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Synesthetic Symbolism: Community Engagement with the Sacred at the Boudhanath Stupa

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I'm walking down a busy pedestrian path of sloping uneven bricks in a neighborhood in Kathmandu, framed by three story buildings on both sides, when the sky rumbles and suddenly turns dark. Vendors spring into action, covering tables of items with secured plastic tarps, and taking out umbrellas to sell to those who will quickly be in need of one. I feel a few drops and hurry up, emerging from the narrow road into the wide pathway encircling the commercial and spiritual centerpiece of the neighborhood: the Great Stupa. The plinths that form the stupa's base give way to its massive dome, topped by the golden cube with eyes painted on each side and crowned by copper-plated tiers, culminating in a shining conical silhouette that pierces the now deep grey sky. There is a mass of people walking clockwise around the stupa, as there always is, and the torrential monsoon rains that have suddenly started don't dissuade people. Why is repeatedly circling the stupa so important that people are doing it in the middle of a thunderstorm?

The act of walking in this circle is called doing kora (*skor ba*).[1] While it likely looks to an outsider like simply a casual walking circuit, this practice is extremely complex and carries a

[1] For most Tibetan words in this paper, I will be using the standard system of giving the phonetic transcription, followed by the Wylie transliteration whenever a word first occurs. The exception is with the word *gnas* or with related words such as *rab gnas, gnas skor* or *gnas mjal*, which I leave in the Wiley transliteration system and do not give phonetic transcription for. This is due in large part to the fact that I frequently quote from a source that also uses *gnas* instead of the phonetic né, and I don't want to confuse the reader.

great deal of significance for the structure and the participant.[2] It is this specific relationship between the Great Stupa and those who perform kora that this paper investigates. In particular, I am concerned with sense experience and movement studies at the stupa: how does the shape and scale of the stupa impact religious practice?[3] How does movement at the stupa play a role in the religiosity of those who circumambulate? How does the iconography of the stupa engage the senses? How does the community create the symbolic and actual stupa? I argue that by engaging with the stupa through movement-encoded cultural knowledge and liberative sense experience, the community effectively becomes an integral part of the Boudhanath Stupa's form. As the center of a historic neighborhood largely populated by a Tibetan exile community that is located in the crowded capital city of Kathmandu, the stupa's complex relationship with practitioners is further exemplified.

This analysis of the Boudhanath stupa is a case study example of one out of many Tibetan-Himalayan stupas in Asia,[4] and it is not unique in the way it is interacted with. It is, however, unique in its location, as one of the most prominent Tibetan stupas in the world that has

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[2] I want to take a moment to address positionality: I come from an American education, supplemented by 6 months of living and studying in Northern India and Nepal. I am a young white woman whose native language is English and who speaks some beginner-level Tibetan. All of these facets of my identity impacted the fieldwork I was able to do and how I interpreted it. I lived in Boudhanath, a few blocks from the stupa, for the summer of 2023, while I stayed with a host family, took intensive colloquial Tibetan language classes at a nearby institution, and did research.

[3] The best example I could find of a holistic approach to studying stupas is probably Mani Lama's book *Boudha: Restoring the Great Stupa* (published 2019), on the reconstruction of the stupa after the 2015 earthquake. His book's introduction and first chapter include a detailed history of stupas as a structure, followed by an explanation of the Boudhanath Stupa's dimensions and details. The rest of the book is (appropriately) devoted to practitioners' interactions with the stupa during reconstruction and everyday life, shown mostly in photography with small captions or interviews.

[4] I mainly refer to the stupa as being Tibetan, because it follows many Tibetan systems of building. In reality, art does not conform to national boundaries, and Nepalis would likely argue that the stupa is not really Tibetan. The term "Himalayan stupas" can refer to Nepali styles as well as more "Tibetan" ones that match mine. I use both terms here to point out the overlap while emphasize that I'm mainly focusing on Tibetan systems of understanding.

been a sacred center for the local and international Tibetan Buddhist community for hundreds of years. This is why I chose to study it in particular; the bustling activity encircling this city stupa is not a secondary attribute or strange social phenomenon, but a necessary facet of the monument.

A Brief Background on Boudhanath

The Kathmandu Valley of Nepal, on the edge of the Himalayas, is home to thousands of stupas. One of the largest, holiest, and most well-known of these is the Great Boudhanath Stupa (Fig.1-8). Located in the north of the valley, it is surrounded by a diverse and closely knit neighborhood of Tibetans, Nepalis, Newaris, and Tamang peoples—not to mention pilgrims and visitors from all over Asia and the rest of the world. As a monument revered by people from a number of ethnic groups (and both Hindus and Buddhists), the stupa is worshiped in a wide variety of ways. Nearly all of these diverse traditions include circumambulation, though kora (the Tibetan term and concept) is what I focus on.[5] Because of the diversity of practitioners at the stupa, it has many origin stories that blend together in different ways for different groups. Nepalis say it was created in 500 CE by King Manadeva, but the Tibetan story places the stupa's origin in an ahistorical time of a previous buddha named Kāśyapa, when a woman who was a

[5] Niels Gutschow, *The Nepalese Caitya: 1500 Years of Buddhist Votive Architecture in the Kathmandu Valley,* (Stuttgart: Menges, 1997), 69. Also see Mani Lama, *Boudha: Restoring the Great Stupa*, (Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2020), 9, for information on Tamang ritual. Newars anoint statues (present at some places at the stupa) with vermilion, and make offerings of rice, flowers, water, and fire. Tibetans generally don't do this, but constantly turn the prayer wheels in the stupa's wall, donate butter lamps and pay for whitewashing as a form of worship. They also are the ones who splash saffron-soaked petals in large arcs on the dome (or they pay for that to be done). They also pay for donations of new prayer flags which will be hung from the stupa. According to Gutschow, however, Tibetans are forbidden from being the ones to climb to the finial and switch out the prayer flags (a task for the Dongol farmer caste). It should be pointed out that Gutschow's book was published nearly 30 years ago, and customs may have changed by now; the number of people allowed on the upper levels of the base has also decreased in the last 30 years.

reincarnation of the Goddess Tara decided to make it in order to store the Buddha's relics and benefit the local community.[6] Over time it fell into disrepair, until 1512, when a Tibetan monk named Shakya Zangpo found a text called *Legend of the Great Stupa* inside a stupa at Samye, the oldest Tibetan monastery.[7] Shakya Zangpo believed that he was a reincarnation of one of the sons of the builder, and that it was his duty to find the Great Stupa and restore it. He set off for what is now Nepal, venturing along the ancient trade route that led from Tibet into the valley.[8] He found the Boudhanath Stupa, determined that it was the one he had sought, and restored it. This was the start of the Tibetan interest in the stupa and area surrounding it; in the following centuries, pilgrims and scholars followed Shakya Zangpo's example and came from Tibet to visit the "The Great Stupa." Many of these Tibetans sponsored the stupa's upkeep (and recorded that they did so) and some even settled in the area or at the monastery that Shakya Zangpo founded in Yolmo.[9]

Background on Stupas

Stupas have been constructed for thousands of years—the earliest evidence of which is in the *Rgveda*[10]—and they can be found across thousands of miles, from southern India to Japan and Mongolia. Beginning in ancient India as large agricultural mounds and reliquaries

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[6] The stupa's Tibetan name, *Jarung Kashor,* "let it be done" and "slipped from my tongue" come from the way the King gave the woman permission to build it. See Lama, *Boudha,* 7. Most of this story was told to me by my host father, Sonam Gyaltsen, and he told me that the old men in the neighborhood were the ones who originally told him the story.

[7] Lama, *Boudha,* 7.

[8] The flourishing and development of the cities that make up modern Kathmandu was a result of the valley being a crossroads of two major trade routes for hundreds of years.

[9] Yolmo (Helambu in Nepali) is a northern region of Nepal near the Tibetan border. The monastery Shakya Zangpo established there became the seat for a line of his incarnations, who were the caretakers of the stupa until the mid 1700s. See Lama, *Boudha,* 9.

