How Bisvaṃtara Got His Dharma Body: Story, Ritual, and the Domestic in the Composition of a Newar Jātaka

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In memoriam Siegfried Lienhard (1924–2011)

INTRODUCTION

The tale of the generous prince who renounces his right to the throne, his children, and, eventually, his wife, and who is finally rewarded for his generosity by receiving back all of the above in a triumphant homecoming, is one of the most popular stories of Buddhism and certainly the most widely known shared tale in Buddhist South and Southeast Asia. Recorded in Pāli, in the South and Southeast Asian vernaculars, and transmitted through texts, performances, and visual representations, the story has become an important part of those societies in the region that support a living Buddhist heritage. The prince is known as Vessantara in Pāli and Sinhala, Vessantar in Khmer, Wethandaya in Burmese, and Wetsandon in Thai versions. The story, which originated in South Asia, is also found in Sanskrit Buddhist literature and it has made its way into Central and East Asian Buddhist literatures as well.

The plot is as follows. In his last birth as a human being before becoming the Buddha, the bodhisattva is born to a royal couple and from early on reveals his propensity towards practicing the virtue or perfection of generosity (Pā. *dāna pāramī* or Pā. and Skt. *pāramitā*). This becomes a major political issue once he gives away his father's state elephant to the king of the neighboring realm. His acts of generosity are on such a scale that the ministers convince the king to have his son banished. The prince leaves the kingdom together with his wife, his daughter, and his son on a horse-drawn chariot. But he gives away first the horses and then the chariot to people they encounter on the way. Continuing on foot, they make it into the wilderness where the prince spends his time in meditation. He is approached by a wicked Brahman to whom the prince hands over his two children. They are led away pleading and crying. Intent on receiving compensation, the Brahman brings them back to their grandfather. When the prince's wife discovers what her husband has done she is devastated. But she too is given away by the generous prince and, being the good wife that she is, acquiesces without complaint. However, this time the recipient is the king of the gods, who had

I would like to thank Steven Collins for having been the first to encourage me to work on the story of the generous prince and for his invaluable advice in my endeavors. I am equally grateful to Stephanie Jamison who read my draft with such care, intellectual acumen, literary competence, and, particularly, so much good will that I feel it could not have been placed in better hands. Further thanks go to Buddharatna Bajracharya, Dipak Bajracharya, Gautam Muni Bajracharya, Max Deeg, Todd Lewis, Lee Schlesinger, Alexander von Rospatt, and Stephen Teiser, to the anonymous reviewers for *JAOS*, to my parents, Christl and Christian Emmrich, who helped me get hold of a manuscript, and to the four Lalitpurbāsī women who shared with me a vow and their views about storytelling and marriage and whose names I have promised to keep to myself. To all these people this piece owes most of what it is worth. Finally, I would like to thank Srilata Raman for constant advice, crucial comments, and an ongoing conversation.

made his demand disguised as an old man. The story now turns towards its happy resolution as the god reveals himself to the prince and returns him his wife. Meanwhile the people and the king, regretting having sent the prince into exile, call him back to the capital where the prince, joined by his wife, is welcomed as the new ruler.[1]

There is only one tradition among the living Buddhist ones that is in disagreement with the others about how the story ends. This tradition, in which the prince is called Bisvaṃtara or, as in the Sanskrit version, Viśvaṃtara or Viśvantara, is found in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley and has been handed on by Buddhists of an ethnic group called the Newars. According to the Newars, the prince, having divested himself of crown, offspring, and consort, does not take back what he has given away and remains in the wilderness, meditating. His father, rather than taking him home, joins him there, and it is Bisvaṃtara's little son who ends up taking over the reins of the kingdom.

This article is, at least in part, an investigation of this deviant ending. It will show that this peculiarity is not one the Newars came up with themselves, but one handed on to them through other, North Indian, transmission lines. Thus the article is partly a contribution towards removing even further that aura of uniqueness and singularity that has surrounded Newar Buddhism, which has been notorious for its "living goddesses," its "married monks," and its supposed flirtations with Hinduism. However, the story's ending is only one example, admittedly the most dramatic, of how the Newar telling differs from the more "mainstream" versions so well known in the Theravāda world. Some of these differences are indeed articulated in a "very Newar" language with references to institutions, deities and images, names and places that present the story as it emerges from the Kathmandu Valley culture. This in itself is nothing surprising, as religious stories throughout the world are almost inevitably refashioned to fit the audience's world. Where the Newar story is different from, say, the versions that have found their home in Southeast Asia is that the plot of the Newar version is intricately interwoven with the fabric of the ritual circumstances under which it is told. The article will show that the Newar text is not only the story of the generous prince but also an encouragement to perform the Eighth-Day Vow, the event during which the story of the generous prince is regularly told. This entanglement of literature and ritual in text and context, and in this specific form, appears to be quite different from the situation in Southeast Asia. What the article also will argue, by referring to similar examples of hagiographical text and performative context, is that such an entanglement is nothing out of the ordinary in South Asia, but a very specific form in which literature and ritual are made to relate to each other.

In a wider sense this article is a reflection on what in the study of Newar Buddhism has been called "domestication," i.e., "the dialectical historical process by which a religious tradition is adapted to a region or ethnic group's socioeconomic and cultural life" (Todd T. Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal*, 3–4). The "domestic" here is that which makes life in the Kathmandu Valley unique and represents the, so to speak, "grassroots level" forces behind that adaptation: the family and household. In the case of the Newars this term has helped to reveal the positions Kathmandu Valley Buddhists have taken vis-à-vis issues sensitive to Buddhism such as individuality and community, family and work. The groundbreaking contributions by Todd Lewis, particularly on the connection between narrative and ritual among Buddhist Newars, have shown how useful this term can be for understanding the processes that drive the emergence, persistence, and sometimes crisis of certain Newar

1. The most elaborate Pāli version is found at Jā VI 479–569; for its translation see VJ tr. Gombrich and Cone. The Sanskrit version is found at JM Kern 51–67; for the most up-to-date translation of the Sanskrit version see JM tr. Khoroche 58–73.

religious practices. Such work has also allowed for a nuanced comprehension of Buddhist formulations of Newar gender relations, particularly highlighting the key roles women play in Newar (as generally in South Asian) domestic rituals. These practices have to be understood as going far beyond the household in its narrow sense, as they consistently shape what happens in public spaces throughout the Kathmandu Valley.

This study is an attempt at developing the term "domestication" further. It will argue that features that may look unique, such as Bisvaṃtara's not returning home or the story's self-conscious references to the conditions of its telling, are not only examples of how the Newars do things differently. Becoming domestic and being at home in the Kathmandu Valley, in this case writing the story of the generous prince, for the Newars involves also attempting to be part of a larger conversation, a world of ritual and literature that opens the Valley towards the whole of South Asia and beyond. In short, the study will point out that domestication is a two-way process, moving towards both the inside and the outside.

Further, in its elaboration of the "domesticating" trends in Newar Buddhism the study will also pursue another path laid out by Todd Lewis, that of the husband-wife relationship in Newar Buddhist storytelling. Lewis has shown how certain stories, particularly those connected to vows, celebrate the responsibility and agency of the Newar wife in contributing to her husband's religious career and thereby to her own. Rather than being a threat to a man's religious aspirations, as the wife is often depicted in Buddhist monastic literature, the woman as wife is a condition for his salvation, and marriage the way their "interlocking destinies" can be brought to fruition, in a Buddhist sense (Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts*, 42–48). The story of Bisvaṃtara will show that this may not necessarily mean that together "they lived happily ever after" or that joint piety should necessarily translate into a joint and harmonious household. On the contrary, even in a model narrative, jointly pursuing the ideal of the perfection of giving may very well lead to a fractured family, an absent husband, and the wife fending for herself. The domestic in the Newar sense may only be fully understood if we include narratives of its own fragility, a fragility that is not accidental but intrinsic, one that the story itself demonstrates and, as we shall see, prompts its female audience to articulate.

In order to do all this I will focus on the text, and to a certain extent the images, of "The Story of King Bisvaṃtara" (*Bisvaṃtara rājāyāgu kathā*) made accessible by Siegfried Lienhard in his marvelous 1980 publication, *Die Legende vom Prinzen Viśvantara*, based on a painted scroll in the possession of the Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin.[2] The edition includes the photographically reproduced illuminated manuscript, a transliteration, and a translation of the text, as well as an art-historical description of the images, the latter two in German. Though Lienhard deals with some of the issues raised in my study in his masterly introduction and in his insightful notes, the intention of his work is descriptive, not interpretative. I therefore additionally see my reading of these materials as a conversation with, a reflection on, and a commemoration of the œuvre of this extraordinary scholar, to whom Newar Studies owes so much. I will supplement the reading by referring to a second manuscript partially documented by Lienhard in his edition, to songs pertaining to the narrative, to ritual texts preserved in Nepalese archives featuring versions of the story, and to snippets of observations and comments involving practitioners and myself on the occasion of ritual readings of the text.[3]

2. For summary in French with a more art-historical focus see Lienhard, "La légende du prince Viśvantara dans la tradition népalaise."

3. All translations, if not stated otherwise, are my own.

MANUSCRIPTS AND PERFORMANCES

Not counting the manuscripts extant in the Kathmandu Valley archives of Ārya Śūra's *Jātakamāla*, Kṣemendra's *Avadānakalpalatā*, and Somadeva's *Kathāsaritsāgara*, all three of which contain versions of the story, the catalogue of the Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project (NGMPP, since 2002 NGMCP) database features fifteen manuscripts of the tale in Sanskrit and almost double as many, i.e., twenty-nine, in Newar.[4] They bear a variety of titles, such as *Viśvantarakathā* (by far the most common), *-jātaka,* or *-avadāna*, alternatively *Viśvantararājakumārakathā*, *-jātaka*, *-vyākhyāna*, *-avadānakathā*, *-jātakathā*, or *Viśvantaranṛpajātaka*. Two versions in Newar (NGMPP C74/7 and NGMPP E352/28) even bear the Middle Indic form *Vessantarajātaka* as a title. The manuscripts record almost exclusively prose narratives, but there are two exceptions in genre. One is the play *Viśvantaranāṭaka* (NGMPP E1445/20), composed in Newar and recorded in an undated manuscript, representing, apart from the Tibetan version enacting the story of Dri med kun dan,[5] one of the few examples of its dramatization outside of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The other, also undated, is a verse composition in Sanskrit entitled *Vissantaragītā* (NGMPP X 1078/1) from a handbook recording the lyrics to by sung to the *sāraṅgī*, a string instrument found in Nepal and Rajasthan, by members of the marginalized Gandharva or Gāine caste, from which, traditionally, occupational bards are recruited. Interesting about this version is not only the variant of the prince's name found in the title that points at the troubled history of the name's form and etymology,[6] but its form, reminiscent of the heavily versified early Pāli version as well as of individual songs, suggestive of a larger Viśvantara verse cycle in Newar. The oldest dated manuscript in the catalogue, entitled *Viśvantararājakumārajātaka*, hails from 1749/50 (Nepāl Saṃvat, henceforth NS, 870), records a Newar version, and features as the twenty-fifth episode in a 681-folio collection (NGMPP E1456/1) spanning a total of thirty-five birth tales. All other dated versions, apart from one completed in 1833/34 and Lienhard's painted scroll from 1837, fall between the 1860s and the 1920s, marking this as a time in which the interest in this story by sponsors and priests seems to have intensified. It may be no coincidence that this period features an emerging interest in producing vernacular versions of Sanskrit texts in the literary world of the Kathmandu Valley, such as in the poetry of Vasanta Śarmā and, most prominently, the Nepālī version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* by Bhānubhakta (1814–1869), published posthumously in 1885 (Datta, *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature*, vol. 1: 444). One possibly more directly connected development is the increased production of ritual literature for the performance of

4. To designate the language spoken and written by the Newars in this study I use the term "Newar" (New.) instead of the older and previously more common "Newari" (viz. "Newārī"), the indological "Nevārī," or the indigenous "Nepāl Bhāṣā" or "Nevāḥ Bhāy." I hereby follow proposals in two recent monographs on Newar linguistics, Hale and Shrestha (2006) and Genetti (2007).

