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Transformation of Consciousness through Suffering, Devotion, and Meditation

This paper deals with the spiritual and personal development of shamans and mediums in Central Nepal. It is based on the work I have done with traditional healers in Central Nepal. The study was carried out from 1984 to 2005 for the total duration of 36 months.¹

Initially I focused on Tamang shamans living in the middle hills east of Kathmandu Valley. The Tamang constitute the largest ethnic minority in Nepal. They came from the southern part of Tibet and speak a Tibeto-Burmese language (Bista 1967:52ff). A great number of shamans can be found among the Tamang. Especially in the multi-cultural areas of Central Nepal, a large part of their clientele are members of other ethnic groups, because it is the healers' reputation rather than their cultural background that attracts customers. During those inter-ethnic consultations Nepali, the *lingua franca* of Central Nepal, is spoken.

Due to economic and political pressures, more and more people of all ethnic groups have moved from the middle hills to the Kathmandu Valley. This in turn has resulted in an increasingly dense population of predominantly low-status people who strive to make a living and due to bad working conditions have a lot of health problems. To visit hospitals, that may sometimes be rather poorly equipped, is a fairly expensive and alienating undertaking. Furthermore, Western-style doctors usually do not offer treatment for psychosocial problems and provide no emotional support for those who do not come to terms with their new living conditions, especially children who have been sent to town by their parents in order to make some cash for increasing the family income.

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Due to the changing social situation, the study focused on intercultural therapies, with a special emphasis on the following basic issues: How much common background or assumptions about the world and the functioning and values of societies is necessary for rendering intercultural therapies effective? Which roles do the myths, that have been handed down the generations, play for successful healing of patients? What has become of shared knowledge and worldview in an interethnic setting? What are the similarities and differences in the healing methods applied by various specialists? An investigation of this kind calls for the integration of different types of traditional healers belonging to different ethnic groups. In Central Nepal healers who establish a strong connection to the spiritual domain are mainly shamans, mediums and tantrics. The tantrics were difficult to approach because their practice is based on a secret body of knowledge that is accessible only to few people, and in addition a fair number of them do not use their abilities for healing.

The mediums and shamans may differ in their contact with the spiritual world. Even though Reinhard (1976:16), in his definition of a shaman, states that he or she either becomes possessed (that is the case for a medium as well) *or* goes on a magical flight, there are considerable cultural differences. Because of that I use the term medium for those who are *not* in the Himalayan tradition, and reserve the term shaman for those healers among the ethnic minorities in the middle hills of Nepal who have also migrated into the Kathmandu Valley.

Most of the mediums in the Kathmandu Valley belong to the ethnic group of Newar. They are the original inhabitants of the Valley and still comprise a large percentage of the population. They have their own language, Newari, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language group (Bista 1967:16ff, Gellner 1994:30). Due to continued migration into the valley there is an ongoing shift in population and cultural dominance. Today there are also non Newar mediums and Newar healers who work more in the style of shamans and trace their shamanic power back to their forefathers. They even claim to have received some paraphernalia handed down from ancestors and to have learned ritual techniques from them. One Tamang healer I have met calls herself a tantric, but she has not undergone a formal initiation specific for tantrics, and the mantras she works with have not been given to her by a human teacher but in her dreams and visions. Some of the shamans who belong mainly to the groups of Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Sherpa, Chetri and Brahmin have changed traditional healing methods, partly because a

lack of traditional knowledge, and partly because of the need or pressure to adjust to the multi-cultural area they live in. The question arises to what extent the concepts of illness causation and the understanding of symbolic therapeutic actions have to be shared by healers and patients. According to most traditional healers it is the connection with deities and tutelary spirits that is crucial in order to make the treatments effective.

THE CALLING

Shamans and mediums usually have a calling experience, which signifies that they have been chosen by a spiritual power to become a healer. Often the experience is not recognized as such right away, and the chosen person's unusual behavior is at first interpreted as a disturbance of her or his well-being for a variety of reasons. The cause to which the disturbance is attributed depends on the chosen person's social environment and the interests of lay people or the point of view of medical specialists who make the diagnosis. Thus, there are often contradicting assumptions regarding the cause of a person's unusual behaviour.