[10] The Rgveda is sacred Hindu text estimated to have been written anywhere from 8000-2500 BC.

symbolizing supremacy and stability,[11] they appear in modified forms across Asia wherever the Dharma has been.[12] In India, stupas were built to house relics of the Buddha and also to memorialize important events and sites in the Buddha's life.[13] They spread alongside other Buddhist commemorative monuments (like pillars or *steles*) outside of India as a result of missionaries sent by kings like Ashoka (3rd century BC).[14] Rulers in foreign cities hosted monks as teachers in their courts, and some of these rulers converted to Buddhism as a result. Pilgrims, travelers, and translators such as the famous Xuanzang (602-664 CE) moved along trade routes like the Silk Road, and kings in new lands built stupas in order to house sacred items and simultaneously to assert their political prowess and wealth through religious devotion. These new stupas would often meld with temple styles and philosophical ideas in the places they arrived, as is the case with the "tower stupa" or pagoda style in China that developed from the Indian structure being influenced by Chinese Taoist/Confucian "shrine pavilions."[15]

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[11] Lokesh Chandra, introduction to *Stupa: Art, Architectronics, and Symbolism*, by Giuseppe Tucci, ed. Lokesh Chandra, trans. Uma Marina Vesci, 2nd ed, (New Delhi: South Asia Books, 1988), xiv. See pages xii-xiii for an interesting discussion of the etymology of the term Stupa.

[12] The Sanskrit word "Dharma" can roughly mean "teachings of the Buddha" in this context, though there are many other ways to translate this word in other situations. Some other examples are "truth" or "doctrine."

[13] Chandra, introduction to *Stupa: Art…,* vi. Also see Pema Dorjee, *Stupa and its Technology: A Tibeto-Buddhist Perspective*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002), 12-15. Many Indian and Tibetan scholars provide lists specifying the 8 reliquary/city stupas and the 8 sacred site stupas built after the Buddha's death; however, the scholars don't all agree or identify the same order or combination for either list. There are still some commonalities. For example, nearly all the lists include the stupa "in Magadha on the banks of the Nairanjana River" as the one commemorating the Buddha's enlightenment. Indeed, this is the site of the Mahabodhi Stupa/Temple in the town of Bodhgaya, visited by a great many pilgrims today as the site of the enlightenment. As for the question of stupas having relics or not, Tucci makes distinctions between three types of stupas (also called cetiyas or chaityas): Paribhotta-cetiya (containing objects used by the buddha), Dhātu-cetiya (containing corporeal relics of the buddha/apostle/saint), and Dhamma-cetiya (containing scriptural work or images or commemorating an event). (Tucci page vi). All are associated with and blessed by an association with the Buddha, for the purpose of spreading the Dharma.

[14] Joe Cummings and Bill Wassman, *Buddhist Stupas in Asia: The Shape of Perfection,* (Melbourne: Lonely Planet Publications, 2001), 30.

[15] Ibid., 160. Of course, architecture was not the only thing blending with new forms in foreign lands— Indian texts would be commented on or added to by scholars in new places, creating new canons of Buddhist thought.

Different Buddhist countries and traditions favor stupas in a wide variety of different shapes, sizes, and iconic or aniconic designs.[16] One of the few generalizations that can be made is that stupas are usually tiered, domed, or tower-like structures, with a wider base and a narrow or pointed top. Konchog Lhadrepa, a renowned Tibetan artist and teacher, explains that this is because "The stupa's shape represents the Buddha, crowned and sitting in meditation posture on a lion throne. His crown is the top of the spire; his head is the square at the base of the spire; his body is the vase shape; his legs are the four steps of the lower terrace; and his throne is the base."[17] Tibetan stupas are unique in their particularly formulaic construction, representing the dimensions of the Buddha's body.[18]

In 1932, the Italian scholar Giuseppe Tucci wrote a series of influential analyses of Tibetan religious artwork, which were based on a few different Tibetan texts and on his fieldwork in Tibet and northern India. The 1988 English translation of the first of this series, with the modified title *Stupa: Art, Architectronics, and Symbolism*, made his work far more accessible to a wider scholarly audience.[19] Tucci's books and translations have continued to serve as a basis for dozens of subsequent studies of stupas by other scholars, who analyze in great detail the way that the dharma is manifested in a stupa's physical form.[20] Dimensions, material, and

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[16] For more details and specifics of how the shape of stupas changed, see Cummings and Wassman, *Buddhist Stupas in Asia,* 26.

[17] Konchog Lhadrepa and Charlotte Davis, *The Art of Awakening: A Users Guide to Tibetan Buddhist Art and Practice* (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 40.

[18] Dorjee, *Stupa and its Technology,* 10. Also see Lhadrepa and Davis, *The Art of Awakening*, 222-224, for another list of five categories of Tibetan stupas.

[19] The Indo-Tibetica Series, volumes I-VI. The first volume, eventually translated in 1988, is: Giuseppe Tucci, *Indo-Tibetica I: "Mc'od Rten" e "Ts'a Ts'a" Nel Tibet ed Occidentale, Contributo allo studio dell'arte religiosa tibetana e del suo significato,* (Roma: Reale Academia D'Italia, 1932).

[20] Tucci's work has been used and analyzed by both Tibetan and Euro-American modern scholars. Most agree with his translations and analysis, though Pema Dorjee (native Tibetan speaker and scholar), disagrees with a few of

iconography usually have ties to specific teachings; one brief example of this is how the four-tiers at the base of some Tibetan stupas are understood to represent (respectively) "the four awarenesses (*smrtyapasthāna*), four perfect renunciations (*prāhana*), four coefficients of miraculous powers (*rddhipāda*), and the five faculties (*pañcendriya*)."[21] As Adrian Snodgrass explains, "The sacred texts are the verbal embodiment of the Dharma; the stupa is its architectural embodiment…The Dharma is the Buddha made manifest in his Word, and each section of the Dharma is a portion of the Body of the Buddha, that is, of his Dharma Body (dharmakaya)."[22] The form of the stupa is the *architectural* embodiment of the dharma, and therefore the body of the Buddha too. This contextual symbolism and explanation of what the stupa *is* to practitioners is necessary to understanding how they interact with it through their own bodies.

Tibetan Etymologies: *Mchod rten*

The word *stupa* is a Sanskrit term,[23] which is translated into Tibetan as chörten (*mchod rten*). The first part of the word, *mchod*, comes from the word *mchod pa* meaning "offering, to honor, to worship, revere."[24] The second half, *rten*, means "a hold, support, base, dwelling place,

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Tucci's translations of tricky sentences. For more, see Dorjee's footnote on 167, referencing a translation on page 130 of Tucci (where Tucci himself notes the confusion of the sentence).

[21] Gutschow, *The Nepalese Caitya*, 265.

[22] Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992), 366. Dharmakaya can be translated as "Buddha-as-reality", Nirmānakaya as "historical Buddha", and Sambhogakaya as "heavenly Buddha". (Encyclopedia of Religion. 2nd Edition, s.v. "Nirvana").

[23] I choose to use "stupa" throughout for ease of understanding and because this term is widely recognized in Nepal and India, even by populations who have other words for stupa in their own languages.

[24] "THL Tibetan to English Translation Tool." RYI and JV definition for *mchod pa.* Accessed Jan. 16, 2024. https://www.thlib.org/reference/dictionaries/tibetan-dictionary/translate.php. Some other compounds with mchod are *mchod stegs*, which is offering-table or altar, and *mchod gnas,* which is an object to which an offering or veneration is given.

abode, receptacle."[25] Combined together, *mchod rten* literally translates to "receptacle of offerings," "honored abode of the deity," or "support for worship."[26] A chörten (stupa) is made for human connection— part of its very definition is that honor or offerings should be given to it by followers.

Kora (circumambulation) creates—and is in itself—an offering and act of prayer, which the chörten holds; kora and physical interaction with the chörten are crucial aspects of the structure as a physical thing. It would not be a "*mchod rten*" if practitioners did not interact with its body through their own. Toni Huber, an anthropologist specializing in Tibetan pilgrimage, adds that "'*rten*' [receptacles/bases] are not just physical edifices, but can also be mental constructions that are 'visible' in certain contexts.[27] Structures and objects become *rten* by having a deity projected onto them or invited to take up residence (*gnas*) in the consecration ceremony termed *rab gnas*."[28] The final stage of building a stupa is the consecration; having gone through *rab gnas*, the stupa now is an abode of a deity.

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[25] Ibid., for *rten*. The verb form *rten-pa* means "to keep, to hold, to adhere to, to lean on".
[26] Ibid., for *mchod rten*. See footnote 25 on following page for some other ways that *rten* relates to stupas.

