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Possessing Power: Ajima and Her Medium

Ellen Coon

On any given morning in the Kathmandu Valley, hundreds of people are visiting mediums. The first medium I visited lived in a small house in the heart of Patan. As I approached her doorway, the first thing I noticed was her mother-in-law, a scowling woman in her late fifties who was scrubbing a pile of laundry on the cement floor. Making my way up the stairs, I hear hymns of praise coming from a small room. I bent to enter and found myself facing a powerful woman dressed in red, seated on an enormous brass and wood throne. Curving snakes of brass coiled up the arms of the throne, and their heads formed a canopy for the head of the medium. Adorned with yellow jasmine and vermillion powder, a crown of leaves upon her head, the deity in the medium had been worshiped just as an image in a temple would be. She listened as people explained their troubles to her, received their offerings of food, money and flowers, and blessed them as they bowed to her feet. To anyone used to seeing married Newar women in their usual roles as household drudges who are constantly bowing to those above them in the social hierarchy -- which for some of the younger women can mean practically everybody -- watching them get worshipped instead is quite startling. This is a recent and growing phenomenon: most people agree that mediums only appear in the Valley forty or so years ago, and that their number is increasing every year.

I have met mediums from Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur, some of whose fame is such that 200-300 people visit them on the days they are possessed, some who are visited only occasionally by a few people. Most of them are women, and most of them are Newar. They form the newest part of a traditional healing network that includes midwives and *baidyas*, and *dhami-jhankris* for non-Newars, but their popularity seems to be growing, while that of midwives and *baidyas* does not. Part of a spectrum of available healers, they are not necessarily in opposition to those practicing Western medicine; rather their job is to discover the underlying cause of illness or any other trouble and to prescribe its remedy, which may even include Western medicine. The Newar universe is an elaborate one, filled with countless categories of beings, both visible and invisible. Any interaction between any two kinds of beings is mediated by rules, and if these rules are not followed, there can be a wide variety of consequences. Problems of any sort are usually interpreted as the result of breach of rules of relationship, but it is difficult to know which rules one has breached and in relation to what. *Baidyas* and midwives are trained healers, but they are human; those who visit mediums point out that only a deity has the omniscience to diagnose with authority the reason for trouble and tell people what to do about it.

All of the deities can appear in mediums, but one group in particular function as the healers: the authoritative, accessible, maternal goddess Harati Ma, her sisters, and her children. These deities have developed an importance and identity locally that goes far beyond their relatively minor place in Buddhist texts and elsewhere. Every year, their popularity grows; Harati Ma's small temple next to the Swyambhunath stupa is packed, all day every day, by Newars and non-Newars doing simple pujas or pujas elaborate enough to require intricate food offerings and the services of a Vajracharya priest. Harati Ma's fundamental characteristic is that she is a mother -- the mother of the Buddha in several previous lives, the obsessive mother of 500 children, complete with individual personalities and idiosyncracies of their own. Most frequently she is called Ajima, a title of respect that means great-grandmother or matriarch. Various groups of goddesses she calls her younger sisters; the ones that appear most often in mediums are the joginis, such as Bijeswari Ma, Vajra Jogini, and Mupta Ma. This

is a kinship network of deities which are profoundly female in character -- there are sons, but no husbands or fathers --and which almost always possess women. Their way of interacting with humans is to create webs of family, so that although there remains a boundary between gods and people, Harati Ma becomes the mother of all, her sisters become aunts, and each of her children becomes a sort of glorified sibling or best friend.

