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Sūtra Pūjā, Sūtra Pāṭha: Worshipping, Reading and Listening to *Avadāna*s in Newar Buddhism

Amber Marie Moore

University of Toronto

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Amber Marie Moore
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Abstract

This article discusses how worship, recitation and various modes of oral transmission contributed to the manifestation of *avadānas* as literary works. I look specifically at the *Maṇiśailamahāvadāna* extant in Nepāl Bhāṣā and Sanskrit, that highlights figures such as the Buddhist goddess Ugratārā Vajrayoginī and a lineage of Vajrācāryas from Sankhu, resulting in a uniquely localized "tantric" *avadāna*. Further, I discuss passages in this text that describe the benefits of reading and listening to *avadāna*s, and also the approaches of scholars and master storytellers such as Badri Ratna Guruju (1946-2016), Barnavajra Vajracharya (1922-1993) and Naresh Man Bajracharya, known for their exceptional transmission of the *dharma* through the lively narration and expansion of *avadāna*s and *dharma* stories.

Introduction

The narration and worship of Buddhist stories, such as *avadāna*s, or "notable exploits," involves an interface between oral and written literary cultures and the materiality of the text itself, a multidimensional interaction that comprises the teaching and transmission of the Buddhist path and its aims. Within the sphere of materiality, narratives are related to as objects of worship and sources of merit: being considered the manifestation of the Buddha of wisdom, Maṇjuśrī. In the context of Newar Buddhism, the narration of Buddhist stories is most often carried out by the Buddhist Vajrācārya priest, a narrator's speech being considered the blessed speech of Mañjugoṣa, "the one with a gentle voice." The narration of *dharma kathā*s, *avadāna*s and *jātaka*s, historically open to the lay public and monastics, has balanced and supplemented the study of philosophical tenet systems, Buddhist monastic code (*vinaya*),[1] and meditative practices, a scenario that remains relevant in teaching Buddhist studies today. Why is this? Since the recitation and reception of *dharma* stories relates to a realm of concrete, embodied and communal relationships and emotions that includes modes of artistic expression, it is not through reasoning or memorization that understanding comes about, but through experience. A cultivation of knowledge that occurs through creativity, literary and performative genius, human connection and the imagination, it was Todd Lewis who pointed out how narratives, especially popular or local narratives, have played a central role in shaping the views of Buddhists in Indic Buddhism.[2] He also showed how traditions related to the *avadāna*s and *jātaka*s have countered the privileging of textual sources and an overt focus on high philosophy.[3] I attempt to forward his idea in this article by

[1] In this paper, unless Nepāl Bhāṣā in indicated, the word given is in Sanskrit, except for in quoted Nepāl Bhāṣā passages from the MŚM of Barnavajra Vajracharya.

[2] Todd Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal: Narratives and Rituals of Newar Buddhism* (State University of New York Press, 2000).

[3] Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal*, 170-171.

providing specific examples of how lived manuscript culture in the Newar Buddhist tradition highlights how, reproducing, adapting, reading, listening to, and worshipping *avadāna*s has been crucial in the transmission of Buddhist knowledge. On the other hand, focusing on the place of *avadāna*s in Newar Vajrayāna Buddhism also demonstrates how Mahāyāna literary traditions, mobile narratives and the *bodhisattva* ideal has been foundational in the formation of Vajrayāna, or tantric Buddhist, traditions sometimes thought of as being more related to ritual manuals, liturgy (*sādhana*), esoteric meditations, and guru devotion (*gurubhakti*).

Figure 1. *Barnavajra Vajracharya Guruju, the late storyteller and the author of the 1999 version of the Maṇiśailamahāvadāna, among many other works in Sanskrit, Nepāl Bhāṣā and Nepali.*

When we look at the reading and worship of Buddhist stories by Newar Vajrācārya priests in Nepal, *avadāna*s such as the *Maṇiśailamahāvadāna* (MŚM) can be recited (*pāṭha*) at private or public events utilizing methods that range from rote recitation to dramatic representations and localized adaptation. The MŚM, a work extant in Nepāl Bhāṣā and Sanskrit**,** is one "great exploit" that contains a rare local version of the classic *Maṇicūḍavadāna* and highlights tantric figures such as the Buddhist goddess Ugratārā Vajrayoginī and Vācāsiddhi Vajrācārya, who was a prolific composer and reciter of his own *stotras* to the goddess and the first married Vajrācārya priest at Sankhu Vajrayoginī Temple. Scholar, editor, writer[4] and Buddhist priest Barnavajra Vajracharya

[4] A List of narratives edited and published by Barnavajra Vajracharya includes:

(1922-1993) (see fig. 1) and his son, Tara Harsa Vajracharya, maintain a family lineage that reaches all the way back twenty-nine generations to Vācāsiddhi Vajracharya. As the story in the MŚM goes, the mendicant Yogajñānacārya was given the name Vācāsiddhi and installed as temple caretaker (*pujārī*) and lineage holder at Sankhu by the goddess Ugratārā Vajrayoginī herself. We find this story in the two-volume Nepāl Bhāṣā version of the MŚM compiled and published in 1962 and 1963 by Barnavajra Vajracharya, a work based on his elder brother's earlier version in Nepāl Bhāṣā which also included a handful of Sanskrit excerpts in verse form. In 1999, six years after Barnavajra Vajracharya passed away, these two volumes were combined and printed posthumously by Nati Vajra (see fig. 2).[5] Although it was not clear which Sanskrit witnesses Barnavajra Vajracharya or his brother used for their text, two Sanskrit manuscripts of the MŚM entitled the *Maṇiśailāvadāna* were, and still are, available in a private collection in Sankhu and the National Archives of Nepal (NA).[6]

1. *Chayakaṁ*
2. *Caṇḍeśvarī Kathā*
3. *Caṇḍeśvarī Bhākaṁ*
4. *Muktināth Yātra*
5. *Maniśailamahāvadāna*
5. *Maniśailamahāvadāna*
6. *Dirgharathāvadāna*
7. *Śrī Svasthan brathakatha*
8. *Cvabāhā [Chobar] Karūṇāmaya*

[5] A complete transliteration and translation of Barnavajra Vajracharya's text is available in my published dissertation. Amber Marie Moore, "The Legend of Ugratārā Vajrayoginī: A Study of the Newar Buddhist *Maṇiśailamahāvadāna*" (PhD diss., University of Toronto 2024), 315-446, ProQuest (31562473).

[6] The ms. is listed as the *Maṇiśailāvadāna*, catalogue number 4-1485, S. 253. Folio No. 85 and the size of the ms. is 34.5 x 8.5 cm.

