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The Buddhist Art of Living in Nepal

Ethical Practice and Religious Reform

Lauren Leve



The Buddhist Art of Living in Nepal

Theravada Buddhism has experienced a powerful and far-reaching revival, especially among the Newar Buddhist laity, many of whom are reorganizing their lives according to its precepts, practices, and ideals. This book documents these far-reaching social and personal transformations and links them to widespread political, economic, and cultural shifts associated with late modernity, and especially neoliberal globalization.

Nepal has changed radically over the last fifty years, and particularly since a popular movement opened the door to democratic political structures and an open-market economy in 1990. Drawing on recently revived understandings of ethics as embodied practices of self-formation, the author argues that the revived Theravada school is best understood as an ethical movement that offers practitioners ways of engaging, and models for living in, a rapidly changing world. It explores Theravada Buddhism in Nepal from the perspectives of its practitioners—people who work the fields, work in offices, or telecommute from homes in Kathmandu—and who find its knowledge convincing, compelling, and worthy of trying to internalize and perform.

The book details Theravada Buddhists' social, ritual, and meditative practices, their often conflicted relations to Vajrayana Buddhism and Newar civil society, their struggles to carve out a space in what was, until 2008, the world's only extant Hindu kingdom and the period of democratic transition that has followed, and the political, cultural, institutional, and moral reorientations that becoming a "pure Buddhist"—as Theravada devotees understand themselves—entails. It is of interest to students and scholars of Anthropology, Asian Religion, Buddhism, and Philosophy.

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In the end, however, these are my arguments and interpretations. All errors, faults, or limitations are my own. That said, may any merit that might come from this work multiply and make its way back to those who have helped me along the way, living or dead, in all directions.

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1 Introduction

Seeing things as they are

The change that results from Buddhist knowledge is similar to the process of making clarified butter (*ghee*). At the beginning, our minds are thick and dense, like butter. But when apply heat, the buttermilk and the froth separate, leaving only the pure *ghee*. Like this, when we apply Buddhism [to ourselves], the result is pure wisdom.

(A. Tuladhar, Kathmandu, 2001)

To be religious is not to live well. It is to take the question of living well seriously.

(William Cantwell-Smith, 1991)

A thing to develop your mind

On a clear autumn morning in October, 1990, I sat in the courtyard of a Theravada Buddhist monastery on the edge of a hill just outside Kathmandu, talking with a young, ochre-robed monk about Buddhism in Nepal. As we looked out across the Valley, over terraced green rice fields to the densely clustered rooftops of the city beyond, Bhikkhu Suganda¹ outlined a history of Buddha dharma in his native land—from Siddhartha Gautama's birth at Lumbini and the early flourishing of the *dhamma* in the Kathmandu Valley to the laicization of the once-celibate monastic order and the putative corruption of the original teachings under the impact of Hindu rule. Not surprisingly, perhaps, given the narrator, the story culminated in the twentieth-century revival of the orthodox Theravada tradition and the purification of Nepali Buddhist thought and practice which Theravada reformers like himself were striving to bring about.

As he described the events of the movement's earliest years, he interrupted his narrative for a moment to reflect. In fact, he said, propagating Theravada dharma was much easier for his own generation than it had been in the past. When the first *bhikshus* (monks) and *anagarikas* (nuns) began to preach in Kathmandu, Nepali people had no knowledge—nor even any memory—of the true *dhamma*, he said. Indeed, the Buddhism practiced by most Buddhists in the Kathmandu Valley at that time was so corrupted by Hinduism that, in some cases, what the new Theravada practitioners knew to be fundamental Buddhist

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rules actually conflicted with local religious norms. Even now, more than fifty years later, he continued, many Newar Buddhists still didn't realize that the rituals they practiced were not authentic Buddhism. They did as they had learned from their parents and grandparents and they assumed that they were doing right. But in truth, he informed me, their practices bore little relation to the universal truth that the Shakyamuni Buddha had discovered. *Real* Buddhism is not about making offerings to deities or priests—whether Buddhist or Hindu, he said. It is not the rote performance of lifecycle or calendrical rituals, nor the divinely sanctified reproduction of a caste-based cultural order, as his ancestors had believed and many of his neighbors still did. Rather, he asserted, it is something very different: a practical knowledge that leads from pain to happiness—"a philosophy to light your life":

The Buddha's original intention was to show people how to develop their wisdom. But due to practical, political circumstances, Buddhism adapted to society in Nepal and intermingled until it became part of the cultural tradition. The form of practice changed from Theravada to Mahayana and, especially, to Vajrayana, which depicts the *dhamma* only symbolically.... When older people do Vajrayana *pujas*, they are preserving the culture. But the young aren't interested [in this]. Young people are educated and they are attracted to modern, scientific-thinking. They demand examples that they can see applied and prove in modern life. So the Buddhism they are familiar with from their parents seems useless to them.

In the past, the monk continued, religion and culture had been fundamentally intertwined. Most people were farmers, he said; literacy was low. And while uneducated people had great devotion, he said, they were unlikely to ask the monks to teach them the "real dharma," which would lead to wisdom. Rather, they visited temples and holy sites to give *dana* and earn merit toward better rebirths. For their children and grandchildren, however, things were different. This generation came to *viharas* (Theravada Buddhist temples)² to listen to the Buddha's teachings and hear them explained. They realized that *dhamma* was not a socially mandated set of ritual duties, but a profoundly transformative universal knowledge. At a time of broad cultural change and intense instability, Bhikkhu Suganda explained, the true Buddha Dhamma offered a guide to human life and the natural laws that govern it which brought timeless truth to bear on immediate human problems. "Religion," he told me, "is not about preserving culture.... Religion is a thing that will develop your mind." And by transforming individual practitioners from the inside out, he promised, the true Buddha Dhamma would rebuild society. This, he explained, was the reality behind the modern rise of Theravada Buddhism in Nepal.