5. Jacques Bacot, "Drimedkundan, une version Tibétaine dialoguée du Vessantara Jātaka." For its English translation see H. I. Woolf, *Three Tibetan Mysteries: Tchrimekundan, Nasal, Djroazanmo, as Performed in the Tibetan Monasteries*. Cf. also Marion Herbert Duncan, *More Harvest Festival Dramas of Tibet*. It may be worthwhile to confront these two Himalayan versions, as Newar traders resident in Lhasa would have long been familiar with the story both in its Newar and in its Tibetan guise.

6. Léon Feer ("Le prince Sou-ta-na des Memoires de Hiouen-Thsang," 183) observes that the Middle Indic form of Viśvantara would be Vissantara, not Vessantara and points at several instances of shifts from *-i-* to *-e-* in Pāli manuscripts. Cf. the use of *vissantara* in the *Itivuttaka* (It 32), where the Singhalese manuscript has *vessantara* and the Burmese *visantara*, explained by the commentary as someone who "has crossed over" (*taritvā*), i.e., "overcome" the poison (*visa*). For a nomological discussion see Alsdorf ("Bemerkungen zum Vessantara-Jātaka," 272), who endorses Jacobi's suggestions quoted there, and Gombrich (VJ tr. Gombrich and Cone, xxxiii), who criticizes Alsdorf and is in turn followed by Lienhard (*Die Legende*, 16 n. 32).

the Eighth-Day Vow, the *aṣṭamīvrata*. In fact the majority of the thirteen dated manuscripts of the *Aṣṭamīvratamāhātmya*, from a total of about forty listed in the NGMPP catalogue, fall in the same period, i.e., between the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.[7] The *aṣṭamīvratamāhātyma*s themselves, found in Sanskrit and in Newar, generally contain one or more *avadāna*s, such as the *Sudhanarājakumārājanma* (NGMPP X1347/1, dated 1945/46, NS 1066), the *Vīrakuśāvadāna* (NGMPP X1346/1, dated 1876/77, NS 997), or the *Viśvantarāvadāna* (NGMPP X1304/1, comprising thirty folios and undated). Apart from the early massive collection referred to above, the *Aṣṭajanmakathā* (NGMPP X1716/1, undated) contains eight of them, the *Nichagū janmayā bākhaṃ* (NGMPP X1720/1, undated) two. Another genre, of which only relatively recent dated manuscripts[8] are found, the *Vratāvadānamāla*,[9] consists of collections of texts written in Sanskrit.[10] All these works, particularly the *aṣṭamīvratamāhātmya*s, are compilations used and referred to in the performance of a particular ritual, the Eighth-Day Vow (*aṣṭamīvrata*) that involves the narration of birth stories.

The performance of the Eighth-Day Vow,[11] which Newars refer to as *aṣṭamī vrata dhalaṃ danegu* (or simply *dhalaṃ dane*), to be rendered as "to observe" or "to fulfill the dharma of the Eighth-Day Vow" (Gellner, *Monk, Householder*, 221), is a one-day affair, to be carried out on the eighth day (*aṣṭamī*) of the bright lunar fortnight (*śuklapakṣa*).[12] The Eighth-Day Vow, which is explicitly undertaken to generally increase one's merit and only sometimes to work towards the fulfillment of more specific wishes, usually takes place in the temple courtyard and centers around a main event beginning in the morning and ending in the afternoon. The participants, the majority of whom are women, are guided by a chief priest (*mūlācārya*), who is likely to follow a manual called the *Aṣṭamīvratavidhāna*,[13] and by the instructor (*upādhyāya*) in charge, among other things, of eventually telling the story. The group of worshippers, usually presided over by at least one leading couple from the

7. The earliest (NGMPP E1197/6) goes back to 1773/74 (NS 894). I have not checked the manuscript NGMPP D58/5 myself, but the early date 1648/49 (NS 769) given for it on the ID card is indicated by the catalogue as "probably faulty." Another place to look for the story would be the much more rarely occurring manuals simply entitled *Aṣṭamīvrata*, also written both in Sanskrit and in Newar (the only two dated manuscripts, i.e., NGMPP D26/11, dated 1820/21, NS 941, and NGMPP H258/12, dated 1954/55, NS 1075, being both slightly earlier and later than the period in question), some of which count over 200 folios.

8. Of a total of seven mss. catalogued, NGMPP X1648/1 and E1740/13 are both dated 1909/10 (NS 1030).

9. E.g., both NGMPP E1740/13 and A228/9, comprising 130 and 61 folios respectively, feature the *Caityavratānuśaṃsā* and the *Suvarṇavarṇāvadāna.*

10. Texts without extensive narrative parts are the *Uposadhavratavidhi*s, which prescribe the *uposadhavrata*, a ritual almost identical to the *aṣṭamīvrata*, only shorter, to be performed at home on almost any given day and for a very specific purpose, primarily by women who wish to conceive. For a brief sketch see John K. Locke, *Karunamaya*, 203–4. For a look at its textual history see Will Tuladhar-Douglas, *Remaking Buddhism for Medieval Nepal*, 163–99.

11. The liturgical side of the vow, in the variant performed at the monastery Janabāhāḥ, has been most elaborately described by Locke (*Karunamaya*, 188–202, and "The Upoṣadha Vrata"); its place in the larger texture of Newar ritual practice has been elaborated by David Gellner (*Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest*, 221–25); and its location within the larger context of South Asian vows has been pointed out by Todd Lewis (*Popular Buddhist Texts*, 89–94). Tuladhar-Douglas has looked at some of its textual and historical ramifications (*Remaking Buddhism*, 168–71 and 182–99).

12. The most prominent eighth day (*mukhaḥ aṣṭamī*) is the eighth day of the bright fortnight in the month of Kārttik, which falls in October-November (Gellner, *Monk, Householder*, 216). This is usually the day in which an approximately two-year-series of Eighth-Day Observances is begun with one performance each at a total of twenty-five sacred places (p. 224), including twelve well-known bathing places prescribed in the *Svayambhū Purāṇa* (Bernhard Kölver, "Stages in the Evolution of a World-Picture," 147–51).

13. Tuladhar-Douglas tentatively dates this text to the seventeenth century (*Remaking Buddhism*, 164).

sponsoring family, make successive offerings to the Buddha, the dharma, the *saṃgha*, and the *bodhisattva* Amoghapāśa-Lokeśvara, a form of Avalokiteśvara, all four represented by particular *maṇḍala*s painted on the ground or depicted on artifacts brought along and distributed. The women and men observe the Eight Precepts: no killing, no stealing, no improper sexual behavior, no lying, no intoxication, no eating after noon, no participating in entertaining events, and no sleeping on big and high beds. In practice, this also involves bathing in the morning, the men in some cases shaving their heads, not wearing either jewelry or makeup, fasting, i.e., eating only rice pudding, sweets, and fruits, and breaking the fast only once in the afternoon after the main event, spending the following night on a mat on the floor without coming into physical contact with members of the opposite sex. All these observances are to be kept until the morning after. Immediately after worshipping the *maṇḍala* and before the breaking of the fast, the white votive thread (New. *bartakā*, Skt. *vratasūtra*) attached to the main ritual pitcher (*kalaśa*) and later to be cut into pieces and tied around the participants' necks, is run through the worshippers' clasped hands. The women and men sitting on their right legs with the left legs raised, hold on to it as the *upādhyāya* reads out one of the stories associated with the event, either randomly picked or following his personal preference or, in the case of a series of events at a series of places, one which is associated with the particular sacred place. One of those stories is the tale of the generous prince.[14]

PRODUCING BISVAṂTARA

The manuscript reproduced in Siegfried Lienhard's edition[15] is called the *Bisvaṃtara rājāyāgu kathā* (*The Story of King Bisvaṃtara*, Skt. Viśvaṃtara or Viśvantara, henceforth quoted as BRK[16]). It dates from 1837 (NS 958), about two generations after the fall of the last dynasties of the local Newar kingdoms and the takeover of the Kathmandu Valley by the house of Gorkha. In that very year Bhimsen Thapa, the first of a series of prime ministers who would eventually become the de facto rulers and who himself held power for most of the first half of the nineteenth century (1806–1837), met a violent death, ending a politically stable but repressive period. The name of the head sponsor, who commissioned the scroll, specified as husband of Māthilakṣmī, remains illegible (BRK 85). He belonged to a *vajrācārya* family. A number of its members are listed in the colophon, all affiliated, as the text states, to the "Pārābartthamahābihāra" (Skt. Pārāvartamahāvihāra), now a Śaivite shrine

14. Of course, the narration of this story is not restricted to the Eighth-Day Vow: apart from informal tellings within the family or as part of school curricula, a time for story-telling is the lent month of Gūṃla (approx. July-August) with various activities scheduled in the monastery or taking place in Newar homes. As we shall see, the manuscript which will be at the center of this study is an impressive painted scroll (New. *paubhahā*) with the story told in a comic-book fashion in a series of tableaux with captions below each scene. Even today, particularly on the day dedicated to "the display of the monastery's deities" (*bahī dyāḥ bvayegu*), it is a widespread practice to unfurl and put up extensive scrolls of this kind in Newar Buddhist monastery courtyards, to view them, read out choice passages, comment on them, and use them to narrate the whole or just salient parts of the story. For photographs of such a display and its viewing by visitors see Mary S. Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, vol. 2, plate 508, and Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts*, 172, fig. 7.1.

15. The abbreviation "BRK" will be followed by the caption number in Lienhard's reckoning; the images will be referred to by "BRK plate" followed by the plate number in roman and the scene number in arabic numbers. The transliteration is found on pp. 53–60, the German translation pp. 61–69, and the reproduction of the entire scroll including images and text with description of the visuals pp. 71–249.

16. When referring to names and textual passages I try to adhere to the non-standardized Newar orthographic forms found in the manuscripts, including the Newar form "Bisvaṃtara." I believe that the domestication that this study is interested in can be best addressed in an idiom that calls the domesticated prince by his domesticated name.

six kilometers outside of Banepa (Skt. Baṃdikāpura), a predominantly Newar settlement on the southeastern fringes of the Valley. The scroll ends with an image of the monastery (BRK plate XXVII, scenes 84–85) as if representing a visual colophon, linking the artifact to the place of its donors' lineage and possibly to the place of its display and the connected ritual performance. Lienhard (*Die Legende*, 26–28, 45) assumes the scroll to be the work of two artists, one responsible for the pictures, the other for the captions. The text itself says that the story was excerpted and presented by Śrībajrāchāryya Munīndra Siṃha, a member of the *saṃgha* of the Janavihāra, in what the manuscript calls Ñadeśa, the variant Newar name for what Newars today call Yeṁ; better known as Kathmandu.