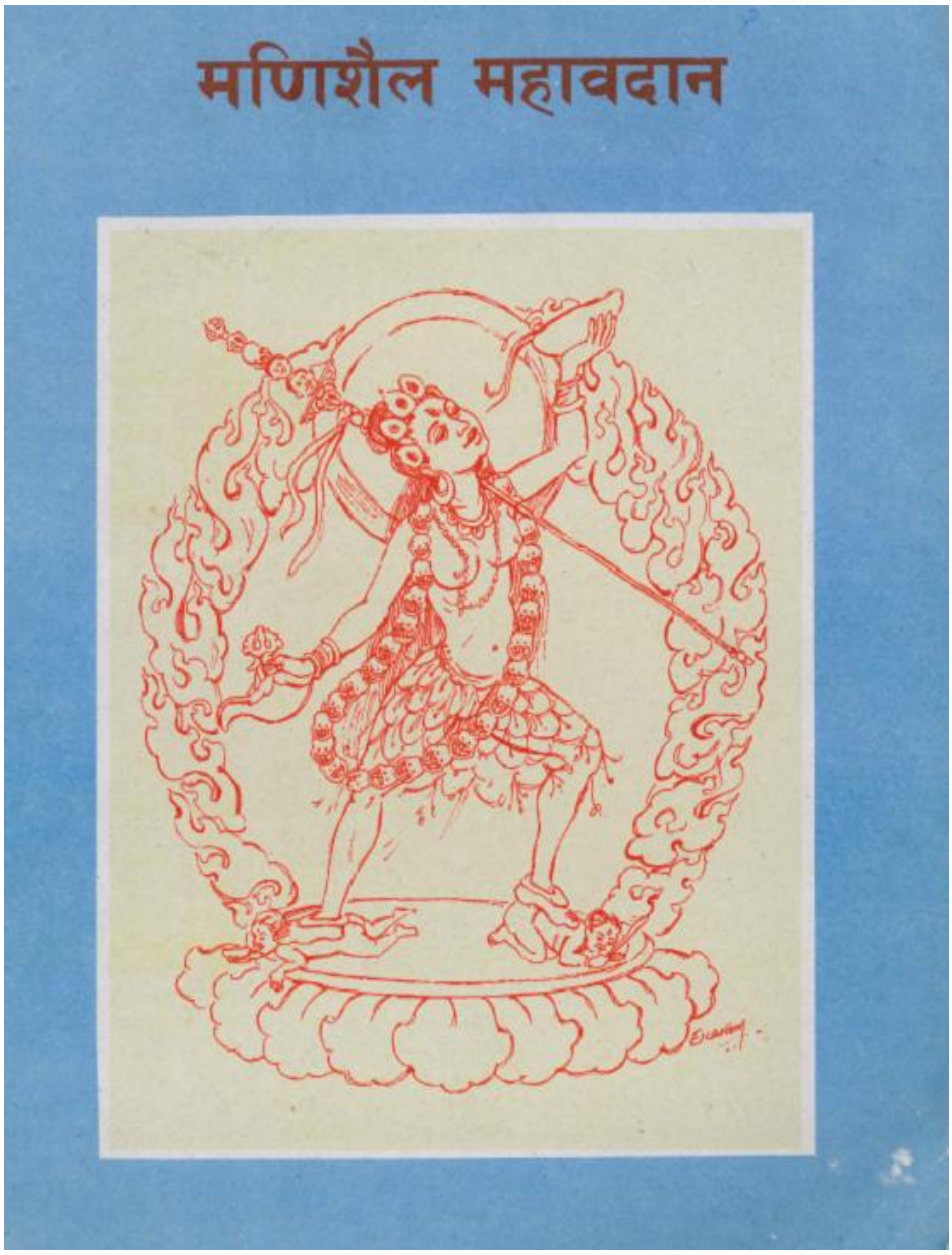

Figure 2 *A stylized image of Ugratārā Vajrayoginī depicted on the cover page of the 1999 Maṇiśailamāhāvadana of Barnavajra Vajracharya.*

Avadānas in Newar Buddhism

*Avadāna*s, *jātaka*s and *dharma kathā*s teach Buddhist doctrines of *karma* and rebirth by telling of previous life stories that provide models for cause and effect morality and training one's mind and body in the six (or ten) *pāramitās*. Although the MŚM contains a number of previous life and karmic accounts, many stories focus on the attainment of this-life liberation (*mokṣa*), or awakening (*saṃyaksaṃbuddha*), and oral histories that preserve unique aspects of family heritage, regional Vajrayāna lore and sacred geography at Sankhu, as related to tantric pilgrimage and praxis. In this respect *avadāna*s often go beyond being generic "classic" variations, aligning more closely with what Lewis coined as "popular stories,"[7] also considered local and religious historical chronicles (*vaṃśāvalī*). Although popular, emplaced, or localized *avadānas* are sometimes expanded from their classic variations, a priori assumptions about the chronology of popular vs. classic renditions should be avoided.[8] For instance, even though well-known *avadānas*, such as Kśemendra's version of the *Manicūḍāvadāna* (circa 1052 CE) is widely considered a "classic" version with recensions emergent in Nepal, these versions are not as disparate as they seem. Interestingly, Bonnie Rothenburg, for instance, has argued that Kṣemendra may have based his composition of the "classic" BĀK on local Nepalese sources among others.[9] Differentiating the empirical from mythical is, at times, neither a beneficial nor achievable aim in this spirit of religious and local or oral histories, and I seek to highlight how *avadāna*s, like the MŚM, and their recitation have comprised valuable contributions to literary, cultural and historical communities in Nepal.

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[7] Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal*, 171.

[8] Moore, "The Legend of Ugratārā Vajrayoginī," 237.

[9] Bonnie Lynne Rothenburg, "Kṣemendra's 'Bodhisattvāvadāna kalpalatā:' A text-critical edition and translation of chapters one to five" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1990), 23.

Newar Vajrācārya priests may use more dramatized approaches to *avadāna* narration with an incorporation of the "nine sentiments" (*navarasa*) of classic Indian dramaturgy as a strategy for entertaining and effective transmission. While rote recitation that re-produces a text word for word is also prevalent, dramatized recitation is considered a suitable, and sometimes ideal, form of "recitation" (*pāṭha*) and *sūtra pāṭha*. Pilgrimages, calendrical festivals, non-esoteric *pūjā*s, *vrata*s and just about any community event may include a narrating past life stories, *dharma kathās*, Mahāyāna *sūtra*s, mantras, *stotra*s, or *dhāraṇī*s, and will also include the practice of worship and offering *dāna*.[10] While these events function to accrue merit (*puṇya*), liberation and ascension to the pure land of Sukhāvati for individuals, they are also sources of community remembering, connection and celebration. Provided language is not a barrier, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike may participate in public storytelling events held in Nepāl Bhāṣā, Nepali or Sanskrit.

The *Maṇiśailamahāvadāna* and the Vajrācārya lineage

The setting of the MŚM is the vicinity of Sankhu and Mt Maṇiśaila, a.k.a. Sankhu Vajrayoginī Temple, the hillside site of an ancient *vihāra* with nine ponds and nine rock-cut hermitages, or small *vihāras*. This site, referred to as *Padmamālavihāra* and *Padmagiri Dharmadhātu Mahāvihāra* in the MŚM, or "Guṁ Vihāra," (the *vihāra* of the forest) (circa 7th C.E.), is colloquially known as "Gubahal." The *vihāra,* nestled in the foothills of Shivapuri Nagarjun National Park (SNNP), was the setting of the development of Vajrayāna traditions from within a Nepalese Mahāyāna environment including the production of the MŚM as a uniquely tantric *avadāna*.

[10] Naresh Man Bajracharya, "One Day Special Talk Program on Buddhism in China and Nepal" (lecture transcript, China Study Centre, Dilli Bazar, Kathmandu, 2004), 10.