The Theravada turn and global modernity

This is a book about Buddhism and ethical practice in the age of modernity. In particular, it is an ethnographic study of the Theravada Buddhist turn in Nepal

and the far-reaching mutations of Newar Buddhists' (and, increasingly, other ethnic Nepalis') sensibilities and subjectivities that it has helped bring about and with which it is associated. Since the first Nepali Theravada monks began to preach their reformist agenda in the Kathmandu Valley in the early part of the twentieth century, Newar Buddhists have engaged in a powerful debate over truth, culture, and how to live in a changing world that has been focused around, and on, what Buddhism is and how to practice it. In this book, I document the powerful social and personal transformations associated with these contested conversations and practices, and link them to widespread political, economic, and cultural shifts that have taken place in Nepal over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, including, most recently, neoliberal globalization.

As I will explain below, I approach the movement and the life practices of the people involved as a type of ethical practice that reveals much about the challenges and changes of contemporary life in a place that is famously imagined as peripheral and remote, but which is very much part of global modernity. Debates over dharma—over what teachings are true and how one should live given that reality—are certainly not new to Nepal or to Buddhism.³ Yet, the Theravada-inspired reform of Newar Buddhism has taken place under distinct conditions that have influenced it in specific and important ways. Scholars of modernity, and of “modern Buddhism”—that is, of the particular forms that Buddhism has taken in the context of, and in dialogue with, colonial and postcolonial modernity—have identified common themes in Buddhist thought and practice that are clearly visible in the case I describe. Yet, as illuminating as it can be to identify core features of (what gets called) modernity—Buddhist or otherwise—it is also important to recall that modernity has achieved its (already diverse) aims unevenly across space and time, and that modern forces have brought forth unexpected and highly contradictory outcomes, as events that have led scholars to reflect on our current “post-secular” moment demonstrate.

Joel Robbins has suggested that the moral domain may be a privileged space “where change comes to consciousness” at moments of cultural transition (2004: 14). And indeed, Nepalis have seen enormous changes in the past few decades—changes that, while uniquely Nepali in their on-the-ground forms, reflect political technologies and economic arrangements which became internationally dominant in the wake of the Cold War. And with this reformulation of public life has come heterogeneous new experiences of personal identity. Like so many others across the globe, modernist Theravada Buddhists in Nepal look to religious knowledge and discipline as a way of living well in a rapidly changing world. Indeed, this is what they mean when they insist that Buddhist knowledge must be “applied” and the reason they call it “the best dharma for today.” This, then, is not a book only about Buddhist reform in Nepal. The Theravada turn there offers a window onto ongoing reformations of religious practice and personhood that are also happening elsewhere, if not uniformly or in identical ways.

A little more background

How did I come to be at that temple on that day, with a notebook, a tape-recorder, and a prearranged interview? Less than three months earlier, I had arrived in Kathmandu with the name of a Theravada Buddhist nun and the approximate location of the *vihara* she had founded, hoping to investigate her work and its impact on the broader Buddhist community. I had studied anthropology in college and planned to begin graduate school the following year. In the meantime, however, I was interested in studying the Nepali language, trying my hand at ethnography, and learning more about Newar Buddhism and the Theravada reform.

I knew that Theravada Buddhism—or “the doctrine of the elders,” as the name connotes—is the dominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Thailand (where Bhikkhu Suganda was trained), Burma/Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. And while there is evidence of Theravada personages and institutions in early Nepal, its defining institution, a celibate sangha, had disappeared by the twelfth century. Since then, ethnic Newar Buddhists have evolved a unique form of Mahayana/Vajrayana Buddhism, preserved in the person and practices of a hereditary caste of married householder monks (known as Shakyas and Vajracaryas) and in the Sanskrit texts that made up that Canon. Newar Buddhism has been nurtured by active trade links with Tibet and embodied in the social structure in inherited patron–client relationships, in ritual relations between high-caste Buddhist families and Buddhist temple sites that tied priests to practitioners to property, and in numerous devotional activities, collective observances, and lifecycle rites.

To a budding anthropologist with a strong interest in Buddhism, the rebirth of a Theravada sangha in Nepal in the twentieth century seemed to pose a host of interesting questions. What had made this revival possible, and what made Theravada compelling to its new devotees? Had conventional Newar Buddhism changed as a result of Theravada’s re-establishment in the religious landscape? What did it mean that this was happening in a constitutionally Hindu kingdom at a time when Hinduism was being challenged, in the name of democracy, by a growing number of ethnic and religious minorities from across the civil spectrum? Could the Theravada revival be considered a kind of social movement, I wondered? Could it be considered a kind of resistance? The limited academic literature on the topic available in English at that time suggested intriguing connections to Newar ethnonationalist identity.⁴

At the start, then, I had little idea that my research would lead me to questions about ethics and globalization, about Buddhism as a form of knowledge, or the challenge of making sense of, and navigating, an increasingly rationalized, yet chaotic, social world. I knew from early on that I was dealing with a transnational movement that self-consciously aimed to reform Newar Buddhist practice and understanding, but I was far from prepared to understand everything that I saw and heard. Like the Newar lay Buddhists of whom Bhikkhu Suganda spoke, I too needed to break from culture and tradition. Albeit in a different—or perhaps not so different way—my mind also needed developing.