[27] There are several other related words which include "rten"; '*Sku-rten*' (statues and paintings) can be translated as "body support", and '*gsung-rten*' (words of the buddha) can be translated as "speech support". Each of these words ('*sku*'/body, '*gsung*'/speech, and '*thugs*'/mind) can be linked to each part of the sacred *om, āh, hūm* mantra in a complex process of symbolism. See Tucci's footnote on p. 25 as a starting point, and also the rest of page 26 which discusses these three different categories of sacred art (three different ways the buddha is contained within it). See Lhadrepa and Davis 229 for *om, āh, hūm*, as it correlates to blessing the vajra, bell, and damaru for ritual use, and see Lhadrepa and Davis 234 for these divisions of body, speech and mind relating to prayer practice with malas.
[28] Toni Huber, "Putting the Gnas Back into Gnas-Skor: Rethinking Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrimage Practice," *The Tibet Journal* 19, no. 2, Powerful Places and Spaces in Tibetan Religious Culture (1994): 30, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43300506. *Rab gnas* is the term for the ritual consecration of any type of sacred Tibetan artwork that will be used for religious practice (*rab* meaning "highest, culminating point, superior" and *gnas* meaning abode of a deity, as discussed below). It is this process that makes the art and the deity inseparable. There are specific procedures for consecrating different things (i.e thangka paintings, statues, stupas), but most involve writing mantras on the item or inserting mantras into a statue. To my knowledge, this process is generally done by a monk of a certain rank (as a monk in Sikkim told me), but Lhadrepa and Davis include a fairly detailed explanation of how to do it oneself. For more, see Lhadrepa and Davis, *The Art of Awakening,* 275-282. Consecration of a place and examination of a stupa building site has its own set of rules; see "Chapter 2: Ritualistic Way of Constructing the Tibeto-Buddhist Stupa Architecture" in Dorjee, *Stupa and its Technology.*

The Tibetan etymology emphasizes the way that the stupa is meant to be interacted with: it is the central anchor of the community, holding the prayers and offerings of the practitioners. It supports their minds and practice, and its very purpose is to be used for the benefit of practitioners and all who interact with it. By nature, the stupa is not a monument to be erected and then admired from a distance, or to be left alone to stand and commemorate a piece of history. It is a living, active site that invites movement and contemplation.

Gnas, Gnas skor, and Skor ba

Another important Tibetan term is the word *gnas,* the primary topic of Huber's article on pilgrimage. Often translated simply as "place," "holy place" or "sacred space," its verbalization as *gnas pa* includes an active sense that means something similar to "to exist, stay, abide, remain" etc.[29] In this way, *gnas* implies an aliveness or life-force present that the English terms "place" or "sacred space" do not. Additionally, a *gnas* may be a constructed building or even a person as well as a landscape. Huber explains:

> gnas are not only aspects of the natural world, such as landscape features. Many of the conceptions Tibetans might apply to mountains and lakes, for instance, can also be applied to certain architectural edifices (e.g. stupa), human-made objects (e.g. religious icons), and particular persons (e.g. Dalai Lamas or Tantric yogins in particular meditative states) because they are considered to be, or to have, deities permanently or temporarily in bodily "residence." In many senses, *gnas* are like *rten* [receptacles], or are in fact treated as a sub-category of *rten*.[30]

Gnas is also a part of both Tibetan words used for pilgrimage; *gnas skor* and *gnas mjal*, meaning "going around a *gnas*" and "to encounter/meet a *gnas*" respectively. The word *skor* is the imperative of *bskor ba* meaning "circulate, cycle, to rotate, to go around."[31] The related term

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[29] Huber, "Putting the Gnas Back into Gnas-Skor," 24.
[30] Ibid., 29.
[31] "THL Translation Tool." RYI/JV for *bskor ba*.

kora (*skor ba*) means "revolution, circumambulation, encircling a holy object."[32] In this way, the ideas of Tibetan pilgrimage and of circling a holy object are tightly connected. Huber summarizes the implications of this linkage: "A Tibetan pilgrimage then is generally a *circular* (*skor*) journey around a *gnas* which constitutes and/or involves *encounter(s)* (*mjal ba*) of some kind."[33] These specific parameters of the Tibetan understanding of "pilgrimage" must be kept in mind when using the English word.

Stupas are both *mchod rten* (a receptacle of offerings) and *gnas* (an abode of a deity/the Buddha),[34] and thus they inherently invite *gnas skor* (pilgrimage, or "going around an abode of the deity"), which is acted out through kora every day. Huber reiterates,

> according to Tibetan etymologies I have collected, *gnas* in the term *gnas-skor* always carries the double meaning of the actual physical place, and of the residence or existence of deities, entities or beings believed to be powerful or significant in some way by the pilgrims who go there for an encounter (*mjal-ba*). There is much ritual evidence to suggest that the physical "stuff" of the place and the vital principle or being that resides there are always so closely associated that they are considered and treated as identical.[35]

In the present case, the physical "stuff" of the place is the stupa, which is then understood to be nearly synonymous with the Buddha. As a physical mandala of the Buddha's mind,[36] touching and interacting with the stupa is touching and interacting with Buddhahood.

Stupa as *Axis Mundi* and a Convergence of Sacred and Profane

I will address more nuances of Tibetan ideas of sacred spaces later in this paper; for now, I would like to evaluate some prevalent concepts of sacred space in Euro-American studies of

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[32] Ibid., for *skor ra*.
[33] Huber, "Putting the Gnas Back into Gnas-Skor," 30.

[35] Huber, "Putting the Gnas Back into Gnas-Skor," 31.
[36] The complexities of the term "mandala" will be explained further in the next section.

religion that apply to the Boudhanath Stupa. “Sacred space” can scarcely be discussed without mention of Mircea Eliade (1907-1986). An influential theorist and historian of religion, Eliade is perhaps most well known for his theory that human experience can be divided into two categories: sacred and profane.[37] Eliade’s profane is the realm of menial everyday life (loci such as houses and stores). The sacred is the miraculous and supernatural “sphere of order and perfection”[38] —spaces like temples, locations of rituals, or power places (such as *gnas* and therefore stupas). Eliade’s sacred provides order for people in an otherwise unpredictable world, with prescribed rules and systems of reciprocation. He argues that people naturally settle at sites “where there has been a ‘hierophany’ (from the Greek *hieros* and *phainein*: ‘sacred appearance’).”[39] This site would be a convergence of sacred and profane, and would then receive a blessing that “establishes it as the center point of a ‘world’ (in Greek a cosmos: ‘place of order’).”[40] The community can then be built around this center, divinely structured. Daniel Pals, reflecting on Eliade’s theories, writes, “in many cultures, this sacred center is marked with a pole, pillar, or some other vertical object that plunges into the ground and rises up to the sky to join the three great regions of the universe: heaven, earth, and the underworld.”[41] This sacred center is termed the *axis mundi*; the center-post of the world.

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[37] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*: The Nature of Religion, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).
[38] Daniel L. Pals,"The Reality of the Sacred: Mircea Eliade", in *Eight Theories of Religion*, 193-228. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 199.
[39] Pals,"The Reality of the Sacred,” 201.
[40] Ibid., 201.
[41] Ibid., 201.

The Boudhanath Stupa fits each of these models.[42] A site where a stupa will be built begins as the location of a hierophany; a piece of land where a sacred event happened or where a relic has been given (in this case, the bones of Kāśyapa Buddha). The stupa is built, consecrated/blessed through *rab gnas* and made into a *gnas* (abode of a deity). Thus, it is turned into the *axis mundi,* the center-point of the world around which the Boudhanath community turns, quite literally.[43] Similarly, the stupa is also a mandala and wheel. Mandala is the Sanskrit term for "circle," and Snodgrass explains: "The mandala is a centered world, an area whose center has been determined and whose boundaries have been clearly defined… It is a cosmicized space, ordered from out of the unlimited extension of unstructured chaos."[44] Both scholars and lay people I talked to have described the Boudhanath Stupa as a mandala (Fig. 8): a map of cosmic patterns of the universe and the form of buddha-qualities.[45] As a wheel, the mandala-stupa "represents the cosmos in cross-section."[46] The outer edge is earth and the human world, and the nave/center of the wheel is heaven or the states above the human plane. The wheel, vitalized by the kora turnings around the center, symbolizes the cyclical nature of the world and

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[42] I am conscious that I am applying western theory to Tibetan structures; however, the stupa fits in practically every way, and I have seen other scholars (both Tibetan and Euro-American) also recognize the stupa as axis mundi and hierophany.

