ready, visiting temples, circumambulating objects etc.). At sunrise, the hilltop was regularly crowded with people doing physical exercise, sweating and stretching, practising yoga and meditating before jogging back down the stairs and towards home or work. One morning a platoon of the Royal Nepalese Army was doing their physical exercise at the hilltop right next to me in a manner that concealed all visible forms of religious devotion.

These examples suggest that Svayambhū has considerably what I would call *cultural usage*. One needs only to look at the fierce and high-priced souvenir trade that takes place in the midst of the most respected religious objects. Moreover, religion still pervades much of the daily rhythm in any case – physical exercise for example is often a meditative experience, too. So to return finally to the term *entertainment*, I think one should not fall into the trap of thinking rigidly in terms of *either* entertainment *or* religious ritual. It is very much possible that the two can be *combined* on a single visit and even in the same performed action. Sharing time with children, relatives and friends at a holy site may invigorate a devotee's sense of belonging to a large spiritual community, which in turn may be a source of welfare and happiness. This example suggests an intermingling of different types of religiosity. Although the sample is much too small for inducing any generalizations, these notions may be worthwhile in considering Newar Buddhist pilgrimage and devotional life.

20. The Buddhācāryas – their social status and religious duties

It is a peculiarity of the Newar Buddhist monastic community that members of the *sangha* are all married. Boys have taken monastic initiation in pre-puberty, and a comparable life-cycle rite applies for girls.[212] After being initiated as members of the *sangha* they continue as householders. As explained above, the caste sub-groups usually regarded as constituting the monastic community are called Vajrācārya and Śākya.

At Svayambhū, the members of the *sangha* have a special name, Buddhācārya (or Bauddhācārya). Functionally and ideologically, they seem to have a unique character, which has not received much attention in scholarship.[213] Technically, they are a subcategory of the Śākyas, of which Locke mentions four and Gellner five.[214] What makes them different from other Śākyas is, however, that they act as officiating priests at the prototypical Newar Buddhist temple area of Svayambhū. It is their responsibility to perform priestly and educational duties in and around the main shrines of Svayambhū. They usually go through the same monastic initiation rite as the Śākyas and Vajrācāryas do, but although their formal status is Śākya, they are still entitled to the Tantric *ācārya* initiation otherwise given exclusively to the Vajrācāryas.[215] In fact, they can act as family priests, but only in a restricted sense, since they cannot have patrons (*jajmān*) outside their own families. Exceptions to the general rule are the Buddhācāryas in Bhaktapur who only receive monastic initiation, which further limits their rights.[216]

The Buddhācāryas constitute a relatively small community based on four lineages. According to Locke, there were 29 households with 185 initiated members in 1985.[217] Sofield mentions 29 households and a population of 212 people in and around the area in November 1998.[218] My informant Ramesh Buddhācārya told me there were ca. 300 Buddhācāryas in 2003. Although usually the *sangha* lives in the immediate vi-

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[212] A unique ritual for Newar pre-pubescent girls (both Hindus and Buddhists) is the *ihi* rite, where girls are ritually married to a *bel* fruit. A description of this is in Allen 1996. One of my informants told me that this custom might have come about in the aftermath of the Muslim invasion in the 14th century. The invaders allegedly wanted to marry young Newar girls. In order to prevent this, the Newars created a mock marriage to a fruit, because of which the Muslims did not want to marry girls who were already married. Thus, the girls were saved from being brides of foreign invaders. A more common explanation links the rite to the prevention of widowhood that in Nepalese society is still a social stigma.

[213] My informant Gautam Buddhācārya said there existed no studies on the Buddhācāryas so far.

[214] See Locke 1980, 21-22; Gellner 1992, 165-166.

[215] Another peculiarity is that they are not initiated as monks in a monastery but in front of the Svayambhūcaitya at the Amitābha shrine. They receive Tantric initiation nearby at the Sāmhyeṅgu hill (Locke 1980, 22; 1985, 397).

[216] Personal communication (electronic mail from the son of Gautam Buddhācārya).

[217] Locke 1985, 397.

[218] Sofield 2000 (web document).

cinity of its central shrine, the Buddhācāryas have scattered somewhat around the Valley, the ones in Bhaktapur apparently having a more isolated community. My main informants lived at Svayambhū (Gautam) or in its vicinity (Ramesh).

The Buddhācāryas are the custodians of the most important shrines in the area and the officiating priests who perform obligatory daily rituals there. According to Gregory Sharkey, who has studied Buddhist daily rituals in the Kathmandu Valley, the shrines in question are the Amitābha shrine at the main *caitya*, the Hārītī shrine, and another *caitya* (the Pulaṃ Syaṅgu *caitya*) near the bus park.[219] *Amitābha is the main exoteric deity* of Svayambhū. In other words, the principal daily rituals take place at his shrine. In nearly 80 % of the Buddhist monasteries in Patan, the main deity is Akṣobhya, who faces east in the Svayambhūcaitya.[220] The main exoteric deity at Svayambhū, then, is somewhat uncommon in the totality of Newar Buddhism. However, this is not very surprising remembering the popularity of the cult of Amitābha's Pure Land and the fact that Avalokiteśvara, the most popular bodhisattva, belongs to the Buddha family of Amitābha. Akṣobhya seems more easily connected to high Tantric deities (see p. 63), which is why he suits well for being the main deity in locality shrines with a more particular and restricted *sangha*. The above attributes of Amitābha allow widespread lay worship to concentrate on him.

I will now examine the daily exoteric rituals of the Buddhācāryas.[221] At several times there are special occasions for rites and observances, but the daily practice (*nitya pūjā*) constitutes the core of all worship. As a background for Newar Buddhist daily *pūjā* we can use a summary by Sharkey.[222] He divides the daily order into four parts, of which the first and the last ones are most important. The *first* rite takes place early in the morning and involves the bathing of the deity with the help of a ritual mirror. A gong is sounded 108 times and a fivefold offering is given (described below). Then hymns (*stotras*) are recited, a bell is rung and a yak-tail whisk is waved before the image. The *second* rite is later in the morning. The focus is on the fivefold offering given once again. A gong is also sounded 108 times and hymns are recited. The *third* rite is in the afternoon, and it contains all the parts of the second rite except the offering, i.e. sounding a gong 108 times and reciting hymns. The *fourth* and final rite is in the evening, when the focus is on the offering of light. First, the area is perambulated, then a gong is sounded and

[219] Sharkey 2001, 233. The informants did not contradict this information.
[220] Ibid, 40. Although smaller, Lalitpur has a bigger Buddhist population than Kathmandu, so the figure is relevant.
[221] Their esoteric rites are performed in their own monastery in secrecy.
[222] Ibid, 55-58. There are considerable differences throughout the cities in terms of frequency of practice. Sharkey's model is an average of all the practice he has witnessed.

finally a light offering is given to the main deity along with some recitation. As Sharkey observes the cycle, the priests wake up the deity in the morning and cleanse him for worship, and in the evening, they prepare him for the night. This is a good example of the anthropomorphism of deities in Newar religion.

My informant, Ramesh Buddhācārya, gave the following description of his and his family's actual ritual duties.[223] The first duty he mentioned is to "sleep around the *caitya* to protect it from thieves". This is common practice, since the one whose turn it is to perform the worship is also responsible for the security of the shrines. He carries big keys with which he opens and locks the shrines. In the morning, Ramesh "opens the doors of the Five Buddhas, Hārītī, Vasundharā and Śantipur." 'The Five Buddhas' are the shrines around the *caitya*, Hārītī's temple we already know and Vasundharā refers to Vasupur, the relatively large temple south of the *caitya* belonging to the goddess of wealth and abundance, Vasundharā (Lakṣmī for Hindus). Śantipur is the archaic shrine at the northern end of the area. It is important especially for Vajrācāryas and Buddhācāryas, who both claim to be descendants of Śantikarācārya, the primordial Tantric priest who is still said to be meditating inside Śantipur. Now if we compare this list of shrines with the one Sharkey had given before, we see that the Amitābha shrine in Sharkey's list is included in 'the Five Buddhas', Hārītī matches well, but Ramesh does not mention the last *caitya* further away. The shrine, being essentially a smaller *caitya*, does not apparently need to be locked at nights, and on another occasion, Ramesh did mention it being a place of worship. The list of places given by Sharkey and my informant seems to match quite well. Of the shrines Ramesh opens in the morning Vasupur and Śantipur are not sites for proper daily ritual, although they are otherwise popular and important places of worship.

In the morning, Ramesh rings the bell "to inform the gods of opening the door", i.e. to make them prepared for the day's worship.[224] Another reason for ringing the bell is "to tell visitors [devotees] that the shrine is open." A different bell was chimed near the Pratappur *śikara*, but I am not aware of this custom after the collapse of the temple. Both bells were rung 108 times, or at least they should have been, Ramesh explained coyly. The auspicious number 108 is an ideal, but it is a different matter whether it is actually reached (on another occasion another young priest performed the evening rites, and I doubt that he really reached the final number, although I myself lost count right at the end).

[223] Field diary I, 41-43.
[224] Field diary I, 41.

The next step in the daily ritual is called *suva tyayegu*.[225] This happens at the Amitābha shrine, the priest is dressed in a red shirt (also Amitābha's colour) and a white *dhoti* (a long men's garment). People chant as the priest "uses his own mantras", in Ramesh's words. He holds a yak-tail whisk (which represents the *aṣṭamaṅgalas*, the eight auspicious symbols) and a peacock feather, while the worshippers ask for liberation from the corresponding eight negative things. Then the priest goes on to worship other deities and proceeds to the Hārītī temple with some unspecified ritual items.

The next rite, according to Ramesh, is *nhevakala pūjā,* where the priest holds a holy water jar in his right hand and in his left, a *pūjā* plate with "cow milk, water, crunch, *tika*, rice, incense and oiled cotton." He reads "the founding text of the *pūjā*", a detailed description of the lunar position and an identification of the king in whose time the worship takes place, as well as "the god to whom we are praying."[226] This practice is commonly known as 'doing the intention' (*saṃkalpa*) (of the rite) and it is performed before every important ritual.[227]

A little later, there is a *pūjā* for Mañjuśrī at his own temple. This probably means the shrine in the saddle between the two peaks that Sharkey referred to earlier. Next, there is a lunchtime *pūjā* to Hārītī and Amitābha. In the evening, there is an evening worship called *sandya yaegu*, when the priest carries with him lamps (*ārati*), rings the bell 108 times, waves the yak-tail whisk, reads texts of the six and ten perfections and finally closes the doors of the shrines. According to Ramesh, the meaning of offering the light is to "ask the god to give the light of wisdom".[228]

As the Buddhācāryas are also teachers of *dharma*, there are two scheduled times daily when devotees can come and ask them questions. The first time is at 8 am and the second time from 2.30 to 3 pm. After the second information session the priests may close most of the doors they opened in the morning, meaning the worship in those shrines has ended.

My informant confirmed the observation made by Sharkey that the main shrines at the area are not all worshipped by the same officiating priest. Instead, the families of the monastic community take turns so that one family attends to the worship at one shrine and another family at another. Otherwise, there would not be enough time to per-

[225] I have not been able to check the spellings of the Newari names of these rites, so I have written them as I heard them, without diacritics.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Gellner 1992, 191. There are different forms of recitals, but the idea is to locate the ritual act in mythical and historical time and place, i.e. in Nepal Mandala, in the age of certain celestial beings, kings etc. The sacred geography of the Kathmandu Valley is presented well in *saṃkalpas*, especially the 'Adya mahādāna' text, which Gellner has reproduced.
[228] Field diary I, 42.

form all the expected duties.[229] Sharkey had obtained slightly different information, as according to his informant the responsibility of one family is to worship at a certain *time*, not in a certain place.[230] In any event, the division of labour between Buddhācārya families ensures the continuing of a full ritual cycle. Newar Buddhist ritual practice is currently facing challenges in the modern world, and the idea of degenerated or neglected practice at the most celebrated site must be disheartening and avoided at all costs.