On fieldwork with changing people in changing times

To write this book, I have drawn upon over five years of intensive ethnographic fieldwork and over two decades of engagement with Nepal. During this time, I have seen children born and watched them grow up into ways of life that their parents struggled to prepare them for and their grandparents could hardly have imagined. I have seen monks and nuns depart for advanced Buddhist education abroad and return home again; begin and end projects; ordain and disrobe. I have worried about my friends and the state of the country, celebrated public victories and private successes, and mourned as some have grown sick, aged, and died.

Significantly, all this has taken place at a time when the structures and norms of Nepali public life have themselves been undergoing dramatic changes. Since 1990, the country has legally recast itself from a Hindu kingdom to a secular republic. It has moved from repressing ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity to the formal recognition of minority cultures. This political liberalization has been echoed in the economic domain as well, transforming an import substitution-based economy—within which almost everything sold in Nepali markets was produced in India or China, and the single television station and radio broadcasting corporation were state-owned and run—to a globalized, market-led economy that has flooded shops and homes with goods, images, and ideals from all over the world.

Let me be more specific. In the spring of 1990, just months before I arrived in Nepal, a popular democratic movement rose up against the King and party-less system of governance. Their efforts led to the establishment of a multiparty electoral system and constitutional monarchy, and set in motion a process of democratic change that continues even to this day. The first years of democracy were extraordinarily volatile. No fewer than ten governments formed and dissolved in as many years as parties and individuals jockeyed to lead. The turbulence increased following the 1996 declaration of a Maoist People's war, as the armed group's promises of social justice (including women's and minority rights, and ethnically sensitive political autonomy) proved compelling to people who felt ill served by the state. The resulting decade-long civil war pitted neighbor against neighbor, damaged or destroyed much of the rural development infrastructure, and, in a country of under thirty million people, left over 15,000 dead.⁵ Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of people abandoned their rural villages for the relative safety of urban areas, transforming the character and landscape of both the capital city and the now-empty villages they left.

The 2001 massacre of the then-king, Birendra (purportedly by the suicidal Crown Prince), and a subsequent coup by Gyanendra, who succeeded his brother to the throne, united the Maoists and mainstream political parties against the Crown, opening the possibility of an end to the war. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement that was signed in 2006 committed the country to secularism, republicanism, and a federal structure that would empower historically marginalized ethnic communities, as well as elect a Constituent Assembly (CA) to draft a new constitution. Yet, despite CA elections in 2008 and, again, in 2013, political

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infighting has continued unabated. Indeed, the promised constitution was only delivered and promulgated in September 2015, following the April earthquake. Many of its terms have proven highly controversial, including provisions related to religious freedom, womens' rights, and the ethnic composition of new federal states. As this book goes to press, protests and negotiations are continuing.

On the social and economic fronts, change has been equally dramatic if differently challenging. Until the late 1980s, Nepal followed the lead of India and other non-aligned countries in seeking to protect its domestic markets and implement progressive economic policies. The result was a tightly regulated, state-led, agrarian-dominated economy. Stiff tariffs on many consumer items limited citizens' access to what the state considered to be luxury items, particularly goods produced outside of India and China. Major industries—including banking, health, education, media, and telecommunications—were government owned and tightly regulated. Prices for basic items like rice, sugar, and kerosene were set by the state.

In the wake of the 1990 democratic revolution, however, and under pressure from international development agencies, Nepal initiated a far-reaching set of policy reforms that reflected the reigning neoliberal ideology: its markets were opened and its industries privatized. Currency controls were lifted, encouraging the freer circulation of both people and capital. With the help of consumer loans and foreign remittances, the many people who moved to Kathmandu in the 1990s and 2000s have built houses and bought cars, paving over the paddy-fields and overwhelming the roads. The cost of land has increased many times over. Those who can afford it send their children to English medium schools and later to private colleges. New malls are now filled with a dizzying array of consumer goods, even as hundreds of TV and radio stations, the Internet, and diversified migratory patterns internationalize citizens' expectations, aspirations, ideals, and trajectories. These changes inspire self-reflection, and feed old and new anxieties.

I will discuss this at greater length throughout the book. What is important to understand now is that all of these events shaped the opportunities, interests, and sensibilities of the people with whom I worked. And they did so in real time. Thus, the state of public life at any given moment also figured dynamically into the way I conducted my research, affecting the conversations I have had, the events I have observed, the questions I have asked (or not), and the friendships I have made—in short, the relationships from which the ethnographic knowledge presented here derives.

All this underscores the complexity of studying Buddhism in practice. The broad shift from religion-as-culture to religion-as-knowledge that Bhikkhu Suganda pointed out was related to changes in the structures and conditions of Newar Buddhists' lives that have been going on, in some form or another, for decades, even centuries. These changes produced increasing dissatisfaction with customary forms of *dharma* and ways of living in the world and, in many cases, led people to embrace modernist reforms. Yet, to fully understand how this happened, we must attend both to the material dynamics of political, economic, and

social change and what these changes have meant to actual people as they go about creating, living, and reflecting on their lives under these particular historical conditions.