Harati Ma and her kin do their healing in intimate, domestic contexts. Possessing their mediums regularly in local houses, they are as easy to visit as relatives in the neighborhood. Sometimes, people simply stop by to chat. No question is too large or too small; the gods will make crucial decisions or answer humble inquiries about the welfare of a stray dog. When people come because they are ill or suffering the effects of witchcraft or other unseen afflictions, the deities give advice, but they also get directly involved. Their main technique is a familiar one called *jhareyau*, meaning to sweep it or take it away, most of the tools for which can be found in any house. With incense and a broom, they sweep disruptive influences away from the patient. They wash her head with water, and give her water to drink, blowing inaudible mantras over the water and the patient with their breath. They may also tie an amulet around a patient's neck, give her incense to burn at home, or even massage sore bodies with mustard oil. The gods are physically handling people. What this means is that worshipping a deity and begging for its help is no longer a one-way process; the deity responds, tangibly and at once. The relationship becomes one of immediate exchange. People still bow to the feet of the deity, but now they are rewarded with a blessing they can hear. As always, people feed the deities, but now the deities can tell them whether the food was good or not and what each of them in particular likes to eat -- since in Nepal what you will or won't eat is a major part of who you are. This close contact puts people in dialogue with the deities so that they can constantly monitor their own lives, get advised on how well they're worshipping and doing in general.

People crave advice, because these are uncertain times. All Newars in the Kathmandu Valley, but particularly the older ones, have seen vast changes in their lifetimes due to the influx of foreigners and new technology. Through the mediums, the deities help people cope with social change by providing them with a traditional framework in which to comprehend it. Buddhist and Hindu eschatology posit a period of moral decay, accompanied by natural and political disasters, as a prelude to dissolution, which will be followed by renewal, a recreation of order, the appearance of a new Buddha, etc. The deities explain their presence in mediums as an effort to comfort and heal humans in this time of chaos and distress, the end of the Kali Yuga. They do this by being loving and approachable, but they also reassert the traditional order, the dharma. For those who had any doubts, their existence and appearance itself confirms the validity of the traditional view of the universe. Speaking through the mediums, the deities constantly describe and enlarge upon that universe. They also reassert its laws, the laws of the dharma, which maintain order and according to which everything must function. Part of the reason the gods are considered powerful is that they possess complete knowledge of all laws, both the esoteric knowledge that enables them to manipulate events, and a worldly knowledge of the laws by which people ought to live. When they heal, the gods use what people call "tantric-mantric things" such as *mantras*, quickly gestured *yantras*, and *mudras* or hand positions that they conceal; they allude to secret dances and rituals that few may watch. The fact that people do get cured demonstrates to them the truth and power of this knowledge. Secondly, while the gods joke with humans and handle them, they also insist on scrupulous adherence to the *niyams*, the correct ways of doing things. These are elaborate rules and procedures not just for ritual contexts but for all of daily living, a comprehensive code that the grandparents know well, but that middle-aged men and women might not know as well and that the younger generation is forgetting. You must bow to all your elders. You should eat nothing before going into the presence of a deity. Each food offering must be prepared and kept pure in a certain way. Going to a medium forces people to learn the *niyams*, as deities give constant instructions and get enraged at infractions, for keeping the *niyams* is the way humans uphold the dharma.

Having affirmed the Newar world view, the deities help people interpret their experience in a way that fits within it, and they urge people to relate to each other in traditional ways. If a woman comes to Harati Ma with a stomach ache, the goddess might say "you walked through the crossroads at twilight

and were caught by the grandmother spirit living there; go offer her black beans and meat." Or, "you offended the holy serpent at the water tap; offer it such and such." Or, "you have been quarreling with you elder sister-in-law again -- you must respect her more and all live peacefully together." Or even, "you just have worms; go eat foreign medicine." Situations brought about by change, too, are constantly arising. A girl arrives with her textbooks, worried about her approaching exams. Many times I have heard Harati Ma say something like: "I can see that you're going to have trouble with English. Give me that book." With the book held close to her face, the goddess goes through it page by page with her *phurba*, a sort of ritual dagger. At certain points she stabs at it and blows *mantras*, then she gives it back. Three weeks later, the girl bounces in, radiant, to offer sweets in thanks for her successful exams. This is a happy scenario, but grimmer products of change come up before the gods, as well; a woman may come weeping with terror because her son is addicted to hard drugs such as heroin, a recent problem in the Valley. Drug addiction inspires deep horror in Newars, who equate it with social and physical death but do not know how to deal with it. In these instances, the deity may prescribe several pujas and insist that the addict be brought before her to receive *jhareyau* for 21 days in a row, along with much of his family; she also may tell people never to leave him by himself. However unwillingly, the troubled person is pulled back into the circle of family and community, and hears plenty of advice and expressions of concern. These are new problems, yet the possessed mediums hand them in ways that reinforce community ties and are consistent with tradition.