[43] Mt. Meru (the legendary Hindu/Buddhist mountain that centers the universe) is also described as an *axis mundi*—and the stupa is also understood to represent Mt. Meru. There is also much associated symbolism with the Sogshing/life-tree central pillar in the stupa, the way Mt. Meru is occasionally shown as a tree, and how "World Tree and World Axis are coincident" (Snodgrass 181). For more, see Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 179. As Snodgrass says in footnote 89, "The Tree as *axis mundi* is a ubiquitous and perennial symbol, one of the richest and most widespread of symbolic themes. A bibliography on the subject would itself fill a volume" (180). See the rest of his footnote for a list of just a few authors on the topic to start with (one being Eliade). See 182-183 for a fantastic continued discussion of Buddha and tree symbolism throughout his life. Also note that *axis mundi* have existed in many cultures and contexts: Jacob's Ladder, the Biblical Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Cross of Christ, and the sacred Norse world-tree Yggdrasil are four examples. (Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, (San Fransisco: Harper Collins, 1983). S.v. "Yggdrasil").

[44] Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 104.

[45] Ibid., 104 and 106. This topic is of course far more complex than I can express here. I highly recommend Chapter 12 of Snodgrass's book.

[46] Ibid., 79.

the "ceaseless flux of phenomena."[47] This wheel is then vitalized by the practitioners who are constantly doing kora.

While some of Eliade's theories are convincing, it is worth noting that other theorists have challenged some of his ideas. J.Z. Smith, in particular, criticizes Eliade's narrow focus on "center," pointing out that Eliade focuses on the spiritual meanings of the "center" without giving proper attention to the periphery.[48] Eliade believes that the world of the sacred center (and thus hierophanies and *axes mundi*) is best understood if we look to "archaic man" as opposed to the "modern man" of Euro-American countries today. Smith, however, argues that Eliade's use of "archaic" and "modern" are not acceptable categories for different modes of cosmogony. Instead, we must "resist imposing even an implicit evolutionary scheme of development 'from the closed world to the infinite universe.'"[49] At best, the terms "archaic" and "modern" suggest an old and new; that societies do, and should, move from the former to the latter. It suggests a hierarchy. Smith convincingly argues that either model may appear in any culture at any time, and if over time a culture's system changed from "modern" to "archaic," it cannot be seen as a regression. To remedy Eliade's terminology, Smith suggests the terms "central-locative" for "archaic" and "peripheral-utopian" for "modern" ("using the term [utopian] in its strict sense: the value of being in no place").[50]

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[47] Ibid., 81.

[48] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 99.

[49] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 101.

[50] Smith, *Map is Not Territory*, 101.

This center-periphery relationship can be seen at the Boudhanath stupa, where the stores and restaurants that encircle it mark a (supposed) outer edge of the sacred space and a boundary for the kora pathway for circumambulation (Fig. 7 and 8). In fact, the practice of kora reinforces the centric-locative ontology already present in the Boudhanath stupa's symbolism. Smith summarizes Eliade in saying that those who fit the centric-locative ontology practice "a joyous celebration of the primordial act of ordering, *as well as a deep sense of responsibility for the maintenance of that order through repetition of the myth, through ritual, and through norms of conduct."*[51] Kora functions as a frequently repeated, ritual "norm of conduct" that helps keep order in practitioners' lives. By habitually walking around the stupa (the physical manifestation of the heaven realms and the Buddha mind) and participating in the movement understood to signify the in-group's belief, practitioners continually re-certify (to themselves and others) their faith in the centered Buddhist cosmogony that the stupa represents.

I am not the first to suggest Tibetan stupas as sacred center-posts (*axes mundi)*. As previously discussed, they are often built as centers of both religious and political power: according to Tucci, "the king participating in the construction of a royal stupa unites himself with the axis of the monument which is conceived of as the metaphysical center around which his kingdom revolves."[52] The idea of stupas as hierophanies where sacred and profane converge is also not new,[53] and the Boudhanath Stupa exemplifies this in the way that it is so closely tied

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[51] Smith, *Map is Not Territory*, 96. Emphasis mine.
[52] Tucci, *Stupa: Art…*, xxiii.
[53] Snodgrass describes how the eight major events in the Buddha's life were "irruptions of the sacred into the profane." Therefore, each place "locates a hierophany, a point of fracture in the barriers separating the worlds…the stupa, as a place-marker that defines this sacred space, positions a point of hierophany, it locates a place of communication between the worlds, a place where the Buddha revealed a glimpse of the realm of the Real." (Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 358).

to everyday life. One cannot worship at the stupa without noticing and being in the vicinity of stores and commercial and material goods. The reverse is also true; one cannot shop by the stupa without noticing and being in close proximity to the spiritual realm. Naturally, those shopping intermingle with those praying or generating merit. Many walkers are even doing both, keeping a foot in each world simultaneously.

Specifics of The Great Boudhanath Stupa

As explained in the section introducing Boudhanath, there is no extant written record of the early history of the stupa. While some records of renovations, restorations, or additions before the 19th century exist, they are haphazard, so it is hard to know exactly what the stupa looked like prior to then. In 1802, Major Charles Crawford, a British cartographer, made a drawing of the stupa that was later published, and it serves as the first visual record of the structure (Fig.2). The shape of the stupa is mostly the same as today, but is missing the two bottom plinths and the large buddha-eyes. The same recognizable mountains frame the background, and the foreground includes several thatched houses, a few farmers chatting, and a road in the lower right corner which was part of the major trade route with Tibet.[54] Another image of the stupa, a Tibetan thangka painting,[55] was created sometime in the early 1800s and shows the stupa almost exactly as it looks today, with the eyes and plinths that the 1802 drawing did not include (Fig. 3). Surrounding the stupa are larger brick and thatch houses, a path of

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[54] Lama, *Boudha,* 11.

[55] Thangkas are a type of sacred Tibetan painting usually done on canvas, depicting deities and holy scenes. They are framed by silk and can be rolled up for easy transportation. Like stupas, thangkas are also consecrated through the process of *rab gnas* discussed earlier.

people circumambulating, and small detailed scenes with gardens and a well that show people participating in everyday life.[56] In 1843, a drawing (Fig. 4) by Nepali painter Rajman Singh Chitrakar shows a closer view of the stupa, with a busy foreground that emphasizes people sitting, standing, and walking in front of the stupa or on its base plinths.[57] Yet another image, a color drawing made by Henry Ambrose Oldfield in 1854, shows a dilapidated stupa in need of repair, with a large group of Tibetan pilgrims with animals and bags in the forefront, some of whom are looking at the viewer (Fig. 5). Other people are in the background on the stupa's structure.[58] These four works from the 1800s vary in terms of styles and perspectives. One notable similarity in each work is the presence of people surrounding the stupa. Whether the people were included as part of an "exotic" foreign landscape by the British or included by the local artists to perhaps highlight the stupa's role as an object of worship, it is clear that all four artists recognized the people surrounding the stupa as a crucial part of a depiction of the monument. Modern images of the stupa show that the basic structure and the people are the only two things about the scene that haven't changed. The stupa has remained a center of community, and drawings like the ones described above demonstrate the way that people have been coming for centuries, if not longer, to the Boudhanath stupa to live, worship, and trade. As the valley got busier, especially in the last century, the fields surrounding the stupa began to be replaced by

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[56] Lama, *Boudha*, 12-13. Included in this picture is the *durtro* or charnel ground, which were mythically associated with stupas and protective mother goddesses in several locations where manifestations of Padmasambhava practiced. The mother goddess Ma Jadzima (the woman who established the stupa) will be discussed briefly in a few pages. For more, see Mimi Church, "History & Mythology: Stories of The Great Stupa" in Lama, *Boudha*, 8.

[57] Lama, *Boudha,* 15.

[58] Ibid., 16.

buildings and homes. Once at the outskirts of Kathmandu, the stupa and surrounding neighborhood of Boudhanath is now fully immersed in the bustle of city life (Fig. 8).

One can still take the route that was once the little path in the corner of Fig. 2; it is now the massive main road running next to the neighborhood, and the Boudhanath Gate that leads to the stupa circle is on one side of it. Hop out of the taxi on the busy street and turn to walk under the gate, and you will enter a different world. As you walk between the buildings towards the stupa, the majority of the monument's 118 foot-tall shape is obscured, but not its shining golden upper third that glints in the sun as it towers over the stores and immediately draws your gaze. I am aware that most readers of this paper have not experienced the Boudhanath stupa, or perhaps any stupa, for themselves. Therefore, I have provided a short formal analysis below; not so that the stupa's iconography can be dissected and analyzed, but so that I can attempt to mimic the senses; recreating interactions with the stupa circle for myself and trying (in a necessarily limited fashion) to do so for the reader.