Lienhard sometimes additionally refers to a second fifty-folios-long unpublished manuscript in his possession entitled *Viśvantarakathā* (henceforth ViK), in which fols. 1–15 are missing. From the samples Lienhard quotes, usually in the footnotes in the main part of his book, which includes a color reproduction of the entire scroll and an iconographic description of the images, one may get an idea of the contrast between the narrative as represented by the captions on the scroll and by a text with claims to a certain literary sophistication. The advantage of the scroll's captions is that they give us the story line in a clarity unsurpassed by versions found in other manuscripts. However, as important as what we may define as the "plot," a term that may be difficult or risky to apply to these kind of texts, are those elements that frame and open or close the narrative. For the Skt. *kathā* and New. *bakhaṃ* (or *khaṃ*, which can also mean 'matter' or 'fact') is definitely more than just a story and even less reducible to a story line or plot, as it comprises diverse forms of religious or otherwise instructive or edifying narrative or doctrinal discourse presented ritually. This understanding of *kathā* assumes that the text in itself may indicate, suggest, prescribe, and reproduce the religious practice in which it is embedded.

The scroll text starts with an obeisance to Vajrasattva (*Bajrasatvaṃ*), the *buddha* central to Newar Vajrayāna, whose worship formula is the standard opening of most of Newar ritual literature, and proceeds with verses directed at Lokanātha Avalokiteśvara. It is to him that the author declares himself to be prostrating "constantly" (*śrī-Lokanāthaṃ praṇamāmi nityaṃ*, BRK 2). The text then switches to the framing narrative (BRK 3) recording an event in which the Buddha Śākyasiṃha (i.e., Śākyamuni) told the following story of prince Bisvaṃtara to the gods, a gathering of *bhikṣu*s, and Upoṣadha Devaputra near the city of Kapilavastu. The obeisance paid to Lokanātha immediately preceding the frame is repeated after the end of the entire story, immediately after the closing of the narrative frame, again referring to Buddha Śākyasiṃha (BRK 82), when Lokanātha too is addressed again. Here the *bodhisattva* is referred to by his other two names common among the Newars: Karuṇeśvara and Lokeśvara of Bugama (BRK 83), the local *devatā/bodhisattva/nāthyogi* also known as Karuṇāmaya, Buṃgadyaḥ, or the Red Matsendranāth, with his double home in the present-day village of Bungamati and in the urban center of Lalitpur. He is the protagonist of one of the largest processions in the Valley. It becomes clear that the real frame of this text is not "the telling of the telling" of this story by Buddha Śākyamuni set in the present (the Pāli *paccuppannavatthu*) or the concluding connection (*samodhāna*) made between the Buddha and his former birth, but rather the worship of Lokanātha Avalokiteśvara. It is this larger frame that places the text within the liturgical context of the Eighth-Day Vow dedicated to the *bodhisattva*, during which the story is read as part of his constant (*nityaṃ*) veneration. This is the first indication that in the Newar context this particular text, but more generally this particular story, is explicitly and inextricably connected to the conditions of its telling and the effects of its articulation. On the other hand, the frames that open up as the viewers, readers, and listeners enter the story at the same time shift the actions' timing and location, from the ritual opening

here-and-now, to the ritual setting in the time and place the ritual creates, to the times and places of Buddha Śākyamuni, to those of his enlightened recollection. As much as the story and the artifact ground their performance in a specific locale they also reach out and displace themselves and their public with them.

Indeed, as if the occasion of the text's reading were to insinuate itself into its texture or, more accurately, as if the text's narrated events themselves were to call for and poetically create the conditions for the celebration of the Eighth-Day Vow, the story begins with King Sibi, the Sanskritic Śivi, ruler of the city called Bidarbhā (*Bidarbhā dhāyāgu nagarasa*), more commonly known as Vidarbhā, consulting with his queen and his ministers about the lack of a male heir. Then all of them, assisted by the *vajrācārya* in his position as *rājaguru*,[17] resort to nothing less than the Eighth-Day Vow to ask for male offspring (BRK 5). The corresponding image on the scroll (BRK plate II, scene 5) depicts them positioned in front of a shrine containing an image of Lokanātha Avalokiteśvara with a *maṇḍala* on the ground between them and the priest holding a manuscript, as if to read out to them the story of Bisvaṃtara. Sure enough, "thanks to the merit [accrued] through the performance of the Eighth-Day Vow dedicated to the Noble Avalokiteśvara" (*āryyabalokiteśvarayāgu aṣṭamībrata yāṅāgu puṃṇyana,* L6), prince Bisvaṃtara is born.

These first lines of the story do two things. Firstly, and most importantly, they create a loop between what is happening inside and outside the text: it is *aṣṭamīvrata* time everywhere. Everyone is celebrating the same event and addressing the same deity. The text homologizes *what* is read with the conditions that require *that* it is read and prefigure *how* it is to be read, the purpose within the text with the purpose outside the text, the effects in the world of literary figures with the effects in the world of humans. This includes the *how*: the performance in the text serves as matrix, example, and model for the performance outside of it, while at the same time the latter embraces, preserves, produces, and reproduces the text.[18] Inasmuch as the scroll and the story are artifact and performance, donated and staged, the safeguarding of the model itself depends on the artist and the priest reproducing it.

This intertwining of ritual time and narrative time may remind one of the elaborate praises of the effects of reading the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra* expounded in extensive passages located within that very text. The work is one of the Nine Jewels (*navaratna*), a group of texts with paracanonical status in Newar Buddhism. It stands at the center of a popular cult of the female *bodhisattva* worshipped in the form of a book (Gellner, "The Perfection of Wisdom"; Emmrich, "Emending Perfection"). Less immediate, but worth considering, is a similar connection between ritual and narrative from a different context. J. A. B. van Buitenen points at the *rājasūya* as the ritual background for the composition of the *Mahābhārata*'s *Sabhāparvan* (MBh tr. van Buitenen, 3–6; van Buitenen, "On the Structure

17. I here follow Lienhard (p. 61), who reads "*vajrācārya* and *guru*" ("der Guru und Vajrācārya," meaning "the *vajrācārya* in his role as (*rāja-*)*guru*." Though the ms., which is particular about word spacing, separates both with a single comma (BRK plate II, scene 5) and does not give it as one word (as implied by Lienhard's comment, p. 69 n. 25), the image shows only one person, which may support this reading. However, as we will see below, this is not necessarily reliable and a compound *gurupurohita* without a comma later in the ms. (BRK plate XXIII, scene 75) further complicates the picture.

18. It is worth mentioning that all of the scroll's captions referring to the story begin with the word *thana* and Lienhard explains this as meaning "as shown in the above painting" ("wie auf dem obenstehenden Gemälde gezeigt," p. 69 n. 20), to be translated as "then," "now," "further" etc. The use of this word indicates that the Newar employed here is not intended to be literary but functional; one should additionally note that there is a certain resemblance to ritual handbooks (*vidhi*s, *paddhati*s), in which new prescriptions indicating the beginning of a subsequent rite are introduced with *thana*, making it the standard section marker in Newar ritual prescriptive language. The use of *thana* gives the scroll's caption the ring of a liturgical manual.

of the Sabhāparvan"). Similarly and building on Christopher Minkowski's analysis of the vedic *sattra* ritual ("Janamejaya's Sattra"), Thomas Oberlies ("König Śibi's Selbstopfer") explains the insertion of the *Mahābhārata*'s *Tīrthayātraparvan* and the story of King Śibi, a close Hindu and Buddhist literary relative of our generous prince (see Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood*), contained therein, as the reformulation of a ritual procedure in the language of epic narrative. The wanderings of the Pāṇḍavas and the inclusion of sub-stories dealing with extreme generosity (such as that of Śibi cutting up his own body to save a pigeon) reenact the *Sarasvatī-sattra*. In this ritual the performers are said to remove themselves from the world of men by "scaling the sky" and by drowning themselves.

To return to the beginning of the BRK, the narrative duplication of the Eighth-Day Vow means that there is a curious reciprocity in the mimetic relation between the performance within and without: the ritual performance that leads to the literary and artistic performance is a repetition, a reenactment of the literary artifice it has itself constructed. Simply put, the performers of the Eighth-Day Vow recognize what they are doing in the text as if witnessing or remembering and identifying with a parallel event: they are king Sibi and his queen, connected by the same object of worship, Lokanātha, here as well as there. But, at the same time, the story and the images suggest that those who participate in the Eighth-Day Vow are doing something that was performed by protagonists of Buddhist sacred history long ago. This makes the reflection turn on itself, turning what they are doing into a repetition of that earlier act. However, the processes at work in the ritual, in the narrative, and in the scroll are indeed less about mirroring than about transformation, of taking part in a larger narrative and ritual event and emerging from it transformed, not just by its repetition but by divine intervention. The fixed point in this movement at the center of these mimetic movements is the deity and the text from which the ritual power enabling these transformations emerges.

Throughout South Asia worshippers become (usually the lay) protagonists of sacred narratives. This is much more than just an act of identification of readers or listeners with characters in a story: it is question of performance. To give just three examples, Newar *vajrācārya*s take over the role of deities when anointing the boy who undergoes temporary ordination (*bare chuyegu*) with the water of the Five Oceans (Gellner, "Monastic Initiation"; von Rospatt, "The Transformation of the Monastic Ordination"). Jain laypeople feature as Indra and Indrāṇī in the celebration of the Five Auspicious Moments (*pañcakalyāṇa*) of a Jina's sacred biography (Babb, *Absent Lord*, 79–82), and devotees take on various roles in enacting the love play of Kṛṣṇa in Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā ritual (Hayes, "The Necklace of Immortality"). The identification of the Buddhist tantric priest with the deity he summons is, of course, possibly the most common such identification in Newar Buddhism (Gellner, *Monk, Householder*, 287–92).

The second thing these first lines of the BRK do is point at the effect and the efficacy of the vow. Here the mimetic power is harnessed in favor of a promise that the vow holds a particular power attractive to all performers: the power to produce a male child. It has worked once with the most miraculous of results, suggesting that it would work in the same way for devotees who expect it to achieve much less. And yet the text as story does not state that, but instead reproduces the situation of the couple wishing for a child in which worshippers set out to perform the Eighth-Day Vow. However, the childless and child-desiring couple represents not just the ideal sponsors of the Eighth-Day Vow, but also popular protagonists, mostly in supporting roles, of innumerable stories transmitted in and beyond South Asia and usually very helpful in getting a story started. One of the most prominent cases of temporary infertility is that of Daśaratha and his three wives at the beginning of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. There the king proceeds by first removing the defilement (*pāpa*) causing this unfortunate

state by performing the *aśvamedha*, the royal horse sacrifice (Rām 1.12–13), followed by an Atharvavedic son-producing sacrifice (*iṣṭiṃ* [. . .] *putrīyām*, Rām 1.14.2a). The queens' consumption of the ritual rice pudding offered by a deity emerging from the fire brings about the birth of Rāma and his three half-brothers. The Pāli version of the story of Vessantara has been compared with the *Rāmāyaṇa* by Bimal Churn Law (*Aśvaghoṣa*, 47) and by Richard Gombrich ("The Vessantara Jātaka"). The latter points out the similarities between the passages in the *Ayodhyakāṇḍa* concerning the parallel banishments undergone by Vessantara and Rāma, as well as journeys of the wicked Brahman Jūjaka and the prince's father to Vessantara and that of Bharata to Rāma, to which one should add the final glorious returns of Vessantara and Rāma to inherit their kingdoms and rule as model monarchs. One should here also add the story of Hariścandra as known from the *Mārkaṇḍeya* (MārkaṇḍeyaP 7–9) and the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa* (DevībhāgavataP 6.12–13 and 7.17–27) and its innumerable vernacular versions, comparable in popularity, as Gombrich remarks (VJ tr. Gombrich and Cone: xxv), to the Vessantara story. It is similar not only in that Hariścandra also loses his kingdom, goes through a period of austerities, and gives away his wife and children, but also right down to literary details. They include details such as the Brahman leading away the protagonist's children and issues like the relationship between a prince's career, family, penance, and kingship. Both involve "a critique of brahman social power."[19]