But the mediums do not only help people to cope with social change. They are also an agent of social change. By becoming possessed, women perform what Karen Brown calls "an act of cultural judo:" in a patriarchal culture where women must exist within usually subservient roles as wives and mothers, mediums become empowered through their identification with the deities. Not only do they see themselves as more powerful, as able to make choices and affect their communities and influence the decisions of their families, but they are perceived as powerful by the people around them and treated with respect. This respect means not only the deference of those whom the medium would ordinarily have to respect -- senior male family members must bow to the medium rather than vice versa; she must receive the first serving of food -- but being freed from most of the morning drudgery of cleaning and cooking, both because the medium is occupied with her schedule of possession and worship, and because she must avoid tasks that would make her impure. So while the possessed mediums are advocating respect for traditional hierarchies, they are in effect overturning them in their own households. In the wider hierarchy of the caste system, too, they are having the same effect, for Harati Ma and her relatives frequently state that they do not believe in caste distinctions. Occasionally, a woman of the butcher caste or some other impure caste sits humbly just outside the doorway of the room in which the medium is possessed. The deities leave her where she is. But to my amazement -- and I heard this in several mediums, not just one -- they remark that the caste system is a human creation that they dislike, and that they're glad it's breaking down. They must mean it, for these gods are possessing women of every caste, from the highest to the lowest, from Vajracharyas to sweepers. And men and women of higher or equal caste are bowing to their feet.

This appropriation of power by women who are, by and large, illiterate and outside the group who wield religious authority has made mediums controversial among Newars. Possession itself is nothing new; almost everyone knows someone who has been possessed by a witch or a ghost or some other malevolent entity. It is possession by a deity that raises questions. Interestingly, most people agree that the deity is present to some degree in most mediums; what distinguishes a good or "real" medium from a bad one is her motives. The laws of order that govern the universe apply to gods as well as to humans, and it is possible for a medium to "pull" the deity to her by doing *sadhan*, learning the appropriate *mantras* from an unscrupulous *baidya* or medium, reciting them, and performing the appropriate kinds of worship. Such women wish to become mediums in order to make money, control their family members, or even in order to harm others, and the deity does not stay fully in them, or willingly, but "in *chaa*," partially and only for limited periods of time. Selfish desires and greed are considered the origin of all evil by Newars. A good medium, by contrast, is ideally completely innocent, ignorant, and inarticulate even in daily life; she observes purity rules, and usually has been suffering.

Suddenly the deity possesses her, wreaking havoc in her daily life and relationships until a comfortable schedule of possession has been established and states that it has come "in *purna*," willingly, fully, and for the lifetime of the medium. Many mediums -- however articulate and sparkly they may be -- stress their shyness and innocence and lack of material desires, perhaps in an effort to avoid any accusations and keep the position they have achieved.

Possession is a direct route to power, which bypasses the mediation of literate male ritual specialists. While the *gurujus* -- the Buddhist Vajracharya priests and their Hindu analogues -- turn to texts and tantric initiations for much of their authority, and of course are born to it by caste, mediums can be of any caste; they are usually illiterate and often do not speak Nepali, and unless they're of a high caste have not had any initiations. Deities confer their own credentials. In an intricate family puja, who has the authority, the priest, or some junior woman in the family who gets possessed by a deity and suddenly starts giving directions? Through the mediums, the deities can speak for themselves, rather than being spoken for. They can tell their own stories, rather than having the *gurujus* explain their stories as they are found in religious texts. In the process, the mediums gain a voice, too. If the deities function as complex symbols, then the mediums cease to rely only on the interpretations of religious authorities, cease to believe only the stories offered by them, and appropriate the symbols for themselves, interpreting them in a way that is personally meaningful and empowering to them. They begin to believe in the truth of their own experience.