Described simply: the stupa is roughly conical, with a wide base and pointed top. At the bottom are three 20-cornered plinths, which get successively smaller as they rise. The base plinth measures 270.20 feet by 272.40 feet,[59] and each is between 6-7 feet tall.[60] When viewed aerially (Fig. 8), the concentric tiers mark an outer edge of the stupa's mandala plan, delineating the sacred-ordered from the profane-chaotic. Resting on the plinths is the 120 ft-in-diameter dome, whitewashed. On top of the dome is the golden cube with a set of eyes, a conch shell nose, and a bindi affixed to each side of it. A red skirt-like curtain hangs from the top edge of the cube,

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[59] Gutschow, *The Nepalese Caitya*, 98.
[60] Keith Dowman, "Liberation upon Seeing: Meaning and Symbolism," in Lama, *Boudha,* 38.

making the effect of the sharp eyebrows even heavier. The stupa's Buddha eyes stare down at you; you stare back.[61] Above the cube are 13 square tiers in gilt-copper plating, getting smaller as they rise.[62] Set on top of them is a diamond shaped golden finial of struts, with the dharma parasol (a golden metal wrought skirt) encircling the middle of the diamond. Hanging from the parasol is a fabric skirt similar to the one wrapped around the cube. The very top of the stupa pierces the sky and connects to the central pillar of the stupa through various internal components obscured from the ground view by distance, the skirt/parasol, and the outer structure.[63] Fastened to the four corner struts of the finial are long strings of brightly colored prayer flags (several to each strut), the other sides of which are attached to poles mounted past the edge of the base plinths. As a result, the stupa is framed diagonally at all times by fluttering prayer flags that emphasize its sloping shape.[64]

At the base of the whole structure, a few feet out from the corners of the plinths, a wall runs around the entire perimeter of the stupa (Fig. 6 and 7). This is the area that practitioners primarily come into physical contact with. It is made up of many angled sides and is about 8 feet tall—high enough that when you are in the kora circle, the place where the first plinth connects to the ground is hidden and the stupa becomes a mass magically rising from the ground into a shining point. The wall is whitewashed, with a slanted top that has miniature stupa shapes

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[61] Cummings and Wassman, *Buddhist Stupas in Asia,* 100. See also Keith Dowman's sub-section "The Superstructure" in the "Liberation upon Seeing: Meaning and Symbolism" chapter of Lama, *Boudha,* 38.
[62] Lama, *Boudha*, 38.
[63] There are many other details about the inner constructions of the Boudhanath stupa which I am not getting into, such as the makeup of the interior pinnacle, parasol, and apex area; nor am I discussing the statute niches or the drum they're in at the base of the dome. This is because I'm focusing on the aspects of the monument which are visible to practitioners from the ground, and because I do not have space to fully unpack these details. For more information, I highly recommend Lama, *Boudha,* especially pages 125-142 for detailed pictures of the reconstruction of the upper section after the 2015 earthquake.
[64] Cummings and Wassman, *Buddhist Stupas in Asia*, 100. Also Gutschow, *The Nepalese Caitya*, 99.

adorning the top of it.[65] The whole wall encircling the stupa has three-foot-long windows cut into it, and in them are prayer wheels held on vertical poles, four or five per window. They have Tibetan prayers in relief, and at the base of each are two small perpendicular wooden handle poles which can be used to turn them clockwise as someone walks along the wall. The wheel windows are mostly covered by bright yellow curtains. Next to the wall runs a wide brick walkway with a slight angled divot in the middle of it, and the first walkway slopes a little to meld with a wider ring of bricks next to it. These pedestrian walkways make up the wide path of the kora ritual circle, whose outer edge is ringed by 3 stories of shops and restaurants on all sides, only broken up by small tributary alleys and paths that cut between the stores. People throng the walkways and storefronts surrounding the stupa from early morning to late at night. Though a traditional iconographical analysis doesn't include people, the community is necessary to describe here. Even in the dead of night when stores are closed, there may still be practitioners doing kora (especially on holy days). The prayer wheels in the wall windows are spun over and over again as an endless stream of hands push them, and the air is filled with different sounds, smells, and sights depending where in the kora circle you are. Near the main gate the honking traffic is still audible, while another side of the stupa—where the busy Goddess Temple and the two doors for inner-path circumambulation are—faces the Guru Lhakang Monastery, so the chanting of monks can be heard. In between the temples in the middle of the kora path is also the large pot of incense, with a large cloud of smoke always wafting out of it and over the

[65] There are also six mini whitewashed stupa shapes on top of the base plinths at several corners. Each of these is roughly 12 feet tall, and there are four on the north side and two on the south. I don't have space or time to discuss what each of these mini stupas symbolizes or were built for. See Lama, *Boudha*, 15 and 37.

practitioners, who can donate incense as an offering.[66] No matter where in the rotation one is, chatter, the rustling of fabric and of feet, and muttering of mantras can be heard. Long benches that face inwards to the stupa are placed periodically along the line where the two walking paths merge, so walkers can stop and sit (Fig. 7). There is a small kora walkway within the wall too, which practitioners can access through two small gates on the northern side of the outer wall. Between the plinths and the wall there is also a small temple for donating butter lamps, and some spaces with boards set up for full-body prostrations;[67] both are meritorious acts that are a part of prayer for Tibetan Buddhists.

Kora and the Stupa as Part of Daily Life

Viewing and understanding all these details of the stupa's physical structure and environment requires human movement— it is simply too big and complex to be comprehended in one spot or with the sensorium from one location. Interactions with the stupa happen at all hours of the day, every day of the year. Some are purposeful prayer encounters, and some more coincidental experiences of shopping or going out for food that necessarily involve the stupa. The stores, restaurants, monasteries, and galleries facing the stupa make it the center of economic and social

[66] The "Goddess Temple" is a small Nepali style wooden lattice-work temple with a shrine inside, located between the two entrance gates for inner-wall kora, set against the outer edge of the wall. The shrine includes a covered statue of the fierce goddess who the temple is dedicated to, whose identity depends on who you ask. Tibetans recognize her as Ma Jadzima, the woman who built the stupa and was a manifestation of a Bodhisattva: from Ngawang Choegyal (Tibetan language teacher, former monk, practitioner, resident), discussion with author at Utpala Café, Boudhanath, August 9, 2023. A different contact, Sonam Gyaltsen, identified her specifically as a reincarnation of Tara. Newars call her Ajima (Grandmother) or Hariti (a demoness). Kieth Dowman, a scholar who has focused much of his research on Boudhanath, says "Whatever her name, in essence she is a female Buddha, her manifestation wrathful, and her function protective. She is a Buddha-protectress who bestows power (siddhi) upon those who invoke her." See Dowman, "Liberation upon Seeing" in Lama, *Boudha,* 36. Her temple is often busy with practitioners of all ethnic groups who stop by on their way around the stupa.

[67] Prostrations will be discussed in slightly more detail later on.

life for the neighborhood, in addition to spiritual life. It is very common to say to someone "I'll meet you at the stupa and then we can find a place for dinner" or "I need a break from homework so I'm going to do a few kora and then I'll be back." One Tibetan friend even told me that the stupa is a common meetup spot for first dates between young people in the area who connected through online dating sites.[68] Shopping at the stupa cannot be defined as neatly non-spiritual either; stores cater to tourists and have trays of cheap trinkets, while next door there may be a gallery of masterful sacred Thangka paintings for sale. Spiritual tourists and pilgrims especially help to blur the lines of the sacred and profane, buying mass-produced dharma items like Buddha keychains or tiny statuettes. Who is to say where the sacred ends and kitsch begins? Most Boudhanath locals who I talked to recognized the benefit the stupa has on the community as hub of commerce;[69] though several people told me that the stupa and neighborhood had changed and that more people just cared about money and didn't appreciate the sacrality.[70] The majority of the owners of the stores that surround the stupa are also practitioners, and they have an interesting role in the blending of commercial and spiritual life. Those who I talked to were very appreciative of the fact that their jobs meant that they were within eyesight of the sacred stupa for the whole day, because simply being near it can help generate good karma and rebirth.[71] They

[68] Konchok Dhondup (Tibetan language teacher, former monk, resident), discussion with author at Utpala Café, Boudhanath, August 9, 2023.
[69] Gyaltsen, August 5, 2023, and Dolma Gurung (practitioner, resident), discussion with author at Pahuna Café, Boudhanath, August 6, 2023. Also expressed by several others.
[70] Lhakpa Dolma Sherpa (practitioner, resident), discussion with author at Caravan Café, Boudhanath, August 8, 2023. Also expressed by Dhondup, August 9, 2023. My Tibetan language teacher, Ngawang Choegyal, actually said that it's good that the stores are annoying, because the emotion of irritation can be worked through during spiritual practice at the stupa.
[71] Sherpa, August 8, 2023.