While the Pāli version of the Vessantara story is interested in the intricate series of births and rebirths, particularly of the prince's mother, queen Phusatī, and while the Sanskrit version by Ārya Śūra and others start *in medias res* with a description of the king and his realm and directly introduce the hero as his son, as far as I know, only the Newar version begins with a problem, the ritual option prompting divine intervention and the birth of the hero, just as in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The parallelism is carried further, when in the Newar version, on the birth of his son, king Sibi makes lavish donations to *bhikṣu*s and Brahmans (BRK 7), recalling the very Bisvaṃtara-like moment in the *Rāmāyaṇa* when Daśaratha after the completion of the horse sacrifice offers the entire earth to the officiating priests (Rām. 1.13.38). The priests refuse, reminding the king that the ruler is the protector of the earth, so that Daśaratha dramatically downsizes his offer to millions of cows, a hundred million gold pieces, and four times the amount in silver (Rām. 1.13.39–41). As before, in this case the Newar version seems to be an attempt at harnessing the power of two worlds: the ritual world of the Eighth-Day Vow and the literary world of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. On the ritual side, and with the public of the vow in mind, the king's donations are what one would expect from a proper patron of a Newar monastery's *saṃgha* and its priests. But, as if to speak to the laywoman as much as to the layman, it adds that the queen, in her parallel female world, "engaged in various conversations about the dharma with her friends" (*sakhipanisa nāpa anega dharmmayā kha hlāṅao coṅa julo*, BRK 9).

Following that, as good Newar parents should, the royal couple performs their son's naming ceremony, accompanied, as prescribed, by a fire sacrifice (BRK 10). In this sequence, too, the narrative mirrors that of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Rā 1.17.11–12). The ceremony concludes

19. Sathaye, "Why Did Hariścandra Matter in Early Medieval India?" 145. A text closely related to the Bisvaṃtara story and of immense popularity in Newar Buddhist literature is the *Maṇicūḍāvadāna*. There too the theme is the perfection of giving (*dānapāramitā*). The very same animals and people (elephant, children, wife) are given away in the same sequential order. It is the ending, however, that moves it into a clearly distinct plot type: the hero eventually gives away parts of his body and finally his own life. For the edition of the Newar text *Māṇicūḍāvadānoddhṛta* see Lienhard, *Maṇicūḍāvadānoddhṛta*, and for a Newar song version idem, *Nevārīgītimañjarī*, 86–90 and 198–201; for a reproduction of a painted scroll featuring the story in text and image in the same way as discussed here regarding Bisvaṃtara see idem, *Svayambhūpurāṇa*.

the first couple of paragraphs before the hero finally arrives center-stage. These passages not only reflect the ideals of domestic ritual care upheld by the royals. They also make the tale of the generous prince resemble that of the prince of Ayodhya as an example of how to tell a royal tale. Comparable only to the Pāli version with its interest first in the former births of the *bodhisattva* and eventually in the vicissitudes of the wicked Brahman Jūjaka, the figure of Bisvaṃtara appears only after one eighth of the story has already been told. In fact, so far the narrator is not so much interested in Bisvaṃtara as in his father or, even more, in the Eighth-Day Vow that helps to produce the prince. When compared to other versions I am aware of, the tale's narrator appears to have purposefully zoomed out and away from its supposed protagonist.

BISVAṂTARA AND THE *SVASTHĀNĪVRATAKATHĀ*

Though the interweaving of story and ritual performance may appear odd and extreme when compared to other versions of the tale of the generous prince, again a brief look across the Kathmandu Valley shows that Bisvaṃtara's case is not an exception but the norm, at least in the Newar world and, beyond that, in the world of South Asian votive literature. Many of the things that may strike us as peculiar are prominently found in one other popular Newar text, popular also in its Nepālī version, recited during vows, mostly but not exclusively by Śaiva devotees: the *Svasthānīvratakathā*, of which Linda Iltis ("Swasthani Vrata") has provided an annotated translation of the Newar version accompanied by an important study of its text and context.[20]

A double narrative frame has the *ṛṣi* Śaunaka ask the *maharṣi* Sūtāju about the performance of this vow. Sūtāju replies by relating the narrative sermon given by Kumāra (or Skandha-Kārttikeya) as a response to Agastya's homologous question. Sūtāju does so, first in the form of a short prescriptive outline of the ritual (*vidhi*) and then as a series of stories involving the goddess (Svasthānī), her various reincarnations, the theme of conjugal strife and female endurance, and the performance and miraculous effects of the vow dedicated to the goddess. In this way the *Svasthānīvratakathā* very much resembles the Buddhist *aṣṭamīvratamāhātmya*s and the *vratāvadānamālā*s, as anthologies of vow-related stories designed for public readings by male performers with a predominantly female public. The first half of the work consists of a collation of Śaiva purāṇic prose texts dealing with the goddess and is followed by a long narrative of the life of Gomayeju, a girl miraculously born to childless parents, cursed by Mahādeva, and experiencing all kind of hardship. Her fate is turned around when Gomayeju learns from the Seven Ṛṣis how to perform the *svasthānīvrata* which leads her to overcome all obstacles and to eventually become queen, and additionally allows for other figures in the story to be successful as well. Just as in the *Bisvaṃtara rājāyāgu kathā*, in the story of Gomayeju the protagonists within the text perform the ritual that involves the reading of the text itself. Further, here too there is no etiological myth, no story about how the vow came about, its invention, originator, or primordial function. The story's protagonists simply happen to perform it, just as is done by those who participate in its reading. As in Bisvaṃtara's tale, so too in the *Svasthānīvratakathā*'s Gomayeju story all is done to place it within the Newar landscape by mentioning Newar personal names, local place names, local legendary creatures, local practices. In that way it is even more mimetic of

20. Its manuscripts are among the oldest Hindu religious narratives preserved in Newar manuscripts, the oldest dating back to 1592/93 (NS 713). For an overview see Malla, *Classical Newari Literature*, 51–56. Recently the history of the text has been more thoroughly investigated by Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz in her 2010 University of Chicago dissertation.

the ritual agents and the sacred places than the scroll and the variant texts of the Newar tale of the generous prince. What the stories of Gomayeju and Bisvaṃtara have most in common is that they share a concern with women suffering under the social and religious constraints and priorities of their husbands. They both aim at resolving these conflicts by placing their protagonists within a powerful ritual performance. The stories further isolate and elevate their protagonists' suffering by giving them a place in a story that is intended to be in a household which, like the home of Śiva and Pārvatī or the royal palace of Bisvaṃtara, is a place beyond historical space.

MALE RITUALS AND THE FEMALE PUBLIC

Another feature, related to ritual, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the role of men, makes this text stand out and gives it its Kathmandu Valley signature: the high profile the text gives to ritual specialists performing their duties on behalf of their sponsors' offspring. As we have seen, both Hindu and Buddhist priests join the king in his vow, [21] both *bhikṣu*s and Brahmans receive the king's gifts. The chief priest and advisor (*purohita upādhyājuna*), represented as one person in BRK IV scene 10, is said to conduct Bisvaṃtara's naming ceremony including the fire sacrifice (*yajña homa*, BRK 10). The next sequence of captions deals with the prince's education by a *paṇḍita* of unspecified religious affiliation (*guruyāta*, BRK 11; *paṃḍita yāka*, BRK 12) and the choice and courting of a bride, culminating in the wedding (*kaṃnyā dāna*) of Bisvaṃtara and Madrī "at an auspicious time" (*bhiṅagu lagnasa*). The wedding is performed in conjunction with a fire sacrifice *comme il faut* (*bidhikarmmaṇa homa yātakāo*, BRK 16) by the chief priest (*purohita*) and the advisor (*upādhyājupanisena*), depicted in BRK VI scene 16 (assuming this particular identification of titles and images is valid) as two distinct individuals. The chief priest is a *vajrācārya* engaged in the fire sacrifice, with the advisor, a slightly less comely looking fellow with a rosary, looking on. It makes sense to pay attention, as Lienhard does, to the differences both text and images draw between the possibly diverging religious affiliations of the agents referred to. This is important in order to understand the way a Newar Buddhist priest and artist would imagine the sharing of ritual work at a predominantly Hindu Nepalese court. Yet it is impossible to deny that the scroll still depicts *vajrācārya*s in charge of all the major ritual events, thus turning court ritual distinctly Vajrayānist, the king into a sponsor of the *śāsana*, and Bisvaṃtara into the ideal Buddhist prince.

The description and depiction of the ritual specialists engaging in these events, however, should not be understood as individual vignettes, but as parts of a larger process in which agents with clearly defined roles propel Bisvaṃtara's transformation into a Newar adult layperson. What we find reproduced here is the trajectory every upper-caste Newar citizen would be expected to follow on his way to full ritual maturity. This not only turns Bisvaṃtara into a Newar Everyman, but creates a parallel between the Newar husband or father or brother and the *bodhisattva*. While other versions seem to hurry along the plot line, paying little attention to what the prince did besides being generous, the Newar versions are

21. Lienhard (*Die Legende*, 69 n. 25) distinguishes the Hindu court and family priest (New. *purohita upādhyāju*) from the Buddhist priest (New. *guru bajrācāryya*), a distinction that is generally accurate; yet the situation in the scroll may be more complicated than Lienhard's distinction would suggest, as it fails to explain why the *purohita upādhyāya* seems to be depicted as a *vajrācārya* wearing a ritual crown. Further, in a passage referring to the performance of the Eighth-Day Vow a *guru-purohita* is mentioned in addition to an *upādhyāya* (BRK 75), with the former being depicted as a *vajrācārya* and the latter suggestively reading out from an *aṣṭamīvrata* manuscript during his sermon (BRK plate XXIII, scene 75). Lienhard himself (p. 45 n. 69) points at some discrepancies between text and image.

as much concerned with painting a portrait of someone who is not only thoroughly part of Kathmandu Valley society, but a religious male who has all his South-Asia-wide life-cycle ritual papers in order. Further, and more importantly, the tale is one of ritual progress, a progression of stages reached, left behind, and transcended, completions and perfections, *saṃskāra*s and *pāramitā*s, as obtained and accumulated as much through the mundane Vedic household rituals as along the lofty path of the *bodhisattva*.