Globalization and the ethical turn

Globalization is often portrayed as an overwhelming force. Whether this force consists primarily in the power of capitalist markets, of the “time–space compression” introduced by high-speed telecommunication technologies, or even of “human rights imperialism,” it is typically represented as something external to and bearing down on its victims—transnational powers coming to transform “local” life and, in the process, completing the modernist project of breaking up traditional forms of knowledge and authority. Faced with such an onslaught, some embrace the new, and build norms and institutions based on the values associated with neoliberal capitalism and liberal democracy; others reject them, and resist in the name of ancient—or perhaps newly minted ancient—certainties. From this perspective, Theravada reformers may seem profoundly anomalous. They are part of a transnational, universalist movement that aims to return to the true, ancient, “original” teachings of the Buddha and fashion them into a tool with which to live modern life.

This is not, however, the only way to think about globalization. As the later chapters of this book will make clear, I am interested in the ways in which political, economic and cultural transformations associated with liberalization and late capitalist modernity are calling forth new forms of personhood and, correspondingly, new ways of relating to religion, society, and authority in Nepal. Yet, as Anna Tsing insists, globalization was never just one thing: it is an “inter-connected, but not homogeneous, set of projects,” often working at cross-purposes, whose power is by no means absolute (2000: 355). As such, it is perhaps best conceived not as a historical context or “a process of secular transformation [whose] significance is ... delimited by social, cultural or economic determinations” but rather as a kind of methodological “problem-space” in which new technologies, configurations of reason, and institutions of collective life are inspiring powerful shifts in human self-understanding (Ong and Collier, 2005: 5). Seen thus, “globalization is less an object for comprehensive theorizing or empirical investigation than the referent or symptom that conditions diversely posed challenges to disciplines, practices and forms of expertise” (Holmes and Marcus, 2005: 247).

Under such circumstances, scholars and the people they study alike may find themselves asking similar questions: “How, then, should one live? How do we evaluate competing visions of a good and worthy life?” And indeed, one thing on which otherwise diverse scholars seem to agree is that globalization—however conceived—has helped catalyze a powerful ethical turn characterized by new levels of reflexivity and associated disciplinary practices.⁶

Scholars tell this story in different ways. Yet, in the end, most track the origins of the ethical turn to a crisis of traditional authority and the putative

existential uncertainty that results. Anthony Giddens' description is typical in many ways. For him, high modernity is characterized by the rapid expansion of interconnections across social, cultural, and class systems, resulting in a reorganization of time and space across non-local regions and the disembedding of social institutions and relations from established forms of society and authority (Giddens, 1990). As "daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global," he explains, "tradition loses hold" and individuals are forced to reflect on what had been taken for granted in the past, including tradition and nature, which are no longer the assumed substrate of human life, but now appear as objects of reflection and management (Giddens, 1991: 5; Beck, 1994). Giddens grounds these changes in the work of expanding industrial capitalism. But he stresses that the consequences are experienced subjectively: in individualistic concepts of trust and rule that replace older expectations regarding duty, obedience and "fortuna"; in the need to subject "tradition" to critical interrogation and a corresponding search for authenticity; and in a variety of reflexive practices that focus on life-planning and the structuring of self-identity. "Modernity," he asserts,

is a post-traditional order in which the question, "How shall I live?" has to be answered in day-to-day decisions—about how to behave, what to wear, what to eat—and many other things—as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity.

(Giddens, 1991: 14)⁷

I would question whether there has ever actually been a time or place where "tradition" reigned quite as securely Giddens seems to think.⁸ Certainly, in Nepal, traditions have long been multiple, contested, and informed by a thoroughly transregional purview. The origins of the particular reformist strain of reformist Theravada Buddhism that reached Nepal in the 1920s, for example, lies in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka and the confluence between British Protestant missionaries, Sri Lankan Buddhist monks and nationalist intellectuals, and American spiritualists and members of the Theosophical Society. It was very much a self-conscious creation and, at the point when it came to Nepal, the country was already being reshaped by its political leaders in conscious dialogue with European concepts of religion, politics, and law. In other words, we are in many ways witnessing the intensification of processes that have existed for a very long time and it is only by casting the process on its full historical canvas that we can see what is truly new here and understand its implications.

That said, most of my Nepali friends would agree with the basic argument that social and political norms associated with ethnic and religious communities have come under intensified pressure from trans-local forces, imaginaries, and configurations of reason in recent years, with the effect that more people are finding themselves inspired or compelled to self-consciously consider which values to embrace and what lifestyles to choose. We see aspects of Giddens'

predictions in many ways in the lives of Theravada reformists who prioritize individualized understanding and commitments of conscience over the collective authority of Newar “tradition.” The search for authenticity is also a feature of Theravada’s appeal in Nepal, as the discursive emphasis on purity makes so clear. And reflexive practices have become *de rigueur* among the Buddhists I worked with in the form of daily insight meditation, life-planning workshops like the one I discuss in Chapter 7, and even the inspirational memes that many of my Nepali Buddhist friends post regularly on Facebook.⁹ Indeed, perhaps the most influential Buddhist teacher in Nepal in the 1990s, and, despite his death in 2013, even today, is associated with the strong claim that *vipassana* meditation is the highest form of Buddhist practice—more pure even than what is taught at the temples by the monks and nuns. What I would add to this argument, though, is that it is not simply that people have more choice about lifestyle (and religious) options today than they did in the past. It is also the case, given the dramatic economic and policy changes that Nepal has seen in the past few decades, that many “traditional” life paths, and the ethical orientations that corresponded to them, no longer represent viable options for social reproduction.