The Buddhācāryas have a lot of cooperation with the likes of the royal family (right next to Svayambhū there is a recurring festival which the king of Nepal participates in and is worshipped as a bodhisattva), government bureaus, the *Ācārya guthi* of Kathmandu (association of Vajrācāryas), scholars and UNESCO officials. In spite of all this recognition, their social status is somewhat problematic. Ramesh told me an example of him going to the police station to attend to a registration. The official there did not recognize Ramesh's surname, i.e. the indicator of his caste (*jāti*), even after many times of explanation. A different kind of difficulty has arisen concerning the *ācārya* initiation of his son. Because Ramesh has married a woman from a different caste, the *sangha* has denied his son the traditional initiation. In the modern times, there are ways of circumventing this problem. One possibility is to use the services of a new organization founded by a certain Vajrācārya, who out of concern for the preservation of religious traditions performs the initiation in borderline cases. Another way is for Ramesh to perform the initiation himself with the help of some willing Vajrācārya priest. A third possibility would be to ask some monks in a monastery to perform the initiation.[231]

This reflects social dilemmas widespread in contemporary Newar Buddhism.[232] In general, there has been a rapid decline in Tantric Buddhism after the democratisation of 1951. It has affected the prestige of the Vajrācāryas most of whom need another occupation merely to survive economically. In addition, the Buddhācāryas' situation has changed, since according to Gautam Buddhācārya the governmental Department of Archaeology curtailed their rights towards Svayambhū some 20 to 30 years ago.[233] Moreover, the rise of Theravāda Buddhism from the 1930s onwards has resulted in conflicting and competing views over correct beliefs and practices (the first Theravāda monas-

[229] Field diary I, 42. Ramesh said his family has duties every eight months for a week at a time. Another man's family has died, which is why he had to fulfil his obligation every three weeks (Field diary II, 68).
[230] Sharkey 2001, 234.
[231] Field diary I, 57. At the time of my fieldwork, Ramesh was pondering different possibilities and I do not know whether he found a solution later.
[232] See e.g. Gellner 1992, 332ff.
[233] Field diary II, 67. This has likely to do with the inclusion of Svayambhū in the UNESCO World Heritage Site list in 1978.

tery is situated at greater Svayambhū). Like many modern revivalist movements, the newly born Theravāda movement emphasises doctrinal and ritual purity, criticizing the social and instrumental religious customs of Tantric Newar Buddhism. There is, according to Gellner, mutual suspicion and even hostility between the practitioners of both religions.[234] However, both of my Buddhācārya informants seemed to approve of Buddhist traditions other than their own.

21. The worldview and ethos of the Buddhācāryas interpreted

In the following two chapters, I will describe and, as far as possible, analyse some characteristics of the two priests with whom I was in contact. What follows is neither psychologically accurate nor a biography. The purpose is to examine basic elements of how they conceive of religion and what factors influence these views. This should have relevance to the study since they are the ones most deeply involved in Svayambhū's daily routines. I want to stress that this is indeed a very superficial interpretation if any, since I only had the chance to speak with them for less than a dozen times in total. This treatment is about my reflections on the interaction between them and me during this short period. Still, its primary function is to shed light on their religious world and implicitly to the variety of interpretations given to Svayambhū by religious authorities.

In a proper Nepalese manner, I give the first word to the elder of the community. My most respected informant was *paṇḍit* Gautam Buddhācārya, a man in his fifties or sixties. His residence and lineage monastery were opposite the shop where I most frequently sat. Prem Śreṣṭha, the shopkeeper, showed great respect towards this learned priest (naturally because of his seniority and higher caste status but also because of his personal qualities) and assured me that this man would tell me things "from top to bottom."[235] The two obviously knew each other well, and Prem would often get leftovers of ritual food as *prasād*.[236]

Gautam is an authoritative teacher of the Buddhist *dharma* and a priest whose own monastery, the Samhyeṅgu Mahāvihār, is located at Svayambhū (including its se-

[234] Gellner 1992, 323.
[235] An expression frequently used by Prem.
[236] Sometimes I would be around when he got *prasād*, which he happily offered to me as well. Usually there would be a fruit or two along with sweet Newar pastries called *malpa*.

cret Tantric shrine as in all Newar Buddhist monasteries). Thus, his life very much revolves around the sacred site. The general Tantric division between the secret and the open, the inner (*guhya*) and the outer (*bahira*), determined what he was able to disclose.[237] In his own words, he could not tell me everything, because otherwise he "would die". Nevertheless, he was willing to talk of *dharma*, because in this way he was able to "help people".[238] This reminds one of the goal of Mahāyāna, where the bodhisattva ideal of compassionately helping others to attain enlightenment is central. What is secret, then, are the interpretations a guru has given him in Tantric initiation (*dīkṣā*) and the special *ācārya* initiation of the Buddhācāryas (see above). In this respect, it was very surprising that as he was recounting the origins of the Svayambhūcaitya, he told me the names of the thirteen spires of gold plated tiers – the thirteen ways to nirvana – but not the ones usually given but *the ones received in Tantric initiation*.[239] Now it was very clear that an outsider was not allowed to know real secrets – it had indeed been proclaimed *lethal* – but it perplexed me for long as to why this particular piece of information was revealed. The only plausible answer seems to be that although these names were indeed esoteric, they were that on an *intermediate level*, and so the line between the secret and the open in Newar Tantrism is not rigid. As one remembers, there are two types of Vajrayāna, the esoteric and the exoteric. Obviously, the names I heard belonged to the exoteric level. Tantric initiation as a rite is 'lower' than the *ācārya* initiation, because the former is open to more castes, being an initiation of the deity Cakrasaṃvara and his consort Vajravārāhī.[240] The latter initiation, on the other hand, entitles one to act as family priest of others and is restricted to fewer people. As a conclusion, the term 'Tantric initiation' does not itself entail *absolute* secrecy. There is definitely an aura of secrecy involved in the initiation, but in the modern day and age things are changing; most secret deities such as Cakrasaṃvara in union with Vajravārāhī are shown in *thangka* paintings and sold to foreigners – a fact of which the older generation strongly disapproves.

We may consider the nature of Tantric information at some more length here. Alex Wayman speaks of 'pregnant' secrets in referring to Lilavajra's (a guru from the 8th century) discussion of three kinds of Tantric secrets.[241] According to Wayman, when the guru guides the disciple through the stages of initiation, the Tantric secrets become

[237] Gellner 1992, 77-78.
[238] Field diary I, 17.
[239] For ethical reasons I will not disclose them in this work.
[240] Gellner 1992, 268.
[241] Wayman 1995, 39-40. The dating is mine and based on Wayman's dating of Lilavajra's teacher on pp. 13-14.

in the disciple 'pregnant.' Like a newborn child these secrets become an essential part of the disciple's existence – a new way of seeing things is thus inevitable. The meanings will have a profound effect in the disciple's life – amplified by the social obligations of kin and caste in the years that follow. From this viewpoint it is no wonder how revealing secrets would mean being killed – one does not have to know *how* it would happen but he nevertheless believes it (although there is no dearth of descriptions of most horrible ways to die in Tantric texts). To return to the revelation of the thirteen ways to nirvana, we might also consider Tsoṅ-kha-pa's (the founder of the Gelukpa school in Tibetan Buddhism) illustration of two ways of explaining things.[242] He distinguishes between *hinted meaning* and *evident meaning*. To reveal esoteric information using hinted meanings is actually safe, since the actual interpretation remains a mystery to the uninitiated one. It is only at the level of evident meaning that the light of understanding pervades the disciple. This is apparently true in the case of the thirteen spires; disparate pieces of information do not actually mean anything unless a guru explains their true meaning. I believe the names I received should be seen in this light.[243]

During our introductory meeting, Gautam told me things that were apparently important to his conceiving of Svayambhū from a religious point of view, as these were the very first things he wanted to tell me about the site. First, he gave a list of the seven mortal Buddhas with their spouses and sons (bodhisattvas). See Table 2:

	Buddha	***Patnī (spouse)***	***Bodhisattva (son)***
1.	Vipaśvī	Vipaśjenti	Mahamāt
2.	Śikhī	Śikhīmalini	Ratnadhara
3.	Viśvabhū	Viśvadhara	Āphasajanga
4.	Krakuchanda	Krakutbarti	Sakal maṅgala
5.	Kanakamuni	Kanthamalinī	Kanakrāj
6.	Kāśyapa	Dharmatārā	Dharmarāj
7.	Śākyamuni	Jasothara	Rahulbhadra

Table 2. The seven Buddha families.[244]

[242] Ibid., 40.
[243] As far as I have been able to find out, some of the names seem to refer to bodhisattva realms or heavens, which goes along well with the general idea of ascending towards the ultimate.
[244] Also included were the respective hand gestures of the Buddhas, but they have been in part contradicted by other authoritative sources. Therefore, I have omitted them here. I have not been able to check the correct spelling of the spouses and sons. Note also that the Newars usually replace the initial V with B (e.g. Bipaśvī instead of Vipaśvī).

The idea of the seven mortal Buddhas is very old, going back to early scriptures in the Pāli canon such as Mahāpadāna Sutta and Dīgha Nikāya.[245] From there, it made its way to the local Svayambhūpurāṇa, the primary textual source on the origin of Svayambhū dating apparently from the 15th or 16th century. As for the legendary origins of Svayambhū that Gautam later told me with the help of our mutual friend, *the main source* obviously is *the Svayambhūpurāṇa*. Another important textual source he mentioned right from the start were the *Navagrantha* a.k.a. *Navadharma* (Skt. – in Newari *Nābyakarna)*, the nine Mahāyāna books considered authoritative and ritually representative of all Mahāyāna literature in Newar Buddhism.[246] Gautam gave me the list of these nine books immediately after the seven Tathāgatas. The *Navagrantha* are applied in rituals frequently, since they are e.g. used in the observance called *aṣtamī vrata* performed every lunar month. Thus applied the books constitute one of the mandalas in the observance, the *dharma* mandala. In fact, they are personified as deities.[247]

The point of the above discussion is that the information Gautam gave me during our few meetings was primarily based on *sacred and authoritative texts*. My suggestion is that they also have a considerable influence on the meanings he gives to Svayambhū generally. The elders are traditionally most familiar with sacred texts (often written in Sanskrit); in other words, profound knowledge of these texts is restricted to a rather small group of people. If we compare the information Gautam gave me with that of the younger Ramesh Buddhācārya, the two appear to have relied on textual authority differently. Gautam immediately went further back to the textual tradition in giving details and lists of books and names, whereas Ramesh – although he too relied on legends from the past – gave a more personal flavour to his accounts (of course this was also due to our similar ages). When I asked Ramesh about the nine books – the *Navagrantha* – he hesitated at first before recollecting them. To quote our conversation:

> Ramesh: "[Responding to my question of what the Navagrantha books represent] Ah, it is very important, and it is very difficult to understand. You have to really give time to study them. "
> Me: "What are these books?"
> Ramesh: "Saddharmapuṇḍarik, it's like… [Thinks] those who have all the religious… it's like… bodhisattva, Saddharmapuṇḍarik. Laṅkāvatāram Sūtram, Ārya Gandhavyūha Sūtram, these things are especially, in Hīnayāna also, Hīnayāna also. This is very… the origin of Buddhism."[248]

Ramesh did obviously know the meanings of the texts, but they did not seem quite as self-evident as to Gautam. On the other hand, he may have hesitated simply because he

[245] Gellner 1992, 193.
[246] Tuladhar-Douglas 2003 (web document).
[247] Gellner 1992, 221; Locke 1980, 193.
[248] Field diary I, 68.

was thinking of the best way to explain the texts. I do *not* suggest that he is not familiar with them, but my impression during his first comment ("It is very difficult to understand") was that he meant the books were difficult for him also, not just for e.g. foreigners. As to why an elder would be more at ease with religious texts than a younger priest is not difficult to understand. First, in time one naturally gets increasingly familiar with them. Second, it is the culturally established duty of Buddhācārya elders to be authorities on texts. Third, younger priests' duties usually revolve around the cycle of acting as officiating priests.

22. An excursus: Vipassanā meditation

A more personal anecdote may illustrate how I experienced Ramesh's way of approaching religious questions. During my fieldwork in Nepal, I soon realized that an impartial attitude towards the local traditions and customs would not be enough. In discussions with the local people, I constantly felt a need to let go of my academic objectivity and personally *stand for something*. At Svayambhū I presented myself as a student working towards a Master's thesis. Still, for my main informants I was also something else: a student of Buddhism in the sense that it should have something to give me soteriologically. In fact, I was interested in Buddhism on a more personal level (although my background is Evangelical Lutheran Christian), and so Prem Śreṣṭha suggested I should go to a place called Dharmashringa on the outskirts of Kathmandu, where a 10-day Vipassanā meditation course would be organized twice a month. After giving it some thought I went to sign up and started the course on September 1. I will now present myself as a case, because I believe this kind of a treatment may open a path towards a better understanding of the Nepalese Buddhist person.

The course was based on the teachings of an Indian guru called S. N. Goenka. He had been taught in Myanmar, where the tradition was believed to be the purest teaching of the Buddha.[249] My impression is that in Nepal this form of Buddhism would count as a revivalist movement that emphasises the monastic ideals of early Theravāda, which has become something of a competitor with Tantric Newar Buddhism in the last decades. The Vipassanā course had a strict schedule: the wake-up bell was at 4 am, dur-

[249] This Burmese form of Vipassanā was popularized in the 1920s and has gained ground e.g. in Sri Lanka (Harvey 1990, 293). It has established meditation centres all over the world.

ing the day the student sat 11 hours in meditation on a cushion, and the meditation times were only interrupted by a breakfast break, a lunch break, a mid-day rest and a tea break. At 9.30 pm lights were turned out and everyone retired to the rooms. For nearly ten days, we were not allowed to speak or otherwise communicate with others – including roommates. Personal belongings had to be left to a storeroom, as no reading, writing or contact with the outside world was allowed. The practice had to be completed as such – there were no lighter versions available.

