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Philosophical Understandings of the World, Human Life, and Society in Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhism: A Comparative Study in the Nepalese Context

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Abstract

This paper explores the philosophical foundations of Buddhist ontology and karma in relation to social structure and transformation, with a focus on Theravada and Vajrayana traditions in Nepal. Drawing on Pali canonical sources—especially the *Majjhima Nikaya* and *Cuḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta*—the study examines how Theravada Buddhism presents karma as a moral law conditioning rebirth and social status, such as the notion that immoral deeds may lead to rebirth as a *chandala* (outcaste). Ontologically, Theravada asserts that existence is a causal process devoid of a permanent self, and liberation is achieved through ethical conduct, meditative discipline, and insight into the impermanence and non-self of phenomena. In contrast, Vajrayana Buddhism, as developed in Nepal's Newar Buddhist tradition, elaborates a non-dual ontology grounded in *Śunyata* (emptiness) and *tathagatagarbha* (Buddha-nature), where karma is not only a moral force but also a transmutable energy accessible through tantric ritual and meditative techniques. By relating these philosophical frameworks to Nepali society, the article reveals how both traditions—Theravada through ethical reform and Vajrayana through ritual and symbolic integration—offer distinct but complementary approaches to individual liberation and societal transformation. The synthesis of these two strands in the Nepali context illustrates the dynamic interplay of doctrinal diversity, social practice, and philosophical depth within contemporary Buddhist thought.

Key words: Buddhism, Theraveda, Vajrayana, reality, caste and class

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Introduction

The question of how Buddhism conceptualizes the world (loka), human life (manussajivita), and society (samaja) lies at the heart of its philosophical inquiry. In the Nepalese context, both Theravada and Vajrayana traditions have coexisted across different

historical periods, offering diverse ontological and ethical frameworks. Theravada Buddhism, preserved in the Pali Canon, emphasizes renunciation, ethical conduct, and meditative insight grounded in the principles of impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anatta), as Gombrich (2009) highlights, thereby presenting a path oriented toward personal liberation and mindful ethical living, which shapes both individual and communal life. By contrast, Vajrayana Buddhism, rooted in tantric scriptures such as the Hevajra Tantra and the Guhyasamāja Tantra, affirms the possibility of spiritual transformation through symbolic ritual, deity visualization, and the realization of emptiness (sunyata) and non-duality, a perspective examined by Snellgrove (1987) that emphasizes the transformative potential of ordinary experience within spiritual practice.

Texts like the Balapaṇḍita Sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya (MN 129) suggest that karmic actions determine rebirth into various social categories, such as Chaṇḍala (outcaste) or Brahmaṇa (higher caste), framing caste not as an intrinsic attribute but as a moral outcome, an interpretation supported by Ñaṇamoli and Bodhi (1995). In Vajrayana, tantric texts reconceptualize worldly life as a field of sacred transformation, where even desire, death, and social systems serve as vehicles for liberation, as Davidson (2002) observes, illustrating a dynamic relationship between ritual practice and social order.

Extensive scholarship has explored these traditions from multiple perspectives. Gellner (1992, 2001) and Lewis (1984, 2015) focused on Newar Vajrayana Buddhism, analyzing its ritual structures, caste formations, and communal identity, while Bechert (1973) and Gombrich (2009) examined Theravada textual foundations and philosophical frameworks, mainly in South and Southeast Asia. In Nepal, the Theravada revival of the early twentieth century has been studied for its reformist ethos and its engagement with Hindu orthodoxy, as Jones (1976) notes, reflecting the socio-religious negotiations of the time. Historical studies by Tucci (1956) and Slusser (1982) document Nepal's Buddhist heritage through inscriptions, art, and architecture, and Vaṃsavalis, as Petech (1958) shows, reveal dynastic ideologies, religious patronage, and historiographical perspectives that also encode ethical and cosmological frameworks.