Following Foucault, I identify these Buddhist reflective practices as parts of a process I call “ethicization”: the motivated and reflexive transformation of self.¹⁰ In adopting this approach, I join a growing number of scholars¹¹ who are also studying ethics not as a problem of moral rules and codes, but as practical and philosophical acts by which individuals self-consciously seek to cultivate values, habits, and dispositions (i.e., as a set of practices by which people produce themselves as certain types of persons or selves).¹² Late in his life, having completed his well-known studies of modern power and subjectivity, Foucault became interested in classical Athens and in a range of spiritual exercises focused on what he identified as the knowledge and, in particular, care of the self (Foucault, 1985, 1986, 1994). Inspired by Pierre Hadot’s (1995, 2002) claim that philosophy was a way of life in the ancient world and not the normativized theoretical discipline it has become today, Foucault argued that for the Greeks, philosophy and its related exercises operated as ethical techniques according to which individuals made critically informed choices about the kinds of persons they wished to be and strove to fashion themselves as such. The function of knowledge in this context was to contribute to a life well led. This, Foucault proposed, was an ethical endeavor involving reflection, disciplinary technologies aiming to produce subjective effects, and a *telos*, or mode of being at which one aims. Seen thus, he concluded, the ethical is “‘a relation of the self to itself’ that manifests ... as ‘the considered’ ... practice of freedom” (Foucault, 1997: 284, in Faubion, 2001: 85). It is “the power individuals exercised upon, and through which they formed, themselves” (Nehamas, 1998: 179).

While this perspective emerges from the specific context of ancient Greece, it can nonetheless help us to understand what is happening in Nepal. Just as Foucault turned to these practices when trying to conceive of a practice of human freedom appropriate for conditions of modernity, Nepali Buddhists are doing the same.

The Greeks problematized their freedom, and the freedom of the individual, as an ethical problem. But ethical in the sense in which the Greeks understood it: *ethos* was a way of being and behavior. It was a mode of being for the subject, along with a certain way of acting.... For the Greeks, this was the concrete form of freedom; this was the way they problematized their freedom.... But extensive work on the self is required for this practice to take shape in an *ethos* that is good, beautiful, honorable, estimable, memorable, and exemplary.

(Foucault, 1994: 286)

To be sure, there are profound differences between ancient Greece and contemporary Nepal. But Theravada reformers conceive of the Buddha first and foremost as a philosopher, and one who developed processes of self-cultivation whose ultimate aim is liberation, even if they conceive of liberation in their own, Buddhist, terms. And they describe themselves and their Buddhism in remarkably similar ways. Thought, from this perspective, is part of an embodied and constructive practice. It is

not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it its meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it.... Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem.

(Foucault, 2008: 117)

In other words, it is a reflexive practice, something that one uses to free oneself from conventional habits and live a particular type of perfected life.

This process of reflexive examination and self-transformation is, I believe, precisely what my friend Anil had in mind when he compared the personal transformation brought about by Buddhist knowledge to the formal distillations that result in purified ghee. It is what Bhikkhu Suganda meant when he insisted that true Buddhism should not be understood or lived as a cultural practice but, indeed, as a “*philosophy* to light your life,” “a thing to develop your mind.” As ever-larger swathes of the Nepali population have become more immediately engaged with liberal forms of reason, production, and governance over the course of the last century, more and more Newar Buddhists (and others) have come to feel that normative truths and practices that governed their society in the past can no longer be trusted as guides to the nature of the world and how best to live in it—at least in any unmodified form. Some of those people have found the ethical knowledge and practices associated with the Theravada turn appealing. This is the reason they call it “the best dharma for today,” and insist that Buddhism should not be abstract, but applied.

Buddhists as philosophers, and the problem of “religion”

If philosophy is an embodied practice of reflexive self-cultivation, and philosophers are those thinkers and actors who seek to produce themselves in certain ways—to practice “the art of living,” as Alexander Nehamas (1998) has proposed—then the Buddhists I worked with in Nepal were paradigmatic philosophers, powerfully and creatively engaged in the pursuit of freedom.

Yet, for academic scholars like myself, this can be surprisingly hard to see. One reason for this may be that to think about Buddhists as philosophers veers dangerously close to Orientalist narratives of Buddhism as philosophy and of cultural decline that have been soundly rejected in most contemporary scholarship (Lopez, 1995b, 1998; King, 1999). However, I think an even more important factor may be the way in which it defies expectations about religion and reason, scholars and studied, that underlie both Religious Studies and Anthropology. What was—and is—so challenging about the Theravada turn is that it inverts so many assumptions about religious versus modern thought. It seems odd to see Theravada Buddhists appealing to modernity in the language of Buddhism. Yet, here, Buddhist thought *is* the medium through which people are trying to achieve independence from traditional authority, to become individuals and develop autonomy, to think freely and creatively. And these are all things that religion is *not* supposed to be.