The doctrinal basis followed broadly general Buddhist themes. The choices of words suggested that the viewpoint was that of Śrāvakayāna, since common concepts appeared in their Pāli form (*paññā* instead of *prajñā*, *dhamma* instead of *dharma*, *kamma* instead of *karma* etc.).[250] The strict rules and daily routines reflected the practice of *śīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration, mastery of the mind) was practised through constant meditation, and *paññā* (wisdom) was to be the result of quieting the mind. The Noble Eightfold Path was followed and the Five Precepts were observed (Eight Precepts for more experienced students). The task was to observe one's sensations while concentrating on various small parts of the body with equanimity, i.e. neither reacting to pleasant nor unpleasant sensations. Thus, the impermanence of all phenomena was to be realized. Physical pain was to go away as was physical pleasure. The guru himself explained the day's progress on videotape in the evening. After consistent practice, increasingly subtle sensations would be experienced, until finally one would experience a flowing kind of perfect dissolution and oneness with the universe.

What I mostly experienced was pain and frustration. However, the silent concentration on one's own physical and mental processes was very revealing. At times, I did feel a subtle 'semi-flow', and in retrospect, the time spent at the course was indeed unique, almost magical. What is more important, however, is that the practice gave a direct *access to the inner world* of a Buddhist practitioner. I shared the course with nearly a hundred Nepalese people (as well as a dozen westerners); we breathed the same air and ate the same food. We westerners did remain culturally outsiders, and after being able to speak again we quickly formed a community of our own. Still, the general experience was something my informants at Svayambhū could and in fact *would* participate in, which is the real benefit of the course in light of this study.

After returning from the course, I went back to Svayambhū to discuss it with my informants. Ramesh Buddhācārya was especially pleased, since he had wanted to do the

[250] Based on the leaflets I received (Vipassana Meditation: An Introduction; Vipassana Meditation – code of discipline and application form; Guidelines for practising Vipassana Meditation) and Goenka's discourses at the end of the day.

course himself for a long time. In an interview just days before the course we talked about Vipassanā when discussing personal faith in general. I quote him:

> We call… that is the word we call in Nepali, *kimbhadanti*, the way of trust. There is no proof, just trust, just believe. […] So book is not quite enough to study Buddhism. You need theory and practical, both. So I'm really happy you're going to Vipassanā. You are getting such a big opportunity; otherwise it's so difficult to take time for Vipassanā. Vipassanā is very… most people they are giving me… to go Vipassanā. It is very good.[251]

Ramesh was obliged to fulfil his caste and family duties, but time permitting he would have taken the course, as many of his friends had done. Hence, he did not explicitly oppose the newer Buddhist trends in Kathmandu.[252] However, basic observational meditation techniques are a common heritage in all branches of Buddhism, and as such, they can be seen as the background for more elaborate Tantric visualization techniques. What we can discern from the above comment is the attitude of emphasising faith (trust, belief) and personal involvement. At other times, it became quite clear how Ramesh laid great stress on learning for someone who wants to become a Buddhist. The place where a Newar Buddhist like him receives teaching is the lineage monastery: "*bāhāḥ* is one kind of school [where one] can study Buddhism in Newar society."[253]

Nevertheless, mere religious education is futile without a mind motivated by the goal of personal liberation. In fact, when I asked Ramesh about a reasonable way to think of Newar Buddhism, i.e. to interpret and understand it as authentically as possible, he said the most important things are as follows:

> The most important thing is trust, important thing is trust. And one another thing is reality, the reality. And one more thing is, you must have good teacher. Good teacher. And the power of understanding.[254]

And a little later:

> One [important thing] is trust, good teacher, best teacher, and one is, you have understanding, you have interest, inner your heart, you have to give interest and give time, and understand very deeply; all those things are very important.[255]

The emphasis on a good teacher reflects the high-caste priests' worldview. In the initiations, the guru gives proper interpretations of sacred symbolism and is irreplaceable in passing forward relevant information. Low-caste or untouchable Nepalese would hardly

[251] Field diary I, 61.
[252] The Dharmashringa meditation centre was established only in 1987.
[253] Field diary I, 76.
[254] Field diary I, 71.
[255] Ibid.

emphasise the teacher's role similarly, as they have no access to such information in the first place. By 'reality', Ramesh said he meant "religious reality,"[256] which in turn connects to worldview. Religious truths are eternal, but they have to be adjusted according to the latest findings of science. Our conception of the world as a whole must be *realistic*. This reminds one not to think of a Newar Buddhist priest as someone exclusively occupied with his traditional ritual duties; simultaneously, he lives and participates in the age of psychological, anthropological and other (Western) influences. An example of Ramesh's anthropological understanding was his narrative of a legendary Tantric master, Jamuna Ācārya. Having told me about this ancient master he said:

> So Jamuna Ācārya is real or not? Or this is folk story? Actually, this is not folk story; this is real story, at that time.[257]

Thus, he made a distinction between a real person and a legendary ('folk') person. In addition, he continued to argue for the historical existence of Jamuna Ācārya by telling me about a recent archaeological excavation in Kathmandu, where an inscription and a *stūpa* from the time of Jamuna Ācārya were allegedly found. This shows how Ramesh can apply critical thinking to the religious authorities found in legends that are dear and inescapable to Newar Buddhists even today. This is not very dissimilar to the way religious specialists are trained in other religious traditions, e.g. in the theological teaching of Christian clergy.

To sum up the outcome of this and the previous chapter, for an elder priest the worldview reflected in traditional religious texts stood out. The community elders have cultural and social reasons for being authorities on the texts unlike the younger generation, whose responsibilities centre on being officiating priests in practice. Tantric secrets are not to be revealed to outsiders, but apart from these tradition-based Buddhist views, some newer ones are being accepted, at least in the case of Ramesh Buddhācārya. The form of religion one practices does not seem to matter as long as one believes in something.[258] Religious tolerance is very important (this was hinted at on many occasions). Ramesh also combines the religious frame of reference with a more critical one, as in explaining about the excavations in Kathmandu. Naturally by living in an urban environment and being a priest in a place like Svayambhū he has had to interact with all kinds of influences and people from around the world. At the same time, this may re-

[256] Ibid.
[257] Field diary I, 79.
[258] Ramesh also said the following: "Even me, I'm Buddhist myself, I'll go sometimes into church. When I go to church, when I see Jesus, I pray to Jesus inner my heart. Because he's the great, he's the great! And I'm not alone." (Field diary I, 74.)

flect the younger generation's more open and free attitude towards religious traditions – which some consider a big challenge in the future of Newar Buddhism.[259]

23. The creation myth and its functions

The religio-cultural significance of Svayambhū ultimately derives from its role in the Buddhist origin myth of civilization and culture in the Kathmandu Valley. Although based on a text labelled as a Purāṇa, the source of the myth is not typical South Asian Puranic literature that would explain the birth of the universe in cyclical phases with layers, continents and worlds.[260] Instead, it is a localized and rather young myth that focuses on how the Kathmandu Valley was turned from a lake into dry land where it was possible to establish civilization. Still, some aspects of the myth refer to ultimate metaphysical considerations that relate closely to the identity of Svayambhū.

As such, the Buddhist creation myth is not unique. A rivalling Hindu myth explains the draining of the primordial lake and birth of civilization in another terms; in the Buddhist version the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī drains the lake, in the Hindu version Kṛṣṇa performs the same act. As to which version is older, there seems to be no certainty. The Buddhist myth also bears great similarities with a draining myth of the Khotan Valley in Tibet. Scholars have suggested that the Nepalese have devised their myth following Tibetan influences from the north.[261]

In any event, the local Buddhist myth has become the dominant one in the Kathmandu Valley. It is the most common explanation of the genesis of the Nepal (Kathmandu) Valley. Of the different existing versions, some emphasize metaphysical elements, others the role of Mañjuśrī, and still others the continuation of certain lineages. However, the prominence of Svayambhū cannot be erased from any version, and thus the popularity of the origin myth indeed ensures and constantly renews the acceptance of Svayambhū as a unique shrine.

The creation myth derives from a text called the Svayambhūpurāṇa. This piece of anonymous literature was composed sometimes during the 15th or 16th century.[262]

[259] On the overall changes see e.g. Gellner 2001, 285ff.
[260] Decleer 1998 (web document).
[261] Brinkhaus 1987, 1-4.
[262] Gutschow (1997, 16) says the oldest recension is from 1557. However, there are some sources that give an earlier date, usually in the 15th century. Since there seems to be no consensus, we can date the

The oldest parts of the Svayambhūpurāṇa may in fact be centuries older, but a likely impetus for construing one solid text was the attack of the Muslims in 1349 CE. After the raid, the local Buddhist tradition was declining, and a unifying holy text was needed to consolidate the Buddhist community – and especially to glorify Buddhist shrines of the Valley such as the Svayambhūcaitya.[263]

The first time I heard the complete origin myth narrated was in Prem Śreṣṭha's shop when Gautam Buddhācārya had joined us. Prem already knew most of the myth by heart, and so he eagerly acted as the spokesman, as I would have needed his translation in any case. However, Gautam Buddhācārya (who obviously understood some English too) supervised the whole situation and always gave the final word. Often he corrected facts to Prem, who then retold the relevant parts. In case I did not understand something, we went through the issue again. Although there are numerous variants of the myth available, and some are surely more elaborate or precise, I feel this particular version catches the spirit I experienced in the narration. This is why I have chosen to retell the myth following Gautam and Prem's lines. Moreover, the climax of the story adds an important aspect concerning the Buddhācāryas.

> The area where Svayambhū was born was 14 square kilometres in size. In the Golden Age (*satya yuga),* Vipaśvī Buddha came from Bandhumatinagar, India, with several monks and went to the Jamaco Hill 18 kilometres from Svayambhū. He thought it necessary to establish civilization in the Kathmandu Valley, which at the time was a lake ruled by snakes (*nāgas*). He threw a seed of a lotus flower into the lake thinking that in this manner, Svayambhū shall be created out of the petals of the lotus, five colours will come to protect the lotus and the whole world will be created. And it so happened that like flashes of lightning the colours emanated from the petals of the lotus. After doing this Vipaśvī returned to Bandhumatinagar.
>
> During the next *yuga* Śikhī Buddha came from Gothihawa to pay homage to the site.[264] He saw the colours emanating from the lotus and paid respect to Svayambhū. Having done this he returned back home like the previous Buddha.
>
> Then Mañjuśrī arrived from China along with prince Dharmākar, 500 pupils and his two wives, Keśabatī (a.k.a. Upokesadhi) and Barda (a.k.a. Mocheda). When he arrived, he saw the lotus and also noticed that the petals were at Svayambhū but the root of the lotus was in another place called Guhyeśvarī where a goddess bearing this name had her temple. Mañjuśrī wanted to drain the lake so that people could come closer to venerate Svayambhū and pondered what would be the best way to clear out the waters. First he tried at a place called Gokarna but did not succeed. Meanwhile,

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different recensions roughly somewhere in the 15th or 16th century. Finding the precise date is not essential in the present study.

[263] Shakya 2001, 28.

[264] In the narration this was said to be Dvāpara yuga, but obviously this was incorrect since the second age preceding Dvāpara yuga is in fact Tretā yuga. There was more imprecision in details all of which shall not be pointed out here.

his wife Keśabatī grew tired and wanted to rest at Phūlco Hill. Likewise, the other wife wanted to stop at Tilaco Hill. Neither one of these places was good for draining the lake. Eventually Cobhar was found in the south. Mañjuśrī lashed with his sword Caṇḍakhaḍga so that a gorge was created and the waters could flow out. All living creatures were washed away in the process. But the ruler of the snakes, Kārkonāth, asked for Mañjuśrī to leave enough water for the snakes to live in. Mañjuśrī calmed him and dug the soil with his sword so that enough water remained for the snakes. This happened in a place called Tauda.

Mañjuśrī headed north to the Guhyeśvarī temple in Baleju (where the root of the lotus was) and was afraid he might bother the goddess of the temple. He meditated a while, apologized for the intrusion and explained that he wanted to create living creatures in the valley. Guhyeśvarī gave him her boon and Mañjuśrī could create all living creatures. He established a town called Mañjupatan, which marked the birth of civilization in the Kathmandu Valley.

Around this time Dharmākar, the prince who had arrived with Mañjuśrī, became the King of Gole. He tried to build a palace in Gole (to the east of Svayambhū) but failed. He tried a second time in Lazimpat (to the north) but was again unsuccessful. Eventually the palace could be built in Narayanhiti, and this is the name the royal palace bears even to this very day.