Raj Balkaran noted how *māhātmyas* were included as sections or chapters in larger *purāṇic* works;[11] but a Buddhist parallel is found in the MŚM with *māhātmyas* comprising part of a larger *avadāna*, or *mahāvadāna* in the case of the MŚM. Balkaran also pointed out how these local "glorifications" received derogatory assessments, being wrongly categorized as merely propping up the popularity of pilgrimage sites.[12] He states further that this idea required some undoing, necessitating a greater focus on the fact that local narratives contain a treasury of historical data for the study of South Asian Literature. As such, the same can be said for the MŚM, since such works have been continually adapted to socio-religious spheres pertaining to "history, geography, class, gender, vernacular language, and local custom."[13]

The Buddhist goddess Ugratārā Vajrayoginī, otherwise known as Kaḍgayoginī or, "red faced mother" (Nepāl Bhāṣā *hyāuṃkhvāḥmāju*), is a site-specific *yoginī*-goddess associated with the temple at Sankhu (Nepāl Bhāṣā: *Sakva*) and the main foci of the MŚM. She is considered the protective goddess of Sankhu[14] and the main tutelary deity of Newar Vajrācāryas. First available in Sanskrit versions, this *mahāvadāna* may have not seen very wide reception until it was translated into Nepāl Bhāṣā, perhaps a result of its narration to non-Sanskritists.

Barnavajra Vajracharya, who was born in Sankhu (Nepāl Bhāṣā, Sakva) and resided at Dula Tvāḥ, later moved to Banepa.[15] In his 1962

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[11] Raj Balkaran "*Mother of Power, Mother of Kings: Reading Royal Ideology in the Devī Māhātmya*" (PhD diss., University of Calgary, 2015), 25.

[12] Balkaran "*Mother of Power, Mother of Kings*," 25.

[13] Balkaran "*Mother of Power, Mother of Kings*," 12.

[14] Bal Gopal Shrestha, *The Ritual Composition of Sankhu: A Socio-Religious Anthropology of a Newar Town in Nepal,* (PhD diss., Tribhuvan University, 2002), 351.

[15] The biography of Barnavajra Vajracharya can be found in my PhD dissertation. For a complete translation of Barnavajra Vajracharya's MŚM into English, see Moore, "The Legend of Ugratārā Vajrayoginī," 315-446.

preface to the MŚM, Barnavajra Vajracharya stated that the MŚM was a record of local oral accounts, but he did not elaborate on precisely how the story was recited or transmitted as a living tradition,[16] although Bal Gopal Shrestha has reported that the MŚM was previously read in Sankhu prior to the introduction of mass media.[17] Vācāsiddhi Vajrācārya, the first married yogin to become a *pujārī* caretaker of the Sankhu Vajrayoginī Temple at the behest of the yoginī goddess herself, is considered the ancient ancestor to all modern day Newar Vajrācārya priests of Sankhu, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur and Patan, a hereditary lineage that is documented in a family tree possessed by Tara Harsa Vajracharya. This specific family genealogy, having been documented for at least 29 generations,[18] extends on up until the present day to Tara Harsa Vajracharya and his family.[19]

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[16] Barnavajra Vajracharya, *Maṇiśailmahāvadāna* (Aitaman and Nati Vajra, 1999), xi.

[17] Bal Gopal Shrestha, personal communication, February 17th, 2020.

[18] This genealogy does not include a date for every name mentioned, but there are several dates given. According to Tara Harsa the first 28 successors are direct descendants from Vācāsiddhi and are listed as follows in Tara Harsa Vajrācārya's document with three of the lineage members being given dates. They are: 1) Vācāsiddhi, 2) Jotideva, 3) Stīradeva, 4) Padmadeva, 5) Gīrīdeva, 6) Maṇideva, 7) Vikramadeva, 8) Vakradeva, 9) Yogadeva, 10) Ugradeva, 11) Ānandadeva, 12) Harṣadeva, 13) Siddhideva, 14) Chandradeva, 15) Kirtideva, 16) Vīradeva, 17) Prajñādeva, 18) Jakṣaradeva, 19) Bramhavandudeva, 20) Jayarājudeva, 21) Ratnadeva, 22) Sundarājadeva, 23) Hiraṇyadeva, 24) Jānadeva (648 N.S., circa 1528 CE.), 25) Vāvudeva (660 N.S., circa 1540 CE.), 26) Jānajyoti (690 N.S., circa 1570 CE.), 27) Siddhimūni, and 28) Jayadharmadeva. After Jayadharmadeva Vajrācārya, the genealogy branches out into five separate lineages of Vajrācāryas who are numerically listed as follows, being that of 1) Jītārīdeva, 2) Amṛtaprabhadeva, 3) Siddhivaradeva, 4) Chautanyadeva, and 5), Karavīradeva. After this point, the lineage divides into eight branches which can be followed in detail for several more generations. As for the lineage of Barnavajra Vajrācārya down to his own sons, it follows from the lineage of five, from 1) Amṛtaprabhadeva, to 2) Bhiṁkvā, 3) Vajradhara, 4) Chandramūnī, 5) Maṇingarāja and Rājalaksmī (spouse), followed by 6), Dhanivajra and Cirīmāyā, 7) Barnavajra and Aṣṭamāyā, and, finally 8) Tārā Harṣa and Tārādevī.

[19] Moore, "The Legend of Ugratārā Vajrayoginī," xxxii.

A lesser-known *avadāna* in Nepal, other popular vernacular readings of past life accounts in Nepāl Bhāṣā, such as the *Vyāghrī Jātaka* (a.k.a., the *Mahāsattvarājakumārāvadāna*), the *Siṃhalasārthabāhuavadāna,* the *Maṇicūḍāvadāna* and the *Viśvantara Jātaka* (Nepāl Bhāṣā: *Bisvaṃtara*) have been more prevalent than the MŚM. Although public forms of recitation and narration are prevalent in Sankhu, especially during the annual Svasthāni *vrata,* and *aṣṭamīvrata* gatherings, the public narration of the MŚM in both Sankhu and Banepa has now fallen into decline. Although many anecdotes pertaining to Sankhu are contained within the MŚM, its narration is no longer part of any annual celebrations there. There are, however, many details about the circumstances of reciting the MŚM that can be gleaned from the contents of the text itself. Having been transmitted and adapted in a long line of Barnavajra Vajracharya's own ancestors, from Vācāsiddhi Vajrācārya to his son, Tara Harsa Vajrācārya, the latter fondly recalls the MŚM being read by his father in Banepa any time he had the opportunity.[20] The late Laxmi Nath Shrestha, a prolific teacher of Nepāl Bhāṣā and Nepali language from Banepa, also remembered Barnavajra Vajracharya narrating the story there.[21]

According to the MŚM, the *yoginī*-goddess asked Vācāsiddhi Vajracharya (then Yogajñānacārya), what he wanted as a reward for his excellent practice, to which he responded, "Oh Mother! I am not supplicating you in order to request a [worldly boon] of any kind, like, 'this or that,' so grant to me whatever you see fit."[22] The goddess was exceptionally pleased with his answer indicating a lack of worldly desire, and addressed him stating that, from now onwards he would be her chosen caretaker and maintain her daily rituals and *pūjā*s, the *nityakarma* and the *nityapūjā.* The *yoginī* then suggested that Vācāsiddhi find a suitable partner to marry and that his descendants could take care of the temple, but with one condition.

[20] Tara Harsa Vajracharya, personal communication, December 11, 2021.

[21] Laxmi Nath Shrestha, personal communication, May 18, 2017.

[22] Moore. "The Legend of Ugratārā Vajrayoginī," 327.