Pfeiffer (1994:213) has pointed out that maybe we should not speak of an initial illness but of a crisis. When an ordinary illness is cured, the person can go back to her or his life. In contrast, due to the experiences the person has undergone she or he probably has grown and can continue life on a higher level. A crisis will definitely change people's life; if someone is able to overcome the crisis he or she will move on as a more mature person; but if a crisis is not resolved, the chances are high of gliding into pathology. A calling experience is obligatory and if it is not complied with it will lead to death or madness. In any case, a call will bring with it a lot of difficulties. Therefore most of the chosen persons beg the deities to stop the process, because they are afraid of the changes in their lives, the confrontation with the illness-causing powers and the suffering they will have to go through. In addition, they can never be sure that they will overcome the crisis and become respected persons who are likely to be re-integrated in their communities.

A shaman's or a medium's crisis often starts with a period of disturbing events that cause indisposition or a feeling of being ill due to unknown reasons. The hardships that persons usually have to undergo in the course of the process of becoming healers are expressed in differ-

ent ways. The following narration of a female medium is centred round the difficulties in her life and her suffering, up to the point when she considered committing suicide:

“Sixteen years after my marriage I got my first child. That time my husband started to drink a lot of alcohol and gave me more and more trouble. I was very sad and I did not want to stay with him anymore. I felt like going somewhere to kill myself. Until I did not have a child he made me feel very bad about not having a child, and now I have a child, but he does not feed it. Where could I go to have peace? I thought there was no use to live on, even though people would say bad things about me. To continue living with him would not do any good. Then I said to myself “just go to the field”. Because my financial situation was very bad, one family let me work on their field for my livelihood. As long as I was working on the field they would not take it back. One day, when I was very depressed, I went to the field to cut paddy. Suddenly something came on my leg. First it was a very small snake that felt cold on my skin. When I looked around it came to my shoulder where I felt some kind of heaviness. I did not know what had come up on my body. Later on I saw that the snake was standing right behind me. When I saw that it was standing on its tail, I thought that it must be Bhagwān. Then I took a bunch of paddy where the snake could crawl onto and put it on the ground. Right after that I felt a sensation like electric current running through my body. First I did not know what to do, but then I thought if I stay on the field, my husband would not come to see me there, nobody would come to see me there. I called the two women who were working on the field next to mine to show them the snake. I told them that it was very small before, but now it is so big. That was Bhagwān who had come to me, because there was so much hardship in my life, so much poverty, and I was not able to go anywhere. Because I wanted to die, Bhagwān came to help me and gave me the power to heal other people.”

The medium told that she was nine years old when she became very sick for the first time. After that she was fine until she got married at the age of eighteen. For days she was in a strange state crying, laughing, screaming and beating her husband. She was taken to a local healer and later also to a hospital where the doctor said that nothing was wrong with her and there was no need to bring her to the hospital.

In the case of this woman, the resentments of family members of the older generation who were afraid that the traditional life-style and

social order could be endangered were an important factor for prolonging her suffering. Especially the parents-in-law refused to accept her calling, because as a healer she should not bow down to their feet, sit lower than they or touch anything polluted by them, such as food leftovers or dirty clothes. Eventually this obstacle was overcome and the medium was able to set up a regular practice.

One Newar medium had problems with her family members who were not religious and did not believe that mediums could be effective healers. Her father was a politician who considered it as inappropriate that his daughter was a medium. She was expected to be a good housewife, taking care of all the practical matters in the home. Only when her mother became seriously ill and was cured by her daughter she was finally acknowledged as a healer.

A male medium had extraordinary experiences from his early childhood that were due to his special connection with Hariti Mā. She is the Buddhist goddess of smallpox, who is believed to be a spirit (*yaksa*) converted to Buddhism and the guardian of young children (Gellner 2001:2003). Although this medium had to suffer a lot, because it was not realized that a deity had come over him, he was also protected by the goddess so that nothing serious or life threatening would happen to him. When, finally, Hariti spoke through him, it was also his legitimisation that he would become a powerful healer. Despite the suffering he took his experiences more lightly, at least afterwards when he was already a well-established healer. The way he told his life story interspersed with funny incidents made his listeners laugh and difficult events lay in the past:

“I was very sick (*bimāri*) for a long time. One health assistant came and gave injections, he gave injections for such a long time and nobody knew what was wrong with me. He checked my pulse and said that nothing bad would happen. He always gave medicine to me. Then one time a man from the village who traded with buffaloes came. My grandfather asked him what was happening to his grandchild. At that time nobody was able to move my head that was standing straight like a rock and I had become very thin. The man from the village said that the head should not be kept like that. Doctors had already given so much medicine to me. Then the man took some rice and checked my problem and

said: ‘Alas! You should do *pujā*² for Mā!’ Following his advice I was getting better every day.”