Keeping in mind the predominantly female audience of the narrative, at least in the context of the Eighth-Day Vow, one may imagine that the story may be not only about Newar males representing themselves but also about inviting Newar women to understand the narrative with reference to their husbands. Indeed, in the votive performances I attended the stories of marital distress and resolution, and particularly their interpretation by the *upādhyāya* in the form of admonishments directed at the listening women, were usually spontaneously commented upon by the women I sat next to. In addition to quips like "what does he know about marriage," or "he should try to be married to my husband," the women worshipping next to me, critically or jokingly, drew and occasionally questioned comparisons between the male protagonist of the story and their own husbands. On the two occasions on which I attended a *Bisvaṃtararājakathā* reading[22] I heard a woman half ironically, half self-commiseratingly comment that she felt she was living with Bisvaṃtara all the time anyway. Another woman, slightly more subdued, yet cautiously denigrating, remarked that Bisvaṃtara going away reminded her of her husband spending a lot of time hanging around with friends or doing unproductive business. The latter echoes the topos and reality of "the heartache and fears of the Newar wife" produced by the custom—again, topos and reality in one—of Newar men spending much time on business travels as elaborated by Todd Lewis in his study of the *Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna* (*Popular Buddhist Texts*, 84–89; "Himalayan Frontier Trade"). Lewis refers to the common Newar narratives of men settling down in Lhasa and making the long way back only periodically, sometimes founding and supporting parallel families at the other end of the trade route. The various comments are expressions of a perception common among Newar (and not just Newar) women that their men, whatever they may be up to, lead lives of their own. What Bisvaṃtara's life story thus seems to achieve is to provoke an identification of the *bodhisattva* with the husband by the wife, to encourage the female listener to picture herself as Madrī, and to make her negotiate between the aspirations of her husband, in the guise of the *bodhisattva* ideal, and her household duties and her own affective preoccupations. While it is insightful to read the *upādhyāya*'s intentions into the story as an appeal to reconcile these conflicts for the sake of safeguarding the happy and Buddhist Newar family and ultimately to harness the wife's energies for the joint progress of the couple in their spiritual practice and towards a better rebirth (Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts*, 47–48), it is equally important to listen to these "reader's reactions." For they give us reason to suspect that the telling of this story is not only an appeal to domestic piety, but, perhaps even more, an occasion on which domestic unhappiness, its relentless and seemingly unchangeable nature, finds its public articulation. We will see below that the topos of irrevocable conjugal separation is not only a contingent oral, local, individual reaction, but something that has been built into the text itself.

22. The occasions were *aṣṭamīvrata*s on December 17 and December 31, 2007, the first at Cukabāhāḥ, the second in a private home, both in Lalitpur. I recorded similar comments when attending a *vasundharāvrata* also at Cukabāhāḥ on February 13, 2006.

SONGS, SERMONS, AND DISGUISES

After rather decorous textual and visual references to the prince enjoying the pleasures of love with his consort (*sukha ānaṃdanaṃ saṃbhoga yāṅaṃ coṅa julo*, BRK 17; BRK plate VI, scene 18), the birth of his children Kṛṣṇājinī and Jālini, and intermittent acts of generosity, which merge the erotic fantasy of courtly life with the depiction of Bisvaṃtara as a powerful Newar householder, the story unfolds in a straightforward way, not unlike the other known versions of the tale. We see a donation hall (*dānasālā*, BRK 24) being erected at the request of the prince and gifts distributed to monks, Brahmans, and beggars (*bhikṣu brāhṃhmaṇa yācakapanista*), the prince's departure on "the (royal) jewel (which is the) elephant" (*hastiratna*) in search of more beggars (*jācaka*, BRK 25), the pride of the kingdom given away (BRK 27–28), Bisvaṃtara maligned by the ministers, encouraged to request his father to dismiss him for a life of austerities (BRK 29–31), and the commitment of his wife to join him with the children in his venture (BRK 32–33). It is striking that Bisvaṃtara's title, which until this point in the text (except for in a caption mentioning blissful family life) had been "prince" (*rājakumāra*), here switches to "king" (*rājā*, BRK 32), which is retained for the rest of the text, including the colophon, as if the renunciation of his kingdom had actually earned him a title equal to that of his father. The departure and voyage to Mt. Baṃka (Skt. Vaṅka) sees a sixfold earthquake (*khutā prakāraṇa bhūṣā bosyaṃ coṅa julo*, BRK 35), mourning royals comforted by their minister, four brahman beggars obtaining the four horses, their replacement through deer by a resourceful Bisvaṃtara, the gift of the carriage to "four wily brahmans" (*chaliya brāṃhmaṇa pehma*, BRK 40–41), and the parents ending up with one child each on their shoulders till they reach the hut set up for them by the gods' handyman Viśvakarma (*srī-Bisvakarmāna*, BRK 44)

While the scroll captions naturally depict the events in a straightforward, unadorned way, apart from the bounty of manuscripts there are several examples available in print of how the Newar elaboration of the story at any given point, and particularly at the moments of heightened drama, looks in the *aṣṭamīvratamāhātmya* texts. They feature a much richer rendering, both more descriptive and dramatic, with plenty of dialogues and dharma-oriented monologues, as in the *Viśvaṃtarakathā* (ViK) mentioned above. There are also songs, dating possibly from the late nineteenth century, which can be part of larger narrative prose texts or isolated and included in collections of songs, reminding us of the verses of the Pāli version which, in all likelihood, were sung as well.[23] The two best-known ones, included by Lienhard in his *Nevārīgītimañjarī*, [24] are sung by Biśvaṃtara and Madrī respectively. As in other versions and traditions of the tale of the generous prince, in certain Newar renderings Madrī's despair at the disappearance of her children represents what Richard Gombrich calls "the story's centre of gravity."[25] It is still preserved as an isolated piece[26] and a well-known song among Newar literati and reciters.[27] As if to act as a counterpoint to the Bisvaṃtara

23. See Gombrich's (VJ tr. Gombrich and Cone, xxi) as well as Collins' comments (*Nirvāṇa and Other Buddhist Felicities*, 541–44); also Durt, "Casting-off of Mādrī," 136, on the vocal performance character of the Chinese versions.

24. Song no. 81, p. 197; song 82, 197–98.

25. VJ tr. Gombrich and Cone, xx. In contrast, Hubert Durt points out that it is "reduced to just one Chinese *gāthā* in the Chinese version of the *Saṃghabhedavastu*" (T. 1450, 183b29-c1; "Casting-off of Mādrī," 136). This applies to other narrative literary versions as well and one may assume that the importance of this scene would have depended on the form and context of its representation.

26. Collins, *Nirvāṇa and Other Buddhist Felicities*, 500 n. 8.

27. In 2007 a *vajrācārya* who teaches song at a school for ritual specialists, the Vajrācārya Pūjāvidhi Adhyayan Samiti at Nyakhachuka in Lalitpur, generously gave me a sample of his performance of a few stanzas of that song.

song, which expresses ascetic reason and heroism, the princess proceeds from a premonition ("the birds sang so sadly, so sadly," *jhaṃga:*[28] *paṃchī khvase khvase hāla*), then to the contrasting of the children's happy play ("put to play after handing [them toy] horse and elephant," *sala kisi biyāva khelalapā tayā*) with their terrible fate ("the water has risen in the little pot, in the little pot," *laṃkha jāse vala ghalasa ghalasa*; "I did not know what was written in my karma," *karamasa cvase halagu ma siyā*), to addressing her husband about their whereabouts and losing her will to live on ("how can this life, this life be kept," *taya gathe thva parāna parāna*) in the light of such disaster. The fifth and final stanza has the reciter (*hlākahma*)[29] of this song give the reason for their disappearance, explaining that the children had left, obeying their father after hearing from him a story conveying the Buddhist message (*dharmakathā*).

In the more elaborate version recorded in the *Viśvantarakathā* (ViK) Bisvaṃtara comforts Madrī by telling her "many things about his former births and various *dharmakathā*s" (*anyeka thaogu pūrbbajanmayā kha nānā prakārayā dharmmakathā kanāo,* ViK 45r; Lienhard, *Die Legende*, 181 n. 35). Later, in addressing Indra-as-Brahman, he launches into an elaborate oration as to the reasons for donating also his wife. It is not (*ma khu*), he says, in order "to be reborn in a great country" (*taodhana deśasa janma juyāo*), or "to obtain plenty of gold, jewels and so on" (*nānā subarṇṇa ratnādi saṃmpatti paripūrṇṇa yānāo*), or "to become a world ruler" (*cakrabartti rājā dhāyekāo*), or to blissfully live in heaven as Indra or Brahmā. Rather it is "to exhort those who have the dharma at heart" (*ddharmmātmapanista hatāsa cāyakāo*), "to have the thought of dharma occur to those who are wicked" (*pāpipanista ddharmmacitta juyakāo*), and to perform the perfection of giving, "thereby showing the Māras" (*mārapanista coyekāo*) and "stunning the world" (*saṃsārasa adbhūta cāyakāo*). He concludes by saying that it is his intention "to narrate the story of his good deeds across several births" (*janmajanmapatiṃ yānāo tayāgu dharmmayāgu kha kanāo*) and "to show people the road and teach [them] the method" (*la kenāo kaṃtha syeṅāo*) by which he himself realized the *dānapāramitā*, the perfection of giving (ViK 47v-48v; Lienhard, *Die Legende*, 203 n. 41). Literary figure and authorial voice, the protagonist and his representation, coalesce in one: Bisvaṃtara himself becomes the exegete of his own story. The text makes the prince both acknowledge and rationalize his outrageous behavior and assign it a place within a Buddhist framework of virtue and perfectibility. As with the connections between the ritual inside and outside the text, we here find words spoken by the *bodhisattva* that could equally be those of the *upādhyāya* addressing his audience and helping them make sense of both the shocking and the miraculous in an old and familiar story.

Back in the scroll, the drama unfolds in a way peculiar to the Newar versions. Indra is the one who "bears the disguise" (*bhesadhāri*, BRK 55) not only once, as in the other narratives, but twice. He plays the role of the first Brahman who takes away the children (BRK 46–50) and brings them back to their grandfather right away, being thereupon handsomely rewarded (BRK 55–57). Following a brief counsel of the gods, he also plays the role of a second Brahman, who receives Madrī (BRK 59–67) and takes her back to her father-in-law too, finally revealing himself to the prince's father as Indra (BRK 70–71). With the narrative in all these instances almost exclusively using the term *brāṃhmaṇarūpa* 'he who looks like a Brahman' (spelt in a non-standardized, Newar way), making clear that there is no "real" twice-born at

28. For the romanization of the *visarga* in Newar scripts Lienhard uses a colon where most scholars would prefer *ḥ*.

29. The speaker describes himself as "a reciter without a sponsor" (*hlākahma anātha jana*; Lienhard, *Nevārīgītimañjarī*, 86), i.e., still in need of one—a formalized request for compensation and sponsorship, placing the song within a larger performance by a wandering bard.

fault throughout this story, the Newar Brahman as the source of strife is in fact a mirage and thus a far cry indeed from the very real Pāli bogeyman, making the Newar version count maybe as the most diplomatically anti-brahmanical one. What this narrative strategy unique to the Newar versions additionally does is to strengthen the role divinities play in the action. Particularly in the wilderness the forces to be reckoned with are superhuman and represent the same kind of powers, if lesser, that the humans of the story turn to for help when performing the Eighth-Day Vow.

BISVAṂTARA'S *DHARMAŚARĪRA*

Similarly, as the story moves on, we can again observe the zooming away from Bisvaṃtara's deeds and the core familial ties to a larger public. After the gift of the children, the gods assemble and, parallel to the women launching into a doctrinal debate after the prince's birth, discuss the dharma as represented by Bisvaṃtara's deed (*Bisvaṃtara rājāyāgu dharmma kha hlāsyaṃ bijyāka julo*, BRK 58). After his decision to give away Madrī, "a congregation of several seers" (*anega ṛṣīśvarapani sabhā*, BRK 63), an echo, possibly, of the seer Accuta who figures in the Pāli version, come together on Mt. Baṃka to praise the prince. Once the virtual Brahman has dragged Madrī away by her hands we see a sixfold seismic shock (*khu pola bhūṣa bosyam coṅa*, BRK 68) rattle the scene as well as a downpour of flowers and milk. Once Madrī is gone, Bisvaṃtara "resumed keeping a vow involving austerity for a long time and with one-pointed mind" (*hākanaṃ ekacitta yāṅaṃ tākāraṃ tapasyābrata yāsyaṃ bijyāka julo*, BRK 69), this time with the marked difference, as the text states, of "having become someone possessing a body which is the dharma" (*dharmmasarīra juyāo*, BRK 69).[30] What this transformation exactly means remains unspecified. However, as its implications may be critical to the Newar variant of the story's ending and the role given in it to the generous prince, it may be important to consider some possible interpretations.