Even though the Ugratārā Vajrayoginī had emerged spontaneously from within Mt. Manīśaila, the MŚM tells us that her presence there should not be taken for granted but depends on the presence of her Vajrācārya lineage there. In the second chapter of the MŚM, the glorious goddess Ugratārā Vajrayoginī states as follows,

> For as long as your lineage remains steadfast [in this place], know that until then, I too will remain here in my place. But, if a time comes when your lineage fades and falls into decline, I too will forsake this place. Understand this.[23]

A distinct aspect of the MŚM is how the work combines South Asian categories of genre. The first section through chapter eight is referred to as a historical chronicle (*vaṃśavali*), and many minor *avadāna*s and *mahātmyā*s are subsumed within the overarching *mahāvadāna*. As such, doctrinal classifications of literature and this-life aims are combined, resulting in a distinctly tantricized or "tantric *avadāna*." It was perhaps the diverse interests of this text's audience that may have influenced the complex nature of the work, which incorporates many Brahmanical terms, figures and aims while still emphasising Vajrayāna Buddhist aims, sites and lineages. It is notable, however, that the prevalence of terms such as *mokṣa* are common in Sanskritic Vajrayāna works.[24]

Methods of Narration

Stories contained in *avadāna*s are considered the "speech of the Buddha" (*buddhavacana*) and often function as *sūtras* in their own right. Merely

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[23] [guthāyetaka chaṃ saṃtāna sthīrajuyācvani| uthāyetaka jithana dudhakā sīkī guble chaṃ saṃtāna hmāse juyāvanī | uble ji thugusthāne maṃtadhakā sīkīdhakā] Barnavajra Vajracharya, *Maṇiśailamahāvadāna*, 5.

[24] Moore, "The Legend of Ugratārā Vajrayoginī," 108.

hearing the recitation of an *avadāna*, for instance, can be considered a cause for this- and next-life liberation and the accumulation of merit, as suggested by many passages in the MŚM. In addition to more pragmatic word-for-word forms of recitation, the transmission of Buddhist narratives also occurs in dramatized and performative storytelling sessions that transport listeners in time and space and which tend to elaborate on the story according to a place and audience. The earliest Buddhist narratives were read, copied or composed by individuals referred to in works such as the the *Kalpadrumāvadānamālā* as *avadānika* and *avadānārthakovida*, translated as *avadān*-ist or *avadāna*-expert.[25] Abbreviated notes or the basic outline of an *avadāna* text was often composed with the intention of being enhanced and expanded on, a useful strategy then as it is now, to provide a structure into which one can insert a range of Buddhist teachings as needed. The rote recitation of Buddhist narratives is considered an authentic mode of transmission and merit production that requires a distinct skillset in the precise replication of material and chanting, whereas the spontaneous expansion on a narrative in a storytelling scenario requires considerable skill in improvisation and that a veritable treasury of knowledge be available at one's fingertips. Along this line of thinking, the setting and audience of a narration event often leads to the inclusion of certain features and details taken from the setting and social context that eventually find a way into written accounts, becoming more reified. Trends in the expansion and adaptation of Buddhist narratives is an acceptable strategy carried out in a variety of ways based on jotted notes used for narration, to wider interpretation and expansion based on a shorter intact classic or popular *avadāna* text extant in handwritten or printed form, as was the case with the MŚM.

[25] Lenz. *A New Version of the Gāndhārī Dharmapada and a Collection of Previous-Birth Stories: British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragments 16 + 25* (Seattle and Washington: University of Washington Press, 2003), 106.

This dynamic, however, presents certain problems regarding the interface of oral and literary traditions when it comes to determining the veracity and contents of an *avadāna*, as there may be no way to verify how much a handwritten witness was abbreviated, being copied from a longer source that may not be currently available. In terms of these kinds of pithy or even more lengthy literary works and their subsequent oral expansion, the handwritten version of the MŚM in Sanskrit, entitled the *Maṇiśailāvadāna* (MŚA-S1), provides an ideal example of an abbreviated version of an *avadāna* that saw expansion in its Nepāl Bhāṣā rendition. With his version of the MŚM, Barnavajra Vajracharya provides us with a written account of how a Sanskrit text was used as a memory aide by modern day *avadāna bhāṇaka*s which was then interpreted, narrated and expanded on through interpretations, translations, commentary, glosses, the insertion of local lore, and further detailed descriptions. This may have also been a more purposeful mode of composition with other aims such as incorporating other chosen sources and anecdotes. What cannot be discerned are the precise circumstances or conditions of such an expansion. As such, a crucial point is that expansive *avadāna*s have not arisen in isolation, but, rather, in reliance on oral traditions and social factors that contribute to their ongoing development as oral and written literary works.

The popularity of narration as a form of religious learning, celebration and entertainment over long hours and days seems to have lost momentum since the latter half of the 20th century. However, a growing awareness of the significance of storytelling and oral history as important intergenerational and cultural practices has perhaps contributed to a rising interest in the preservation of Buddhist narratives. Charismatic teachers may cherish their roles as dramatic communicators, a skill that facilitates a full immersion and visceral experience into the tale for audiences. This form may have also been bolstered by a Vajrayāna environment that already emphasized an ability to visualize, imagine and embody a deity

and their associated retinue. But it is not merely the form of engagement which makes narrative traditions, for as described by Reiko Ohnuma, such narratives are "written in a manner that produces meaning and which matters to us."[26] It is also the collaborative aim for the accumulation of merit from reading or listening to the story that matters to both audiences and reciters alike.

Alexander O'Neill has discussed the textual agency of *sūtras* as living repositories of the *dharma*, as well as the methods of expedited forms of recitation of such texts where the duties of reading are divided among a group of individuals who complete the task in a concerted effort.[27] Of the pragmatic nature of dividing the reading of Buddhist texts, he states that, "Newar Buddhists read according to this custom with all of the *Navagranthasūtras* of the Newar corpus, but for shorter texts, such as the *Nāmasaṁgīti*, they can easily be read or sung in about a half an hour without being divided."[28] O'Neill also discusses the qualities expected of reciters according to the three Buddhist vehicles. For the recitation of Pali *suttas,* O'Neill mentions that an ideal narrator requires a high degree of capacity in memorization, inspirational ability, and the ability to recite clearly and accurately in addition to being ordained.[29] Of Mahāyāna narrators, he points out their ideal qualities as being the "son of good family, or daughter of good family" or, otherwise, a *bodhisattva*.[30]

The late Guruju Badri Ratna Bajracharya (1946-2016) was one of the most renowned storytellers of this century in the Kathmandu Valley area. During public events, he was an animated narrator who read in such

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[26] Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh, And Blood. Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2007), 14.

[27] Alexander James O'Neill, "Pustaka Pūjā: A Study of Sūtra Worship in Mahāyāna Buddhism" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2021), 201.

[28] O'Neill, "Pustaka Pūjā," 197.

[29] O'Neill, "Pustaka Pūjā,"116, 122.