Then three successive Buddhas, Krakuchanda, Kanakamuni and Kāśyapa, came together to venerate Svayambhū. With them, they brought 700 monks who were divided into four tribes or castes: Brahmins, Rājas [sic], Vaiśyas and Chetris. They all went to Keśabatī – by now the name of a river – in order to shave the monks' heads, but there was no water for hair cutting. Nearby at Bāgedwar there was a tiger's head (Np. *bāgh,* 'tiger'). Krakuchanda went to it, pointed his finder and said: "If I should have the least bit of spiritual power in my hands, let there be water in this place!" And so the Bāgmatī River (the main river in the Valley) was created. Then the 700 monks returned to Gothihawa.[265]

The King of Gauḍa was called Pracaṇḍadev. Once he wanted to start to lead a modest and simple life. He decided to turn over his kingdom to his son and left for Svayambhū with his wife. He meditated a lot and visited the twelve powerful spots (*tīrthas*) in the Valley, thereby learning many Tantric powers. In Kathmandu, there lived a monk named Guṇākar Ācārya. The king went to him and asked how best to protect the self-existing light of Svayambhū from evil-minded people of those dark times (*kali yuga* – the present aeon). Guṇākar responded that despite his kinghood Pracaṇḍadev could not protect the light unless he gave up all his worldly possessions, including his wife. After thinking it through the king agreed to become a monk.

Pracaṇḍadev and Guṇākar went to Gopuchhangracaitya (modern Pulaśu fifteen minutes away from Svayambhū). There the king was given a new name: Śāntikar. Then they went to another place called Āgaṃ chẽ (actually the name for the inner shrine consecrated for a Tantric deity), where the king received the powers of a Vajrācārya and was given another name: Śāntikarācārya. This happened when King Birkadev was the ruler of Kathmandu. Śāntikarācārya now had the powers to cover the self-existing form of light (*Svayambhū jyotirūpa*). But he did not have sufficient funds for this. He

[265] This account does not mention Śākyamuni Buddha, but in other sources he is closely tied with Svayambhū. He reveres it like the previous Buddhas and teaches Buddhas and bodhisattvas about its sacredness, who in turn pass the teaching to others (including king Aśoka). Although Śākyamuni Buddha is believed to have actually visited the Kathmandu Valley, this is historically very unlikely.

went to King Birkadev who gladly gave the money needed. So the construction of a *caitya* could eventually begin.

Śāntikarācārya meditated so fiercely that Indra's heaven was shaking. Indra saw the noble act that was taking place and quickly summoned the gods. Together they decided to help in building the *caitya*. They took the form of human beings and came to the building site as monks. The correct spot for covering the light was Phuvankhel at the bottom of the Svayambhū hill.[266] First they made ten holes, then blocks out of jewels, and so the *caitya* eventually took shape. The gods in human form built the thirteen gold spires at the top of the *caitya*. At this point Śāntikarācārya realized who the monks were. Among the gods were protectors who were given independent residences (Vasupur, Agnipur, Nāgpur, Śāntipur and Vayupur). Gilded statues of Ādibuddha and Ārya Tārā were placed at the top and the shrines of the Five Buddhas and their Tārās were built around the *caitya*.

Right next to the *caitya* was the shrine of Hārītī. Its pinnacle was bent in the building process. Consequently Hārītī needed to be pacified with a fivefold offering (beaten rice, black soybeans, black beans, meat and fish). The fierce goddess was appeased and the construction could continue.

King Birkadev won the honour to be the handler of the sanctifying ritual. When the ritual was finished, Śāntikarācārya went to meditate inside the Śāntipur building and swore that nothing would happen to Svayambhū as long as he remained there. Before this, he had brought four brothers from Gauda to protect Svayambhū. They were called Rantachori, Dhanchori, Thansinju and Parmānanda. These were the forefathers of the Buddhācāryas. Śāntikarācārya himself gave them the special social status they hold today.

This happened some 1800 years ago. After King Birkadev the Licchavis came to rule the country. The population of Nepal steadily increased and the place prospered.

The myth begins with the first of the seven mortal Buddhas, Vipaśvī, coming to the primordial lake ruled by *nāgās*. Although the birth of the self-existing Buddhahood in the form of light (*jyotirūpa*) is in a way accredited to him, it is obvious that he cannot be the creator of a self-existing phenomenon unless he himself somehow *is* the eternal principle, the Ādibuddha. The self-existing Buddhahood is a metaphysical concept, a *prima causa,* pointing towards the beginning of all material existence. It can be connected with the Mahāyāna principle of *śūnyatā*, emptiness, and as such, it is the ultimate reality of all things. The notion of the Ādibuddha is a personification of this principle, and anthropomorphic or 'caityamorphic' forms of the Ādibuddha are e.g. Vajradhara, Mañjuśrī and Svayambhū, but never Vipaśvī Buddha. Therefore, we must draw a line between the already existing, amazing light of Buddhahood and its more elaborate manifestation, where out of the lotus grew the five colours representing the Five Buddhas. In this act, primordial oneness took a more understandable shape, with

[266] How this might be so has remained unclear to me, since the contemporary *caitya* is naturally on top of the hill. It may be that the original more modest *caitya* has actually been placed elsewhere.

attributes linked to the prevailing South Asian fivefold system of elements, wisdoms, mind pollutants etc.

Is there a natural explanation to the origin of the light? According to N. P. Shrestha, methane gas has leaked out from the soil in places where the prominent shrines of the Valley (e.g. Svayambhūnāth, Paśupatināth and Guhyeśvarī) are located. This has resulted in bright light phenomena that have caused great bewilderment, which in turn has called for a religious explanation.[267] Hindu seers and thinkers have given their own interpretations in areas where they were the dominant force at the time, and similarly Buddhist authorities have interpreted e.g. the occasion at the Svayambhū area in their own terms.

The next notable phase in the myth is the arrival of Mañjuśrī who drains the lake. The coming of Mañjuśrī from China is miraculous; in some accounts, he flew through the air with his mount. His role in the creation myth links Kathmandu closely to Tibet and China, and it has surely reinforced the continuous ties of Northern Buddhism and Svayambhū (exemplified today by the Tibetan and Bhutanese monasteries in the area). Mañjuśrī is the central deity of the Dharmadhātuvāgīśvara-maṇḍala, the relevant mandala of the Svayambhūcaitya. Therefore, von Rospatt has suggested that Mañjuśrī is also the central deity of the Svayambhūcaitya and hence the Ādibuddha, as has been discussed before. This interpretation is plausible based on textual sources, but it is not exactly heard in actual practice, at least according to my limited experience. Mañjuśrī usually gets the credit for draining the lake and establishing civilization (first to the town called Mañjupatan), which seems to be his real contribution in the common people's view.

Interestingly, the root of the lotus flower was said to be in Guhyeśvarī, the temple of a goddess who is often given a Hindu identity rather than a Buddhist one. The popular Hindu legend of Guhyeśvarī says she was originally Pārvatī, the wife of Śiva, who threw herself into a sacrificial fire. Śiva carried her corpse around the world in agony, but her body parts fell in different places. Her secret (*guhya*) parts – the anus, vulva or vagina – fell on the site where her temple is located.[268] However, there are *two* major Guhyeśvarī temples. The larger and more recent shrine is further away near Paśupatināth, and it bears stronger Hindu connotations. The one related to the Svayambhū myth is the 'old' (*purāṇo*) Guhyeśvarī not far from Svayambhū – a considerably smaller shrine than its counterpart, with a lotus-shaped brass plate as the central theme. Gautam Buddhācārya emphasized that it was indeed this *old* Guhyeśvarī where the root of the

[267] Shrestha 1997, 187.
[268] Michaels 1996, 317.

lotus was. Now besides being given multiple Hindu identities, Guhyeśvarī is often seen as a Buddhist goddess (e.g. Prajñāpāramitā, Tārā, the consort of Avalokiteśvara or Ādibuddha or even Nairātmya, the Tantric consort of Hevajra). She can even be identified with the Buddha essence of Svayambhū.[269] Therefore, the rooting of the flower is connected with the Tantric Buddhist aspect of the goddess Guhyeśvarī, not the Hindu aspect. My long-lasting impression was that rooting the lotus in Guhyeśvarī was a paradoxical sign of syncretism in the Svayambhū myth, but a more thorough investigation proves this untrue. As the *purāṇo* Guhyeśvarī probably is indeed the older one of the two,[270] its linkage with Svayambhū actually ensures a position where Buddhists can – in this case – claim to have a longer tradition, which is all-important in questions of religious self-image. This, I think, is why my Buddhist informant wanted to emphasize the fact.

In the narration, the subsequent mortal Buddhas come from one place. This is inaccurate, as in other sources deriving from the Svayambhūpurāṇa each of the seven Buddhas has his own place of origin. Śākyamuni, for example, comes from Kapilavastu.[271] Furthermore, they are all given main actions they performed and mountains they stayed at. Two things are worth noting based on variants. First, Krakuchanda gets credit for creating the main rivers in the Valley, Bāgmatī and Viṣṇumatī. Second, Kāśyapa is said to have taught Pracaṇḍadev who then became the famous Śāntikarācārya. Therefore, the older system of the seven Buddhas has apparently been modified to function better in the local context of the Kathmandu Valley.

The role of Śāntikarācārya is quite interesting in the myth. He is the former ruler of Gauḍa, "an important city in medieval Bengal and an important centre of tantrism."[272] He came to Nepal to lead a spiritual life and met the *siddha* Guṇākar Ācārya, who was a self-taught yogic master and initiated Śāntikarācārya as the first Vajrācārya in the Valley. Thus, Śāntikarācārya holds a position as the forefather of all Vajrācāryas. Śāntipur, the place where he, according to legends, is still meditating, is the Tantric shrine of the general association of all Vajrācāryas (*Ācārya guthi*) in Kathmandu. The most secret shrine is behind an ancient door sealed with a huge lock, leading into a cave. According to Ramesh Buddhācārya, only two people can go inside the cave: one certain prestigious Vajrācārya and the eldest (*thakali*) of the Buddhācārya families.[273]

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[269] Ibid., 319-321.
[270] Ibid., 311.
[271] E.g. Gellner 1992, 193.
[272] Locke 1980, 25.
[273] There is a story of a Malla king going inside the cave to pray for rains after a long draught. He is said to have found Śāntikarācārya still meditating. The plea was successful and the rains came.

The most highly esteemed Vajrācāryas in Kathmandu claim to be descendants of four of Śāntikarācārya's early disciples.[274] Legend has it that the origin of their monastic system lies in the four monasteries set up by these four disciples. It is quite interesting, then, that also the Buddhācāryas claim descent from four progenitors, but different ones. As was told in the myth, Śāntikarācārya brought four brothers from Gauḍa who became the forefathers of the Buddhācāryas. Therefore, both the Vajrācāryas and the Buddhācāryas see themselves as descendants of the one who built the Svayambhūcaitya and presides over Śāntipur, but also as ones that diverged very early on. There are far more Vajrācāryas around the Kathmandu Valley than Buddhācāryas, and they all have their respective lineage monasteries. As to why and how the Buddhācāryas became the officiating priests of the great *caitya* itself, remains a very interesting topic for further research.

The Svayambhū myth is an account of the prehistory of the Valley. It ends with the coming of the Licchavis, which marks the beginning of the historical era in Nepal (the first inscriptions providing historical evidence are from the beginning of the Licchavi era in the fifth century CE). The myth serves several functions. *First*, it reinforces the sacredness of a site where extraordinary natural phenomena have been observed. It does this by applying the system of the seven mortal Buddhas (found already in the Pāli canon), all venerating Svayambhū as a unique site for attaining enlightenment.[275] Hence, the centre of Buddhism is *relocated* to the Kathmandu Valley (this will be discussed below). *Second*, it popularizes the Mahāyāna doctrines of the Ādibuddha and the Five Buddhas in the context of the Nepal Valley. These are older Indian Tantric formulations, likely to have been known in Nepal long before the myth was compiled. The account of the Svayambhūpurāṇa ultimately establishes them as a central doctrine in Newar Buddhism and links them directly with the Svayambhūcaitya.[276] *Third*, Mañjuśrī's role in setting up civilization in the Valley has secured continuing relationships and alliance with Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism – a fact which naturally owes to Nepal's central location along the trade routes between India and Tibet. *Fourth*, the myth links the birth of civilization to a Buddhist worldview and doctrine. *Fifth*, the highest hereditary Buddhist castes in Newar society build their caste identity on the example of Śāntikarācārya as depicted in the myth. *Sixth*, in the construction process Tantric priests, the reigning king and Vedic gods all cooperate, creating strong cultural ties

[274] Ibid., 28.
[275] Other accounts of the myth mention this more clearly, see e.g. Shakya 2001, 33. Svayambhū is seen as the perfect spot for attaining enlightenment and as the home of the Buddhas of all three world ages.
[276] According to an inscription, King Jaya Pratap Malla built the shrines of the Five Buddhas around the Svayambhūcaitya only in 1654 CE. The Svayambhūpurāṇa was already well known at the time.

between Newar Buddhism and its wider cultural context. Finally, the myth has ensured the legitimate position of Svayambhū as the exemplary Newar Buddhist shrine and one of the best-known places in the Kathmandu Valley.