Like in other narrations it was emphasized that Western-type medicine is of no use for problems of this kind. Sometimes it is even considered as a treatment that could make the condition of the suffering person worse. Only the man from the village realized that Hariti Mā had an influence on the young man, who should manifest devotion to the deity. Later in life his condition became again very serious:

“After I had married off my daughter, I was possessed very often. At that time I was throwing things here and there and made much mess in the house. Everyone was so scared that my brother decided to bring the army doctor from nearby. They tried to calm me down and I was given an injection in my buttock. It was so painful! I asked the army doctor why he had given me an injection, because there are no cuts and no fever. Then I became unconscious. As soon as I was awake I behaved like mad again. Then they took me to the hospital. I said to someone: “you are not a doctor”, and he replied: “Prabhu³, you are in tension!” Why should I have been in tension? I did not have any problem. The doctor was so surprised and said: “It is not like this, Prabhu.” Later they also wanted to give oxygen to me, but I told them that I did not need any oxygen and pulled the tube out. Finally they sent me back to the house. ... Some time later they brought a shaman. He started to do a healing ritual for me and went on for such a long time. I grabbed the little broom from him and said: “How can you heal me with this?”⁴ After that he left the house, the doctor and the health assistant were also gone. You could ask those people who were sitting here at that time. And then it was all over. I poured a bucket of water on myself and took a bath. Everyone realized that something had changed. It was around ten years ago. Since then I have a lot of power.”

The Nepali word *bimāri* means sick, but its connotation is extensive, ranging from just not feeling well to being seriously ill. When he told about the incidents with the doctors, of course, he understood them from the point of view of his present life. Injections and oxygen seemed as crazy treatments that could not make his condition any better.

² Ritual to honour the deity.

³ Respectable way of addressing god.

⁴ If a person already has a strong connection with deities, no healer or doctor can do anything.

The medium even pointed out that the doctors regarded him as a god – but one who needed medicine to calm him down. The outrageous behavior was considered as a transient state of mind and not as an illness, so also the shaman was not able to cure him with simple methods like brushing out illness-causing agents. As soon as the strange behavior has ceased, the power of the deity invested in the shaman can be used fully.

A calling experience or a deity revealing itself through a chosen person is usually followed by a long period of intense personal and spiritual development that should also lead to a life-style that is suitable for deities. Sometimes such a period also precedes the calling experience or is considered to be part of it. The traditional shamanic initiation ceremony that introduces the neophyte to the public and after which he or she is accepted as a mature shaman - if the tests are mastered - (Peters 1998:77ff) is often not carried out anymore, especially in the Katmandu Valley. Mediums traditionally just start to practice and are respected more and more if their treatments are successful. Some of them have an experienced medium that helps them establish their practice, but they do not learn anything from that person.

PURITY

To be pure is something essential for the work of mediums as well as for that of shamans. A kind heart, a good way of life, and helping other people are considered as most important in the career of spiritual healers. This implies also avoiding pollution in everyday life. If a person shows unusual behavior or is ill for a prolonged time, bringing him or her in contact with something polluted can be used as a provocation technique to find out the reason for the person's strange state. A Tamang shamaness told about the time before it became clear that she was going to be a healer:

“One day my husband, who was working in the army at that time, was preparing for his written test that is required to be taken by military men in their barracks. I was trembling and one of my hens was moving around. It was quite a big hen. Suddenly the hen was caught by a wild cat and carried away. ... A footman on duty threw a rock at the wild cat which ran away leaving the hen at the spot. Because the hen was not dead, it came back running toward us fast. When we looked at it, we saw two small holes at its neck that were caused by the wild cat when carrying the hen away holding it with its teeth. After some medicine