It was for this reason, I believe, that I first responded with confusion when my friends and interlocutors told me things such as Buddhism was not a religion, that the Buddha was actually a kind of scientist who anticipated the modern discoveries of quantum physics and Einstein. Or that *vipassana* meditation should not be understood as a religious practice but as a scientific technology—an entirely secular knowledge-producing technique. When I first heard these things, I confess, I thought that my Buddhist friends were making claims to being modern which, following Bruno Latour, I understood as reflecting a kind of process of ideological purification in which certain kinds of ideas become confined to a credulous and devalued past, while others, which conform to sanctioned understandings of nature and agency, are valorized as characteristic of modernity (Latour, 1993). This was not entirely wrong; yet it missed the most important part of what they were trying to tell me, which was that the Buddhist teachings and practices that I conceived under the sign of religion presented themselves to them in a wholly different way. To fully understand what they were telling me, I had to reconsider what I thought I knew about religion, and about the ways in which their Buddhist practices fit into it. This, in turn, would lead to new thoughts about scholarly theory and identity.

Before continuing, I need to clarify this and to specify what I believe to be at stake—in part, to demonstrate just why the Theravada turn is so revealing of contemporary global predicaments. The crux of the problem is this: post-Enlightenment Euro-American thought has conceived of religion in a way that makes it exceptionally difficult for people like myself to perceive Nepali Buddhists as the kind of free, critical, and creative thinkers that we imagine

ourselves to be. In fact, when secular academics define certain ideas, practices, or ways of knowing as “religious,” we implicitly classify them as qualitatively different from our own and deny them certain types of agency, reflexivity, and creativity.¹³

It has become a truism to observe that modern scholars are in the shadow of the Enlightenment. Yet this shapes what we think we are discussing when we talk about “religion” and the methods we deem suitable to study it. Critical studies of the history of religion as a scholarly concept have highlighted its roots in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European debates about nature, knowledge, prayer, humanity, and Divinity.¹⁴ With the eventual triumph of reason as the preferred method for knowing the Divine as well as a divinely given *telos* for human perfectibility, a new model of human subjectivity arose, and a new understanding of religion. In Kant’s classic essay “What is Enlightenment?” an Enlightened person is described as someone who draws on his own critical faculties—that is, he applies reason—to know God and to evaluate human knowledge and social institutions. By no means an atheist, Kant was nonetheless deeply skeptical of all claims to revealed knowledge, by which he believed institutions like the Church prevented people from taking up their own reason, and were therefore enslaved.

Kant’s other writings reveal Enlightenment beliefs that shaped not only the development of scholarship but also the character of modernist Buddhism. Particularly important for understanding what’s happening today in Nepal was his rejection of arguments that posited God’s immanence. By the end of the eighteenth century, there was widespread agreement in the ontological difference between the Divine and His Works. God may have been the Clock Maker, but he wasn’t the clock. Nor could he be compelled to manifest in the world by means of words or actions (ritual). The only way to know the Divine and to participate in its qualities, then, was through individual rational inquiry and reasoned contemplation. Under these conditions, any conviction that “man possesses an art of bringing about a supernatural effect through wholly natural means” came to be seen as the sign of an irrational mind (Kant in Styers, 2004: 57). The Enlightenment’s lasting gift to modern scholars of religion, then, is a far-reaching set of presumptions about knowing itself that sets us apart from—and above—those whom we study, presumptions which rest on inherited assumptions that separate “reason” from “faith” and “us” from “them.”

Here I am describing a historical process that others have called the “privatization” of religion; that is, its transfiguration from a concrete and public set of truths, practices, and institutions to an abstract domain of individual moral commitments, feelings, and beliefs normatively subject to rational control.¹⁵ From the late seventeenth century on, debates about religion and reason took place against a historical backdrop of dramatic social change occasioned by colonialism, industrialization, and the rise of the nation-state, all of which processes created new demands for disciplined labor and corresponding methods of technical-bureaucratic control. For public reason and modern forms of social subjectivity to expand, beliefs and behaviors associated with prior forms of

society needed to be contained. Ideas and practices seen to conflict with the emerging ideal of the bourgeois public sphere as a space of universal reason, transparency, and equality were labeled “magic” or “religion” according to how much of a threat to modern forms of regulation they seemed.¹⁶

This is the reason we say that religion and modernity are—and emerged as—inter-constitutive categories. To situate the origins of this way of thinking in Europe, however, is not to suggest that it remains European. I describe it here to lay bare some of the biases that scholars like myself inherit when we identify ourselves as students of “religion” or “religious life”—in particular, the assumption that religious commitments (whether “religious thought,” “belief,” or practices) are qualitatively different, perhaps even incompatible, with modern sensibilities. Yet, the reason I need to discuss this at all is that the people with whom I worked in Nepal shared many of these ideas—they even identified some of them as originally Buddhist.

On the one hand, this should not be surprising. Modernity understands itself as the space that is not all of the things that “religion” is purported to be or to represent. And my friends and informants do consider themselves modern. But if “the modern discourse on religion and religions was from the very beginning” both “a discourse of secularization” and “a discourse of othering,” as Masuzawa suggests (2005: 20), then the problem I faced starts to come into view.

Despite the landmark critiques of the 1980s and 1990s that accused anthropologists of “imprisoning” natives in homogenized, hypostasized and dehistoricized “local” cultures (Appadurai, 1986b, 1988; Dirks, 1992a; Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, 1997b, 1997a), and more recent discussions in the anthropology of ethics that point to the way in which classical theories influenced by Durkheim locate religion on the side of authority and cast it as a conservative cultural force (Laidlaw, 2002; Robbins, 2007a, 2007b; Zigon, 2007; Lambek, 2010a, 2014), anthropologists still tend to assume that we are the ones with the universalizing theory, that we are uniquely qualified to interpret others’ worlds.¹⁷ This is especially true when those informants are “religious.” While few today would be comfortable dismissing religious sensibilities as signs of outright false consciousness and even fewer would write them off as evidence of a pre-logical mentality or the flawed psychic productions of underdeveloped cognitive worlds, much anthropological work continues nevertheless to treat religious thinkers as cultural others of a sort.