24. Observations on Tibetan Buddhism in Svayambhū

Vajrāyāna Buddhism is practised in both Nepal and Tibet. Hence, most divinities found in the Nepalese Buddhist pantheon are mutually familiar in Tibet. The Dalai Lama is an incarnation of Avalokiteśvara, the most popular bodhisattva in Nepal, and practically all other exoteric and esoteric Vajrāyāna deities coexist in these traditions. The greatest differences between the two traditions are, on the one hand, the Tibetan emphasis of Lamaism, and on the other hand, the Indic influence in Nepal. Ramesh Buddhācārya noted: "Actually in Tibetan Buddhism they don't have Gaṇeś, Śiva and Pārvatī. Only in Newar religion they have Gaṇeś, also Kumārī *pūjā* […]."[277] Likewise, Hindu-Buddhist counterparts like Guhyeśvarī as Pārvatī/Tārā or Kumārī as Taleju/Vajradevī are not found in Tibet. Both Vajrāyāna traditions are similarly influenced by folk beliefs and practices; *bön* in Tibet and shamanism and ancestor worship in Nepal, which are both contemporarily practised in the Nepalese countryside as well as in large cities.

Besides having been a thoroughfare between Tibetan and Indian trade the Kathmandu Valley has for long been venerated by Tibetan Buddhists as a sacred place. Turrell Wylie was influential in introducing the Tibetan religious geography of Nepal to Western scholarship by translating a Tibetan handbook for pilgrimage in Nepal written in 1820.[278] However, the history of religious cooperation is several centuries older, both sides having influenced the other in a tolerant atmosphere.

Svayambhū has been one of the most venerated sites for Tibetan Buddhists in Nepal. Although the real concentration of Tibetan Buddhism is the Bodhnāth *stūpa* in eastern Kathmandu – around which a practical Tibetan township has developed – Svayambhū has nonetheless been another popular pilgrimage site. There are several Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and residences near the Svayambhū area. The appearance of

[277] Field diary I, 64. Into 'Newar religion' I assume Ramesh includes Buddhism, although he uses the word 'they' instead of 'we'. But just a little earlier he had said: "When *we* start to do worship or get a new job, first *we* pray to Gaṇeś."
[278] See Wylie 1970.

rows of Tibetan prayer flags hundreds of metres before is the first sign of approaching the site. Tibetan Buddhists have an important role in the regular whitewashing ritual of the Svayambhūcaitya.[279] A few metres north of the *caitya* is Karmarāj Mahāvihār, a Tibetan Mahāyānist *vihāra* established in 1954. Next to the western Amitābha shrine is the Deva Dharma Mahāvihār, probably founded in 1893 and inhabited by Bhutanese Buddhist monks, hence also linking Svayambhū to the Bhutanese Buddhist tradition.

Karmarāj Mahāvihār is the most visible and popular monastery of the ones mentioned. The monks perform *pūjā* twice daily (at 5 am and about 4 pm) and follow a strict monastic schedule. The *pūjā* consists of recitations of sacred texts flavoured with the Tibetan sounding of horns and gongs. The Karmarāj Mahāvihār monastery is a very popular place of veneration for Nepalese Buddhists. At the entrance, there is a 3,66 metres tall gilt-copper repoussé statue of Śākyamuni Buddha from the 1950s. The family of a renowned Newar artisan, Kuber Singh Śākya, created it. They are likewise responsible for many other works of art in Svayambhū and other important sites.[280] Practically all visitors pay homage to the statues of Tibetan Buddhist saints at the entrance. Once inside, the locals continue naturally towards the left, where they turn a giant prayer wheel, then walk through a hallway with many statues of deities, usually neglecting the room where the Mahāyāna monks sit for *pūjā* (which usually attracts only westerners). They usually touch quickly as many statues as they can and pass by without much ado. Coming back to the entrance hall they stay for another phase of veneration (the large statue is given more time and devotion than the rows of smaller statues inside), before leaving the monastery and continuing the tour at other shrines. Hence, the Karmarāj *gompa* is a routine stop for many during their visit at Svayambhū (also the Bhutanese Deva Dharma Mahāvihār enjoys similar kind of devotion but apparently on a more modest scale).

The affiliation of non-Nepalese Buddhist monasteries at Svayambhū is a natural outcome of the long and close cultural relations between Nepal and Tibet. In the process of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna expanding from India to Tibet, Nepal was an important intermediary. Furthermore, both Nepalese and Tibetan Buddhist teachers and artists have regularly visited each other during the centuries, and cultural bounds have been reinforced by the means of royal marriage.[281] Many of the Svayambhūcaitya's renovations

[279] The *caitya* is ritually whitewashed so as to ensure its renewed purity. It also has a special birthday in October, during which its all-seeing eyes are renovated, wick lamps are lighted and a fire sacrifice is performed (Gutschow 1997, 26). This ritual renovation is a very important feature for Newar Buddhists also, but I did not obtain personal field information on it.
[280] Slusser & Giambrone (web document, read on 24 July 2004).
[281] An overview of Nepal-Tibet religious relations throughout the centuries is e.g. Dhungel 1999.

in past centuries are said to have been carried out or contributed by Tibetan (or Bhutanese) Lamas; e.g. the sixth *zhva-dmar-pa* in 1629/30, '*brug-pa rin-po-che* between 1751 and 1758, and the tenth *zhva-dmar-pa* in 1790, to name but a few.[282]

To sum up, the Tibetan and Bhutanese cultural influence is an organic part of the Svayambhū complex, which is today evident in the existence of monasteries, residences and ornaments throughout the area. Tibetan Buddhism is even sold to foreigners in the form of prayer flags and other souvenirs. This suggests that the inner dynamics of the religion itself and the significance of *dharma* as a universal law surpass any national division. Common Vajrayāna iconography and doctrinal basis are elements likely to ensure the coexistence of ethnic Newar Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism at Svayambhū. Although nationalism was in fact a visible element during the fieldwork, my informants directed any hostility or suspicion towards *India*, not Tibet.

25. Nationalism and relocation

Nepal as a state was born after the Hindu ruler Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered and unified the three separate Malla kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley in 1768-69.[283] From 1846 to 1951, the Rana family held actual supreme power as prime ministers while the lineage of the Shah kings was held suppressed. In the aftermath of World War II, many Third World countries experienced changes in their regime. In Nepal, the Shah kings restored their supreme power in 1951, overthrowing the Ranas. The present state of Nepal is officially a constitutional monarchy, the king holding supreme power while a prime minister heads a Council of Ministers. In 1990, a new constitution introduced a multi-party system. Recently the kingdom of Nepal has received international attention in notorious ways: in 2001, most of the royal family was massacred, and an insurgence ('People's War') by Maoist rebels has held the country in a wearing state of civil war for over a decade.

The common urban Nepalese citizen has a rather strong sense of national pride. To be Nepalese is important, more so because the great civilizations around Nepal, i.e. China and especially India, have kept the country in a peculiar intermediate position. India has been Nepal's mighty big brother, influencing major cultural and religious de-

[282] Ibid., 186-87, 189, 194.
[283] Gellner 1992, 9-10. The process was swift but in practice extended to 1769 before being completed.

velopments in the landlocked country. The recent rapid inclusion of Nepal to the global markets has resulted in the painful realization of the country's total economic dependence on India. Resources are scarce mainly due to geographic realities; in most parts of the country, elevation changes and monsoon rains render cultivation and transportation exceedingly difficult. Lack of access to sea makes import and export trade dependent on India's market policies. Other kinds of problems exist, too. Many young Nepalese girls are deceived to work as prostitutes in India with a promise of decent work, and although the girls could eventually manage to escape, their families still would not accept them back because of social stigma. For reasons like these, resentment is felt and expressed every now and then.

Nepalese nationalism lives in legends. Ramesh Buddhācārya told me about Jamuna Ācārya, the great Nepalese Tantric master of the past.[284] In the legend, Jamuna Ācārya was a virtuous guru who only used his powers for good ends and taught his disciples in this manner. At the same time, an anonymous Indian Tantric master attempted to impress his disciples in mischievous and inappropriate ways. There was competition between the two gurus – who Ramesh called 'magicians' once or twice – but in the end, the Nepalese guru taught the Indian one a lesson about the right use of Tantric powers, and the Indian guru eagerly apologized.

I have mentioned earlier how the old musician I interviewed at Svayambhū gave another example of possible nationalism (see page 69). He discussed Hārītī, the terrible female ghost, who before becoming Buddhist killed children. According to the musician, "She actually killed Indian people who came here." The colour of the Indians was dark (or black), so the demon was also black in colour.[285] This was the only time I heard Hārītī killing especially Indians, and although the very nationalistic-sounding undertones of these examples do not need to be interpreted as such, they seem to indicate a certain tendency to identify Nepalese religion as at least equal to its Indian counterpart.

In addition to depicting Indians as inferior in legends, the tension lives in contemporary issues. Ramesh told me about a recent archaeological discovery in India:

> Actually a couple of years ago in India, they dug some places and found something, and so they say that Buddha was born in India, but it is not true. The Japanese and Sri Lankan governments and many Buddhist people didn't accept that. It is not true. They want to say Buddha was born in India. I think they also like to say Mt Everest is in India [laughs].[286]

[284] Field diary I, 77-79.
[285] Field diary I, 52-53.
[286] Field diary I, 61-62.

The need to hold on to the few nationally important landmarks is understandably great, as they are a crucial source of foreign income through tourism.

In the discussion on the creation myth, we saw that the *relocation* of religiously and culturally important phenomena is one of the functions of the myth. It is indeed a very common theme in South Asian (and world) mythology to re-establish the primordial condition so that the truly important activities connect to a more familiar milieu. This has obviously happened in the case of the Svayambhūcaitya. As von Rospatt puts it:

> The importance of the Svayambhūcaitya for the Buddhist Newars cannot be overestimated. As the place where the principle of Buddhahood, the Ādibuddha, manifests itself of its own accord, it is not only the cultic centre of Newar Buddhism but in a certain sense the ontological centre of Buddhism at large.[287]

Hence, the role of e.g. Śākyamuni Buddha diminishes from being the historical founder of Buddhism to a pilgrim who humbly venerates the self-existing light of Buddhahood at Svayambhū among other saintly persons. One does not have to look far for examples of the major influence of Svayambhū to Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley. In every small locality shrine there is a *caitya*, representing the archetypical Nepalese *caitya,* viz. the Svayambhūcaitya. Sometimes the connection is explicit and sometimes implicit, but no Newar Buddhist would refute the notion of the Svayambhūcaitya being the exemplary *caitya* in the Valley. Its description is printed in virtually any tourist guide or other publication presenting the salient features of Nepal. In some rituals, the general Hindu custom of beginning a ritual with the worship of the light of Gaṇeś is interpreted as actually worshipping the light of Svayambhū.[288] All these illustrate the prominence of Svayambhū and, in the last example, the replacement of traditional Hindu interpretations with an indigenously Buddhist one.

Von Rospatt hypothesizes that the relocation of the centre of Buddhism characterises an ethnocentric tendency of the Newars so that they have always incorporated foreign elements into their civilization. As a result, they have transformed these elements into being indigenous.[289] I wish to suggest that the roots of this phenomenon go further back in South Asian civilization and reflect more of the Hindu inclusive tendency than any 'purely' Buddhist belief or practice system. I will take here Gellner's stand in arguing that "Hindus are inclusive and will tend to accept Buddhists as Hindus […] Buddhists on the other hand tend to define anything which is not on a ~~strict definition Buddhist as~~ non-Buddhist, and therefore as Hindu."[290] Although

[287] Von Rospatt 1999, 27.
[288] Ibid. (n. 44)
[289] Ibid., 28.

tion Buddhist as non-Buddhist, and therefore as Hindu."[290] Although Svayambhū has apparently been a Buddhist landmark from its inception (we have no documents stating any original Hindu interpretation), the surrounding culture of the Licchavis from the fifth century CE onwards has always been dominantly Hindu, thus influencing the overall manner in which religious phenomena have been treated. This resulted in a situation where Svayambhū was doctrinally, socially and ritually constructed as the centre point of Buddhism but on Hindu terms borrowed from the larger cultural horizon.