Naturally, there are people who don't like this at all. A classic disagreement smolders on about what's true: what we hear from the priests who read their texts, or what's being lived and experienced. Take the example of one *guruju*. He is a famous old man, a Vajracharya priest who is considered an authority on religion and once even had his own radio show. He charges foreigners three rupees a minute for his time. When asked about mediums, the *Guruju* gave a disgusted snort. "What people say, that Harati Ma came in the body of someone or that her children came into somebody -- that's all lies. What proof do they have? In folk tales, they say whatever they want, whereas when we say it, we can prove that this is from this book, this is from that one, and so on, so it's true." The *Guruju's* version of Harati Ma's story is that she was a *yakshi* with enormous breasts and oppressive fertility, who had 500 children; to feed them, she ate all the humans around until the Lord Buddha taught her a lesson. He hid her favorite child -- a son, of course -- until she promised to stop harming people, and then ensconced her up in her temple next to Swyambhu, where he can keep an eye on her. The *Guruju* likes to say that the Buddha "subdued" Harati Ma. But there's another version of this story. The one the Goddess Harati Ma herself told me, while possessing a Shakya woman in Patan, was far more complex, differed in significant details, and emphasized the power of free will. Let me read it to you in her own words, although I have had to abridge it.

"Oh ignorant child! I am Harati Mata. I am called Ajima because I am the mother of the whole world. In my previous birth, I was an ogress, a *lakshi*. One day when I was about to eat my own child, my husband exclaimed 'Hetteric! I don't ever want to see your face again.' He left me then in the shelter for pilgrims at Swyambhunath. While I was there, Bhagwan Buddha came to my left side. In many previous lives, he had been my son; my husband left me to him, because he didn't want a wife who ate her own kids. It was then that I realized everything. My husband leaving me made me realize that I had to take a peaceful form, that I could overcome my own desires and control myself. Only from that time was I placed as a goddess in the temple and called Harati Mata. But I still called myself Chandai Harati, or Wicked Harati. I gave trouble to the local people by taking their children. Bhagwan Buddha saw the people crying 'oh, my son died, oh, my daughter died,' because I took them. I was taking whoever's kid I wanted, causing grief. It was because I was a *lakshi* and so my own kids left me, that I wanted more and more. I didn't have many kids, so I went and gathered as many as

possible. 'Oho,' said Bhagwan Buddha, 'Harati Mata is giving so much trouble to the local people, causing them sorrow.' So he took my best, favorite baby, my youngest daughter, and hid her. He took my child and covered her with his black begging bowl. When he took her, I wailed like the others, 'oh, my child!' And she wasn't there. I searched all over the jungle, but nowhere could I find my child. So I went to ask Bhagwan Buddha where she was. He said, 'oh, my child, you made other people cry so much for their kids; how do you feel when you lose just one child? You gave such sorrow to others; when you lose your kid, why should you cry?' Like that he scolded me. I said 'yes, I took more children because mine weren't enough!' I searched three times, but Bhagwan Buddha didn't let me find my child. Then I started to cry, pulling out my hair. Bhagwan said, 'as you are crying now, isn't it the same with the others?' Then he made me promise that from now on I wouldn't take any children, and I promised. It seems that at that moment, I came out of sleep. By taking others' children I hurt them, and I myself was hurt the same way. I swore to myself that I would never take anyone's kid again. And at that moment, he showed me my child, from under the begging bowl.