[30] O'Neill, "Pustaka Pūjā," 151.

a captivating way that members of the audience would remain "glued to their seats," so to speak, until the *dharma* story was completed. Naresh Man Bajracharya, a foremost disciple of Badri Ratna Guruju and a master narrator in his own right, began narrating *avadāna*s himself at the age of sixteen. He commented on the distinct approach of his teacher who would often expand extensively on texts such as the *Maṇicūḍāvadāna,* taking every opportunity to insert other relevant *dharma* stories and Buddhist discourses, including Buddhist astrology, into a text. The adaptation of Buddhist narratives was also emphasized by Raju Shakya, professor at Padma Kanye College, who indicated that some degree of extrapolation and adjustment to context, setting and audience in the oral telling of *avadāna*s is to be expected from skillful and knowledgeable narrators and Buddhist priests.[31] Naresh Man Bajracharya takes a similar approach to his teacher with his narration, being extremely animated and energetic with both his voice and body as he embodies buddhas and various characters in the given *avadāna*. Using every opportunity to teach and expand on specific terms and points of the text as much as time allows, those who prefer dramatized modes of narration read *avadāna*s in such a way that purposefully evokes the nine sentiments (*navarasa*) of classic dramaturgy. But although a narrator may impose their own use of the nine sentiments on a reading, written versions of the MŚM are also composed in a way that include the *navarasa* enumerated as: romantic love (*śṛṅgāra*), comedy (*hāsya*), compassion (*karuṇa*), wrath (*raudra*), heroism (*vīra*), terror (*bhayānaka*), disgust (*bībhatsa*), wonder or surprise (*adbhuta*), and serenity (*śānta*). Devices that serve to inspire and provoke an audience, and drive home the moral of a story, help to commit a message and figures to an audience's memory. Despite the Buddhist emphasis on the development of equanimity and the pacification of the afflictive emotions and even though the message may be one of renunciation of the world, wrath, romance and grief are seen as skillful means for conveying *dharma* stories

[31] Raju Shakya, conversation with the author, May 15, 2023.

and Buddhist teachings in a relatable and compelling manner. Commenting on the importance of utilizing the *navarasa* in live narration, Naresh Man Bajracharya has explained:

> As for Badri Ratna Guruju, why was he such a popular storyteller? He had many special qualities, not just one or two, but his storytelling was such that, once he would start to tell the story, nobody would move from that place until it was over. Everybody would become completely concentrated, and would feel so lively like they were actually watching a real incident occur. From the quality of his voice to his way of reciting the Sanskrit *ślokas,* his manner of expression was just like a movie or a real incident of something going right on in front of you. He knew how to evoke what is called, the nine flavours, the "*navarasa,*" in his storytelling. How do you enact the *navarasa*? For example, "*lasya*" is with laughing, "*raudra*" is with the expression of wrath, "*karuna*" is with the expression of compassion, and so forth. And likewise, there was also his manner of surprising the audience at certain moments. In this way, these *navarasa* or "nine flavors" are used so that the audience will enjoy the story, and it will touch them on a deeper level.[32]

It is often through remembered emotions and images that we construe and recollect the meaning of a story. The way that it touched us personally determines its effect on our own life and character, and the way it is remembered. Intense emotions such as love, sacrifice, horror or grief can have the greatest capacity to trigger emotions that will reside as embodied memories of a given *dharma* story and its imagined protagonists. The *navarasa* are therefore the crucial aspects of South Asian literature that have been incorporated into oral and written Buddhist works and

[32] Naresh Man Bajracharya, conversation with the author, April 23, 2022.

*avadāna*s in Nepal in particular. Their capacity to inspire action and invoke devotion in their transmission cannot, therefore, be understated.

Sūtra Pāṭha: recitation as a site of tantric liberation

Although *dharma* stories, such as the MŚM, are narrated by the Buddha in the body of the text through a use of concentric narrative framing, narratives are read aloud to public audiences by Newar storytellers who may also be meditators, ritual specialists and Vajrācārya priests. Since the aim of the Buddhist doctrine extends beyond notions of this-life flourishing and well-being, with future lives and outcomes of being prioritized, these works see a movement towards radical acceptance of suffering as per the Mahāyāna *bodhisattva* path. For example, in chapter nine of the MŚM, the Bodhisattva Maṇicūḍa removes and sacrifices a jewel embedded in his forehead to cure a great plague afflicting the homeland of his enemy. Having entered the waters of the Maṇirohiṇī River, the blood streaming down from the *bodhisattva's* head is described in gory detail. This kind of graphic imagery has left a visceral imprint on generations of Buddhists who worship this river at Sankhu and seek both the curative and liberative blessings of the *bodhisattva*. The gravity of this sacrificial scene which is notably reminiscent of sacrificial slaughter is also further intensified by the notion that the *bodhisattva*'s altruistic intentions were strong enough to exempt him and his assistants from the proscription against Buddhists drawing the tiniest amount of blood from a *bodhisattva* or committing suicide. After having put the audience in real life narration through an emotional ordeal that will not be easily forgotten, the necessity of self sacrifice involving strong emotions on the Buddhist path is exemplified through the gift of the *bodhisattva*'s body (*dehadāna*), a scene that could also be construed as a solicitation for Buddhist vegetarianism, the prohibition of

sacrificial slaughter in addition to the cultivation of merit, empathy, compassion, and perfect generosity.

Even though *sūtra* recitation (*sūtra pātha*), *sūtra* worship (*sūtra pūja*), or book worship (*pustaka pūjā*) showcases a more aesthetic side of Buddhist ritual and literature, the recitation of narratives also have a logic all their own within the moral and eschatological rubric of Buddhism. Reciting, listening to, and worshipping *avadāna*s may act to facilitate the aim of contributing to one's storehouse of merit , but in the MŚM, it is considered to result in a person becoming pure and attaining final liberation, even being assimilated into the body of the great goddess Vajrayoginī herself. According to passages in the MŚM, liberative benefits are brought about through merely reading and reciting the *avadāna*.

In Sanskrit sources such as the Devanāgarī MŚA-S1 and Pracalit *Maṇiśailāvadāna* MŚA-S2, Ugratārā Vajrayoginī is referred to as the liberating goddess who is the mother of all Tathāgatas, Prajñāpāramitā and various names such as: Śrī Ugratārā Vajrayoginī, Śrī Ugratārā Devī, Vajrayoginī Devī, Khaḍgayoginī, Vajravairocaneśvarī, Ekajāṭībūddhimātā, Mahācīnatārā, Mahācaṇḍalī, Vajradevī, Mahādevī, Paraṃeśvarī and Tārāṇi. According to the MŚM, Vācāsiddhi and his wife Jñānāvatī who attained the state of this-life liberation, or *jīvanmukti*, together, are assimilated into Ugratārā Vajrayoginī's divine body. The Nepāl Bhāṣā section of chapter one in Barnavajra Vajracharya's MŚM depicts the benefits of narration as follows,

> Whosoever will listen to the story of the emergence of the glorious goddess Ugratārā Vajrayoginī in the form of a divine flame, their minds will become pure, and whosoever will listen to the story, their hearts will become happy. Whosoever shares this story with others will overcome the degeneration of the Kaliyuga and other associated negativities. Their personhoods, becoming pure, they will attain all excellent qualities. Having been of service to the

> glorious goddess Ugratārā Vajrayoginī, they will be assimilated into the body (*śarīre līnajuyā*) of the glorious goddess Ugratārā Vajrayoginī, the one who is the mother of all of Tathāgatas.[33]