On the other hand, the Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness was the philosophical basis without which the conception of Svayambhū as self-existent and timeless could not have been formed. In addition, the concept of the Ādibuddha (that apparently evolved in India in the tenth century[291]) has been a crucial tool for constructing the idea of the Svayambhūcaitya as we know it today. For the *substance* of the relocation of Svayambhū as the centre of Buddhism, we need to look for the Buddhist tradition itself. The Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna monastic system still prevalent in the Valley in the first millennium CE ensured a sociocultural base for worshipping Svayambhū as a Buddhist site.[292] A major influence in the relocation process has been without a doubt the rather late Svayambhūpurāṇa text. It would thus be wrong to neglect the clearly Buddhist elements involved in the history of the site. Nevertheless, in deciphering the cultural relocation process in general, the notion of the more powerful inclusivist tendency in Hinduism may provide elements for better understanding the phenomenon.

To sum up, there are and have been reasons for stressing the distinctively Nepalese nature of Svayambhū. Being a relatively small South Asian country Nepal has had difficulties in raising its voice over its dominant neighbours, for which a real need has perhaps evolved only recently due to economic and political hardships (the salient one being the civil war between the Maoists and the government). The religious heritage itself has been a source of natural pride, but not without more or less subtle hints towards the inferior qualities of especially Indians. The hints in question are not very boisterous but more of the quiet self-assertive type. However, the tendency to relocate centres and personages of great importance from abroad to Nepal has been a successful and, it seems, a working way to gain and sustain religious self-esteem. The South Asian mythic story-telling tradition has influenced the process that has doctrinal ties with the Mahāyāna notions of emptiness and the Ādibuddha. In all, relocating the centre of Bud-

[290] Gellner 1990, 221.
[291] Harvey 1990, 127.
[292] An introduction to the history of Buddhist monasticism in Nepal is e.g. Allen 1973.

dhism to Svayambhū has been a key factor in establishing the site as the primordial and essential Newar Buddhist shrine.

26. Conflicts of interests as religio-cultural dilemmas

Many bodies supervise the cultural and religious heritage found in Svayambhū.[293] The local 'Federation of Swoyambhu Management and Conservation' collects entrance fees from foreigners and is closely in contact with the caste-based religious authorities in charge of rituals (my older Buddhācārya informant belonged to the general committee of the federation). On national level, the government body most responsible for cultural sites such as Svayambhū is the Department of Archaeology (DoA), although other departments like the Forestry Department also have responsibilities. On an international scale, Svayambhū is a UNESCO World Heritage site and has therefore wider cultural importance.

On August 4 2003, one of the two tall *śikara* towers next to the Svayambhū-caitya caught fire. The 348-year-old Pratappur *śikara,* made of brick and wood, was a home for an important Tantric deity (Cakrasaṃvara) as well as some minor deities – all being stone statues placed in a hole at the high end of the building. Initially, it did not take long before the caretakers noticed the fire, although it was midnight. What followed was a surprising and to some an agonizing clash of values and expectations.

When Pratappur caught fire, the first practical thing was to extinguish it as quickly as possible and save all the important religious figurines. However, as a powerful Tantric deity was inside, it was out of the question for a fire fighter to just rush in with a hose. An apology prayer was needed first to ask the deity for forgiveness for disturbing his peace.[294] Ramesh Buddhācārya explained that the apology prayer was needed because "even stone images, in our religion, they have all life."[295]

[293] Sofield has recorded a total of 17 organisations involved with Svayambhū in 1994 (Sofield 2000, web document).
[294] Newspaper article 'Rescuing God from God', the Kathmandu Post, 12 August 2003.
[295] Field diary I, 83.

Plate 9. Pratappur after the fire with bamboo scaffolding.

The problem was that no one had entered the temple in 30 years. It was opened only at times of national crises or when the eldest priest of a community was replaced by a new one. Hence, even ritual specialists were at first perplexed about the situation. However, a prayer was held and the rescue operation could begin. It turned out that the Tantric deity inside was intact whereas some protector or 'bodyguard' deities around it were damaged – which some locals interpreted as a job well done since the main deity remained unharmed.[296] Those previously afraid of approaching the deity were now cheerful. A priest allegedly said, "We were silly to suspect any harm on the God. He is perfectly fine, and in fact in good humo[u]r."[297] Rumours started spreading about the cause of the fire, and according to one version, it was the Hindu god of fire, Agni, who had started the fire out of malevolence towards the Tantric divinity.

The real tragedy followed in the weeks after the fire. Cracks appeared in the walls of the temple very soon, indicating a risk of the whole structure's collapse. All parties agreed that the temple needed restoration, but the schedule and sharing of responsibilities seemed to pose too difficult a task for different interest groups. The priests needed to perform special consecration rituals before the actual restoration, but they had to wait for an auspicious time. The government authorities in charge of the funding said they were waiting for the priests to come up with a date that never came. The priests

[296] Newspaper article 'Rescuing God from God', the Kathmandu Post, 12 August 2003.
[297] Ibid.

claimed the government was neglecting the restoration of a cultural heritage monument and did not want to issue the money. Some locals even argued that it was more profitable for the government to wait for the structure to collapse. Religious authorities seemed to favour foreign agencies like UNESCO and distrust the governmental Department of Archaeology. My informant Ramesh thought that the local UNESCO representative showed a lot more interest in the safety of the rescue workers than the government had done, e.g. by immediately providing the workers with hard hats unlike the government did. He also thought that had the fire been at Paśupati, the main Hindu temple, everything would have happened a lot quicker: "Last month it was burned, Pratappur. Still they are working very slowly. If it had happened in Paśupati temple they are so making the [effort or progress]."[298]

Figure 9. A comic strip of a government official at Svayambhū.[299] © Rajesh K. / The Kathmandu Post.

On September 23, the building partly collapsed. I had left Nepal three days earlier, but on newspaper pages the conflict between the priests and the government continued. It seemed as if both parties were ready to act as soon as the other party made a move, but instead of such a move, the standstill continued. In the meantime, the last parts of the temple were on the brink of final collapse. The local media seemed to be

[298] Field diary I, 82-83.
[299] The Kathmandu Post, 12 August 2003. In the background are the Svayambhūcaitya and the Pratappur temple.

siding with the religious authorities rather than the government, citing clearly more often the opinions of the former than the latter.[300] The religious authorities in question were respected figures like the royal priest, who is cited e.g. as follows: "It is useless to talk with the DoA officials. There is nobody who can understand the Newar[i] tradition of worshipping the mysterious deity inside the temple. They simply say the money is ready and we can start the rituals, but they do not release the money."[301] A DoA official on the other hand argued, "We are ready to provide the money for the rituals, but the priests are not coming up with a date."[302] After a long time of dispute, the very costly consecration rituals were organized at the beginning of December 2003, after which the reconstruction could begin. In July 2004, the work was nearly complete.[303]

It is fair to say that all parties most likely share a certain concern for the future of Svayambhū, although they obviously interpret things from different perspectives. It is not the task of the present study to argue for or against their correctness. Nevertheless, the tensions that an incident like this brings forth can be analysed. What both sides share is a number of *obligations,* in other words responsibilities that reflect their ethos (the things they consider important, the way things ought to be done). It is a question of relevant moods and motivations – in Geertz's terms – that determines the essential features of each party's thinking. The priests' obligations are more direct in terms of social status, since failure to respond well to the tragedy of Pratappur would likely raise doubts about their capability to act determinately as authorities at Svayambhū. Ultimately the effect is even more profound, as the strict obligation to perform correct rites is an elementary part of their *worldview*. They have been initiated to the secrets of Tantric deities and they have sworn not to reveal these secrets by their very lives. Thus, the deities are *existentially* important. On the other hand, the government bodies' obligations are based on the legitimised scope within which they are entitled to perform. The field of archaeology and restoration of monuments has its own priorities, and Svayambhū, although regarded as one of the most important shrines in the Valley, is only one of their many considerations. Still, the government provides the funds for elaborate rituals, which for the religious specialists may feel intimidating. It was after all only a few dec-

[300] The media's response would be worthwhile to analyse more precisely, e.g. by discourse analysis or rhetoric analysis, a treatment which falls beyond the limits of this work. I am basing my interpretation predominantly on five articles. In them, the voice of the 'common man' is quite clearly one that respects the religious traditions, whereas the government should constantly be acting more quickly, more wisely, more determinately etc. See Fig. 9 for an illustration of this situation.
[301] Newspaper article 'Pratappur temple waits for restoration', the Himalayan Times, 21 October 2003.
[302] Ibid.
[303] Newspaper article 'DoA restores 348-yr-old Pratappur temple', the Himalayan Times, 2 July 2004.

ades ago that the priests had to turn over some of their responsibilities to the government, which is still lamented.

Another example of dilemmas between conflicting interests is a dispute over illegal buildings at the other end of the greater Svayambhū area. Ethnic groups from the Himalayas and the hill regions, mostly Manangs, have slowly settled in at this end of the area, commonly known as the Buddha Statue Park due to a large statue of Śākyamuni Buddha. The settlements of these groups are usually modest and made of concrete. The problem is that they are illegal, because the governmental Svayambhū area Master Plan from 1989 prohibits any construction that could diminish the value of the original structures going back several centuries.[304] In September 2002, the minister for Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation went to the Buddha Statue Park with other officials determined to put into effect the demolition of illegal houses. The residents protested, calling to the minister for Labour and Transportation, who was ethnically close to them and known to promote the interests of groups with Tibetan origins. He halted the dismantling process. A newspaper quotes him, "Being Buddhist myself, I am going to defend my community and I am ready to fight with the government in that case."[305] As the journalist observes, it is the very government the minister himself is part of, so the outcome is a high-level dispute over interests – "a ministerial farce" according to another article in the same paper.[306]

In the dispute, one side emphasises the agreed Master Plan that prohibits construction, while another holds on to the values of a more distant ethnic Buddhist community. The Nepalese cabinet of ministers consists of representatives of various ethnic groups. The minister wanting to dismantle the buildings had no ethnic connections with that community whereas the other minister did. Although we can draw no conclusions based on this information only, an interesting point in the debate is how Buddhism is conceived of. The minister siding with the Manangs explicitly claimed he was Buddhist. We do not know about the other minister, but in a way he, too, was trying to promote Buddhist values, viz. the Newar Buddhist cultural heritage in the Valley that ought to remain intact. The Master Plan was designed to prevent the Svayambhū area from expanding too much, which the newer settlements could possibly endanger. The need to keep Svayambhū intact was also an international question because of its inclusion in the World Heritage Site list in the 1970s.[307] The cultural importance of the site was without

[304] Newspaper article 'Politics over Swayambhunath monuments', the Kathmandu Post, 5 October 2002.
[305] Ibid.
[306] Newspaper article 'Swayambhu demolition turns into a ministerial farce', the Kathmandu Post, 27 September 2002.
[307] Newspaper article 'Politics over Swayambhunath monuments', the Kathmandu Post, 5 October 2002.

a doubt valuable nationally, but international recognition also ensured more funds for preservation as well as income through tourism. For a country struggling with economical problems and a civil war, international aid is essential, and the religious and cultural heritage of the country – especially the Kathmandu Valley – is one of its main advantages along with the Himalayas. Therefore, it is understandable that a prominent tourist area such as Svayambhū is preferably kept in its traditional Newar form. After all, the creation myth concerns only the Valley, the traditional stronghold of the Newars. Still, at the same time, other ethnic groups are attempting to keep their religious and cultural traditions alive. They are by modern standards as Nepalese as the Newars, but the changes they inflict in the Valley architecture are clearly regarded as a problem. This has resulted in a confusing power struggle.

During the last decades, the traditional Svayambhū community has seen its autonomy becoming contested. In the Nepal now so open to the outside world, there are more and more parties wanting to share responsibilities over the area. Hence, Sofield argues that the traditional Newar community has felt disempowered.[308] The increased flow of visitors – an estimated 150 000 pilgrims and tourists annually – places great demands on sustainability, and perhaps modern challenges concerning littering, polluting, deforestation and breakdown of buildings require a wider revenue base than the traditional *guthi*-based religious community could offer. Lately there has been apparent progress in key issues concerning sustainability, partly thanks to a UN-based quality tourism project.[309] Nevertheless, difficulties still prevail in the question of *space*. As Sofield observes, space at the area has been contested; there is sacred space versus secular space, private versus public space, family versus social space, work versus leisure space etc. – all in a very condensed area.[310] Unwanted intrusion into space is thus common. Although Sofield argues that the earlier difficulties have been overcome recently (his article was published in 2000), I think this is only partly true. Surely, there have been improvements in the last decade, but the density of different interest groups at the area is apt for creating tensions in the future as well. On the one hand, density creates much of the magic of Svayambhū, when one sees so much symbolism and artistic splendour in one compound. On the other hand, space is still very limited, and it remains to be seen how well the constructions stand the test of time. Another point is that in this small environment, the religious symbolism itself seems paradoxical at times,

[308] Sofield 2000 (web document).
[309] Ibid.
[310] Ibid.

which during my fieldwork led me to question the ultimate religious identity of Svayambhū.