also appreciated how easy it was for them to do kora; most said that they get off work and then do several rounds of kora before heading home for the day.[72]

The most prayerful, purposeful practice of kora generally involves using prayer beads and reciting mantras and prayers as one walks, with the understanding that kora is purifying the doer and generating merit for them.[73] My Tibetan language teacher, Ngawang Choegyal, specified three important parts of kora practice for Tibetan Buddhists: the first is good motivation (to help oneself and all sentient beings get good rebirth), the second is mantra recitation (to help keep oneself focused on prayer and not lose proper motivation), and third is dedication prayer (for all sentient beings to become happy and enlightened).[74] Kora is a daily (or several times daily) ritual for many, and some devout practitioners do kora continuously on auspicious days. Different numbers of kora hold differing significance; some do three for the Three Jewels of Buddhism (Buddha, dharma, and sangha (community)), or they will do a number that correlates to what they are praying for (the number of hours a loved one is in surgery, for example).[75] Others do any number that is convenient for their schedule, but generally, the more the better. Of course, not all kora is done with prayer beads, full focus, and prayer. People still see it as merit-gaining if you aren't praying or doing it with religious intent (though it's certainly considered more beneficial to do it with focus on prayer).[76] In a lecture I attended, a Khenpo (Buddhist teacher) joked that the stupa is a "psychological fitness center," and that doing kora is training for both

[72] Gurung, August 6, 2023.
[73] A system in Buddhism that involves doing good (i.e. praying, donating to a temple, helping someone, sacrificing for the good of another) with the understanding that something good for you will result from it later down the road (i.e. a better rebirth, good fortune, etc). It is linked to the buddhist system of karma.
[74] Choegyal, August 9, 2023.
[75] Ibid., August 9, 2023.
[76] Gyaltsen, August 5, 2023. Also expressed by Gurung, August 6, 2023.

body and mind. Many other community members expressed similar sentiments.[77] These two functions go hand in hand, with a close relationship between physical movement and religious benefit— the mere act of walking around the stupa exposes you to it and is therefore good.

Movement Contains and Represents Cultural Knowledge

Kora also carries cultural knowledge that practitioners participate in when they circumambulate. Deirdre Sklar, a dance and movement studies ethnographer, argues that movement carries "embodied cultural knowledge": a system similar to a language, that is not understandable to an outsider without qualitative observation, cultural immersion, and participation assisted by communication with insiders.[78] This movement-encoded knowledge includes culture-specific ideas of order and meaning; how the world works and where the doer fits within it.[79] Scholar Toni Huber has spent many years in Tibet observing and participating in Tibetan pilgrimage, and he argues similarly that sense experience and movement carry far more complex meaning than what an outsider might see:

> When observing pilgrimages certain of these physical relational forms may be easily misinterpreted, or even missed altogether. A pilgrim who appears to be just staring at a group of boulders may be in the process of a sophisticated landscape interpretation

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[77] Khenpo, (monk, teacher), lesson given to author via verbal translator at Rangjung Yeshe Institute, Boudhanath, June 7, 2023. Also expressed by Gyaltsen, August 5, 2023, by Gurung, August 6, 2023, and by Sherpa, August 8, 2023.

[78] Deidre Sklar, " Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance," in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 30.

[79] The stupa's complex symbolism and meaning is well understood by the neighborhood, and those engaging with it every day. Many people told me about the "Divine" or the dharma that they saw embodied physically in the art and architecture of the stupa. A Khenpo (buddhist teacher) said in a lecture I attended that stupas may be understood as a 3D teaching. "Every part of the shape of the stupa has meaning— it's an illustration of the mind of the buddha— a 3D map of what we want to achieve." (Khenpo, June 7, 2023). Another practitioner friend of mine who has been living and studying in Kathmandu for 30 years explained it similarly: stupas are "physical versions of Buddha, because buddha and his marks (bodily signifiers) and stupas are all a code for internal mind shape and qualities." Frank Varheit, (practitioner, resident), conversation with author at Utpala Café, Boudhanath, June 22nd and 23rd, 2023.

> exercise…. much of this level of pilgrimage, and its frequency, can go unnoticed by the "outside" observer.[80]

As Huber previously argued with the term *gnas skor* (going around an abode of a deity), Tibetan pilgrimage is by definition circular and therefore includes kora. On an observable level, the action of doing kora involves an understanding of which way to walk, what to focus on, and what mantras to say. On a hidden level, kora is a reinforcement of the Tibetan Buddhist cosmology and dharma that the stupa represents. Interaction with the stupa places oneself in one's proper place as an earth-side moving cog in the outer edge of the cosmic wheel. Full engagement involves the senses in a conceptualization of the stupa as a multiplicity of meanings: simultaneously the Buddha's body, the center pillar of the world, the manifestation of cosmic order and reality, the abode of the gods and of all things sacred. As Sklar also argues, this knowledge cannot be transferred merely via reading or speaking; one must experience movement with their own body to fully understand it.[81] This is crucial for gaining the knowledge contained through kora. Things like the feeling of your shoes on the kora path's uneven bricks, the spatial senses of the stupa above you, the people and stores around you, the noises of prayer and daily life, and the scent of the incense pot cannot be adequately expressed and truly felt through words alone. Huber argues that in order to interpret kora, you must participate;[82] one needs the actual sense of moving their body around the Buddha's body in order to begin to understand the deeper meanings formed through the practitioner's relationship to the stupa itself. Each part of the stupa contains the dharma in its entirety, and all the parts together are the dharma made physical. The

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[80] Huber, "Putting the Gnas Back into Gnas-Skor," 39.

[81] Sklar, " Five Premises," 31.

[82] Huber, "Putting the Gnas Back into Gnas-Skor" 33.

practice of kora is one of those crucial parts, and to grasp your own role in the great wheel you must physically *feel* it and supplement the sensorial information with great quantities of cultural knowledge.[83]

Sense Experience is the Focus of Kora

This sensory information gained through kora is the most important part of the practice. The Dalai Lama once said: "When you walk a circular pilgrimage route, such as this one around Mount Kailash, your feet touch the earth with big spaces between them, but when you prostrate, your whole body connects with the sacred ground to close the circle."[84] Prostration is much more physical, which is why the Dalai Lama implies that it may be preferred— for the extreme or full-body sensory contact with the sacred that is offered.[85] Prostration is necessary to mention here because it is another form of kora, but I cannot further examine the practice's similarities and

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[83] I did start down the road that Sklar prescribes for understanding cultural movement: I spent many hours observing the practice, I took intensive language classes, I lived with a host family for the two months I was there, and I asked many insiders about the practice. Of course, two months of intensive research and immersion will never make up for a lifetime of cultural heritage. Kora is not a closed practice— anyone can do it, and most buddhists are happy to see non-buddhists participating (for example, see Lama, *Boudha*, 187). Whether you're a devout Tibetan practitioner making purposeful prayers, an American buddhist who understands that the stupa is holy but doesn't have an understanding of the Tibetan tantric symbolism, or even a pig washed away in a flood (story from Choegyal, Aug. 9, 2023)— kora is kora, and kora is good. I have done many kora rotations and have the necessary sensory experience (and lots of background research) to understand somewhat. However, I am not a Tibetan, nor a Buddhist, so I cannot grasp kora's encoded cultural knowledge in its entirety.

[84] Fourteenth Dalai Lama, *My Tibet*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990), 132, quoted in Huber, "Putting the Gnas Back into Gnas-Skor," 35.