According to tantric Buddhist doctrine and the MŚM, a *vajra-yoginī*, being a Buddhist *yoginī*, prioritizes the realization of selflessness and awakening or liberation, rewarding her devotees accordingly for transcending worldly aims and desire for material boons when possible. It is therefore made clear in the MŚM that, although Ugratārā Vajrayoginī has the power to grant a range of worldly blessings and boons (*varadāna*) to her devotees, genuine practitioners of Buddhism will eschew worldly aims, resulting in them receiving the highest form of praise. In terms of iconography, she is depicted as a stylized image depicted on the cover of the MŚM (see fig. 2 above). With diverse representations from a wrathful *kāpālika* deity to benevolent mother-goddess (*mātṛ*), Ugratārā Vajrayoginī is typically represented as a less benevolent figure that appears with a full bodied and wrathful countenance holding a blue lotus and adorned by serpents in other images and literary works connected with the same site. It terms of her categorization in the Newar tantric tradition, it is clear that she is not to be considered a "female Buddha," as scholars such as Judith Simmer-Brown and Miranda Shaw have suggested in the context of the *vajra-yoginī* in the Tibetan Vajrayāna tradition.[34] Alternatively, human tantrikas, practitioners of yoga and *dhyāna*, who are female are never referred to as *yoginī*s in the Newar tradition, and to suggest otherwise would be considered

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[33] [tvasapola jyotirūpa śrīugratārā bajrayoginīdevī utpattiṃ juyā bijyāgu kathā sunāṃ citta suddha yānā nyani sunaṃ thugu kathā nyanā mane harṣamānayānā parajana pinta upadeśa biī thuhmasyeṃ kaliyagu mala, arthāt pāpa saṃghayāta tyākā ātmā suddhajuyā satguṇa lānā śriugratārā bajrayoginīdevīyā sevaka juyā, tathāgatapini māṃjuyā bijyānā cvaṃhma śrīugratārā bajrayoginī debīyā śarīre līnajuyā vanī || ||] Barnavajra Vajracharya, *Maṇiśailamahāvadāna*, 4.

[34] Judith Simmer-Brown, *Dakini's Warm Breath: The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), 137; Miranda Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 8.

absurd. Ugratārā Vajrayoginī is rather considered as, the "mother of Victors," Mahāmāyā, and Parameśvarī,[35] the Great Goddess, a *yoginī*-goddess who is the source of Buddhahood itself. As such, she is a divine figure who mediates and facilitates the path to Buddhist liberation and the respective realizations of Buddhahood for her devotees. Ascension to the Pure Land Sukhāvatī is something that is repeated time and time again throughout the MŚM. Specific passages referencing such aims typically occur towards the end of each chapter in the MŚM. These passages describe specific benefits of reading and listening to the story, and not all are related to tantric soteriological aims.

In a passage praising the benefits of listening to and reading the "*Māhātmya* of Jotideva" the three *guṇa*s are mentioned, providing an example of the text's dialogic nature. However, Tuṣita Heaven is also mentioned in the same section as follows:

> Whosoever takes up the path of virtue and wishes to obtain merit and listens to this *māhātmya* of Jotideva, they will, having become happy in their minds, become endowed with wisdom. Whosoever desires to benefit others and listens to or tells [the story] of Jotideva to others, it will be impossible for that person to ever (*gabalyem*) transmigrate to the unfortunate states (*durgati*).[36] Having been released from suffering (*duḥkhaharaṇajuyā*), desire, hatred and the like will be overcome, and the three qualities (*svaṃgu guna*) of *raja*s, *sattva* and *tama*s will be attained. Having benefitted worldly beings and having adhered to the yogic practices continuously, whoever has a feeling of friendliness towards every single living being will attain every wisdom quality, and will, at the time

[35] The text gives the masc. pronoun *parameśvara* in conjunction with *mahādevī.*

[36] The three lower realms are the hells, the hungry ghosts, and the animals.

> of death, come to dwell in Tuṣita Heaven where they will experience every happiness.[37]

Chapter four of the MŚM mentions the benefits of reading *dharma* texts and reciting and listening to the story of Yogajñāna and Ugratārā Vajrayoginī as, a) becoming a person who is fully freed from negativity, is renowned as a great being who has completely purified body, speech and thought, and, b) becoming a person who will take the *bodhisattva* vow and become a protector to all beings.

At the end of the "*Mahātmyā* of Kuṭila" in chapter seven there is mention of the benefit of teaching or reading the story to others with the intention of inspiring faith and devotion. A more missionizing message that portrays the story contained in this *māhātmya* as having a particularly Mahāyāna and Buddhist aim of ascending to the pure land of Sukhāvatī, there are several instances of this passage throughout manuscript witnesses. One instance of this passage is found in a Sanskrit excerpt that Barnavajra Vajracharya included in his own text although the ms. source of this excerpt is unknown. Another instance is found in translation in the Nepāl Bhāṣā body of his text. Yet another example of this same passage remarking on the benefits of reading and causing others to listen to the story is found in an independent Sanskrit ms., the hand-written MŚA -S1 housed in a personal collection in Sankhu.

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[37] jotideva praśāntāca sunāṃ puṇyalāyedhakā kāmanāyānā maneharṣamānayānā. jñānadāyeka juyācvaṃgu ārthāt jñānavadejuīgu || jotidevayāgu praśaṃsānyani || athavā parajanayāta thaṃki || thuhma manuṣya gabalyeṃ durgatīdhayāgu tarbhigugati vanemālimakhu || duḥkhaharaṇajuyā rāga 'dveṣa, yāta tyākā rajoguṇa, satvaguṇa, tamoguṇa, thva svaṃgu guṇalānā. lokapiṃta hita yānā sadākāla yogacāryasa ratejuyā sampūrṇa prāṇīpiṃta mitrabhābayānā dakojñānaguṇaṃ parejuyā āṃtyakālasa tuṣitābhubanevanā sukhabhoga yāyedaī || Barnavajra Vajracharya, *Maṇiśaila-mahāvadāna*, 14.

The Sanskrit excerpt included in the MŚM of Barnavajra Vajracharya (MŚM-B2) reads as follows,

> idaṃ kuṭila mahātmye, avadānaṃ subhāṣitaṃ || śraddhayācānu modanta, śṛnvaṃti śrābayaṃtiye || tesarbe śraddhayā nityaṃ, dānam kṛtvānumo ditā || satsaukhyaṃca ciraṃ bhutvā hyanteyāyu sukhābattīm ||[38]

A parallel verse in corrupted or unorthodox Sanskrit is found in the stand alone *Maṇiśailamahāvadāna* (MŚA-S1) ms. and reads as follows, suggesting that it may have been related to the witness used by Barnavajra Vajracharya:

> idaṃkarila mahātmya taṃ subhāṣitaṃḥ || śrabrayātu modantaḥ śṛrāvāṃti śrāvayaṃtiyeḥ || te sarve śuchgayā nityaṃ dāna.kṛtvā numod itāḥ || tatsau suciraṃ bhuttkā svaṃte pāyuḥ sukhāvatīṃḥ ||[39]

This Sanskrit excerpt from Barnavajra Vajracharya's text translated into English reads as follows:

> As for this well-spoken legend contained in the *Kuṭila Māhātmya*, those with faith who teach it to others and cause others to listen to it, and who, with faith, making daily offerings and offer appreciation, all of you , will enjoy pure delight for a long time, and will, finally, be transported to Sukhāvatī.

This closely resembles the Nepāl Bhāṣā section in his same work, likely being a loose translation of the Sanskrit. The Nepāl Bhāṣā section as translated into English reads,

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[38] Barnavajra Vajracharya, *Maṇiśailamahāvadāna*, 30.

[39] Moore, "The Legend of Ugratārā Vajrayoginī," 371.