Despite this substantial scholarship, comparative studies analyzing philosophical conceptions of the world, human life, and society across Theravada and Vajrayana traditions remain limited, particularly in the Nepalese historical context using primary sources such as Pali texts, tantric scriptures, inscriptions, and Vaṃsavalis. Inscriptions from the Licchavi (c. 400–750 CE) and Malla (c. 1200–1768 CE) periods demonstrate the coexistence, patronage, and institutional articulation of both traditions, as Slusser (1982) and Regmi (1965) have shown, while Vaṃsavalis, though often stylized and mythologized, articulate Buddhist

cosmologies reflecting moral and political order grounded in karmic and royal legitimacy, according to Petech (1958). This study therefore aims to investigate and compare how Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions conceptualize the world, human life, and society, emphasizing doctrinal foundations alongside their articulation in historical and social contexts.

Problem Statement

Despite the wealth of scholarship on Nepalese Buddhism, comparative studies that systematically analyze how Theravada and Vajrayana traditions conceptualize the world, human life, and society are limited. Most existing studies focus either on ritual, historical, or textual aspects in isolation, without integrating metaphysical doctrines with social and historical contexts. While Theravada texts emphasize moral causality and ethical conduct, and Vajrayana texts foreground ritual transformation and spiritual hierarchies, few studies have examined these philosophical conceptions side by side, especially in relation to Nepal's inscriptions, chronicles, and socio-political history. This creates a gap in understanding how Buddhist metaphysics, ethics, and social organization intersect and manifest in historical and textual sources.

Research Questions

The study addresses three core research questions: What are the principal philosophical views on the nature of the world, human life, and society in Theravada and Vajrayana texts? In what ways are these views expressed or legitimized in historical inscriptions and Vaṃsavalis? How do textual and historical sources illustrate the coexistence and differentiation of these traditions across Nepalese history? By linking metaphysical doctrines with social and historical contexts, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Nepal's religious-philosophical heritage.

Purpose and Justification

The purpose of this study is to investigate and compare the doctrinal foundations of Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhism regarding the world, human life, and society, and to contextualize these conceptions historically within Nepal. By integrating textual analysis with epigraphic and Vaṃsavali evidence, the research illuminates how metaphysical doctrines were embedded in social hierarchies, ritual structures, and historical narratives. The study is justified on the grounds that it addresses a critical gap in Buddhist studies: linking metaphysical and ethical doctrines with social and historical realities in Nepal. This approach contributes to a deeper understanding of Nepal's religious-philosophical heritage and clarifies the interplay between doctrine, ritual, and societal order in shaping historical Buddhist communities.

Materials and Methodology

This study employs a textual-philosophical and historical-analytical approach, grounded in the comparative study of Nepalese Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions. Four primary source categories inform the research. First, Pali canonical texts, notably the Majjhima Nikaya, including the Balapaṇḍita Sutta (MN 129), link karmic actions with social outcomes such as rebirth as a Brahmaṇa or Chaṇḍala, thereby encoding moral causality into social stratification, as Ñaṇamoli and Bodhi (1995) observe. These texts illuminate how ethical conduct is integrated into the moral and social order envisioned by Theravada Buddhism, providing insight into the relationship between karma, rebirth, and hierarchical differentiation.

Second, tantric scriptures such as the Hevajra Tantra and Guhyasamāja Tantra reconceptualize worldly life as ritually transformable, offering esoteric models of ethical and cosmological order, as discussed by Snellgrove (1987) and Davidson (2002). These texts foreground a transformative approach in which ritual, visualization, and symbolic action intersect with social and spiritual hierarchies, suggesting that everyday experiences can become vehicles for enlightenment.

Third, epigraphic records from the Licchavi and Malla periods document the doctrinal and institutional coexistence of these traditions and their endorsement by political authority, as Regmi (1965) and Slusser (1982) indicate. These inscriptions provide material evidence of Buddhist patronage, demonstrating how religious and social hierarchies were materially and symbolically reinforced over time. Fourth, Vaṃsavalis—including the Buddhist Vaṃsavali and Gopalraj Vaṃsavali—mythologize dynastic legitimacy and religious cosmology, reflecting Buddhist ethical ideals in the structuring of kingship and caste, as shown by Petech (1958), and offer narratives through which rulers articulated moral and cosmic authority.