The point I wish to make here is not that structural or symbolic approaches to religion are simply wrong. Rather, it is that they have been conditioned by inherited ideas about modernity, agency, knowledge, and scholarly identity that legitimate—even perhaps necessitate—hierarchical relations between anthropologists and those with whom they work. There are powerful prejudices, then, that predisposed me to “other” my Buddhist interlocutors, to see their Buddhist engagements as “religion” with all that this implies, rather as reflexive practices that were part and parcel of modernity. No matter that this is precisely what they said.

Against the localization of Buddhist reason

Jonathan Z. Smith makes a similar point when he cautions students against mistaking what he calls “locative” religions—cosmologies that “offer a map of the world that guarantees meaning and value through structures of congruity and conformity”—for more universal patterns of religious experience (Smith, 1993: 292). However successful scholars may be at describing and interpreting such forms of religious expression, he insists, religions that present the nature of the cosmos as continuous with local forms of spatial and temporal authority are the self-serving “productions of well organized self-conscious scribal elites who had a deep vested interest in restricting mobility and valuing place.” While Smith does not quite say that contemporary scholars of religion are playing the same role as such scribes, he certainly implies it, urging colleagues to be skeptical of models that lay undue emphasis on congruency and conformity. These theories, he charges, tacitly construe Western scholarly practices as critical, creative, and culturally transcendent, in contrast to the putatively place-bound, mythic, and reiterative modes of non-European thought.

For Smith, the popularity of this paradigm in the academy suggests modern researchers’ sense of themselves as people who meet new events with new ideas and who speak (universal) truth to power—and the corresponding assumption that members of the religious cultures they study are unable to think beyond the ideas promoted by local authorities to secure their own reigns. Comparing religions to maps—models that people draw on to navigate life unknown—Smith observes that it is not overly credulous “natives” who err in mistaking chart for territory: it is overly confident (and excessively literal) scholars who mistake religious rhetoric for what people actually believe.¹⁸ Insofar as theoretical understandings of “primitives” and “religion” conceive others’ religious mentalities as congruous with the boundaries of their culture and as determinative of their worldviews, they reproduce a subtle but significant rationalist bias which predisposes scholars to hear and interpret “religious” thought as the localized opposite of our own putatively more universal truths.

This is where my training got in the way when my interlocutors used the language of particles and waves to explain Buddha’s teachings. I was similarly bemused when Dharma Ratna, who we will meet in Chapter 5, cast Buddhist cosmology on the secular stage of world politics by speculating about whether the Oslo Accords—which he took as a sign of impending global peace—might indicate that our present, debased Kali Yug (world era) was ending and that the next Buddha, Meitreyā, would be coming soon. Or take the above-mentioned arguments that the Buddha was a scientist and that meditation is a kind of scientific technique. My first response to these statements was confusion, since meditative insights and knowledge gained through controlled scientific experiments seemed so different to me. Later, since these conversations often seemed to have missionary overtones, I decided that my interlocutors must be using science as a strategy to try to appeal to my own beliefs. Since I assumed that I was dealing with a culturally circumscribed form of knowledge, it was difficult to see their

arguments and thinking as keyed to the same scale (using the word here in the senses of both music and geography) as my own. And I was not, as it turns out, the first one to make this mistake. Anna Tsing (2000) noted the same disparity in conversations with her own informants in rural Borneo. She had come to the field, she later realized, assuming that she was the one who had the tools to universalize, and one of the major effects of this assumption was to localize the words and thoughts of those she studied—that is, to interpret their thoughts and insights primarily as representative of a fixed system of beliefs. Yet, she found, those same “local people” did not see themselves in that way. They were quite aware that they were thinking creatively about universal human concerns and demanded to be taken seriously as such.

What is most interesting to me in retrospect was that I interpreted these conversations as examples of my interlocutors trying to enlist me in their values and invoking a prestigious and authoritative discourse, that of science, to convince me to overcome my reasonable doubt. Given the education and accomplishments of the people with whom I was conversing—teachers, translators, businessmen, and engineers who had taken the same math and science classes that I had (and had doubtlessly in some cases scored higher in the exams)—I treated these utterances as rhetorical strategies, not truth claims. Reinterpreting their speech acts in this way preserved my sense of the qualitative gap between religious and scientific knowledge. But for this very reason, it also made it hard for me to hear what they were trying to say.

In hindsight, I am struck by how far I went to protect a notion of self that was obviously highly questionable. While my friends certainly hoped that I would come to understand Buddhism in the way that they did, I do not think that many of those who cited Buddhism’s scientific credentials did so primarily to dignify themselves or legitimize “their” “religion” in my (privileged, Western) eyes, as some colleagues have suggested. Rather, they were trying to convey what made Buddhism credible to them and how they understood it. They were using the vocabulary to which they were accustomed when discussing physical reality, employing what they assumed were common principles and values that I would also understand. We were not, for the most part, engaged in a competitive evaluation of cultural property where modernity, reason and science were my cultural property and theirs was local culture and a higher religious truth. Their point was that Buddhism—when properly understood—was not distinct from or opposed to modernity or reason; in fact, it *was* modern reason, in an especially effective and valuable form!