"Chwaaskamani Ma is my mother. I was born in my mother's lineage; I've never seen my father. We are all originally from Tibet. Chwaaskamani Ma was a very powerful, great Ajima in Lhasa. She gives blessings, but I don't invite her to come in human beings, because of her huge age. She is an old woman and can't eat anything. I have a grandmother, but she isn't there now. she is the highest, the most important of the grandmothers, the one who sings. I come here with all my children riding on my body. I have said to my family, when they each go to different places, they each have to do one type of curing or helping. I have taught them that. My husband lives in heaven, not on this earth. Saying, 'I can't hear about other people's suffering anymore,' he left. Since he went to heaven, he doesn't have to do anything.

"Now, people are like my sons and daughters, so I don't give them trouble. In this whole world there is misery in every country between people; it is like war going on. People are eating more flesh and blood; witches are increasing. There are more quarrels and misunderstandings going on. That's why, in this Kali Yuga, we stay in humans, to do helping and healing to lessen the suffering of human beings. I have come to do as many favors and be as helpful as I can to human beings. As things get worse, we'll speak through someone in every house.

The medium through whom Harati Ma told me this story is a shy, frail woman in her fifties, who rarely even leaves her house and wouldn't dream of arguing with a priest directly. Yet she, too, has an effective answer to the gurujus, and that is her story, the story of her life and her ever-deepening relationship with the gods. It's a constantly evolving story, one she tells and retells, of how the goddesses have made sense out of her suffering and her life. Tara Devi¹ is a grandmother now, surrounded by boisterous children and cared for by loving sons and daughters, but things have not always been so easy. Her husband is what Newars call a *latho*, deaf, dumb and retarded, and the story of her early life is a chronicle of her sufferings. As she tells it, she frequently interrupts herself to explain things in light of what happened to her later. What follows is an abridged version.

¹The medium's name has been changed to protect her privacy.

"I have gone through such a lot of suffering that really, it's like dying and being reborn. It seems that *deo* comes fully to those who are suffering and who are innocent, the motherless and those with pure hearts. That was true for me. I lost my mother when I was 13, so in my father's house I did hard work. At that time, Harati Ma used to come in my dreams, too. Sometimes she came in an old form, sometimes she came exactly like the image in her temple, with her crown. Every time, she would repeat, Child I won't be unjust to you -- I'll look after you.' I didn't know who she was. When I was sick, I used to see her on the wall, with her silver headdress vibrating and all her children on her shoulders, just like in the temple.

"One year after my mother died, I got married. Our karma is so powerful! It seems that by suffering as I did, I had to work off my karma, Ma made me. A woman's lot is inexplicable. My husband is deaf and was born without intelligence. When I used to go out, people would mock me saying, 'you're so beautiful, but your husband is a *latho*.' I would ignore them or reply that it had come as part of my karma. They said, we thought only your husband was a *latho*, but you are also a *lathi*!" And it's true, I don't know how to talk with people, don't know how to quarrel with people. Truly, only because Ma came can I talk this much. I am very shy.