The analytical lens is provided by Vaiseṣika philosophy, particularly the Vaiseṣika Sutra of Kaṇada, whose categories—dravya (substance), guṇa (quality), karma (action), sāmānya (generality), viśeṣa (particularity), and samavaya (inherence)—enable systematic comparison of how reality, action, and ethical identity are conceptualized in both traditions, as noted by Matilal (1977) and Chatterjee & Datta (1984). The category of dravya clarifies the basis of human and social existence, whether as impermanent aggregates in Theravada or symbolic manifestations in Vajrayana, while guṇa and karma illuminate how moral, ritual, and social qualities and actions contribute to hierarchical differentiation through karmic causality, linking metaphysical principles with observable social structures.

Doctrinal tensions also emerge when these traditions are analyzed through Vaiseṣika principles. For example, Theravada's denial of inherent self (anatta) appears to conflict with

the ethical justification of hierarchical rebirth, whereas Vajrayana's notion of inherent buddha-nature coexists with elaborate ritual hierarchies and empowerment structures. Viewed through this lens, Buddhist philosophical frameworks—though not explicitly caste-based—tend to legitimize social hierarchies through metaphysical and moral reasoning. In Theravada, social hierarchy is morally constructed via karma, while in Vajrayana, ritual initiations, tantric lineages, and symbolic distinctions produce hierarchies grounded in spiritual authority. These structures are encoded in the texts and reinforced historically through inscriptions and Vaṃsavalis, where rulers and elites are portrayed as morally and cosmically superior.

By integrating textual exegesis, historical-contextual analysis, and classical Indian metaphysical reasoning, this study reveals how Theravada and Vajrayana traditions both philosophically construct and historically sustain models of social differentiation in Nepal. The approach provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between doctrine, ritual, and societal order, showing how metaphysical and ethical principles were embedded in the social and political fabric of historical Nepal.

Discussion

Buddhist philosophy offers a nuanced view of ontology and karma, shaping both ethical conduct and social structures. The Theravada PaliCanon explains social inequalities through karma, emphasizing ethical behavior over birth. In contrast, Vajrayana Buddhism, particularly in NewarVajrayana of the Kathmandu Valley, integrates Mahayana philosophy**,** tantric ritual, and local cultureto promote a transformative vision of emptinessanduniversal liberation **(**Gellner, 1992). This tradition remains the only surviving pre-modern urban Buddhist system in South Asia, with a rich ritual and philosophical heritage.

Buddhist Ontology and Karma in the Pali Texts

Buddhist ontology—*bhava* (being) and the nature of existence—rests upon the concepts of impermanence (anicca)**,** non-self (anatta)**,** and suffering (dukkha)**.** These principles guide the understanding of both the individual and the collective. Karma (*kamma* in Pali), as intentional action, creates the causal links that shape not just personal destiny but also social system and conditions. In this framework, society is not merely a collection of individuals but a dynamic manifestation of collective kamma.

The *Anattalakkhaṇa*Sutta (SN 22.59) declares that form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness (*pañcakkhandha*) are not self. This view implies that neither the individuals nor the societal institutions possess fixed essences. Social roles, status, or identity areconventional designations (*pannatti*) without ultimate reality (*paramattha*). This text particularly says, "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself." (SN 22.59). Thus, from

an ontological standpoint, society is a compound of conditions, subject to constant arising and cessation (*uppada* and *vaya*), not a permanent entity.

The principle of paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination), explained in texts like the *Mahanidana Sutta* (DN 15), asserts that everything arises in dependence upon conditions, which extends to social phenomena. For instance, conflict emerges from craving and clinging, themselves conditioned by ignorance (avijja), and the sutta illustrates this interdependence: "With ignorance as condition, volitional formations arise; with volitional formations, consciousness…" (DN 15). This interconnectedness highlights that social problems are karmically conditioned rather than random or divinely ordained. In Buddhist philosophy, karma functions as the determining factor in human experience, yet it is understood not as fate but as intentional action (cetana), as explained in the *Anguttara Nikaya* (6.63)*,* which states that "It is volition, monks, that I call karma; for having willed, one acts by body, speech, and mind".