was applied on the wounds the hen suffered even greater pain. My husband proposed to cut the hen, which was quite big, and eat it rather than let it go like that. I did not agree to eat it. He persuaded me to eat the chicken trying to convince me that it was not dirtied by anybody, not tasted at all, but only injured by the wild cat. So we cooked the chicken in the evening and ate it. After dinner I went to bed while my husband was still reading. Exactly at twelve o'clock in the night deities ascended on me and I began to tremble. In that trembling state I hugged a cotton quilt firmly. When my husband looked at me, I laughed. Later on my husband told me that I laughed boisterously as he looked at me and he was very much scared at the situation. It was a hot month but even then I was hugging the quilt and laughing like mad. Then he tried to wake me up shaking me and asked me why I was laughing like that. He told me later that the more he wanted to know the reason for my laughter, the louder I went on laughing. At this he became very scared and kept the door wide open so that he could run away in case I came down upon him. Then he splashed water over my face from a brass pot with a spout. Instantly I stood up from my bed and asked him angrily why he had made me eat chicken that had already been tasted and fouled. My husband expressed his surprise at this question and said that he had not done that. Again I shouted at him that he indeed had given me the polluted chicken that had already been tasted and fouled by the wild cat. After this I trembled vehemently. I went on shivering and trembling all over. The fouled chicken was the root cause of all this."

Due to the strong connection with deities, pollution cannot be tolerated anymore. For the husband of the shamaness this also means that he too has to change his life, respecting the situation. In the narration of the shamaness the polluted hen precipitated a series of events that set an end to her suffering and eventually made her a healer accepted by the community.

Stories like this are told many times in pretty much the same way. They show the paths from being a disturbed person to becoming someone who needs special treatment - because of the strong connection with spiritual beings - so that the therapeutic actions can exert positive effects on the whole community and its individual members. Such incidents also give legitimisation to the healers. Thus, shamans who do not know the "creation myths" sing their own life stories during the long rituals. They say that no specific texts have to be recited, but that

anything that describes their position and how it came about fulfils the same function.

Pilgrimages are important for gaining and renewing power, but pollution can happen easily on the road. At the pilgrimage places people are under the protection of the deities and the atmosphere is so strong that no accident happens and in a trance-like state people avoid everything that could cause pollution.

The Tamang shamaness told that on the way back from a pilgrimage place she met a man who was in a very serious state. Despite the fact that shamans work as “individual” healers they undertake pilgrimages in smaller or larger groups. Undertaking pilgrimages in groups is partly due to practical reasons, in terms of expenses and entertainment, and partly for creating opportunities to share experiences and provoke each other in a sort of contests. On such a special occasion there are usually also quite a number of lay people accompanying the healers, attending them and getting blessings at a holy place. According to the shamaness, the other healers present at the place where they found the sick man, left saying that they were not able to bear the extreme chill there. But the sick man was wreathing with acute pain in his heart. When asked what had happened he answered: “Mother, I am going to die, the pain is unbearable. Please, do something!” The shamaness said that she started to examine him, wondering where she could find some ashes⁵ at a place like that:

“I picked up some soil dust instead, and when I had just touched him, I found it was effective. I blew my breath over his body chanting mantras and gave him some empowered water to drink. After that I told him to leave the place immediately, because it was not suitable for a sick man to stay any longer at such high altitude. We asked him to go ahead of us and sat down on the hill. All the members of our group had not yet assembled together. We borrowed a plate from the sick man to eat some snack. Later it was found out that the plate had been left unclean. I felt its effect immediately. At first I had thought that it was clean and pure and so I had borrowed it. As soon as I had eaten I felt a shiver all over my body. It struck my mind that I had eaten from a defiled plate. In an instant I felt its pressure. I said that the plate was unclean and defiled.

⁵ Used for treatments. Purified ashes are used along with blowing mantras on a sick person, and are sometimes also ingested orally.

The sick man, on the other hand, got better after ten minutes' walk. Unclean and defiled food does not suit me and I have to be given only pure food. As soon as I realized that the food was impure, I threw up. Then I felt like defecating. When everything I had eaten had come out completely, I was relieved."

Also in this case the deities with whom the shamaness was connected so strongly did not tolerate any impurity. The only way to deal with such a situation is to get rid of everything polluted right on the spot. This may not be done intentionally, but it happens and it works.

Eating outside one's house always bears dangers with it and should be avoided as far as possible. A young male medium told that he always cooks his meals himself to make sure that they are not polluted by anyone and that there are no impure ingredients in the food. He does not eat chicken meat or chicken eggs and therefore he also stays away from noodles because there might be chicken products in them. Which kinds of food items are considered to be impure is said by the deities, and is culture-specific to a large extent. Those healers who follow a strict discipline stay home as much as possible, at least insofar as eating and drinking are concerned. In general, it can be said that the ethnic minorities from the hills feel more relaxed about their food.