[85] Prostration, in this context, generally describes a movement process done by practitioners. While standing, they make prayer hands (palms or fingertips touching each other) and move or touch their hands to the forehead, mouth, and chest (in that order). They then lower themselves to the ground, stretching out their hands flat in front of them, with their whole body laying facedown on the ground. It is fairly common at stupas and other *gnas skor* (pilgrimage) sites to do prostrations as kora: practitioners stand up from the stretched out position and take a step or two to get to the spot where their outstretched fingers touched, beginning the process again. Kora via prostration makes pilgrimage much harder, and the repeated stress on the body can cause injuries as severe as broken ribs (described by an older friend who was tasked with caring for a woman prostrating around Mt. Kailash who broke several ribs in the process).

differences to walking kora because it is outside the scope of this paper.[86] Huber's assessment of Tibetan pilgrimage in general (both walking and prostrating) is that:

> Most commonly it is about a direct (and observable) physical, sensory relationship of person and place through *seeing* (in both the sense of direct encounter (*mjal*) and "reading" and interpreting landscape, etc.), *touching* (by contacting the place), *positioning* (body in relation to place), *consuming/tasting* (by ingesting place substance), *collecting* (substances of the place), *exchanging* (place substance with personal substances/possessions), *vocalizing* (prayers addressed to the place or specific formulas), and even in some cases *listening* (for sounds produced by the place).[87]

Many of these sensorial loci are at work in the practice of kora at the Boudhanath Stupa, particularly seeing, touching, positioning, and vocalizing. Being in close proximity to and even making contact with holy objects is a popular form of worship in many religions.[88] In Tibetan Buddhism this especially manifests in reverence for *gnas*, containers and representatives of deities. Holy people such as the Dalai Lama, objects such as reliquaries, and places such as stupas are revered as the buddha-qualities and the truth of dharma manifested into tangible—

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[86] Interestingly, there are less Tibetans prostrating around the stupa now than there used to be, which Dowman claims is due to Tibetans being "more concerned with cleanliness of dress than in the past" (Dowman, "Liberation upon Seeing" in Lama, *Boudha,* 38). There are wooden prostration boards inside the stupa wall, as opposed to open spots on the sacred ground. These board are covered by plastic tarps when not in use, and I wonder if the boards are there to provide cleanliness. This implies that it's about the movement, not touching the ground, and I am interested in further investigating the importance and meaning of moving through prostrations. Also see Huber p. 33 for a mention of the somewhat metaphysical concept of defilements (*sgrib*) that is believed to be cleansed by kora and prostrations.

[87] Huber, "Putting the Gnas Back into Gnas-Skor" 38.

[88] A vast amount of research on sense experience in other religions has been done by a laundry list of scholars. In particular, I have read lots on medieval Christian examples. For a small sample, see Stephen Lamia, "Souvenir, Synaesthesia, and the Sepulcrum Domini; Sensory Stimuli as Memory Stratagems," in *Memory and Medieval Tomb*, edited by Elizabeth Valdez del Alamo, Carol Stamatis Pendergast, 19-41, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2019), and Kathryn M. Rudy "Eating the Face of Christ: Philip the Good and his Physical Relationship with Veronicas," in *The European Fortune of the Roman Veronica in the Middle Ages*, edited by Amanda C Murphy, Herbert L Kessler, Marco Petoletti, Eamon Duffy, Guido Milanese, Veronika Tvrznikova, 168-179, (Thessaloniki: Brepols Publishing, 2018), and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, (New York: Zone Books, 2011).

touchable— things. The ability to have sensory experiences and relationships with them is highly sought after and regarded as very auspicious.[89]

Tibetan Liberation through the Senses at Stupas

Sensory relationships in particular—with holy objects, persons, or places—are so important in Tibetan Buddhism because of the common understanding that liberation is the result of those sense experiences.[90] Joanna Tokarska-Bakir analyzes how that reciprocal relationship works, and argues that liberation through the senses fits into an Eliadean/Smithian "central-locative ontology."[91] When the whole world and fabric of reality is interwoven with hints of the sacred—manifested both in the orderly center-focused community (around stupas such as Boudhanath) and in the natural landscape—then frequent meaningful and liberatory sensory interactions with the sacred are an unavoidable part of everyday life. Thus, the Tibetan view of a world steeped in the sacred necessarily includes liberation through the senses.

Tibetan Buddhism has a long history of honoring "the soteriological power of simple sensory contact."[92] Tokaraska-Bakir explains liberation through the senses as "cognition-

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[89] Huber, "Putting the Gnas Back into Gnas-Skor" 47.

[90] One example of this can be seen in Snodgrass's discussion of tree symbolism, where he quotes the Mahā-sukhāvatī-vyuhā's description of the Wish-Granting Tree/Bodhi Tree growing in the Pure Land of a Buddha. The tree is always in flower and is decked with jewels and sacred symbols, and Snodgrass paraphrases how "Those beings who hear the sound of that Tree moved by the wind, who see it, who smell its scent, who taste its fruits will never more suffer diseases of the ear, the eye, the nose or the tongue…". Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 183.

[91] Tokarska Bakir does say "archaic ontology," but I am modifying it after Smith's revision because it's the same concept that Smith and Eliade are discussing, and she makes the distinction that archaic ontology should not have any temporal connotations, which is exactly what Smith says for part of why "centric-locative" is better. See Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "Naive Sensualism, Docta Ignorantia. Tibetan Liberation through the Senses," *Numen* 47, no. 1 (2000): 90. doi:10.1163/156852700511432.

[92] Tokarska-Bakir, "Naive Sensualism, Docta Ignorantia," 70.

through-unconsciousness," or a way of comprehending something without needing conscious thought, foreign to European intellectual religious systems that focus on text.[93] Technical understanding of a devotional act or the thing you are reading, saying, or seeing, is not the point. In other words, "interest [is] not so much in the theme (what a text is *about* or *what* an image represents), but in their rheme (the materiality of a text, the substance of an image, what the text or the image is)."[94] Sensory liberation happens through memory, through touch, through wearing, through taste, through hearing, and through seeing. The Boudhanath Stupa is interacted with in a variety of these ways, particularly through sight and touch. Stupas are often called or named things like "the great liberation through seeing," "liberates people just by being looked at," or "the view that gives the blessing of virtue and religion."[95] Indeed, the Boudhanath Stupa is referred to as "The Great Stupa, whose sight liberates" by Tibetan Buddhist master Dudjom Jigdral Yeshe Dorje.[96] Tokarska-Bakir explains that all those things which may liberate by touch can also liberate via sight, namely, *tulkus* (reincarnations of deities and great teachers) and blessed beings.[97] As *gnas,* monuments inhabited by a deity or blessed beings, stupas are able to liberate through touch in addition to sight.

Practitioners are Necessary

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[93] Ibid., 93-94. The example Tokarska-Bakir gives is Protestantism, which bolsters Gregory Schopen's discussion of Sola Scriptura and the way that Protestantism has influenced the focus on text in religious studies scholarship and Buddhist Studies more specifically. See Gregory Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31, no. 1 (1991): doi:10.1086/463253.

[94] Tokarska-Bakir, "Naive Sensualism, Docta Ignorantia," 76-84.

[95] Ibid., 83.

[96] Franz-Karl Erhard, *Views of the Bauddhanāth-Stūpa* (Kathmandu: 1991), 13, quoted in Gutschow, *The Nepalese Caitya,* 99.

[97] Tokarska-Bakir, "Naive Sensualism, Docta Ignorantia," 82-83.

It is clear that the sense experience involved in kora is important to practitioners. But what is the effect of the practitioners on the stupa? The relationship between the community and the structure is not a one-way road. The most obvious reason that the stupa requires practitioners is for its physical upkeep. A monument of the Boudhanath Stupa's size and importance decays and accumulates a *patina of use*;[98] stones are worn down from thousands of feet walking on them during kora, walls and prayer wheels accrue oils and dirt from people's hands, prayer flags get tattered and dirty because of weather and pollution, and the same can be said for the whitewash. Practitioners keep up the visual sensorium of the stupa by replacing flags, sweeping the path, making new prayer wheels, donating and re-hanging flags, and sponsoring new coats of whitewash. These acts of caring for the stupa are often understood as forms of worship in their own right. Following the 7.8 magnitude earthquake in Nepal in 2015, the stupa required a massive and painstaking reconstruction. The whole top section needed to be removed, repaired, and cleaned, as damage extended a meter into the top of the cube.[99] This entire project was managed and carried out by local groups, volunteers, and craftsmen. It is seen as meritorious to build or reconstruct a stupa, and in Mani Lama's book documenting the process, many craftsmen express great pride and gratefulness at getting to be part of "a sacred endeavor."[100] Without the labors of the local community and practitioners, the stupa likely would not be able to last for many more decades like it now will. It is a cyclical relationship: practitioners' *physical* use

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[98] Patina of use is a term I've created to describe the way religious objects are physically changed as a result of being repeatedly used.

[99] Lama, *Boudha,* 97.

[100] Ibid., 168.

(kora) *physically* wears down the stupa, it needs repairs, repairs are done by practitioners, and it is used by practitioners and worn down again.

This stupa-practitioner relationship exemplifies the principle of interdependence that is so crucial to Buddhist philosophies of non-duality. Just as the sacred center needs the periphery in order to be identified, a stupa—as a *mchod rten* or "receptacle of offerings"— needs people to *give* those offerings. The way to grasp the stupa's meaning is not to observe, but to participate. Practitioners' own enlightenment is a part of the Buddha's enlightenment— to move your body around the Buddhas is to participate in his enlightenment, the very thing that the stupa symbolizes and *is*.