Though karma is individual, collective experiences—like being born in a particular country or community—can be the result of shared karmic patterns (*sammutikamma*). The *CakkavattiSihanadaSutta* (DN 26) and *AggannaSutta* (DN 27) illustrate how moral degeneration leads to social decline and suffering. The *CakkavattiSihanadaSutta* outlines a karmic theory of social justice: when rulers do not uphold dhamma, moral decay follows, leading to poverty, theft, and violence. This decline is not punished by a god, but unfolds naturally via themoral law of cause and effect**.**The *CakkavattiSihanadaSutta*states"When the kings do not care for the poor, then poverty spreads, and with poverty come stealing, with stealing comes violence…" (DN 26). This reinforces the view that good governance and ethical conduct are karmic necessities for a healthy society.

The AggannaSutta (DN 27) offers a powerful doctrinal counter to Vaishnava theories of varna, particularly the belief that caste is divinely ordained. Rather than accepting caste as immutable or sacred, the Buddha presents a historical and functionalist explanation of social stratification. According to this sutta, human society originated through gradual social differentiation, not divine will, and the four varnas emerged out of functional necessity rather than metaphysical superiority. Thus, the Buddha's position is not merely sociological but profoundly ethical, rejecting the notion that spiritual worth or moral legitimacy can be inherited through birth.

This radical egalitarianism is further reinforced in the VasalaSutta (SN 1.7), where the Buddha asserts: "Not by birth is one a Brahmin, not by birth is one an outcaste; by deeds is one a Brahmin, by deeds is one an outcaste." This direct refutation of caste-based essentialism strikes at the heart of Brahmanical orthodoxy and introduces a karmic basis for moral evaluation—it is action (karma), not heredity, that determines ethical and spiritual value

(Bodhi, 2000). In this light, the Buddha not only critiques caste as a social institution but offers an alternative moral epistemology, where ethical conduct, not lineage, defines human worth.

The CuḷakammavibhangaSutta (MN 135) strengthens this argument by providing detailed explanations of how karmic causality influences social outcomes, including birth in different castes. The sutta explicitly links unethical actions in past lives—such as killing, theft, or deceit—with rebirth in lower castes such as the chandala, a group regarded as ritually impure in Brahmanical ideology.

Importantly, this should not be misunderstood as moral justification of caste, but rather a didactic device. The Buddha uses the prevailing categories of his time to explain how moral choices—not bloodline—lead to one's social situation. As Gombrich (2009) notes, the Buddha appropriated existing terminology to subvert and reframe it within a karmic framework. The emphasis is not on legitimizing caste, but on asserting the universal potential for liberation (nibbana) through ethical cultivation (sila), meditation (samadhi), and wisdom (panna), regardless of one's birth.

Critically, these suttas also resist any deterministic interpretation of karma. Unlike fatalistic views that tie people forever to the results of past actions, Buddhist doctrine emphasizes the transformative power of present ethical conduct. Even a person born into a despised caste like the chandala can attain arahantship if they follow the path of virtue and wisdom (Harvey, 2013). This is a significant departure from Vaishnavite hierarchy, where liberation (moksha) was often seen as inaccessible to lower castes or women.

Therefore, the Buddha's karmic model serves as both a critique and a reformulation: while it accepts that moral consequences manifest in this and future lives, it rejects essentialist and birth-based inequalities. This approach reflects a moral cosmology where agency, responsibility, and ethical discipline—rather than social birth—become the basis for spiritual advancement.