Even though the healing methods of shamans and mediums are based on specific cultural traditions, they can be applied in regard to clients from different cultures and at any place in the world. Outside Nepal the practical everyday life can be quite difficult. A shamaness told that during her visit to America she had lots of problems with her food, because she cannot eat some types of meat and several kinds of vegetables. Furthermore, if she eats something that has been touched by a person who is impure for some reasons, it will have a bad effect on her.

A Newar medium, who was asked if she had practiced as a healer while living in the United States, replied that it was too difficult to avoid the food she is not supposed to eat and that she suffered a lot because she was punished by the deity. After a dispute with her only son who had lost everything in business, she wanted to earn some money to build a house. A Brahmin family, for whom she had worked before, agreed to send her to some relatives in the United States to cook for them and do other chores in the household.

“I went alone and stayed over there only for three months. Then I could not bear to touch anything polluted, because it had a very bad effect on me making my body tremble. I was desperate and I suffered a lot. Mā [Hariti] would not allow me to touch anything impure. I cannot eat beef or pork and so I had a very hard time over there. One day I cooked pork and so I had to clean the meat. At night Mā said that I have to do a ritual for her, she was gritting her teeth and expressing her anger. When I got up the following morning one of my fingers was swollen very much and I felt a lot of pain. I told them about my finger and asked them to take me to a doctor. They scolded me and said that it is not like in Nepal, doctors are too expensive in America. What to do? Then I put some ash that I had taken with me from Nepal on my finger. I wanted to sit in meditation, but there was no place for that. The only thing I could do was to go to the bathroom, like going to the toilet, lock the door and sit in meditation. I started to see Mā and got blessings from her. I did not want to get out of the bathroom anymore. They knocked at the door and asked me what I was doing in the bathroom for such a long time. Then I told them that I wanted to go back to Nepal.”

The medium found it difficult to find a suitable place for devotional rituals but she is sure that Ma is present all over the world. Due to the insensibility and ignorance of some people in America she was not able to adjust and to work as a healer. Even her host family from Nepal have become estranged from their traditional way of life and threatened the medium that she would end up in a mad house if she continued to show such strange behavior.

INTERRUPTION AND CONTINUITY

Even if a calling is accepted, but a person cannot continue the path that he or she has been chosen to follow, there will again be serious problems and/or illness and suffering. The growing union with spiritual powers cannot be reversed anymore. Some women may neglect their profession because they are very busy with their children and the household. Men may look for a different job to earn more money to support their families and then find it too difficult to continue the spiritual path in a secular surrounding. A shamaness told about her life:

“After I got married and had come here, I did not work as a healer for six years. Then I had a very serious crisis again. For three months I was

lying in bed sleeping. There was no pain, nothing of that sort, but I was sleepy all the time and did not know what was going on around me. When I got up I had to vomit, when I slept there was no vomiting. In this room I was lying all day and night. At the beginning of the fourth month – it was on a full moon day – I heard a voice ordering me to get the shaman’s equipment that I had used before. When I had everything with me I should do a ritual in my house. Only thereafter I would become alright. Like we are talking now this was told to me. I was not able to get up and so I asked my husband to bring the equipment. My husband replied: “Today, I am not on leave. Tomorrow I will get leave, so I could go to the village tomorrow. But I will ask my father.” Then the father said he would go to get the things. He might have reached my home – how funny – my *japmālā*⁶ arrived in my bed. How did it come? Nobody knows that. I was sleeping like this,⁷ it was right in my hand. Then I felt as if I awoke from a sleep and I wanted to get up. For a moment I was afraid that I would vomit again after getting up. But when I got up I found myself very light. I was told to take a bath. Since there was no tap there I asked some relative to go and fetch a pot of water and also get me some *titepāti*⁸. She wanted to know what for I needed that. I told her that I wanted to take a bath. “If you are so sick, how are you going to take a bath?” I replied that I had to take a bath that day. The water and the *titepāti* were brought, I took a bath, and I threw away my clothes. That morning after taking a bath I became very fresh, strong and light. Then I told my younger sister to smear the house with cow-dung⁹, because I would do a ritual that night. Father and the others of the group who had gone to my village would arrive home bringing my stuff. At that time we had cows and my younger sister did everything needed. In the evening I did a special ritual in my house. Then suddenly the disease was gone forever. It was not there any more. Because I had quit working as a healer for some years, I had to bear all that.”