In the end I learned that to call something “pure” Buddhism was specifically to distinguish it from other Buddhisms that the speaker considered to be grounded in faith. *Vipassana* meditation was scientific precisely because it did not base its truth claims on tradition or divine authority. Knowledge thus acquired was material, empirical, and even falsifiable—either you yourself experienced what the Buddha said was the case when you sat down to meditate or you did not. Ironically, then, in calling Buddhist meditation “scientific,” my friends were actually drawing on the very same Enlightenment-based

presumptions that prevented me from hearing what they were trying to say! The difference was that they never questioned their ability to distinguish religion from science, and hence were able to creatively mix categories to make a point that they hoped would help me to understand and navigate the world that we shared in a more insightful and, as a result, happier, way. They urged me to meditate because they assumed it would benefit me in the same ways that it benefitted them, and they praised Buddhism to me in the terms in which they understood it.

Since the Enlightenment, an enormous amount of energy has gone into working out the boundaries of religion, philosophy, and in particular, science. But even though we are used to thinking of such terms as indexing different types of knowledge, we need to recognize that they are above all means of disciplining our ways of understanding and acting in accord with modern ideologies and rationalities, with all the biases those bring. Thus, when I expose my own interpretative errors and trace them to errors that are fundamental to the academic disciplines in which I was trained, I am not talking about a mere intellectual misunderstanding; I am also pointing to something about the way knowledge itself comes to be disciplined, in accord with deeply embedded ideas about human difference, and about the relation between peoples, logics, and places. These ideas have a very long political history, and a profoundly ambivalent one, since they partake both of struggles for democratic freedoms, and in justifying racism, colonialism, and every kind of imperialist violence.

Toward a radical coequality

All of this calls for a radical insistence on the coequality between scholars and their human subjects of study—as well as an openness to new perspectives on religion (cf. Fabian, 1983). The great challenge for ethnographers working with people who grew up in cultures (including religious cultures) that are different from their own is how to recognize, and to think from, our common conditions.¹⁹ Another way to put this would be to say: to truly universalize means to abandon our sense of ourselves as the only truly universal thinkers, and of Nepali Buddhists (for instance) as trapped in some form of local particularity. We have to learn to see our own tradition of thought as just that, a tradition, one among many traditions that have unfolded and expanded in historical time. To do so means to both “provincialize” post-Enlightenment thought (Chakrabarty, 2000), in the sense of seeing it as one among many, but also, however paradoxical it may seem, to genuinely universalize it through that very act of dislocation, to see it as a mode of thought that has always existed on a world stage and to which people everywhere contribute.

Certainly, this is clear of my interlocutors in Nepal. They too had to struggle with the biases, values, and teleologies embedded in post-Enlightenment categories. This is why the modernized method of *vipassana* meditation they practiced did not appear as a religion to them, and also why that mattered. It is how Bhikkhu Suganda and others could propose a classic functionalist explanation

for the rise of reformed Theravada Buddhism: older forms of Newar Buddhism, they would explain, had come to function largely to support a traditional, hierarchical social structure—one that was increasingly unable to hold together under the assault of globalized modernity. In other words, they were not only thinking *about* the same problems as anthropologists, they were thinking about them *through* many of the same categories and assumptions—necessarily so, since those categories and assumptions are folded into the very institutional structures that pose those problems to begin with. Accepting others as coequals also means recognizing that others—who, after all, can bring shared categories into relation with other intellectual resources and traditions—are capable of just the sort of creative insight that we have come to tacitly relegate to ourselves. Ultimately, what Nepal’s Theravada turn offers is a powerfully different understanding of these categories, one that unsettles and destabilizes foundational scholarly assumptions in a way that can tell us something about the conditions which produced, and continue to produce, those categories in the first place.

Neither is this just an intellectual project. It is simultaneously intellectual, and practical. At a moment when so many people—scholars and practitioners alike—understand the increasing public assertion of religious identities as a turning away from modernity, the Buddhists with whom I worked themselves see it as a way of analyzing modernity, constructing modernity, and above all, *as a way to live modernity well*. James Laidlaw has argued that the essence of ethics is critical reflexivity: “the claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is not an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative” (Laidlaw, 2014: 3).²⁰ Indeed, Buddhists’ engagement with what Buddhism is and its practical application is a sign of their reflexive engagement with contemporary²¹ life in all of its dynamism and heterogeneity.

The Theravada turn and Buddhist modernism

This book is an ethnographic study of Buddhist life in Nepal as expressed in what I call the “Theravada turn”—a transformation of Newar Buddhism, or, more specifically, many Newars’ (and, increasingly, other ethnic Nepalis’) Buddhist sensibilities and subjectivities that began in the early twentieth century and which continue to evolve and attract adherents today. I call it a *Theravada* turn because it involves a return to the Pali Canon as a source of teachings and norms, and because Theravada monks and nuns were the ones initially responsible for introducing the reformist critiques and remain leaders of the movement. At the same time, I call it a Theravada *turn* because most of the lay Buddhist practitioners discussed in this book do not empathize exclusively with a sectarian Theravada identity.²² Individuals’ relationships to formal Theravada institutions tend to vary over time and Theravada reformers are part of an active and eclectic Newar Buddhist field of which most practitioners remain a part, even as they seek to purify it. Thus, while it is not insignificant that the movement arose from, and continues to reflect Theravada authority, this case may also be thought of as a socially and historically situated example of what Buddhist Studies scholars