Nepali Vajrayana

Central to Vajrayana philosophy is the concept of śunyata(emptiness), inherited from Madhyamaka thought. All phenomena are seen as empty of inherent existence, but in Vajrayana, this emptiness is not merely a negation—it is dynamically unified with clarity and awareness, the luminous mind (prabhasvaracitta). The Hevajra Tantra says, "All dharmas are devoid of own-being (svabhāva); they are like illusions or magical creations." (Snellgrove, 1959). In the Newar Buddhist tradition, this philosophy is ritually enacted through deity yoga, where the practitioner visualizes themselves as a deity (devata) to recognize the non-duality of form and emptiness (Gellner, 1992).Moreover, the idea of tathagatagarbha (Buddha-nature) holds that all beings have the inherent potential for Buddhahood. In the Vajrayana rituals such

as the abhisheka (initiation) and caryadance, this is not just a metaphysical idea but a lived experience enacted through sacred performance as Lewis (2000) demonstrates. These practices transform metaphysical ideas into lived experience, allowing Vajrayana followers not only to understand but to realize enlightenment through ritual, visualization, and embodiment.

Vajrayana in Nepal emphasizes the tantric path, which employs mantra, mudra, mandala, visualization, and initiation (abhiseka) as skillful means (upaya) that transform ordinary perception into enlightened awareness according to Gray (2007). The Cakrasaṃvara Tantra teaches that through the yoga of mantra and deity, one realizes the body as the mandala of the Buddha, illustrating the transformative potential described by Gray (2007). In Newar Buddhism, the most prominent deity is Cakrasaṃvara, whose mandala forms the centerpiece of public rituals such as the Vajrayogini festivals and saptavsra mandala pujas conducted in courtyard shrines (bahas), which generate both communal merit and cosmic harmony as observed by Gellner (1992). Templeman (2002) explains that vajrayana also preserves the ancient tradition of caryāiṭi, esoteric dance-songs composed by tantric masters like Saraha and Luipa that are performed during rituals to embody non-dual wisdom and compassion in the way.

One of the most distinctive features of Vajrayana is its non-dual view of reality, where saṃsara (cyclic existence) and nirvaṇa (liberation) are understood as not two separate realities, but as different perceptions of the same truth, a concept explained by Tuladhar-Douglas (2005) in the Cittavisuddhiprakaraṇa, which states that when the mind is purified, saṃsara itself is nirvaṇa. This understanding is ritually expressed through transgressive symbolism, where elements normally considered impure—such as wrathful deities, cremation grounds, and sexual union—are reinterpreted as expressions of the sacred nature of reality, as Davidson (2002) demonstrates, when viewed through enlightened awareness.

Newar Vajrayana is distinct in that it integrates monastic and lay practices into a hereditary system, with the Vajracaryas, a caste of tantric priests, performing rituals, initiations, and maintaining the transmission of sacred knowledge, as Gellner (1992) observes. While the bhikṣu monasticism of other Theravada or Tibetan traditions is largely absent, the householder tradition of Vajrācaryas preserves tantric continuity through family lineages, and ritual knowledge is passed from father to son, with major life-cycle rituals—from birth to death—conducted through Vajrayana rites, which Lewis (2000) notes allowed Newar Vajrayana to survive the rise of the Vaishnava dharmasutra tradition in the Kathmandu Valley during the Malla period, making Nepal one of the last living centers of Vajrayana Buddhism.

The feminine principle plays a vital role in Nepali Vajrayana. Goddesses such as Vajrayogini, Tara and Prajnaparamita symbolize wisdom (prajna), which unites with method

(upaya) in tantric union to generate enlightenment. In rituals and iconography, ḍakinisare revered not only as protectors and consorts but also as embodiments of gnosis. Vajrayoginitemples in Sankhu, Pharping, and Patan are important centers of pilgrimage and tantric practice, especially among women practitioners and yogic adepts (Simmer-Brown, 2001). Scholars increasingly recognize the importance of this tradition for understanding classicaltantra in its living form (Davidson, 2002; Gellner, 1992). Its integration of society, ritual, and philosophy offers valuable insights into how Buddhist thought manifests in lived community.