> As for the great and lofty [record known as] the *Kuṭila Māhātmya*, whosoever should listen to it with a happy mind filled with devotion, or otherwise, cause others to listen, and moreover, from this day onwards, offer with devotion the various types of offerings with a happy heart, every single one of those people will enjoy great bliss and will finally come to dwell in Sukhāvatī.[40]

The eighth chapter of the MŚM then concludes with mention of the benefits of listening to the story in connection with a pilgrimage to nine ponds in the vicinity of Sankhu. The following passage was translated from Nepāl Bhāṣā,

> Whosoever should listen to this story of pilgrimage (*yātra*) to the nine ponds, as told by the glorious Bhagavān Śākyamunī, will gain a happy mind. Otherwise, whosoever gives instruction to other living beings, causing them to listen, they will go to the heavenly realms. Having taken birth in the sphere of this world, they will experience various joys, and in the end, they will become such a person to whom the one in whom the glorious primordial power resides, the glorious goddess Ugratārā Vajrayoginī Devī, will appear directly and will be taken along the path of liberation (*mokṣa*).[41]

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[40] thva mahā uttam juyācvaṃgu kuṭīlamatīyā mahātmye sunāṃ harṣacittaṃ śraddhātayā nyani, athavā parajanapinta nyaṃkai | hākanaṃ nhithaṃ śraddhātayā aneka dāna pradāna yānā harṣamāna yānā cvani, thapiṃ sakaleṃ tā takaṃ sukha bhogayānā ante sukhābatī bhubane bāsa lāī || iti śrīmaṇiśaila mahātmye kuṭilavadāna kathā saptama pariccheda samāptam || 7 || Barnavajra Vajracharya, *Maṇiśaila-mahāvadāna*, 30.

[41] śrīśākyamuni bhagavāna ājñādayekā vijyāgu navakuṇḍala yātrāyāgu kathā sunāṃ harṣacitta yānā nyani | athava parajanapinta nyaṃkai updeśabī vayāta svarge vaṃsāṃ martya maṇḍale janmejuyā cvaṃsāṃ aneka sukharasa bhoga yākā ante śrīādiśaktī juyā

The above parallel passages show that the benefits of reading and listening to the text were mentioned throughout various Sanskrit and Nepal Bhāṣā witnesses of the MŚM, and were not an intervention of one author. The close similarity between Sanskrit verses in disparate manuscripts points to a potentially related source of Barnavajra Vajracharya's work and the relationship between the Sanskrit source and a similar Nepāl Bhāṣā verse in the same manuscript highlights the ways that Sanskrit has been utilized in a primarily Nepāl Bhāṣā work.

Sūtra Pūjā: the worship of the MŚM

A preliminary ritual for recitation known as a *pustaka pūjā*, or, *saphu pūjā* in Nepāl Bhāṣā, is a ritual which may extend to the early recitation of narratives across Northern Buddhist traditions. A discussion of this topic also requires close consideration of the negotiation between Nepāl Bhāṣā and Sanskrit terms. Additionally, one must reconcile the idea that the MŚM is considered a *sūtra*, a *mahātmyā, or* merely a book (*pustaka*), but the results of its recitation are just as effective and incorporated as a part of the Vajrayāna path in Newar Buddhism. Thinking about how overarching terminology is used to describe *avadāna*s in practice also helps to understand the vicissitudes of how Buddhist narratives are described and conceptualized. In the end, it is the context of narration that conceptualizes the text as a Mahāyāna *sūtra* as demonstrated by the preliminary ritual as described below and which may alter the written text for future generations. The narration of all manner of Buddhist stories and *sūtra*s is not always referred to as *sūtra pāṭha,* or *avadāna pāṭha*, but as a form of book (*pustaka*) recitation. Additionally, although *avadānas* are not titled *sūtra*s like other

bijyānā cvaṃmha śrīugratārā bajrayoginī devīyāgu sudṛṣṭi praptajuyā mokṣa mārge lāimha juī || Barnavajra Vajracharya, *Maṇiśailamahāvadāna*, 38-39.

major *sūtra*s, we see the use of the term *sūtra pūjā* and *sūtra pāṭha* in reference to the preliminary worship and recitation of *avadānas* for narration. But in Nepāl Bhāṣā, the same preliminary ritual to narration may be referred to as *saphu* or *pustaka pūjā*, referring to the text as a book, not a *sūtra*. In terms of occasions for narration, the reading of Buddhist narratives does not necessarily adhere to certain times according to Naresh Man Bajracharya and Tara Harsa Vajracharya.[42]

Another point to consider is the ritual procedure for narration within a public setting. First the *dharmāsana*, the ritual seat for the storyteller, is assembled and the teacher takes their seat before beginning to narrate the story. The text is considered the manifestation of Mañjuśrī and words spoken by the narrator after this point are considered to be the *dharma* and the utterance of Mañjughoṣa,[43] implying that the speaker may also be identified as Mañjughoṣa, but it is not clear. It is notable in this respect that Mañjughoṣa is an epithet of the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, and is considered to be the patron deity of enlightened speech that can be understood by all beings in their own languages: an exemplary model for narrators. For the *pustaka pūjā* ritual first, the ritual seat is set up for the guru, then the seats are prepared for the audience, most often facing the teacher. Traditionally, the *dharmāsana* for the teacher would not be too high, and there is usually one small special table where the book to be worshipped and the *pūjā* plate will be placed together, then the narrator and priest will worship the text with the ritual *pūjā* plate. According to Naresh Man Bajracharya, the steps for *pustaka or sūtra pūjā* on the occasion of narration proceeds as follows,

> This *pūjā* begins with putting one piece of flower on the book to be narrated, and that *pūjā* begins with a recitation of the very famous

[42] Naresh Man Bajracharya, conversation with the author, April 20, 2020; Tara Harsa Bajracharya, conversation with the author, December 11, 2021.

[43] Naresh Man Bajracharya, conversation with the author, April 20, 2020.

śloka that starts, "*svābhāva śuddha sarvadharma svābhāva śuddo huṁ* [...]." After that, the text to be recited is transformed into Mañjuśrī followed by the verses for offering incense and so forth. Then again you take a little of the rice and hold it in your hand while chanting the offering verse. This continues, and then one puts down a little bit of water and a few grains of rice and chants again. The other offerings are made with, "*oṁ vajra* [...]" and so forth, ending with "*svāhā*." Then there is the offering of *ṭīka*, or "*ghande*," and a certain kind of thread called the "*jajanka,*" and the rest. This is followed by offerings of flowers, food, milk, light, and again, offerings of puffed rice with the verse that starts out, "*hedharma, hetu prabhava* [...]" and so forth. Again, there is the pouring of a little rice and water and a piece of flower, with "*oṁ akharo huṁ phaṭ svāhā,*" then finally, one folds the hands with rice enclosed and recites one hundred of the six-syllable mantras, followed by the long Vajrasattva mantra. With this, the *pūjā* is completed and this comprises the offering and worship of the text that happens before the narration. This is the only *pūjā* performed before storytelling and within this ritual there is not necessarily any additional ritual for self-generation or the generation of altruistic intent or *bodhicitta* since the Vajrācārya priest has already performed their daily rituals and so has *bodhicitta* all the time, day and night. So, there is no other ritual or prayer that needs to be done, just the basic worship of the text without many more preliminaries. However, when the guru is finally finished worshipping the text to be narrated, he will announce, "we are now starting to tell the story," and will pronounce to the audience, "okay fold your hands now and repeat with me." The guru will then chant the refuge prayer, "*Namo Buddhaya, Namo Dharmaya*" and the rest, and the audience will follow

