Identify the need that you are meeting. If you are supporting researchers, you can explain why the research that they are doing is important and whom it affects. Explain the importance of this need and how the work that you are doing will impact it.

The need we are meeting with this project is helping in the movement to preserve the cultural heritage of Nepal and Buddhism. We are making a website that will host a navigable 3D model of Swayambhu, one of the oldest temples in Nepal. This website will have annotations and information that provides context for the cultural heritage site. This includes audio, video, photos and text annotations that illustrate the many meanings of Swayambhu and its deep significance to the diverse local and international communities that focus their ritual and cultural lives there.

This is an urgent need due to two factors threatening Swayambhu and other cultural heritage sites nearby. The first is more tangible: Swayambhu is situated in the Kathmandu Valley which has seen increasing number of earthquakes and natural disasters every year. It recently was struck by an earthquake in 2015 and required extensive construction to repair. Thus, in the case of a disaster, where Swayambhu is completely annihilated, having a record of the important cultural site will be integral to preserving this important piece of culture. Further, due to increased globalization and modernization in Nepal, driven by development, many aspects of the culture at these sites is rapidly changing. This makes it more important to preserve it through filming ritual practices, recording interviews with Buddhist monks, and capturing the rich narrative that exists there today. Further, after recording these pieces of culture, we can use them to contextualize the 3D model on our website and give students and researchers a way to learn about this heritage site, even if it is drastically different in the future.

As professor Leve said, “Our goal is to create a dynamic user-experience where, for example, a visitor to the site might click somewhere in the model and hear an old man talking about visiting the site as a child, what it was like back then, and how he loved to play with the object that the visitor clicked on while his grandpa performed prayers. Or they might click elsewhere to access an explanation of an object and a link to another page containing a video of someone doing a ritual that uses it. Clicking in a different location might bring up a monk telling a story of how a Buddhist deity produced monkeys at the temple from the lice in a yogi’s hair, or a list of statues that have been stolen from the premises that are now in private collections or European museums, or a pilgrim explaining that she came to the stupa to complete the death rituals for her mother…” These stories would otherwise be lost forever without an active effort to preserve and share them.

By having this website, a part of Buddhist and Nepalese culture and history will be preserved and serve as a record of the tangible and intangible religious heritage in Nepal. The first-person navigation of the model gives users a similar experience as visiting the site! Further, we hope to support multiple languages which would increase accessibility to this information.