Obviously, here the term *dharmaśarīra* is not used in the straightforward technical sense referring to a piece of written dharma inserted, usually, into *caitya*s and other artifacts as part of a rite of consecration.[31] Although the story's prince clearly does not turn into a piece of writing in a reliquary, we will have to return to that meaning below. I would rather suggest we begin reading *dharmmasarīra* here along the lines of Paul Harrison's critique of conventional translations of *dharmakāya* and his explorations of its historically earlier connotations. Regarding *dharmaśarīra* Harrison refers to Lancaster's comments on it in the third chapter of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* (ASP 29; ASP tr. Conze: 105–6) and concludes that there is no connection with the *dharmakāya* as understood by the fully developed later *trikāya* doctrine ("Dharmakāya," 78 n. 14). Further, Harrison rejects the reading of *dharmakāya* as an abstract unified substance and proposes instead to translate it in an attributive sense as denoting somebody who "is said [. . .] to 'have the *dhamma* as his body', someone who "is truly 'embodied' in the *dhamma*" (p. 50). Pointing out the shared semantic field of *kāya* and *śarīra* as meaning both "ensemble" and "body" Harrison argues in two directions. Both terms refer, on the one hand, to an assembly, a collection, a physical encompassment and realization of the dharma in its constituent parts as in its totality, and, as he stresses, multiplicity. On the other hand, they refer to the representational, substitutional, identificatory character of the dharma in its relation to the physical, corporeal, personal, charismatic, authoritative presence

30. Here I follow Paul Harrison in his translation of *dharmakāya* ("Is the Dharma-kāya the Real 'Phantom Body' of the Buddha?" 49–50; 54; 81 n. 48). My own use of "dharma body" for what Bisvaṃtara acquires presupposes Harrison's reading while maintaining the more readable form.

31. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 9–10; Bentor, "Tibetan Relic Classification," 16.

of the Buddha. The term *śarīra*, however, different from *kāya*, bears the additional denotation of bodily remains, i.e., refers to a live body or to the remains of a dead one, in its entirety or in parts, in the absence of the living whole (p. 79 n. 27). The *Karmavibhaṅgopadeśa* states that the realization of the *dharmaśarīra* equates or even exceeds in valence the physical body of the Buddha.[32] This seems to refer clearly to bodily, but even more to textual relics understood in the above way as collections of and identifications with the Buddha and the dharma.[33] If we take these observations together we have the following range of readings regarding Bisvaṃtara's fate. On the one hand, if we take *dharmakāya* and *dharmaśarīra* as overlapping and read both as referring to bodies alive and present, then we can understand Bisvaṃtara's body as having acquired the qualities of dharma. These include, in addition to that of the perfection (*pāramitā*) of generosity (*dāna*), more generally that of virtue (*śīla*), and, in view of his meditative endeavors, possibly the complete set of dharmas as well as the dharma in its entirety necessary to identify him with the Buddha. We have good reason to consider stopping short of reading *śarīra* primarily as bodily remains, as the text does not mention death or *parinirvāṇa*. By reading *dharmmasarīra* as denoting Bisvaṃtara's bodily transfiguration into a Buddha-like being, alive and strong, we would remain safely within the story. It would even narratively prefigure the Buddha's standardized words at the conclusion of this birth story, in which the latter identifies the narrative's protagonist as a previous birth of his.

If, on the other hand, we were to take the connotation of *śarīra* as relic more seriously, that would involve understanding Bisvaṃtara here as virtually absent and as having turned into a relic. His absence could be explained by his having removed himself from the world, both through his remote location and his constant and deep meditation. However, with the term *dharmaśarīra* used to refer to relics of the Buddha, we have here, as in our previous option, a clear attempt to stress his Buddha-like qualities, in this case not only in life, but as if after death, if not in *parinirvāṇa*. Hence, the use of this term may indicate not only a buddhafication of Bisvaṃtara, but also a hint at his possible fate in terms of a realization of nirvāṇa even before death, turning Bisvaṃtara into someone who reaches liberation in life, a *jīvanmukta*. That would be particularly surprising, as it would imply his reaching final liberation even before his final birth as Gautama Siddhārtha. But, while this may be surprising from the point of view of a unified and consistent buddhology, in which details within individual birth stories are expected to be consistent with and subordinated to the logic of the larger narrative tying together previous births and the hagiography of Buddha Śākyamuni, taken for itself and within the Newar Buddhist context this tale would still make sense. For a traditional Newar Buddhist storyteller the ideal hero is the layman tending towards asceticism and the ideal ascetic is Buddha-like, which implies possessing the qualities of a *siddha*. The *siddha* in turn is he who, due to his secret knowledge and his practice of tantric ritual, has achieved liberation in his lifetime. With Bisvaṃtara towards the end of the action

32. MKV/KVU quoted by Harrison, p. 54. Harrison (p. 80 n. 35) refers to such statements as "The dharma taught by the Lord is the body of the Lord" (p. 157: *ya eṣa dharmo Bhagavatā deśitaḥ etad Bhagavataḥ śarīram*) and "The dharma is the body of the Lord" (p. 160: *dharma eva* [or *dharmaś ca*] *Bhagavataḥ śarīram*), together with the frequent use of the noun compound *dharma-śarīra* (at one point—p. 157—described as *Bhagavataḥ śarīram pāramārthikam*). Harrison further notes that "[b]ahuvrīhis also crop up in the expressions *dharma-śarīras tathāgataḥ* (p. 158) and *dharmakāyāḥ tathāgatāḥ* (pp. 158–59), which have the same meaning we saw above: 'The Tathāgata(s) is/are *dharma*-bodied.'" Harrison's quotes and page numbers refer to MKV/KVU.

33. Another ambiguity important to Harrison is that of the word "dharma." He points out (p. 56) that it refers to three things: to the dharma taught by the Buddha, to the dharma(s) realized by the Buddha as a person, and, more specifically, to an item on a list of particularly pure dharmas necessary to constitute a *dharmakāya*.

moving along that very same series of identifications, it may not be surprising to see all the features of a mountain-forest-dwelling *siddha* attributed to him. In the order of things presented by this narrative, Bisvaṃtara would have become a *buddha* before the Buddha and, with even the soteriological accoutrements that come with Newar Buddhism spilling over into the penultimate birth of the Buddha as a human, a very Newar Buddha at that. Bisvaṃtara is elevated to Buddha-status irrespective of its compatibility with the larger picture of the *bodhisattva* heading towards his birth as Śākyamuni. This resonates with the fact that, unlike the Pāli version where the pre-birth narratives weave Vessantara's life into the cosmic workings of karma that extend beyond his birth, Bisvaṃtara's life appears, at least by comparison, singular and closed. The standardized frame featuring Śākyamuni's telling of the story does not do anything to relativize that. This way, again, the Newar versions are much closer to the Sanskrit, North-Indian, brief, stand-alone prose versions of Ārya Śūra, Kṣemendra, and Saṃghasena.

And yet, while the term *dharmmasarīra* may point at Bisvaṃtara's departure and be a hint at his elevation to buddhahood, what remains open is why a term should be used for the prince's final transmutation that so obviously refers to the continued presence of the Buddha in texts. There may be no way to account for this semantic aspect of the term and it may not even have been intended to be alluded to in the understanding of this passage. However, if we take it seriously, can it be that the text Bisvaṃtara may be said to become is the one he embodies, represents, and is identified with, the one narrated by Buddha Śākyamuni to his disciples, the Buddha's word repeated during the Eighth-Day Vow and inscribed in this scroll, the *dharmakathā* of the generous prince? Can it be that Bisvaṃtara vanishes as he becomes his own story, formulated in the Buddha's own words? Though far from being articulated by contemporary Buddhist Newars, such a reading would resonate well with the self-reflexive workings of the reformulation of the story as a ritual text that includes its own telling as performance and more generally the practices revolving around texts as embodiments of *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas*.

BISVAṂTARA AND PARALLEL ENDINGS

With more than one eighth of the *Bisvaṃtara rājāyāgu kathā* left to be told, this is the last we hear of Bisvaṃtara. The most striking difference between the Newar version and others is indeed that the protagonist does not return to become king.[34] And yet, here too the Newar tradition seems to share this particular narrative feature with others. In the Sanskrit Buddhist version authored by Saṃghasena, studied by Dieter Schlingloff and in more detail by Hubert Durt,[35] the story concludes very similarly. This, apart from the closeness to Ārya Śūra's version noted by Lienhard (*Die Legende*, 16), may be the strongest indication that the Newar versions are part of what Durt calls a "Northern tradition" of the story ("Offering," 177). Durt characterizes Saṃghasena's version (T. III. 153, j. 2–3, pp. 57–61), the third story of a collection entitled **Bodhisattvāvadāna* (*Pu-sa ben yuan jing* 菩薩本縁經 T. 153), and a less well-known version of several Chinese ones, as "radical" and "épure" ("Offering," 150, 154). Here the author decides to do without descriptions of the prince's youth or any

34. In the *Viśvantarakātha*, the other, unpublished, ms. Lienhard refers to in his edition, this development is narrated analogously, but in other terms, as: "Then, after remaining alone, Prince Biśvaṃtara performed the concentration called 'the placeless'" (*thanaṃ li Biśvaṃtara rājakumāraṇa ekāntana bijyānāo asthānaka dhayān nāma samāddhi yānāo bijyātaṃ*, fol. 49v; *Die Legende*, 18 n. 39).

35. Schlingloff, "Das Śaśa-Jātaka," 60 n. 1; *Studies in the Ajanta Paintings*, 96 and 111 nn. 18, 19; Durt, "Offering of the Children"; "Casting-off."

descriptions of the scenery, be it the city, the palace, or the wilderness, omits place names, and, similarly to the Newar versions, mentions only the most prominent figures by name, with the hero being called either *bodhisattva*, prince, or both ("Offering," 158–59). It shares only with the Newar versions the episode where Indra impersonates a Brahman twice: one who asks the *bodhisattva* for his spouse and the other who asks, in this case, for his eyes, neither of which happens.[36] But it is with regard to the ending that the parallels are most striking: though the children are returned to the king by the payment of a ransom and the *bodhisattva*-prince seems to continue living with his wife, which of course diverges from the Newar tellings, here too there is no reconciliation between the king and his son ("Offering," 162) and no glorious return of the couple to the kingdom ("Casting-off," 156). Instead the *bodhisattva*-prince undergoes, as Durt calls it, "a minor apotheosis" with celestial voices proclaiming "that this man (the prince) has enlarged [. . .] the tree of the way to *bodhi* [. . .] that in a not too distant future he will achieve *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi* [unsurpassable, proper, and complete enlightenment], that he is a *bodhisattva mahā-sattva* practicing the *dāna-pāramitā* [the perfection of generosity] whose action [. . .] will not be met with indifference [. . .]" ("Offering," 165–66; "Casting-off," 156). That neither Saṃghasena's nor the Newars' predilection for a somewhat ragged ending represents some deviant narrative choice is shown by a look at the larger South Asian context.[37]

As mentioned before, Somadeva's monumental Sanskrit *Kathāsaritsāgara* also contains the story of the generous prince (KSS 113.17–97).[38] In it he is called Tārāvaloka, son of the ruler of the Śivis Candrāvaloka, husband of Mādrī and father of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa (not *the* Rāma-and-Lakṣmaṇa, of course, but nevertheless). His story, from his early generosity right up to the role of Indra and his return as king, is so similar to the pattern of the other Viśvantara tales that it would be inadequate not to call it a version. Where it differs from most versions is where it agrees with Saṃghasena's and the Newars'. After the ascetic Tārāvaloka has been consecrated as king by his father, he is promoted by the goddess Lakṣmī to become the ruler of the *vidyādhara*s, mythical creatures endowed with magical powers and usually residing in remote Himalayan regions: "There having enjoyed overlordship and having absorbed the [magical and secret] knowledge [of the *vidyādhara*s] he at a certain point became detached and retired to an ascetic grove (*tatropabhuktasāmrājyaś ciraṃ vidyābhir āśritaḥ / kālenotpannavairāgyas tapovanam aśiśriyat //* KSS 113.97). Just like Bisvaṃtara, Tārāvaloka does not return to his father's kingdom, but differently from Bisvaṃtara he does keep his wife and does accept kingship, and, again like Bisvaṃtara, he finally ends up renouncing for good. Though Tārāvaloka's story may be slightly more convoluted than that of Bisvaṃtara, who only renounces once, both heroes, in addition to receiving heavenly praise, undergo a transformation. While Bisvaṃtara has acquired a dharma body, Tārāvaloka has "absorbed" (*āśritaḥ*) *vidyādhara* techniques, among which feature prominently those of

36. Durt, "Offering," 153, 164–65. As Durt points out, there are echoes of this in the *Bhaiṣajyavastu* 66a18–19, where the first Brahman is Indra and the second has been put a spell upon by Indra (T. 1448, 68.a15–17).