Conclusion

Upon entrance to the stupa circle, you see it and it sees you.[101] No matter where you stop in your kora rotation, one of the four sets of eyes is visible to you—and vice versa. Immediately, the practitioner or tourist who views it is forced to engage: to make eye contact or break it, to be whisked away around the kora path with the flow of people, or purposefully resist. This is not a secluded mountain stupa that takes a five-hour hike to reach, nor a stupa in a temple complex surrounded by monastic life. This is a city center, where urban sprawl encroaches on, mixes with, and enhances the stupa's sacrality. At one section of the kora circuit, the rhythmic sounds of the *om mani padme hum* mantra waft into the air at nearly all hours of the day, helping listeners generate compassion and merit. The sacred Sanskrit syllables are not, however, being vocalized by a monk or practitioner. Instead, they play on an endlessly repeating CD from the

[101] There is a connection here with the Hindu concept of darśan, in which the god is viewed by the devotee and simultaneously the devotee is viewed by the god.

front steps of a souvenir shop that rings the stupa, only about 20 feet from the walls. People doing kora scan the restaurant-fronts for their friends, glance at the stores' wares laid out near their feet, stare off into the distance or down in front of them while using prayer beads, or look at the wheels set into the stupa's walls as they spin them. Rarely does anyone twist their neck to look up at the stupa's dome and top as they walk. After all, the iconography is not the point—the interaction in the kora ring is.

A Buddhist friend of mine who has been living in Kathmandu for 30 years once told me that he thinks of the Boudhanath Stupa as "samsara and nirvana in a nutshell."[102] Each person who does kora participates in the meaning and cosmology of the stupa, (whatever that may be for each individual), and thus creates the monument, imbuing it with symbolism. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche explains that "for the Himalayan Buddhist, the Stupa represents a living embodiment of Dharmakaya, the 'body of the doctrine.' Rather than seeing the stupa as a mere memorial or a symbolic teaching vehicle, the Himalayan believer invests the stupa with the capacity to spur the observer towards nirvana simply by seeing or contemplating it."[103] Believers make the Boudhanath Stupa what it is. In the end, sacred art that doesn't have someone to interpret it and imbue it with meaning is simply matter.[104] The practitioners and the community rebuild the stupa, perpetuate its symbolism, and actively make themselves a part of that symbolism through

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[102] Varheit, June 22 and 23, 2023. Samsara is the endless cycle of life, suffering, death, and rebirth. Nirvana is the escape from that cycle.

[103] Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, quoted by Cummings and Wassman, *Buddhist Stupas in Asia,* 26. I would also like to mention a conversation with an American Buddhist friend, who told me that the Stupa's "liberation upon sight" means that it brings out "interdependent arising compassion," and basically that *if you're open* then it is a catalyst for liberation. How I understand this as an agnostic is that even if the stupa holds no special power/is not a catalyst, if people *think* it is, then it could be so for them.

[104] Tokarska-Bakir, "Naive Sensualism, Docta Ignorantia," 97.

kora and engagement with the structure. Hence, the Boudhanath Stupa cannot be dissected and analyzed as sacred art without equal attention being paid to the people who create it both physically and meaningfully. The practitioners, as the physical and symbolic outer rim of the cosmic wheel, interpreters of encoded meaning, and recipients of sacred benefits, are a crucial facet of the stupa. The center needs periphery, and vice versa. Boudhanath Stupa's monumental core and its fluid practitioner-made outer edges are thus twin parts of the same whole.

Figure 1:

The Boudhanath Stupa in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal
Builder Unknown
Built approx. 5th century BC
Photograph summer 2023 by author of upper/main section

Figure 2:

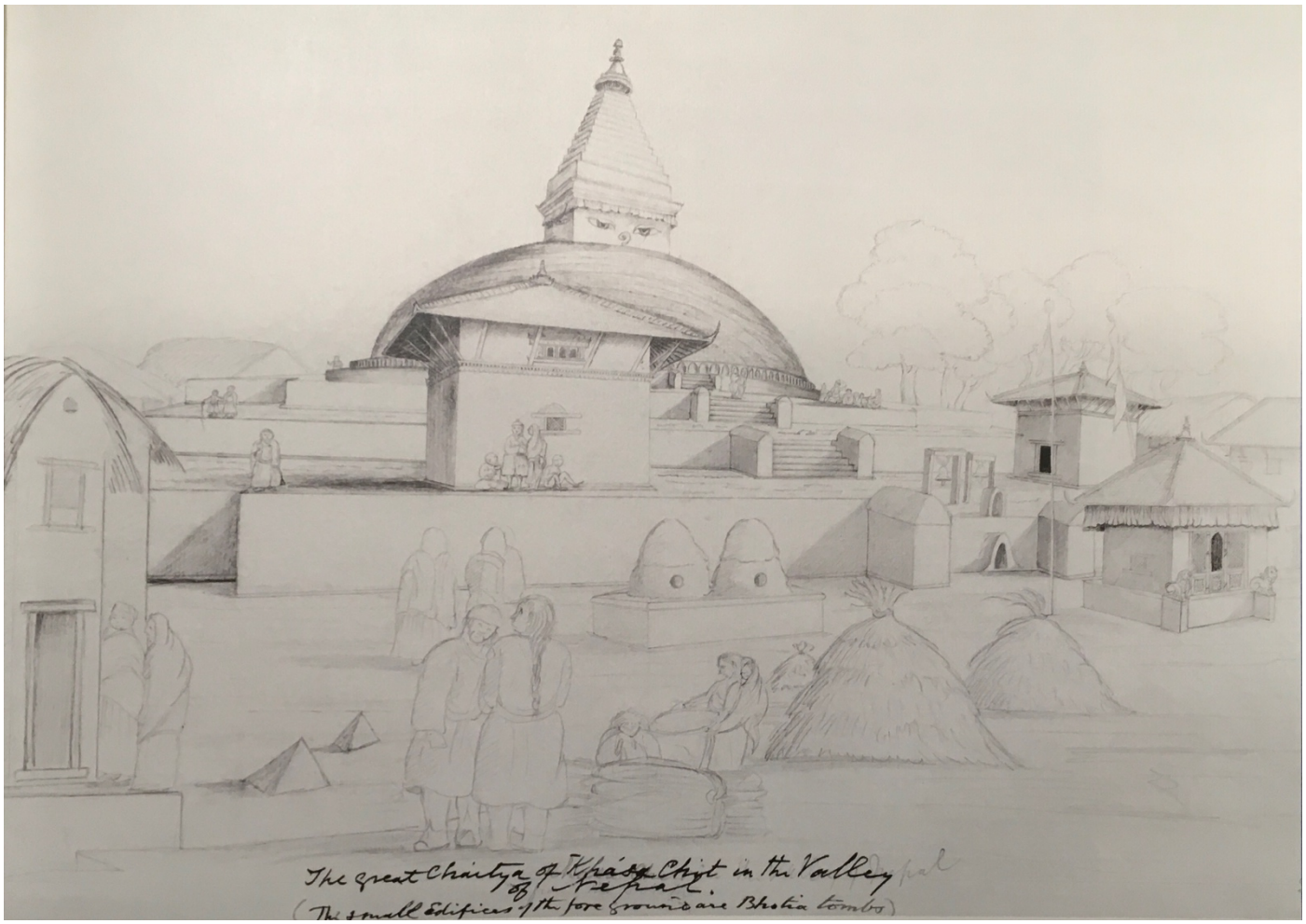
The Boudhanath Stupa and surroundings (no clear title)
Charles Crawford

1802-1803
Copper-plate engraving based on Crawford's drawing

Figure 3:

The Great Stupa (no clear title)
Likely done by a hill artist from the area
Early 19th Century
Tibetan style Thangka Painting on canvas

Figure 4:



The great Chaitya of Khasa Chit in the Valley of Nepal
Rajman Singh Chitrakar
1843
Ethnographic drawing

Figure 5:

The Great Stupa (no clear title)
Henry Ambrose Oldfield
1854
Drawing used in Oldfield's book *Sketches from Nipal*

Figure 6:

The Boudhanath Stupa
Builder Unknown
Built approx. 5th century BC
Photograph summer 2023 by author of view from kora pathway

Figure 7:

The kora walkway and stores at the Great Stupa
Photograph by Author's friend
Summer 2023

Figure 8:

Aerial View of Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu, Nepal
Bing photograph online
January 15, 2020

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