27. Is Svayambhū Hindu in disguise?

The above question may sound perplexing and even controversial. However, during my fieldwork I came across some contradicting elements that made me wonder if there was indeed more Hinduism to Svayambhū than met the eye of the regular devotee or tourist. Was there something hidden beneath? Before going further, I can safely say that most of these elements puzzled me simply because of my own preconceptions and the fact that I was new to the place. In the process of re-evaluating my material, it has become quite clear that Svayambhū itself is not quite as paradoxical as I for long thought it to be. I had started off with some rather naïve presuppositions about what a Buddhist site should represent, and it is mainly these presuppositions that I would like to consider, as I am quite sure I will not be the last one to make these observations.

As anyone studying the Kathmandu Valley would probably agree, the place is a tremendously complex system of religious symbols. Not only is there the traditional interaction between Hinduism and Buddhism but the archaic influence of animism and shamanism as well. Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) have not made a major impact, but that too may be changing in the future. It is commonly known that there are not one but many types of Hinduism (Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism and Śaktism being most popular ones) and Buddhism (Vajrayāna, Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna). Sometimes the common ground between these two Great Traditions is said to be Tantrism, since both share Tantric interpretations of orthodox texts. The two have also coexisted for long in the same South Asian cultural environment.

The Kathmandu Valley is a unique example of a coexistence of these religions in a small geographical unit. The Sanskrit-based Buddhism that disappeared from India has been preserved there alongside Hinduism until the present day. Still, both traditions have their own distinctive power places, Svayambhū being commonly labelled as the prime Newar Buddhist one. It is so regularly explicitly called Buddhist that the refutation of this self-evident claim would seem nothing but misleading. On the other hand, if

there is common ground between the two religions, could we not find traces of Hinduism at the heart of Newar Buddhism, too?

Plate 10. The Patan Durbar (Royal) Square.[311]

My impression of Svayambhū concealing strong Hindu influences was born when I was observing the Hārītī temple next to the Svayambhūcaitya. The *pagoda* style architecture of the temple clearly resembled similar but notably larger Hindu temples around the Valley, especially at each of the main cities' old royal squares (see Plate 10). In my previous studies of the Living Goddess Kumārī, I had also encountered signs of Hindu and Buddhist meanings intermixing. Even in the interview of Ramesh Buddhācārya it seemed that Hindu influences did in fact exist in Svayambhū:

> So our own Gaṇeś, where is our own Gaṇeś at Svayambhū? He is just below the stairs; there's one Gaṇeś and Kārttikeya. So that is our main Gaṇeś. At Svayambhū, many people worship to that Gaṇeś when they have a birthday or other special day, and [they] also [worship] their own Gaṇeś.[312]

Gaṇeś is the Lord of Beginnings and most Newar rituals begin with his worship to ensure a successful rite. The plain presentation of this Hindu deity as 'their own Gaṇeś' by a high-caste Buddhist priest perplexed me at the time. On the other hand, the same priest contested my impression of the Hārītī temple as being more Hindu than Buddhist. He had just told me how different goddesses might have both Buddhist and Hindu interpretations. I had then explained my attempt to find connections between Hinduism

[311] The royal compound is to the left; adjacent to it is the Patan Museum. To the right are e.g. the Viśvanāth and Bhimsen temples. Note the architecture of the buildings.
[312] Field diary I, 64.

and Buddhism in Kathmandu, and asked him whether Hārītī was in any way connected to Hinduism. He responded:

> Well, that is, I told you different people trust in their own way. So actually Hārītī doesn't belong to Hindu, especially in my opinion. I'm not talking against the Hindu; all religions are useful and important to us. So Hārītī [was] an Asura. She had killed so many children to feed her own children because she had 500 of them. […] So how can you say she was Hindu? [I answer: 'When I look at the temple, it just reminds me of some Hindu temples in some way…'] [He responds:] Maybe you are also right, not totally wrong. But inside the Hārītī temple there's a statue of Cakrasaṃvara and Vajrasattva and five *dhyanibuddhas*. Around the temple there are *torans* (tympana). The most important thing in *pagoda* and *stūpa* architecture [is] you must always see the *toran*.[313]

In the quotation above, one can notice how the horizon of 'the other' had not yet been fused into my own. My informant apparently knew that the temple architecture was similar to Hindu temples in the Kathmandu Valley – in fact this must have been self-evident for someone having been brought up there. However, for him the true meaning of the temple was not in the building type but in the *statues of deities* inside, as well as the *figures in the tympanum* over the doorway of the temple.[314] For him the iconography was evident but for me, who had only known the place for a short period, the temple was an indication of the outer cultural uniformity of Hindu structures. I had not yet grasped the deeper meanings. In fact, for the whole period of my fieldwork I naïvely rested assured on the notion that I had observed something the locals had failed to notice. In retrospect, I think the previous study on the Kumārī biased my perspective. She is equally worshipped in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

However, worship in fact brings further evidence to my initial claim. In lay practice, the goddess Hārītī appeals to both Buddhist and Hindu devotees. Bearing different names, she is widely worshipped among the Hindu populations of at least Nepal and India.[315] This is one reason why Svayambhū as a sacred site is frequently visited by so many Hindus and not just Buddhists; the goddess who is believed to help small children is important in spite of doctrinal differences. The deities Ramesh mentioned in the quotation above were Cakrasaṃvara, Vajrasattva and the Five Buddhas – all Buddhist deities. A secret Tantric deity like Cakrasaṃvara should have no significance for a Hindu devotee, but Hārītī, on the other hand, very much does as a helper of children in need. It seems that Ramesh as a Buddhist priest intuitively stressed those deities who were the best examples of the Buddhist doctrine. In lay practice, practical needs and other worldly issues surmount the doctrinal side.

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[313] Ibid., 63.
[314] On the tympana in Newar monasteries see Locke 1996.
[315] Merz 1996, 343-344. In India she is known in other forms and with other names, like Śītala in West Bengal (Riikka Uuksulainen, personal communication).

The physical proximity of objects such as the Svayambhūcaitya and the Hārītī temple is itself quite remarkable, but traces of religious pluralism are even more pervasive. According to some Hindu observers, the central pole in the Svayambhūcaitya represent a *liṅga*. Throughout the greater Svayambhū area there are small votive *caityas* that even a Buddhist pilgrimage guide says to conceal *liṅgas*.[316] In addition, there are numerous manifestations of Hindu goddesses; Lakṣmi at the Vasundharā shrine and Sarasvatī's shrine on Mañjuśrī hill.[317] This kind of pluralism pervades the whole Newar society, and in popular Hindu temples, different iconographies overlap similarly. For example at Paśupati there is an annual ritual in which a crown depicting the Five Buddhas is placed on top of the *śivaliṅga*.[318]

To sum up the above, for a Buddhist Tantric priest, Buddhist figures defined the Hārītī temple. Lay devotees can be both Buddhist and Hindu, and they usually concentrate on the healing effects of the deity regardless of doctrinal accuracy. The outer structure in this case hints at Hinduism, as do rather many other representations of Hindu emblems and deities (all of which are not listed here). Thus, we can argue that some Hindu elements do in fact exist, but the deeper one goes in religious (and caste-based) specialization, the more Buddhist the interpretation becomes. For the majority of people this really has no difference, as they may commonly participate in both Hindu and Buddhist rites. They know that the religious experts are the ones to whom doctrine makes real difference.

As a concluding remark, I would like to return to the family metaphor of religions. Saler talked about some instances having *more* of a certain quality than others, thus exemplifying a certain religion more convincingly. In the case of Svayambhū, it would be ungrounded and wrong to claim Svayambhū to be Hindu, since there is obviously *more* Buddhism to be found – in the mythology, in the iconography and identity of the deities, in the general architecture (the Hārītī temple being an exception), in the social structure etc. The existence of Hindu elements reminds us of the predominantly Hindu cultural sphere surrounding Svayambhū, especially in the city of Kathmandu. Nevertheless, an aura of Buddhism indeed surrounds the sacred site. All we can perhaps say is what Ramesh Buddhācārya partly conceded above: It is *not completely wrong* to

[316] Majupuria *et al.* 1987, 89.
[317] Ibid., 86, 98.
[318] Field diary I, 61. This custom is based on a legend of a world guardian (*lokapāla*) called Virūpākṣa, who became Buddhist. He attempted to destroy Paśupati, but as someone had placed the Five Buddhas' crown on top of the *liṅga,* he could not destroy the Hindu object since that would have entailed destroying the crown of the Buddhist Five Buddhas too. Virūpākṣa's statue lies next to the Svayambhūcaitya.

see Hindu elements, but there is *more* Buddhism than Hinduism in the Svayambhū complex.

F. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

28. Conclusion

I have investigated, interpreted and analysed the sacred site of Svayambhū in Kathmandu, Nepal from different angles. The purpose has been to find out the forms of religious practice and belief especially in the Newar Buddhist context. I collected the field material *in situ,* and secondary sources have supplemented the primary material. The scholarly interest has been hermeneutical, i.e. to interpret and understand meanings communicated verbally and non-verbally. The cognitive aspect of category concepts has been taken into account. It is now time to draw conclusions.

In the broad cultural sphere of the Kathmandu Valley, there are religious centres virtually known to all. They are a significant part of the cultural climate that is transferred from generation to generation. Svayambhū is obviously one of these centres. It has a long and solid history, and the popularisation of the Buddhist creation myth has ensured its position in the Valley's common heritage even to non-Buddhists. Svayambhū has considerably what I call *cultural usage*. It attracts Hindu devotees mainly because of the Hārītī shrine right next to the Svayambhūcaitya, but apparently also because in lay religious practice the Hindu and Buddhist iconography is to an extent interchangeable. Moreover, a lay devotee can regard pilgrimage to the site as *entertainment*, which does not necessarily diminish the value of the visit, due to the practical benefits of a religious journey.

The Buddhācāryas are the Newar officiating priests at Svayambhū. Their contemporary ritual duties, sociocultural position and religious inclinations were explicated in more detail than in other Western scholarly studies I am familiar with.[319] Their peculiar intermediate caste status between the Vajrācāryas and the Śākyas presents some so-

[319] Much more accomplished studies by e.g. Gellner, Locke, Sharkey and von Rospatt do mention the Buddhācāryas, although at a minor length, and many scholars would surely have important insights or corrections to suggest. I only hope the discussion on the Buddhācāryas will continue.

cial and personal religious dilemmas I have attempted to point out. However, as the protectors of Buddhism at the central shrine of Newar Buddhism, their status is by far acknowledged and they interact with many parties that share a mutual interest in Svayambhū. This does not always happen without difficulties, as was seen in the conflict of interests concerning the burned Pratappur temple.

The meanings religious specialists give to Svayambhū and their religion obviously differ from lay meanings. Reasons for this derive primarily from the Newar socio-religious hierarchy Gellner and others have illustrated. The identity of the deities seems to become more important the higher one's position is in the religious hierarchy. A Tantric priest at the top of the hierarchy incorporates a variety of relevant exoteric and esoteric meanings, the latter being soteriologically more important but the former having a complementary importance in the whole. The Buddhist *dharma* belongs to all, and uninitiated ones are imparted meanings that they can handle and understand. However, it is only with the help of a guru that the most profound meanings of relevant deities can be understood. Especially for the older generation, the material in sacred literature constitutes the authoritative horizon through which Svayambhū is interpreted to those who wish to learn.

The Svayambhūcaitya itself is what I shall call a *pan-Buddhist phenomenon*. In the various possibilities of its symbolic interpretation are incorporated all layers and levels of the Newar Buddhist hierarchy, which has helped it to retain its supreme status throughout the centuries. The central deity can be an esoteric or an exoteric one depending on the point of view. The doctrines of the Ādibuddha and the Five Buddhas combined have made possible a variety of devotional and ritual approaches that ensure the symbolic flexibility typical of an important religio-cultural site. The existence of other branches of Buddhism than the traditional caste-based Newar Buddhism at the area further invigorates its symbolic and ritual possibilities. They all add to the preferred ethos of Buddhism as a tolerant and all-encompassing religion, although the arrival of modern movements appears to entail conflicts with the traditional forms of religion.

One important feature in the mythical significance of Svayambhū is the *relocation* of the centre of Buddhism to Nepal. It provides motivation for being proud of Nepalese citizenship, which in turn may create more veneration and respect towards Svayambhū even by non-Buddhists. We thus return to the cultural importance accepted in its own terms without any strict religious doctrinal authentication. Nationalist tendencies have been communicated mainly as opposed to the Indian and not the Tibetan tradition, the latter however also being a prominent influence at Svayambhū.