37. It is obvious that the Newars have been aware of endings diverging from that of their own story throughout the history of the tale in the Kathmandu Valley: as we have seen, manuscripts of the Kashmiri versions are well represented in Kathmandu Valley archives and I have pointed out before that Newar traders in Lhasa would have been likely to have attended the *Dri med kun ldan* performances there. More recently, Theravāda institutions have exposed Kathmandu Valley Buddhists increasingly to the Pāli version beyond the interest of Newar intellectuals in the canonical sources, particularly in the guise of its Burmese retelling. In 2005 I attended a narration of the *Wethandaya Zatdaw* at the meditation center called Antarrāṣṭriya Bauddha Bhāvanā Kendra in Kathmandu. The narrative kept very close to the Burmese schoolbook version documented by O. White; see also Goss, *The Story of We-Than-Da-Ya*.

38. For a translation see KSS tr. Tawney, vol. 2, 498–503.

alchemical orientation that, usually through the ingestion of metals, make the ascetic body refined, incorruptible, and everlasting.[39] And it may be that there are echoes of such a magical enrichment, a final *saṃskāra* resulting in the newly perfected dharma body through which Bisvaṃtara, the *siddha*, exits the Newar narrative.

One may suspect, not without reason, that those versions that end with the hero in the wilderness are less about him as a king than about him as an ascetic, or, more precisely, less about the employment of the ascetic topos for the reformulation of kingship than about the employment of the topos of kingship for the reformulation of asceticism. The Theravādins' Vessantara, the Mūlasarvāstivādins', Ārya Śūra's, and Kṣemendra's Viśvaṃtara, Vālmīki's Rāma, as well as the purāṇic Hariścandra, have in common that their stories end well because they are ultimately bound for kingship, resolving and yet containing the tragedies that unfolded along the way, as David Shulman and following him Steven Collins have pointed out.[40] The Newar Bisvaṃtara, Saṃghasena's *bodhisattva*-prince, and Somadeva's Tārāvaloka are all disinclined to rule, and the happy ending in their case consists in their final and irreversible renunciation. Though, at least in terms of their ending, the second type of narrative may be reminiscent of the hagiographies of Buddha Śākyamuni, they are consistently not about outright rejecting life in the palace or kingship. Rather, all the latter protagonists simply forgo it temporarily or for good because conditions are created that prevent them from succeeding their respective fathers. In all the cases the decision in favor of asceticism is not one of dramatic renunciation, but one in which, on the contrary, compliance with society's demands and expectations leads the protagonists to further demonstrate their superhuman capacity to abstain. Conditions emerging during their penance, an invitation to return or the lack of such an offer, the proposition of an alternative kingship, or simply the wish to pursue their ascetic activity bring about one or the other ending.[41]

Whether the Newar version owes its ending to the narrative's place within the Eighth-Day Observance is unclear. It will remain difficult, if not impossible, to say how much earlier than the earliest Newar manuscript I am aware of (i.e., 1749/50) the Newar version was composed. To be sure, and as we have seen, this ending is not a Newar invention, but a feature of the story accepted and transmitted as part of the narrative parcel that arrived and was accepted in the Kathmandu Valley. Hence, the eventually husband-less family is not one which a local oral commentator may have sarcastically added, but one built into a version of the story that may have found its domestication in many homes, possibly as a part of various and related ritual contexts, and which may have travelled among many locales independently

39. David Gordon White refers to a ritual called *vedha* (piercing) mentioned in the *Kulārṇava Tantra*: "This is the eighteenth and final *saṃskāra*, known as *śarīra-yoga*, 'body Work' or 'transubstantiation'. In this final operation, the alchemist will generally hold in his mouth a solid 'pill' (*guṭikā*) of mercury, which will gradually penetrate his body and so transmute it into an immortal golden, diamond or perfected body" (*Alchemical Body*, 314–15). For the connection of these processes with *vidyādhara*s and mountains see pp. 323–34. Here White refers to the *Kaulajñānanirṇaya* attributed to the *siddha* Matsyendranāth, the yogic celebrity who, as mentioned above, is identified with Lokanātha Avalokiteśvara, to whom the Eighth-Day Vow is dedicated.

40. Shulman quoted in Collins, *Nirvāṇa*, 499–502.

41. Though Śākyamuni as narrator is found in both the Pāli and the Newar versions and the placement of this birth-story close by the *bodhisattva*'s last birth may suggest a thematic connection between the two princes, Buddha Śākyamuni's narrative may be part of a third plot type of active rejection of kingship either as a prince or as a king, found as a sub-plot in the above-mentioned stories such as Tārāvaloka relinquishing his suzerainty over the *vidyādhara*s or Bisvaṃtara's father renouncing his throne. This paradigm is central to the narratives of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* (YV), where the framing narrative is about Rāma, who grows weary of his impending kingship and considers forsaking it, only to be convinced by the sage Vasiṣṭha, in an argument reminiscent of that of the *Bhāgavadgītā*, to hold back. One of the stories told to the prince by Vasiṣṭha is the story of King Śikhidhvaja, who actually gives up kingship and is joined by his wife Cūḍālā (YV VI.1.77–109).

from being domesticated in the Kathmandu Valley. To write a history of its emergence and development in the literature of the Kathmandu Valley will require a more detailed look at the extant manuscripts, possibly without much hope, in view of the manuscripts' late date, of firmly establishing its historical route of provenance.[42] But a protagonist who remains suspended in penance and acquires a superhuman body approximating him to the lone forest monk, to the *bodhisattva* who is at the center of the event's worship, and to the *siddha*-like *vajrācārya* does fit both the ritual intention and the ascetic, devotional, and self-empowering stance taken by those who undergo the Eighth-Day Vow.

One should keep in mind that in the Kathmandu Valley, historically the Newar kingdoms' monarchs, not to speak of the later Gorkha dynasty, usually came closest to being Buddhist inasmuch as they supported Buddhist institutions. If one additionally considers that the extant versions of the story of Bisvaṃtara and their increased production fall in a period of a triumphant and firmly ensconced house of Gorkha, supported by a rejuvenated Śaiva ritual establishment oriented at least as much towards perceived North Indian orthodoxies as towards local Newar power groups, it would not seem surprising that a version that depicts Buddhist asceticism rather than Buddhist kingship as a model for Newar householders would make eminent sense to a Newar Buddhist public and ritual community. And yet, as most of the ritual and narrative has shown us and as we shall see in the concluding sections of this study, a historiography of this kind is probably one of the lesser worries of those who participate in the telling of this story.

AFTER BISVAṂTARA

As least as striking as the fact that the Newar Bisvaṃtara abandons his prospects for kingship is that he thereby effectively abandons his own story. The narrative at this point seems to leave its protagonist behind, turning to others, thus being able to expand the boundaries of its events beyond the actual presence of its hero. It may not be the hero's actual fate, which is shared with other versions, but the nonchalance with which the narrator continues to tell the story after some of us may expect it to be over already that makes for the uniqueness of the Newar narrative. After the repatriation of wife and children and Indra's epiphany, this text returns (BRK 72) to its meta-narrative, ritually self-conscious, and here most eminently self-reflexive stance by having Madrī and their children tell the king, the queen, and the minister nothing less than "the story of King Bisvaṃtara" (*Bisvantara rājāyāgu kha*). After this King Sibi makes an announcement on this matter to his subjects and, together with his reformed minister, instructs them to celebrate (how could it be otherwise?) the Eighth-Day Vow of Lokanātha Avalokiteśvara (BRK 73–74). After having brought (*bijyātakāo*) the *bodhisattva* in the form of his image (as Lienhard interprets it, *Die Legende*, 70 n. 44), the king initiates a fire sacrifice performed by the *rājāguru* functioning as *purohita* and has the *upādhyāya* give a sermon (*byākhyāna yātakāo*), all as part of a major celebration of the vow. In line with what was said above regarding the text-image discrepancy, the painted episode (BRK plate

42. While a look at non-Buddhist versions is useful to contextualize the Newar (and not only the Newar) text, Lienhard's assumption that the ending of the Newar versions is due to "Hindu tendencies and the strongly syncretistic spirit which presumably dominated in the Kathmandu Valley since very early" ("hinduistische Tendenzen und der stark synkretistische Geist, der im Kathmandu-Tal vermutlich schon sehr früh geherrscht hat," *Die Legende*, 18; cf. 233 n. 48) does not explain why the Newar ending should be particularly "Hindu," erroneously presupposes the Pāli version as a model *for* rather than having possibly only a historically earlier verse core *than* all other Buddhist versions, does not take into account Saṃghasena's version as a possible early Buddhist predecessor of the Newar one, and tacitly dismisses the fact that, as we have seen, both "Hindu" and "Buddhist" versions, both in Nepal and beyond, may share either ending.