Vajrayana Buddhism that is far from being esoteric in isolation, it is embedded in everyday life and communal rituals, maintaining a tradition where enlightenment is possible within society, body, and time. Through this lens, Nepal becomes not just a geographic space but also a living mandala of tantric wisdom.In Nepal, Theravada and Vajrayana coexist, each shaping the cultural, ritual, and philosophical landscape in distinct ways. Together, they offer two paths of transformation—one through ethical renunciation and gradual purification, the other through esoteric engagement and rapid realization. Both contribute to a holistic Buddhist vision of society, where liberation is not isolated from social context but deeply entwined with how humans live, relate, and construct meaning. Their coexistence in Nepal demonstrates the plurality and adaptability of Buddhist thought, capable of addressing both the individual's inner liberation and the communal quest for harmony and justice.

Buddhist influences in history

Buddhism, though often receiving less formal state patronage than Vaishnavite Hinduism, has played a foundational role in shaping the cultural, architectural, and spiritual identity of the Kathmandu Valley, and the region served as a critical space of religious coexistence and synthesis where Buddhist and Hindu traditions flourished in parallel, as epigraphic records and historical chronicles (vaṃśāvalīs) by Regmi (1983) and Vajracharya (1973) show the persistent presence of Buddhist institutions, rituals, and iconography within a broader context of Hindu statecraft.

During the Licchavi period (ca. 1st–8th century CE), the earliest available inscriptions in Nepal, often composed in Sanskrit and Gupta Brahmi script, provide critical evidence of religious plurality, and while royal patronage favored Vaishnavism and Shaivism, inscriptions also record land donations to Buddhist monastic institutions (vihāras) and references to Buddhist clergy, as shown in the inscription of King Mānadeva I (c. 464 CE) at Changu Narayan, which, although primarily Brahmanical in nature, situates Buddhist elements within a shared religious framework according to Regmi (1983), and the Thapathali inscription of Amshuvarman (c. 605 CE) further attests to this pluralism, as documented by Vajracharya

(1973). by recording endowments to both Brahmins and Buddhist monasteries, reflecting a pragmatic and inclusive approach to religious governance.

King Narendra Deva (reigned c. 643–679 CE), one of the most illustrious rulers of the late Licchavi period, is renowned for his substantial contributions to the promotion and revival of Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley. Historical chronicles and inscriptions suggest that his reign marked a period of enhanced Buddhist influence, particularly under the auspices of Mahāyāna and early Vajrayāna traditions (Regmi, 1983; Slusser, 1982). According to Tibetan sources, notably the *Deb thersngonpo* (Blue Annals), Narendra Deva maintained strong religious and political ties with Tibet, facilitated through the intermediary Śāntarakṣita and the Nepalese Buddhist monk Śāntarakṣita's disciples (Tucci, 1956). These connections were crucial in transmitting esoteric Buddhist practices from India to Tibet via Nepal, establishing Nepal as a significant conduit in the diffusion of Vajrayāna Buddhism.

Narendra Deva's alliance with the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo further enhanced the Kathmandu Valley's stature as a center for Buddhist learning and pilgrimage. This political alliance, which included military collaboration to reinstate Narendra Deva to the throne with Tibetan support, resulted in intensified cultural and religious exchange between the two regions (Petech, 1958). The establishment and restoration of vihāras during his reign, as evidenced by inscriptions and later chronicles, underscores his active patronage of Buddhist institutions (Vajracharya, 1973). Moreover, some traditions attribute the renovation of the great stupa of Boudhanath to this period, either by Narendra Deva himself or under his patronage, indicating royal engagement with major Buddhist monuments (Bernier, 1970). His reign illustrates how Buddhist rulers in the Kathmandu Valley utilized religion both as a diplomatic tool and a means of reinforcing their moral legitimacy.

Mahayana influences became increasingly evident in art and iconography from this period. Licchavi-era sculptures depicting Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara suggest Mahayana Buddhist devotionalismwas embedded in elite and popular religious practices (Slusser, 1982). Stupas such as Swayambhunath and Boudhanath trace their foundations to the Licchavi period. Although these monuments were later expanded, their original structures reflect the strength of Buddhist architectural patronage (Bernier, 1970). Inscriptions carved into stone sculptures, often bearing the names of lay donors, indicate that both elites and commoners participated in Buddhist merit-making activities.