"I used to cry the whole night. Then I had my elder son. After that, my parents-in-law cared for me, for he was the first son. Once my brothers-in-law married, things started to change. I had more and more children. Then they started to say, the one who isn't earning anything is having more kids. They used to tell me, 'oh, you should do the work of your husband, too.' They began to abuse and neglect me. Even so, I tolerated it. Here there were 50 people in the family. I used to cook burning the logs; for me, the morning meal used to be at 2 or 3. I became very thin." Daily I had pain, but I used to become deathly ill at least once each year. So many things happened! Four times they took me down to the ground floor for dead people, but always a part of me would come alive or a sound come out of my mouth, because Ma is staying in me. I became mad, and nobody wanted to see me. I used to cry with no apparent reason. Sometimes I wanted to laugh and roll around if anybody was there. People thought I was possessed by a witch -- I got a lot of beatings and thrashings because they thought I was possessed. One day, the stove began to dance from side to side. I should 'look! the pot is going to fall off!' My daughter got frightened. I was almost unconscious. I fled the kitchen and went and stood in the main doorway. I sat there like a huge rice-pounding mortar; nobody could move me. My face looked very strange. They pulled my hair and beat me, but nothing happened. At midnight, I began to bathe at the stone spout, with my shawl still on. After one, brother-in-law returned from a party and said, 'who's that bathing, a madwoman?' I was all wrinkled from bathing, and they were able to drag me home. From the main door, I jumped in one jump about fifteen yards to the bathing enclosure and was rooted there. Everyone was frightened; it was then that they locked me up. The next day, I returned to consciousness, and realized that I had almost no clothes on my body. the day after that, I said, 'I'm hungry.' But they said, 'don't feed a madwoman.' I became too weak to rise. It was for eight days. I cried, 'I am conscious! Oh, what a bad karma I have!' I used to beat my head; they stared, afraid that I would break it. I beat it saying, 'what sin have I committed, that I have to live in this condition?' Later, Ma explained everything. She said 'my child had to have these things happen to prepare her.

To purify her, we made her bathe, we made her see the stove dancing, so she wouldn't cook.'

"Again I had pain in the stomach. Then, my eldest son got the neighbor pregnant. We had already arranged for him to marry someone else. His uncles said they were not going to welcome a woman who got pregnant outside. They were furious and they blamed me, they said that I must have known about it. It must be that they were scolding us because he took away their honor. I felt terribly ashamed, too ashamed to even look at anyone's face. They said, 'you go wherever you want to.' I went away with my son. With my son, new daughter-in-law, and my other children, I stayed in my brother's house for fifteen days. Then he said that he was not going to keep us, so we stayed somewhere in rent. On the third day there, my daughter-in-law gave birth. We didn't have a single paisa. My brother gave us our food; then he gave us work. That's how we lived. During those times I really suffered. It was then that Ma came.

"When I was staying there, my mother-in-law became sick. After she died, the goddess came in talking form. The seventh day, Ma didn't let me eat; for the whole day, food disgusted me. When I slept, I woke up after an hour or two and saw that the fingers on my right hand were trembling. I was only conscious of those, not of my whole body shaking. I could hear my daughters crying, but I was unconscious of everything else. I trembled for eight days and eight nights. They brought doctors one after the other -- I don't know how much my kids spent, whether they took loans or what. On the eighth night, Danced. People came and said that I was possessed by a witch. They were going to put a garland of shoes on me; my elder son approached me to put it on. Just in time, Cried out in a strange voice: 'Hey children! What ignorant children you are! I have tried to come and stay in your mother for nine years, but none of you tried to do *bhau* [to meditate or concentrate on a diety].' Everyone was frightened. Said, 'only in the beginning when I come to humans can I show my form. I won't be able to stay on your mother in my own form every time, so next time, don't think I'm not here.'

At this point, the weak and seriously ill medium swung her right leg straight up in the air, her knee by her ear and the sole of her foot pointed skyward; her head turned to the left, and her left hand went up as though tilting a skullcup to her lips. Her body had assumed the classic posture of the joginis. She stayed that way for four hours.

"It was Bijeswari Ma who had come. The children were frightened by the *murti*. A cloth merchant who lived in front of the house came up and said, 'it's for sure that Bijeswari Ma has come.' Ma said 'Give me puja. Make an *asan* for me and do puja.' The news spread fast and most of the neighborhood came running. Somebody gave a straw mat. Somebody gave a red cushion. Somebody purified the room with cow dung and ocher, and somebody made the puja. In one big leap, Sprang halfway across the room onto the *asan* -- all on one leg! When I came to consciousness, I saw fifteen puja pots all in a row.