When the shamaness was prepared to practice again as a healer, all her complaints suddenly disappeared. Her instant recovery from the crisis lasted until the end of her life. Being her neighbor during several

⁶ Rosary used for muttering the name of a god or a religious formula repeatedly.

⁷ Shows lying back.

⁸ Bitter weed (*Artemisia vulgaris*).

⁹ To clean and purify it.

periods of my fieldwork I had the chance to observe and take part in her healing work for some time. She never showed any signs of confusion, disorientation, depression or lack of energy again. More and more clients came to consult her, because she was considered to be a powerful healer. When she got old and felt she would die soon, she went back to her village bringing with her the ritual paraphernalia so that someone of her father's family could use them.

A calling influences a person's whole life until the end. If the demands of deities or ancestor spirits are not obeyed, suffering, insanity or death will ensue. Even if a person becomes sloppy in regard to devotional and healing practice later in his or her career, life will definitely become very hard. One Tamang shaman, a specialist for the old traditional rituals, neglected devotion and purity for some years. During this period there were a lot of problems in his family and the shaman started to drink in the early morning so that he was hardly able to see his patients. His clientele as well as his income dwindled and this in turn made him drink even more. Eventually the shaman managed to get out of the vicious circle so that his life took a different turn again.

Regardless of how many obstacles there are and how much suffering someone has to endure, the deities' demands to improve lifestyle, to work hard on overcoming the crisis, to give in to spiritual powers and get transformed bear many consequences. For the matured healer the issue is not if life has become more or less enjoyable and comfortable, but to accept life the way it is. Family, mundane activities or even hardship are slowly fading as emotional experiences. With time conflicts dissolve and relationships are seen in a different light. A medium told about her situation right after having set up her practice as a healer:

“Because of Bhagwān my life has changed a lot. I cannot eat what I want, and my husband is still young, so sometimes he gets angry with me and tells me that he wants to marry another woman, because he has a desire for things, but I do not feel any desire. I just want to stay clean, quiet, and calm.... If I did not have my daily responsibilities it would be good. I just want to show devotion to the deities.”

GAINING POWER, KNOWLEDGE AND CLIENTS

In order to strengthen the connection with the spiritual world after a calling, deities and ancestor spirits must be worshipped regularly. One

common technique is reciting the names of deities and concentrating on them. During this process there is a loosening of ego boundaries and a change in the sense of being oneself. A growing submission of the own person to spiritual powers takes place.

Repetition of these words *mero bhakti guruko śakti* “my devotion, the guru’s power” is also used for devotional practice. It does not make any difference if the words are pronounced aloud or silently. According to many shamans, continued remembrance of gurus is essential for successful healing: “Without guru nothing can be done.”

Notably, the devotional exercises do not have to follow a certain pattern, so that each healer develops his or her own individual style. One shamaness, for example, takes a bath and performs a *pujā* with pure water from a well nearby every day in the early morning. Patients may arrive before she has finished her *pujā* in her house. When she is still doing her devotional exercises they have to stay outside whereas later they wait for their turn inside the healer’s room. Specific practices might change over the years. Once she told me that she gets up at three o’clock in the morning to visit some holy places in addition to her usual daily routine.

A shaman living in the Katmandu Valley has integrated hand reading (which has happened to learn in the public parks of Katmandu as a child) into his healing practice. Although hand reading and shamanic techniques come from quite different cultural traditions, their combination is not considered as inappropriate. In the course of the years he has become quite popular and sees sixty to hundred clients per day. When asked if he also performs the traditional night rituals he replied: “I work from six o’clock in the morning until six, seven or eight o’clock in the evening. How can I work during the night, too? If some people want a traditional Tamang ritual I refer them to someone else.” It appears that the demand for the elaborate night rituals is decreasing.

Performance of only short therapies also means that there is no more reciting on a regular basis of the “creation myths”, telling about the beginning of shamanic practice and the paraphernalia that have been used since primordial time. Those myths used to be an essential part of a traditional healing ritual. Because this shaman (who also practices hand reading) did not want to break with the tradition, he started singing the myths every Saturday morning before seeing the clients. In this way he remembers his gurus and practices devotional meditation. In his

opinion it is one important factor that has made him such a popular healer.