The Malla period (ca. 1200–1769 CE) marked a significant transformation in Nepalese Buddhism. With the increasing influence of Vajrayāna and esoteric tantric practices, Buddhism became more localized, syncretic, and ritually elaborate. The Kathmandu Valley, particularly among the Newar communities, witnessed the development of a unique tradition—Newar

Buddhism—that combined Mahayana and Vajrayana doctrines with caste-based social structure and richly symbolic ritual systems.

Malla-era vaṃśāvalīs frequently document royal patronage to both Hindu and Buddhist shrines. King YakshaMalla (r. 1428–1482) is credited with restoring the stupa at Swayambhunath and initiating other Buddhist projects (Hasrat, 1970). The Gopālarājavaṃśāvalī describes Malla kings partaking in the SamyakMahādāna, a major Newar Buddhist festival venerating Dīpaṅkara Buddha, thus affirming the continued significance of Buddhist rituals in the royal domain (Petech, 1984). In this period, the roles of Vajrācāryas and Śākyas became central to religious life, performing rituals such as the Pañcadāna, Vajrasattvapūjās, and elaborate Buddhist art flourished under Malla rule, as evidenced in paubhā paintings, bronze sculpture, and stone carvings. The increased representation of deities such as Tārā, Vajrayoginī, and other tantric figures reflected the integration of Vajrayāna visual culture into the religious and artistic milieu. Temples like HiranyavarṇaMahāvihāra (Golden Temple) in Patan exemplify the synthesis of Buddhist iconography and Newarcraftsmanship. Slusser (1982) mentions that some Malla rulers, such as Siddhi Narsingh Malla of Patan, even composed hymns that praise both Hindu and Buddhist deities, reflecting religious syncretism at the highest level of governance.

Religious syncretism was the norm throughout these historical epochs. Shared sacred spaces, joint festivals, and overlapping ritual practices demonstrate a ritual inclusivity and pragmatic pluralism. Buddhist deities like Avalokiteshvarawere often worshipped alongside Hindu gods in communal events, signifying the deeply interwoven nature of Nepalese religious identity. The Kathmandu Valley's pluralistic ethos allowed Buddhist traditions—notably Mahayana and Vajrayana—to thrive despite shifting political tides and limited formal patronage.

Conclusion

The philosophical discourses of Theravāda and Vajrayāna Buddhism in Nepal demonstrate intricate ontological, ethical, and social frameworks that have shaped religious identity, social organization, and ritual life over centuries. Theravāda presents a worldview rooted in impermanence, suffering, and not-self, emphasizing individual moral cultivation through ethical conduct and karmic responsibility. This framework links personal actions to social outcomes, where virtuous conduct fosters higher social and spiritual status, while unethical behavior may result in lower rebirths.

In contrast, Vajrayana integrates Mahayana principles of emptiness and compassion with esoteric rituals and symbolic practices, allowing practitioners to transform ordinary

experiences and social distinctions into opportunities for spiritual awakening. The Newar Buddhist tradition in Nepal exemplifies this synthesis by combining tantric practice with structured lay and caste-based ritual systems, creating a living framework where spiritual cultivation and social life are closely intertwined.

By examining Buddhist thought through the lens of classical Indian philosophical categories such as substance, quality, and action, it becomes evident that both traditions articulate social hierarchies while upholding principles of ethical and spiritual egalitarianism. Karmic reasoning and ritual authority provide mechanisms for mediating tensions between moral equality and social differentiation, demonstrating how metaphysical concepts are enacted in lived social and religious contexts. Historical inscriptions and chronicles from Nepal further reveal a landscape of religious coexistence and syncretism, where Buddhist and Hindu institutions shared patronage, rituals, and sacred spaces. The persistence of these traditions over time reflects both adaptability and resilience, illustrating how philosophical doctrines, ritual practice, and socio-political structures mutually reinforce one another.

Overall, the coexistence of Theravāda and Vajrayāna Buddhism in Nepal highlights a pluralistic yet structured spiritual environment. By linking textual philosophy with historical materiality and socio-religious practice, this study illuminates the ways in which Buddhist thought has historically shaped, and been shaped by, the broader social and cultural fabric of Nepal.

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