Finally, I have suggested that there is *more* Buddhism in Svayambhū than Hinduism. Although to a casual visitor this may seem self-evident, there are some paradoxical features that hint towards a more Hinduized view. This is at least partly due to the overall religious pluralism and syncretism in the Valley. There is syncretism even at Svayambhū, but not in an uncontrolled manner. As far as the material suggests, there has clearly been more doctrinal, mythical, social and functional evidence for arguing that Buddhist meanings predominate over Hindu ones. Whether it is predominantly Śrāvakayāna, Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna Buddhism is extremely difficult to say, because the symbols are multivalent and interchangeable. Another reason is the complementary nature of the hierarchy of interpretations in Newar Buddhism.

On an existential level, Svayambhū really appears to be soteriologically most important to the monks and priests in the area. However, in the optional rites of instrumental religion, all levels in the cultural hierarchy are welcome to participate to get help in worldly needs. In social religion, high-caste priests as well as devotees perform due obligatory rites. The social system needs *both* in order for the traditional order to function, and although Svayambhū gives numerous interpretive possibilities for different individuals, it is the feeling of sharing religious and cultural actions with others that ultimately prevails, even in the midst of a modernization process. Everyone is part of the whole, acting according to what is expected and considered right. The self-existing light of eternal Buddhahood serves as an example and an inspiration.

29. Evaluation of the study

This study has been both a demanding and a rewarding enterprise. There have been difficulties, but in the end, what I have learned seems to matter a lot more than any hardship. The sudden change of subject during the fieldwork burdened the project. I had to reorganize my resources, but with the help and friendliness of the people at Svayambhū, this presented no insurmountable problem. Financial resources were constantly limited, as over 80 percent of the expenses were covered without external funding. In spite of several requests to academic institutions, the only scholarship eventually came from outside the academia. Nevertheless, I am very pleased to have undertaken the work, as it has widened my cross-cultural horizon and especially my understanding of Nepal – a

country that has so much to teach us westerners in terms of communal life, hospitality and gratitude for the simple things in life.

I have been somewhat apprehensive of some aspects of the interpretive approach. Although it has become extremely popular especially in anthropology, I am still somewhat troubled about the arbitrariness of the 'guessing at meanings' thinking and vague concepts like 'the really real'. Have I reached anything near the really real of Svayambhū? How can one tell?

Clearly, the results here are not general. A case study records and evaluates events in a unique situation with a limited sample. Personally, I would prefer concentrating on the hermeneutical *process* that has taken place. During the research, I have learned that all one can actually operate with are the phenomena encountered in experienced empirical reality, and it is the merciless rational pondering of the findings that may yield results in a qualitative study. Still, all one can come up with are interpretations. Some of mine could surely be contested. The first reason is that Newar Buddhism is an overwhelming phenomenon to start with, and hence one tends to emphasise some aspects while neglecting others. Second, my use of material and methods has at times been admittedly eclectic. I have attempted to present Svayambhū with the breadth aspect in mind, but at times, the reader may have wished for a more profound treatment of a theme. I hope the connections between the different contexts may be found.

Surely, there are important issues concerning Svayambhū that this study did not include. This is where further studies can complement the picture. Especially works on the Buddhācāryas are welcome. How they have acquired their present position, how they see their role as guardians of Svayambhū, what future challenges lie ahead of them – answers to questions like these would shed a lot of light on the past and present of an important monastic community in contemporary South Asia. Furthermore, I hope future studies on ancient religious manuscripts to increase our understanding on how Svayambhū has been conceived of at different times. Alexander von Rospatt's forthcoming work on the consecration rituals of Svayambhū is likely to be an important contribution.

Finally, many of the discussions in this study are by no means exceptional. The coexistence of traditional Buddhism and Hinduism is not confined to Nepal – there is ample evidence of similar developments in e.g. Sri Lanka, although the conditions there are naturally different in some respects.[320] Another interesting parallel considering the

[320] See e.g. Gombrich *et al*. 1988.

discussion of syncretism is the coexistence of Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan.[321] Moreover, many practices and beliefs associated here with Svayambhū are part of the way of life in the Kathmandu Valley in general. However, I doubt these academic considerations would bother any serious devotee climbing up to the Svayambhū hilltop. There, overseeing the whole Nepal Valley is a place where anyone is welcome to experience a unique magic.

[321] See Gellner 2001, 319ff.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

Primary sources

I. Unpublished field material

a) Field diaries and photographs

Field Diary I (29.7. – 21.9.2003), 83 pages.

Field Diary II (29.7. – 21.9.2003), 102 pages.

The field diaries are in the author's private collection. Field Diary I includes a transliteration of Ramesh Buddhācārya's interview (25 pages). There are 81 photographs of various sites, situations and people in Kathmandu and Patan. Another set of photographs from my previous journey to Kathmandu is also in the author's collection.

b) Interviews and other recorded material

1. Three meetings with Gautam Buddhācārya on 17, 20 and 21 August 2003. Dialogues based on interview topics and a narration of origin myth. Translated by Prem Śreṣṭha. 97 minutes.
2. Three meetings with Ramesh Buddhācārya on 24 and 30 August and 18 September 2003. Dialogues and one recorded and transliterated open-ended interview in English. 135 minutes.
3. One semi-structured interview of two musicians (male) on 28 August 2003. Translated by Prem Śreṣṭha. Notes taken in field diary. 18 minutes.
4. One structured interview of devotee (male) on 31 August 2003. Translated by two hired research assistants. Notes taken in field diary. 12 minutes.
5. One structured interview of devotee (female) on 31 August 2003. Translated by two research assistants. Not recorded at interviewee's request, notes taken in field diary.
6. Recorded sounds of morning worship at the Hārītī temple, afternoon worship in the Karmarāj Mahāvihār monastery, musicians' festival performance and my own comments.

All recordings are in the author's private collection. Original recordings consist of five audiotapes, of which three have been transferred onto CD-R for improved quality. Details of interviews from the Kumārī house have not been included here.

II. Published material

a) Newspaper articles (accessible also via the Internet; URL: http://www.nepalresearch.org/)

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21 October 2003: 'Pratappur temple waits for restoration'.
2 July 2004: 'DoA restores 348-yr-old Pratappur temple'.
The Kathmandu Post:
27 September 2002: 'Swayambhu demolition turns into a ministerial farce'.
5 October 2002: 'Politics over Swayambhunath monuments'.
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APPENDICES

Appendix I – Glossary

ācārya – A Vajra-master, a guru or priest.

ācārya guthi – The guild of Vajrācāryas in Kathmandu. See *guthi*.

ācārya initiation – The highest initiation in Newar Buddhism. Entitles one to act as family priest in rituals. Requires first monastic initiation and Tantric initiation.

Ādibuddha – The primordial awareness or Buddha-nature immanent in all sentient beings.

āgaṃ – The Tantric shrine of a vihāra. The Tantric image enshrined inside is found there.

aṣṭamangalas – The eight auspicious symbols: white parasol, two fishes, conch-shell, banner, endless knot, vase, lotus and yak-tail whisk. Applied in various ways in Newar rituals.

aṣṭamātṛkā – The eight Mother Goddessess worshipped by both Hindus and Buddhists. Each city and town of the Valley is surrounded by their eight *pithas* that delimit the sacred space within.

bāhāḥ – The most common type of Newar vihāra. Is divided into main and branch monasteries. Members are either Vajrācāryas or Śākyas or both.

bahī – A less common type of monastery, an 'outer' monastery. Members are Śākyas only.

Buddhācārya – A special Buddhist group with both (→) Śākya and (→) Vajrācārya characteristics. The 'protectors of Buddhism' at Svayambhū, the principal shrine in Newar Buddhism.

caitya – A circular object venerated since the early days of Buddhism. Represents the Buddha or the mind aspect of body, speech and mind. May house Buddhist relics. Also known as stūpa.

Cakrasaṃvara – A powerful Tantric secret deity. The deity of Nepal Mandala. Also represented in different ways at Svayambhū. See Vajravārāhī.

dharmadhātu – The dharma realm. The ethereal realm of the divine order that the enlightened mind understands.

gompa – A Tibetan term for monastery.

Gorkhālī – Refers both to the Parbatiyā people and the national Nepali language.

guthi – An organization that helps an individual Newar fulfil his or her social and religious duties by communal action. Constitutes a basic element in Newar group identity. Membership is in some cases obligatory (everyone belongs at least to a death *guthi*) and voluntary in others.

kalaśa – Ritual flask made of bronze, copper or silver. Used in different rituals, including the daily *nitya pūjā.*

lokapāla – World guardian, legendary protector of religion. Manifested as a group of Four Kings in all cardinal directions.

Maharjan – A majority Newar caste group consisting of farmers, potters, masons and many others.

maṇḍala – A circle, a two- or three-dimensional symbolic mind map through which the mind transcends towards a higher level of consciousness or understanding. Close but not similar to yantra, another ritual diagram.

Navagrantha – The nine authoritative books of Mahāyāna Buddhism: Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, Gandhavyūha, Daśabhūmi, Samādhirāja, Laṅkāvatāra, Saddharmapuṇḍarīka, Guhyasamāja, Lalitavistara and Suvarṇaprabhāṣa.

nitya pūjā – 'regular worship'. Daily performed rituals in Newar Buddhist shrines.

pañcāmṛta – The five nectars (water, milk, ghee, honey and raw sugar). Used in monasteries for the bathing of the image.

pañcopacāra – Fivefold offering of coloured powder, incense, light, flowers, foodstuffs (usually rice grains and beaten rice). Also called *pañcopahāra*.

paṇḍit – A learned and respected teacher of religion in the South Asian context.

Parbatiyā – 'Hill people'. The culturally and politically dominant ethnic group in Nepal. The Nepali language is the language of the Parbatiyās.

pāramitā – Perfection or virtue. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, there are six chief perfections (*ṣaṭpāramitā*) that can be added another four to included the total of ten perfections (*daśapāramitā*).

sādhana – Visualization of a deity. A central action in meditative rituals.

Śākya – Sub-caste of Newar Buddhist married monks. Not as thoroughly initiated in Tantric esoterism as the (→) Vajrācāryas and hence not allowed to act as family priests. May receive Tantric initiation.

saṃgha – The Buddhist community, i.e. followers of Buddhism universally or locally. In Kathmandu the community consists of two lineages, the Vajrācāryas and the Śākyas.

Śreṣṭha – A large and well-educated Newar caste group. Consists of both Hindu and Buddhist practitioners although in duties Hinduism is emphasized.

siddha – Accomplished Tantric master. 84 great masters (mahasiddhas) are often referred to.

Svayambhū jyotirūpa – In this context the self-existent Buddhahood manifested in the form of light.

Svayambhūpurāṇa – An anonymous 15th of 16th century text describing the legendary origins of the Svayambhūcaitya and the birth of civilization in the Kathmandu Valley.

Urāy – A large Newar caste group of carpenters, stonemasons, copper workers etc. Strong Buddhist inclinations.

vajra – lit. 'thunderbolt' or 'diamond'. Refers to a) the absolute Emptiness itself which is indivisible, impenetrable and indestructible like a diamond, b) the enlightened state where determination is as adamantine as a vajra or c) the iconographic symbol held by deities and used by Vajrācāryas in rituals. Originally the weapon of Indra (thunderbolt).

Vajrācārya – Sub-caste of married Newar Buddhist monks. The only ones who are allowed to act as family priests for laymen because they receive the (→) ācārya initiation. The most respected Buddhist group with exclusive knowledge on rituals and esoteric religious customs. See also Śākya.

Vajradevī – The chief female divinity in Vajrayāna Buddhism.

Vajravārāhī – The female consort of Cakrasaṃvara.

Vajrasattva – The central guru in Vajrayāna Buddhism. Also known as Vajradhara and has many other manifestations.

vihāra – General term for monastery.

Appendix II – Interview questions and themes

Questions to devotees at Svayambhū (translated by Newar research assistants):

1. What is your background (caste, locality etc.)?
2. Why did you come to Svayambhū?
3. Why do you usually come?
4. How often do you come here?
5. Do you usually come alone or with others?
6. Which deities do you worship? Does it feel different to worship different deities?
7. How do you worship? Please describe.
8. Do you find help to your needs or problems? What kinds of concrete results are there?

Questions to the Buddhācāryas at Svayambhū (not necessarily asked in this verbatim form but treated as overall topics of discussion):

1. How is the area organised? How do the different institutions interact? Is there a bigger body in charge of the whole area?
2. How many devotees come here during different seasons? When is the busiest time? Which is the busiest time of the day?
3. Describe the daily *pūjā* at Svayambhū. Where does it take place? How many times a day?
4. What is the relationship between Svayambhū and other *caityas* in Kathmandu (Boudha etc.)?
5. Which written material mainly tells us about Svayambhū?
6. Who is the deity (*nyasa*) of the *caitya*? Dharmadhātuvāgīśvara?
7. What do you think of the paradox of the Svayambhūcaitya being on the one hand self-existent and on the other dependent on human acts (consecrated by priests)?
8. What can you tell me about the seven mortal Buddhas and their families?
9. What was the origin of Svayambhū?
10. Describe the role of the Buddhācāryas.