Many Newar mediums follow a very strict daily discipline. They get up very early to take water from a tap or well, that should not be touched by anyone, and clean all the plates and cups used for rituals. Afterwards they take a bath with however much water there is and wash face, hands and feet or the whole body. They do some kind of meditation, remember the deities by saying their names, and give offerings. Before the healing sessions they should not eat anything and not even drink tea in order to be pure and clean.

Meditation practices and presentation of devotional offerings have aesthetic qualities. Special words are spoken in rhythmical ways or sung in melodies created by the individual healers in connection with their tutelary deities. The various kinds of materials used as offerings are arranged according to the wishes of the deities. There are no specific demands and no rules to be followed by the healers. It is a creative process that is being shaped instantaneously in the given situation.

It may happen that during devotional exercises a person's body starts trembling. This too is interpreted as a sign that someone is connected with a spiritual power. Rhythmical drumming, singing, and trembling are also used to mark the beginning of the ritual time¹⁰, in which different processes are made possible and the laws of everyday life are somewhat relaxed and alleviated. Drumming and dancing are traditional techniques of the shamans; trembling is a technique for shamans as well as for mediums.

Furthermore, drumming, dancing and trembling are highly efficient techniques for inducing altered states of consciousness.¹¹ The term technique implies intentionality, but the shamans and mediums say that the trembling just happens. Certain behaviors influenced by deities can even show up suddenly, for example, in the streets. In such cases the healers go in front and the people behind them will be protected.

Reinhard's definition (1976:16) states that "a shaman is a person who at his will can enter into a non-ordinary psychic state". Crapanzano (1977:9f) argues that the emphasis on *control* may be of more impor-

¹⁰ Compare Turner (1989) and van Gennep (1909).

¹¹ The effect of rhythmic movements of the body can be used in any culture. Contemporary music therapy in the West emphasizes the therapeutic value of rhythm and its importance in the development to a healthy person.

tance for the Western observer than to the healers and their communities. Deities can act through shamans and mediums at any time, but it never happens at an inappropriate moment. Uniting with deities leads to non-dual action that is “spontaneous (because it is free of objectified intention), effortless (because it is free from a reified “I” that must exert itself), and “empty” (because one *is* wholly the action, so that there is no dualistic awareness *of* an action)” (Loy 1988:10).

In order to be able to work as a shaman or a medium, one has to explore the spiritual world, overcome fears and gain the ability to control demons and other illness-causing spirits.

Whatever ability or knowledge is needed for working as a healer is learned through connection with spiritual powers. A shamaness told that she has learned everything from the spirit of her deceased father and the deities with whom he has been connected. During her dreams spiritual teachers lead her to some places, and give her mantras and everything else she needs for her work. The teaching might also take place while she is awake and engaged in some daily routine. “My imagination (*kalpanā*) reaches at other places. The body remains here, but I reach to places far away. At that time I am fully absorbed in my plays and conversations with the spirits.” When she was asked if she also visits other places in her imagination while performing healing rituals, she answered:

“No, I don’t. Now I am fully mature. I have completed my staying in the cave.¹² I have already eaten the incense and the lamp and completed playing with the spirits. Thus, I am now a fully trained shaman, the knowledge has penetrated me completely. That is the reason why I can do everything that a shaman has to do. If it were not like that, spiritual powers¹³ would come over me only at moments, and at other times they would leave me alone. Deities have made me experienced by asking me to do a thing like this and another thing like that. I learned from them day by day slowly and gradually. Now I have achieved all the required

¹² *guphā* – traditionally structure for storage (Peters 1998:94); in this shamaness’ case a military tent was put up on a cremation ground. The tent was provided by her husband’s colleagues. Usually a shaman has to stay there for three days and three nights continuously, deal with illness-causing spirits or demons to show that he/she has overcome fears and is a mature healer.

¹³ Helping spirits who are invoked at the beginning of healing rituals.

skills. It was only when I was a beginner that I went outside in the flights of imagination. Now everything comes rushing towards me.”

Under the influence of deities, healers exhibit extraordinary powers. One medium told that just by blowing a mantra on a rope that was tied around him, the rope would open. He also emphasizes that some people in his community changed their minds perceiving his special abilities: “When I just moved my hand a coconut came out of it. Then people slowly started to believe in the power that was in me and started to respect me.”