"Fifteen days after Bijeswari Ma started coming, people brought a mad boy and a crying baby to be cured. But Ma can't because her hand and cup are up so she can't give *jal* and cure. To the mad boy, Ma said 'today you came but I'm not in a position to cure, so I'll invite my elder sister Harati to come.' To me, She said, 'Harati Ma will cure sick people, and I'll help look

after you in your house.' I don't know what did it, but Harati Ma came from the next day on, and people have continued bringing patients to Ma's place."

After less than a year, Buddhi Maya was held in so much respect by the community that her brothers-in-law were shamed into asking her back. On the appointed night, a strip of red cloth was stretched along the ground from the doorway of the medium's rented room all the way to the doorway of her husband's house, several courtyards distant. A crowd of well-wishers had gathered.

"I heard that there were people sweeping ahead with a broom, there were people pouring a little stream of water, there were others sprinkling *situ* gras in the path. There were a lot of people. there were countless people lighting incense, just like at Bhagwan Buddha's *jatra*."

Just after midnight, worshipped by the crowd along the way, the goddess in Buddhi Maya danced down the strip of red cloth and into the house that was waiting for her.

"My younger brother-in-law was shivering with fear when the gods came. Coming up the stairs, it's said that it didn't look as though it were climbing, but as though it were floating up to the puja room. They gave puja, and Ma scolded them, saying, 'How ignorant you people are! I've come to stay in this child for nine years; we both sisters wanted to come, but you didn't know. How didn't you? You people didn't have the faith to realize that Ma would come. Didn't you people beat her? You weren't hurting her, you were hurting me. You tortured me, didn't you? You pushed me, didn't you? I had stayed in my child to purify her.' And Ma reminded them of everything that had happened. From then on, they all believed. They were frightened. They burned an enormous butter lamp, begging for forgiveness. And all of them bowed to Ma's feet."

From that time on, Buddhi Maya's extended family has had to treat her with the respect and deference due one who is favored by the gods. she says,

"an old granny used to say that I shouldn't feel my suffering, just tolerate it, and one day they would come to bow their heads to my feet. And now they have. Since I've reached the house of Iswar, wherever I go, people respect me, do *man* as to a god.

"Since I've reached the house of Iswar, why should I abuse people back? Why should I remember what happened? In the whole world, I pray that there won't be any terror, or suffering; I pray that nobody will have any pain. In the world, so much terror is coming. I pray that everyone will be blessed. I'm doing puja with these Love-Mothers. I'm not like others; I don't know how to say this and that, but I also have known *dukkha*, so I learned to request that nobody would have any *dukkha*, any pain or suffering, in all the world. I don't know how to say it in any other way."

When Buddhi Maya sits on her *asan* in trance, she -- and the gods -- present an image that is rich and life-embracing. Her clothes are vivid red and diamonds sparkle in her ears; gold sequins dance behind her and brass implements catch the glow of butter lamps, and the area around the *asan* is crowded with food and flowers, children and full vessels. The deities who enter this room are little concerned with transcendence or enlightenment, but rather are concerned with this world, with "dharma rather than moksa," as A.K. Coomaraswamy puts it. They are concerned with the struggles and the joys of daily

living -- both for humans and themselves. They are involved in relationships and maintaining right relationships, both among humans and themselves. Able to express themselves in the persons of the mediums, they are not fixed icons, but whole, complex personalities that constantly evolve in response to new circumstances and situations, showing every facet of themselves. Karen Brown has said that deities represent "existential options," that is, each one explores and demonstrates, or "holds" one way of "being in the world." It's clear that through the mediums, the goddesses point toward more powerful, assertive and compassionate ways of being in the world, especially for the mediums themselves. Buddhi Maya's story echoes the profound realization in Harati Ma's: that personal suffering can be transmuted into a concern with the suffering of others, that the victim can become the healer. Neither the goddess nor her medium tries to change the system in which she finds herself; Harati ma accepts the inevitability of the Kali Yuga, and Buddhi Maya does not question the constraints of Newar culture. Instead, they change themselves, by awakening their own positive, loving energies, whose end is not to control, but to sustain.