> in the same way. Then he may chant a few more *ślokas* of his choice and start with the narration.[44]

The assistant to the narrating Vajrācārya will give the *ṭīka* blessing (*tilaka*) to listeners by applying a paste to devotees' foreheads during the narration. There is no fixed time frame for giving the blessing, but the *ṭīka* tends to be given near the middle to the end of the event, depending on the number of people attending. There is no fixed rule as to who assists the narrator or priest, but the assistant should be considered as Gaṇeśa by the listeners during the ritual. However, Naresh Man Bajracharya has mentioned that, for listeners, the narrator is simply considered the *"bahkaṁ khanema guruju,*" or the "storyteller *guruju.*"[45] According to Naresh Man Bajracharya, Badri Ratna Vajracharya has mentioned that a narrator should visualize his own voice to be the divine voice of the epithet of Mañjuśrī, Mañjughoṣa, *ghoṣa* meaning "speech" and *mañju*, "gentle."[46] This may be visualized for the purpose of making one's voice clear and effective when speaking to a large or diverse audience. Naresh Man Bajracharya has commented that merely listening to the story, listeners should be able to visualize the setting and the diverse actors easily in their mind's eye as if the events are actually occurring.[47] Naresh Man Bajracharya explains the preliminary ritual as follows,

> [The narrator] begins by putting one piece of flower on the book, and that *pūjā* begins with the very famous *śloka*, "*svabhava suddha sarvadharma svabhava śuddho hum svabhāva atmaho haṃ*." So, while this [part of the ritual] is performed, the Vajrācārya also adds the

[44] Naresh Man Bajracharya, conversation with the author, April 10, 2020.
[45] Naresh Man Bajracharya, conversation with the author, April 10, 2020.
[46] Naresh Man Bajracharya, conversation with the author, April 10, 2020.
[47] Naresh Man Bajracharya, conversation with the author, April 15, 2022.

> word Mañjusrī to the *mantra*. So he worships the text assuming it in Mañjusrī, and [in this instance] the text is Mañjuśrī.[48]

This preliminary *pūjā* for narration is the same for all narratives and all *avadāna*s in Newar Buddhism. O'Neill outlines how the *pustaka pūjā* is carried out as a more elaborate *pūjā* in the context of the worship and recitation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*.[49] But in this case, the *pustaka pūjā* is not a preliminary ritual for narration, but rather the main event. In some instances, the two can be combined with the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* being followed by a telling of the *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, for instance, for the public.[50]

According to Naresh Man Bajracharya, the ritual text for *sūtra pūjā* in the context of narrating *avadānas* is described as follows:

> [T]he first part describes Śākyamuni Buddha, where he was staying, and what he was doing, and it describes the Buddha's characteristics (*lakṣaṇa*): how he was as he was sitting under the Bodhi tree: the golden tree. Then the ritual addresses all the deities that were around when the Buddha was delivering the story: all of the *yakṣa*s, *nāga*s, *kinnara*s and *gandharva*s. In the text, they all gathered at that spot and listened attentively to the Buddha's discourses. Then one comment is added to the text, it says, [in reference to the story to be narrated], "Likewise, in this way, I too am telling this Mahāyāna *sūtra*, so whatever you are reciting, whether it is a *jātaka* or *avadāna,* it is considered to be a Mahāyāna *sūtra*, and a telling of a Mahayana *sūtra*. The last *śloka* of this ritual text is the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, where it states that bowing down to the Mahāyāna *sūtra* or, having paid salutations to the Mahāyāna *sūtra*, I [the narrator] am starting the narrating now." So, this is the

[48] Naresh Man Bajracharya, personal communication, April 15, 2022.

[49] O'Neill, "Pustaka Pūjā," 250-252.

[50] Naresh Man Bajracharya, conversation with the author, April 15, 2022.

> abbreviated meaning of the whole text. Then, immediately after the recitation of this ritual text, the narration of the story can start. Some of these Mahāyāna *sūtras*, like the MŚM, are also considered to be related to the Vajrayāna, but they are considered the same, as *sūtra*s. Finally, the *avadāna* will be touched to the forehead of the priest.[51]

Although this is a common and simple structure for worship found in various other scenarios, the ritual worship of books in the context of narration as Mañjuśrī is not well known. While there may be other rituals that focus on the book worship itself more than the recitation of the text, this is a ritual where the *pūjā* is a preliminary action and the reading and communicating of the text in either expedited or performatives modes is the main event.

Conclusion

This article has addressed various modes and themes on the topic of reciting and worshipping Buddhist life stories (*avadāna*s) on the Vajrayāna path. As oral and literary works, I discussed the many adaptations that occur in the transition from oral to written works as an ongoing process in transmission. Live narrations carried out by Newar Vajrācārya priests preserve their lineage in a long line of Vajrācārya back to Vācāsiddhi at Sankhu. With this work, I strove to honour and highlight the history, works and advices of Vajrācārya storytellers who have successfully composed, compiled, and passed on Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna *avadāna*s to future generations. Specifically, I highlighted lesser known contributions of the

[51] Naresh Man Bajracharya, conversation with the author, April 22, 2022.

author of the MŚM and pandit Barnavajra Vajracharya (1922-1993) and his own family lineage, including his son, Tara Harsa Vajracharya.

I forwarded Todd Lewis's idea that the narration of *avadāna*s balances excessive focus on textuality, tenet systems and dialectics often foregrounded in Buddhist Studies. Events centred around the recitation of *avadāna*s engage with embodied experiences and emotions, while also making contributions to socio-religious, cultural and emplaced lived histories that are significant to specific regions and socio-religious communities. Methods and strategies involved in the recitation and worship of *avadāna*s were addressed as were passages in the MŚM that explain the many benefits of listening to and reading narratives. I therefore conclude that various forms of narration, especially more dramatized approaches, contribute to an ongoing adaptation and localization of *avadāna*s. In brief, factors such as community connection, engagement with affect and the acceptance of a certain fluidity in narration are what comprise the effective transmission of the *dharma* and *avadāna*s in this context. It is thus my hope that a growing awareness of the significance of performative storytelling as an important intergenerational practice and teaching practice will continue to contribute to a rising interest in the preservation and narration of *avadāna*s. It is also significant, in this respect, that the practice of transmission through narration in the Newar tradition extends beyond the privileging of abstract forms of knowing that grounds the written word in first-person experience and attention to emotion, an emphasis on aesthetic approaches and interpersonal connection that may prove to be beneficial when integrated into academic forms of study and teaching Buddhist Studies as a whole.

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Notes on the Contributor

Amber Marie Moore is a Buddhist Studies scholar who specializes in Buddhist narratives, philosophy, Caryā dance, and the translation of Buddhist manuscripts. She completed her BA in Buddhist Philosophy at the University of Kathmandu before earning an MA in Religion and Culture with Wilfrid Laurier and a PhD at the University of Toronto. A two-time recipient of the Sandhya and Riten Ray Award in Indian Philosophy and Religion, Amber recently completed an Asoka project with the Khyentse Foundation and continues to lecture and carry out research at the University of Toronto.

Correspondence to: Amber Marie Moore.

Email: ambermarie.moore@mail.utoronto.ca.

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