Deities come over the healers and show themselves in different appearances, speak and act in unusual ways. One medium has a postcard that shows “herself” with the faces and attributes of several deities. During her healing sessions she sits behind a thick cloth so that people might not become frightened by the appearances. For the advanced healers corporeal form and mind are non-dual.

“... it is a radically transformed world. The familiar, everyday world of material objects was formerly balanced by an ego-consciousness that was supposed to be observing it. The disappearance of that discrete consciousness requires a new explanation of what awareness is. The awareness that was previously understood to be observing the world is now realized to be one with it. No longer do “I”, as the locus of consciousness, see something external. Rather, the non-dual, self-luminous nature of the world stands revealed. When we want to describe this experience, what shall we say?” (Loy 1988:210).

Bāgh Bhairab, a fierce powerful deity in the shape of a tiger, comes in critical stages of healing sessions and brings a special atmosphere into the room.¹⁴ When I asked a shamaness how she feels when Bāgh Bhairab comes over her she answered: “At that time my awareness changes, and even my body becomes more or less like a tiger. I can feel the shape of a tiger from the inside.” According to her, in the Golden Age it was possible to transform into a tiger completely. Another shaman told that he could become a tiger if he knew the right mantra.

¹⁴ The ability of shamans who transform themselves into tigers or other animals is a widespread belief (see also Riboli in this volume).

CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE I

Scharfetter (1996:72ff) points out that in Western societies for person who is awake and conscious the ego (I, me) stays the same continuously in the course of one's life and personal history. The consciousness of the I is the certainty that "I am myself" all the time. Furthermore, Scharfetter notes that we *do not have* consciousness, but we *are* consciousness. In his opinion the I is something abstract that stands for the human person being oneself. Being one with the cosmic consciousness is what he calls transpersonal, a trans-ego-experience.

Even though Scharfetter (2004) takes into account cultural differences, he emphasizes the dangers of the spiritual path. If the demarcation of the I (i.e., the border of one's own person), the consistency of the I (i.e., the certainty that one has a coherent life, being the same all the time) or the activity of the I (i.e., the certainty that one's own experiences, thinking, and acting are determined by oneself) decrease appreciably, one glides into a pathological state. Ego-boundaries can be loosened at times to experience an oceanic feeling, but in everyday life there is no room for that.

Spiritual healers in Nepal have given up their sense of being oneself to a large extent; their actions are not done with their own intention, and the calling constitutes a break in the coherence of their lives. Yet, they are perfectly fine and able to help the people around them. During the healing sessions shamans and mediums are treated like deities. Clients bow down to them, offer incense and give those deities, who like to have light, burning wicks to eat. Sometimes they also ask for a special kind of incense or even burning coal. An atmosphere of awe is created that opens up the patients so that even very short treatments exert a big effect.

Some deities like to eat burning wicks that are offered by the people in the audience. The healers swallow the burning wicks that are given to them, but the light is an offering for the deities with whom they are united. While watching a video recording that showed deities coming over her during a healing session together with a medium, the shamaness was very surprised. Sounds, gestures, and movements were determined by the deities. She had never seen herself like this and said: "This is not me. My appearance is the same as Kāli's. Nobody will say this is me. My voice is different. Look at my eyes! Some said that they had seen different faces but I never believed them. Now it is becoming clearer to me."

One medium through whom several deities speak during the healing rituals sings a devotional song addressing Mother Earth. In the course of the song she herself becomes Mother Earth.

Mātā you are Mother Earth
 It is only your support
 With which we have been living
 Mother Earth Mātā
 Be kind
 Who else is there for us
 Carrying the load of the earth
 Has been difficult, Mātā
 This is Kāliyug¹⁵
 When it is difficult to keep up the earth
 Liberate the people of the world
 Be kind
 I cannot bear it all
 I cannot carry the earth anymore
 If I leave
 Then the world will be finished
 Be kind
 Oh Buddha Bhagwān

The medium's identity has changed: she is herself and not herself, she is not a perceiver who perceives something that is separate from herself; the consciousness of the I is not set against the world that she could be conscious of.

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¹⁵ The present age that has been preceded by three others. It is the Black Age in which bad qualities of people are prominent, prosperity declines, and everything will come to an end.

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