XXIII, scene 75) presents the viewer with a setup familiar even to modern-day witnesses of a Newar votive event: the *vajrācārya* conducts the fire sacrifice and his ritual associate, the *upādhyāya* to his left, handles a manuscript and seems to preach to a courtly crowd in the presence of the figure of a white Avalokiteśvara, present also at the first Eighth-Day Vow (BRK plate II, scene 5) and at the beginning of the scroll (BRK plate I, scene 2). Repeating the first *aṣṭamīvrata* performance, here too in its wake the king copiously donates to *bhikṣu*s and Brahmans. King Sibi then proceeds to take the dramatic step, again reminiscent of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the preoccupation with installing a crown prince (*yuvarāja*) to succeed weary Daśaratha, of first announcing and then performing the royal consecration (*rājyābhiṣeka*) of his grandson Jālini, henceforth referred to as *kumārarāja* 'boy king' (BRK 76–78). Durt ("Offering," 177) has pointed at the more substantial role Jālini plays in what he calls the "Northern tradition" of the tale. In a variant mirroring of Bisvaṃtara's departure, King Sibi too (BRK 79–80), to the distress of the crown prince and his entire family, relinquishes his royal responsibilities, takes on the ascetic's vow (*tapasyābrata*), leaves the kingdom of Bidarbhā, and "in an ascetic's grove practiced austerities for a long time" (*tapobanasa tākāraṃ tapasyā yāṅāo*). The story ends with a paragraph stating that Bidarbhā was now jointly governed by Crown-prince Jālini, Queen Madrī, Princess Kṣṇājinī, and the minister, who all "ruled happily ever after" (*rajayi calaya yāsyaṃ ānandana bijyāka jula*, BRK 81).[43]

In this last part it is King Sibi who becomes the protagonist. He mimics his son by abandoning (or rather donating?) his kingdom and heading for the life of an ascetic. That leaves only Jālini as Prince Regent in a position similar to that in which Vessantara or Viśvaṃtara ends up in other versions, only as the crown's representative within a joint royal family steering committee. This continuation of the story without its main protagonist can be understood through a perceptive remark of Lienhard's. When referring to the concluding frame, reminding us that it was the Buddha who told this story, Lienhard (*Die Legende*, 70 n. 47) points at the easily overlooked fact that here, syntactically, the reference to "the birth the Buddha took there" (*thao janma kāyāgu)* is not to King Bisvaṃtara, but to "the story of King Bisvaṃtara" (*Bisvaṃtara rājāyāgu kha*, BRK 82). In its ritual context storytelling comes first and the protagonist second. He is only relevant because he is part of a story, only insofar as he *has* a story, and more than that: only insofar as he propels the story forward. The story is the protagonist and the protagonist is his story. Would this not also indicate that Bisvaṃtara, who turns into a *dharmaśarīra*, does become indistinguishable from his own *dharmakathā*?

While the actions of King Sibi can still be read as his son's powerful example extending beyond the limits of his narrative everyday presence, the preoccupation with the handling of power in the kingdom after the departure of the first in line to the throne and the incumbent may be nothing more than a more comprehensive way of prefacing that "they" (actually "the others") "lived happily ever after." And yet, it does try to achieve closure after a series of spectacular abdications and maintains a fine balance between the eccentric and shining example of the ascetic stars of the family and the conscientiousness of those who make sure that the kingdom prospers. It is the latter in whom the ritual worshippers, concluding their vow, could recognize themselves. It is the ritual worshippers who contribute towards the prosperity of the king who rules them and who in turn ensures, as part of his royal duty, that the Eighth-Day Vow can be practiced again and again and that the story of Bisvaṃtara can

43. In the version recorded in Lienhard's unpublished *Viśvaṃtarakathā* (ViK 50r; *Die Legende*, 216 n. 46), while the prince's family is also said to live happily ever after, the king acts less dramatically than in the scroll version. He remains on the throne and instead, with his mind set only on his son (*putra Bisvaṃtara rājakumārayāgu nāma jukva kāyāo*), commits to making generous donations (*ddharmmadāna yānāo*), as if becoming a Biśvaṃtara on the throne.

be told and retold. Viewed this way, the panoramic version, so to speak, of the story of King Bisvaṃtara is less about zooming out from a hypothetical core plot, adding on frames and vistas to include more of the effects the central figures have on its world. Rather it is about finding a place for Bisvaṃtara and placing him within a variegated texture of commitments and agendas, of literary, ritual, visual, or doctrinal conventions and expectations specific (but not restricted) to and actually transcending the historical situation in and around the Kathmandu Valley around the middle of the nineteenth century, as well as within the liturgical setup of the Eighth-Day Vow. And it is the story of that protagonist which is used, changed, and reassembled to find a ritual place for its protagonist and to allow him to have a range of effects on the listeners and viewers. In that sense, the hagiography of the generous prince is broken up and reassembled to build something that resembles much more the hagiography of the Newar family as the ideal family. The members of that family, imagined as a royal one, go different ways, sometimes diverging (like Bisvaṃtara and his wife and children), sometimes converging (his wife and his children, and one could add the minister), sometimes parallel (Bisvaṃtara and his father). A range of roles, goals, activities, and life stories are possible, kept together and focused upon by the final frame of the story. It is again the same imagined family that undergoes the shared activity of the Eighth-Day Vow and for whose happiness it is conducted. And it may not be a coincidence that this ritual's story's ending finds Bisvaṃtara's wife as the senior-most non-renouncing, household-managing family member, someone in whom the mostly female participants of the vow may want to recognize themselves, at the center of a family thoroughly renewed and reorganized by a devotion with dramatic centrifugal effects. Capturing the story of Bisvaṃtara within a comprehensive ritual practice may be one way of domesticating the text the Newar way. But it is a domestication the performance of which is left in great part to the woman and transfigured by a renunciation of her own that she is forced to live with.[44]

CONCLUSION

A transmuted generous prince persisting in renunciation, dramatically emulated by his father with kingship casually passed on to the grandson, is a plot line that may have implications not only for our understanding of South Asian royalty. It also complicates models conceiving of Newar Buddhism, and Buddhism beyond Nepal, as propelled in its domestication by the upholding of values centered on the lay community, the family, and women. This study has tried to direct our attention to the reverse side of domestication: How family-oriented, how domestic is a literary household in which the protagonist becomes and remains ascetic? How, for his Newar public, does the ascetic resist community, family, and marital obligations and allow for the imagining of a life beyond the civilized world of the Nepalese royal realm? Could this story be an opportunity to think about how the individual only emerges from within the communal, the renouncer only from within his family? This is no monk who becomes a householder, as some narratives of the vicissitudes of Newar Buddhism and the ritual performances of Newar Buddhist life-cycle rituals themselves may have suggested.

44. Interestingly it is in Saṃghasena's version, i.e., the only other Buddhist one ending with the prince not returning, that, as Durt has pointed out, Madrī is depicted as the strongest and most self-reliant princely wife ("Casting-off," 143–44). Another tale prominent in Newar Buddhist literature in which the prince does not return and the wife remains separated from her ascetic husband is that of Yaśodharā from the *Bhadrakalpāvadāna*, studied by Joel Tatelman ("The Trials of Yaśodharā"; *The Trials of Yaśodharā: A Critical Edition*). With the *bodhisattva*'s wife there moving along an ascetic trajectory of her own without the prospect of a reunion with her husband, and her offspring destined for renunciation themselves, we have a comparable, yet very different, view of the effects of the husband's religious aspirations on family and of what it may mean to be a woman.

Conversely, this story seems to be speaking primarily to women, who are encouraged to imagine their husband going homeless, who are urged to understand the anti-family side of the various ideals he may be expected to follow. The woman as *pativratā*, i.e., she who has taken the vow to be a good wife, may be asked to develop the ability to imagine herself following him onto the path of perfection right up to the bitter end. As a consequence, she becomes the very last gift he can offer. She is divorced from her husband in the culmination of his merit-making and his ultimate and irrevocable un-becoming a householder. Hence, it is not just the wife, who takes care of the home, versus the justifiably homeless husband. It is the performance of the paradox that the ideal of the domestic, when applied to a conjugal partnership in which one role of the husband is to pursue the eccentric renunciatory path, implies that the wife renounce the husband as he renounces her. The new domestic life of the family within the undomesticated wilderness of Mt. Baṃka is only stage one in a process that ultimately leads to the lonely de-domesticated man in his hut, as it is only thus that he will be able to acquire a dharma body. In short, this story is about understanding the constant thrust of the husband towards the ascetic as part of the challenges, limitations, and ultimately gender-specific transcendence of domesticity. And in the Newar version there is no hope for the wife that all this will lead to his ultimately moving back into his father's palace with her as his queen. Rather, the wife will end up as a single parent within her extended family, ruling her house and the kingdom together with her son, the king.

To be clear, this scenario is primarily and exclusively imaginary: no ordinary Newar Buddhist wife has to fear being given away to a phantasmagorical Brahman and no Newar man finds himself under the pressure to work out a dharma body. And yet, as in the *Svasthānīvratakathā*, marital suffering, whether of high or low intensity, or if only as a conversational topos when discussing marriage, undergoes a literary, narrative, and religious transfiguration when it is represented as the de-domesticating tendency towards domestically outrageous behavior, in this case firmly embedded in its rationalization as asceticism in pursuit of the perfections of the *bodhisattva*. The Newar version of the tale of the generous prince gives Newar women the opportunity to think about the personal anxieties and the social expectations centering on the domestic and represented by marriage. The domestic is a complex which mobilizes those narrative and ritual themes that express forces that both threaten to tear the domestic apart and scatter its protagonists into a prefigured and imagined forest-monk wilderness full of demanding wayfarers, appreciative *ṛṣi*s, and divine changelings. But, in a way, the story strives to accommodate the wishes of a wife who is expected to enable, yet never fully to participate, in her husband's outrageous fortune, who is advised to accept her husband's absence and her own enhanced domestic powers, as if he was already living in a better place and not be expected to return anytime soon. The story and the practices that call it to life do not so much celebrate the successful ritual completion of the final phase of the male *āśrama* sequence. Rather, they reconfigure the domestic under the conditions of its imagined breakdown.

The interpenetration of ritual and narrative throughout the texture of the story points at something similar: at the reverse of a text and a ritual looking for its locale and its historical setting. The way the story seems to get absorbed into the ritual and the way the ritual seems to acquire a narrative body resembles a process in which both close around each other, begin to relate primarily to each other in a movement that seems to seal them off both from local references and idiomatic peculiarities. The story shedding the idiosyncrasies of its improvising narrator, his voice, his accent, its interruptions, its being told once, here and then, attains the recursive stereotypy and prescriptive legality of the ideal ritual. The ritual, in turn, comes to life not in the peculiar liturgical style of its main priest or in the interaction with

its improvising sponsors, but in a legendary tale in which it can actually effect, accentuate, and propel some spectacular action. The story is not just a story that one is told and that the audience may tune in or out of, but one that is liturgically implemented. The ritual is not just a manual, a prescription running the risk of not being adequately followed, but the narrative of its own success. Together, story and ritual are much more magnificent and beautiful than on their own, particularly because they may help each other to free themselves from as many contingencies as possible, because they can allow each other, even while being, as we have seen, so thoroughly built out of the stuff that Kathmandu Valley culture is made of, to extract themselves from the locale in which they happen and the time they are given. Story and ritual together are the place and the time into which its local and domesticating individuals can imaginatively and performatively remove themselves from their own domus for the duration of the event. Together ritual and story accomplish something which Sheldon Pollock ("Mīmāṃsā," 610) has suggested with regard to the *purāṇa*s, being "merely another texualization of eternity," in which the authors and redactors "eliminated historical referentiality and with it all possibility of historiography."

While domestication may be the conceptualization of our (and here I include the Newars) hope and our legitimate intention to historicize the way the Newars have dealt with Buddhism, the *Bisvaṃtara rājāyāgu kathā* shows us that we may hereby be swimming against the current of what, through story and ritual, the Newars (and should I include us?) are also, and powerfully so, trying to do. Writing the Newar life-cycle into Bisvaṃtara's hagiography, featuring the *vajrācārya*s as ritual specialists, attaching the story to a specific sacred site in the Valley, approximating local literary and visual idioms, to name just a few—all this may be only one aspect of the process we may call domestication. At the same time text, image, and ritual connect with, attach themselves to, close themselves around, and weave themselves into each other to create an artifact or an event that removes itself from the contingencies of the domestic and simulates its place- and timelessness, from which it draws a different kind of authority and beauty. Both go together: while the aperture of domestication makes the Newar version of the story of the generous prince resemble that which is taken to be representative of powers that tie it down and make it retrievable and deployable by local agents and institutions, it is this other movement of self-referentiality, self-absorption, and closure that, issuing from the domestic, gives it the power to be an image, not of the familiar, but of the perfect world.

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