The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies
HIMALAYA

Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 21
Number 1 *Himalayan Research Bulletin; Nepal After the Revolution*

Article 6

2001

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Todd Lewis
College of the Holy Cross

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Recommended Citation
Lewis, Todd (2001) "In Memorium: Richard Kohn (1948-2000)," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 21: No. 1, Article 6.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol21/iss1/6

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In Memorium

Richard Kohn
(1948-2000)

The community of Himalayan scholars lost one of its most kind and original members May 28th, 2000, when Richard Jay Kohn died in Kensington, California. Ricky was beloved for his rare combination of insight and compassion, and respected globally as an expert on Tibetan Buddhist art and ritual who generously taught, wrote, and shared his unflagging good humor. In addition to being a Research Associate at the University of California-Berkeley, Richard also taught at Indiana University and the University of California- Santa Cruz. He is survived by his wife Marianne Betterly-Kohn and their son Jack, age 9.

After Ph.D. coursework at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Kohn received a Fulbright Fellowship and for over five years researched Tibetan Buddhism in Nepal, particularly in Solu-Khumbu. He translated ritual texts and studied the major festivals, most notably the Sherpa's Mani Rimdu rituals. His award-winning documentary film, *Lord of the Dance / Destroyer of Illusion* (1985), shows Ricky's precise scholarship and commitment to depict Tibetan Buddhism as it is for the typical Tibetan. As he once wrote, "Rituals are what most Tibetan monks spend most of the time doing. If we want to understand these people on their own terms, we should look at their rituals." A book on this subject is being published by State University of New York Press this year, *Lord of the Dance: The Mani Rimdu Festival in Tibet and Nepal.*

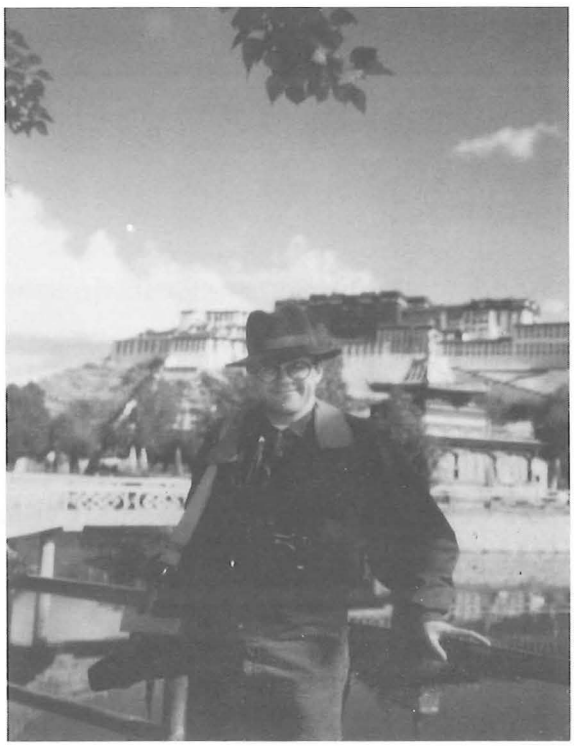
Based on his extensive knowledge of Tibetan art and its ritual uses, Dr. Kohn served as Associate Curator at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, working especially for the *Wisdom and Compassion* exhibit on Tibetan art held there in 1991. He also was a major contributor to the volume of the same name that documented and interpreted this exhibit. Richard was also instrumental in establishing the Tibetan and Himalayan Religions group in the American Academy of Religion in the early 1990's.

I met Richard in 1979, having arrived a few weeks after him to begin my doctoral research in Nepal. Although few know this, it was Ricky who successfully argued to the ambassador that Fulbright grantees should

receive embassy medical care as well as other benefits, a policy that benefited hundreds of subsequent grantees. In the early 1980's, as we labored to find our niches as scholars in often trying urban Kathmandu, Ricky was always eager to observe Newar festivals, thoughtfully alerted me to unusual events in the local Tibetan world, and talked late into the night about a host of comparative themes in Buddhism in which we were both interested.

What I remember about him most fondly, however, is his wit and unexcelled sense of humor. Strike-related power outages, visa entanglements, dysentery, or landlord problems? Through whatever came up, Ricky helped me and many others keep
perspective. His house was a salon of sorts that welcomed an assortment of scholars, expats, shamans, and lamas from every direction, with Ricky ever the cultured host offering unfailing hospitality, insight, and solutions. The music there was always fresh and the wine ready. I had always hoped that Ricky would write on the anthropology of expatriot life in Kathmandu then, including one nexus that was often as interesting to us as Nepalese Buddhism: the Marine Bar on Saturday nights, where Peace Corps volunteers mixed with embassy *wallahs,* USAID officers, Marines, and the miscellaneous others like us.

One obituary's characterization of Richard as "combining the taste of a count with the soul of a poet" cannot be improved upon. His being a gentleman scholar was especially evident at an American Academy of Religion panel in 1995. He was one of three American scholars invited to review an important new book on Tibetan Buddhism, with the author present to respond to their assessments. After the tenured professors wielded their sharp rhetorical knives without much compassion for the author, it was Ricky who seemed the most human-hearted scholar as he skillfully interwove critique with appreciation. All who knew him will miss his acute intelligence, his unique insights into Buddhism, and his ever-compassionate human warmth.

In addition to the films and book mentioned, Richard Kohn's other major publications are: "Trance Dances and Aeroplanes: Montage and Metaphor in Ethnographic Film," *Yearbook of Visual Anthropology 1,* 1993; "The God of the Plain" and "The *Torma* Empowerment," in Donald Lopez, Jr. ed. *Religions Of Tibet in Practice* (Princeton University Press, 1997); "The Ritual Preparation of a Tibetan Sand Mandala," in A.W. MacDonald, ed. *Mandala and Landscape* (Kathmandu: DK Printworld, 1997); "Women in Himalayan Buddhism," in *Encyclopedia of Women in World Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1998).

Todd Lewis, College of the Holy Cross