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# Practicing the Perfections: *Communitas* During the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* at Swayambhunath, Nepal

Michelle J. Sorensen

Based on observations from personal participation in the 2014 *Saga Dawa Kortsay* at Swayambhunath Stupa complex located near Kathmandu, Nepal, my essay draws attention to the distinctive lay Buddhist community that is formed in such ritual performances. Using Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*, I argue that the liminal experience of the pilgrimage enables the constitution of a distinctive lay Buddhist community in terms of the self-transformation usually reserved for monastic practitioners. In contrast to recent accounts of Nepali pilgrimage that emphasize the subordinate role of the lay community in the Buddhist sangha, I argue that lay participants in ritual performances like the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* cultivate individual and collective identities as members of the sangha in their own right, with their own responsibilities for practicing and preserving Buddhist teachings. Through discussions of the Swayambhunath complex, pilgrims' efforts toward self-transformation, and their practice

of Buddhist perfections through donations to mendicants, I use the example of the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* to explain how a distinctive lay Buddhist community is formed by pilgrims through the situation of *communitas*.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, lay sangha, pilgrimage, *communitas*, merit.

## Introduction

In the summer of 2014, I conducted research in the village and environs of Pharping, Nepal, known by Tibetans as Yangleshö (Tib. *yang le shod*). Although my focus was on researching the contemporary practice of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of Chöd (Tib. *gcod*), on Thursday the 12th of June I was invited to join some people who would be participating in a *Saga Dawa Kortsay* (Tib. *sa ga zla ba skor tshad*). The *Saga Dawa Kortsay* I completed with the other participants was a circumambulatory pilgrimage of Swayambhunath Stupa complex located near Kathmandu, Nepal. This *Kortsay* is made annually during *Saga Dawa*, the auspicious fourth lunar month of the Tibetan calendar, and is begun on the most propitious evening of the full moon during that month.

While this circumambulation is a traditional South Asian pilgrimage that provides opportunities for merit making and self-transformation for any participants, I want to consider how pilgrimages like the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* are distinctive in providing lay Buddhists—that is, non-celibate and non-monastic Buddhists—with opportunities for community building. In order to elaborate the construction of lay Buddhist communities during ritual events such as the *Saga Dawa Kortsay*, I will rely on Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*, perhaps the most influential idea in contemporary discussions of pilgrimage. Turner's idea of *communitas* is grounded in what he calls "liminal phenomena," which create "a 'moment in and out of time,' and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals . . . a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties" (1995 [1969]: 96). In other words, liminal phenomena such as pilgrimages take people out of the usual structural arrangement of their society, allowing them to constitute new social bonds of *communitas*: "an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals" (ibid). While this egalitarian structure is temporary, it persists in some form when people return to their usual social structures. In the case of the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* and similar ritual performances, the pilgrimage allows lay Buddhists to step out of their secular social roles and participate in the "relatively undifferentiated" community of non-monastic practitioners (ibid). This experience of constituting themselves as a distinct lay sangha allows them to recognize, when they return to their secular lives, what Turner would call "an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society" (ibid: 97).

Lay Buddhists' experience of pilgrimages like the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* allows them to recognize their bond as lay Buddhists, which they subsequently bring back to their daily lives. The *communitas* generated by their historical participation in such pilgrimages belongs to Turner's "normative" type, in which "the need to mobilize and organize resources to keep the members of a group alive and thriving and the necessity for social control among those members in pursuance of these and other collective goals" eventually produces a "perduring social system" (1973: 194). We can see rituals like the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* as transitory events that affirm the distinctive community of the lay sangha, thus allowing this community to maintain individual and collective identity as lay Buddhists, even as they return to their social and religious roles as part of a more complex society.

While Turner's theories are by no means new, the concept of *communitas* is frequently invoked to analyze a range of Buddhist pilgrimage experiences. In the context of pilgrimages in Nepal, Dina Bangdel uses *communitas* to describe how pilgrimage for Newar Buddhists forms "a collective experience of the community in formalized ritual settings" (2010: 63). For Bangdel, popular Buddhist pilgrimages in Nepal have strong political implications, as the Buddhist community as a whole affirms its "religious identity" as *communitas* "among a largely Hindu majority" (2010: 79). Similarly, Kerry Lucinda Brown invokes Turner to explain the function of *dana* (gift-giving) and pilgrimage in Newar Buddhism. In Brown's account, *dana* functions to affirm the lay community's role in offering "food, clothing, and monetary support" to monastic communities in exchange for "teachings, blessings, and merit that support them on their own journey to enlightenment" (2010: 87). Lay pilgrims, in Brown's analysis, affirm their symbiotic role as material supporters of the Buddhist dharma, thereby playing their part in the "shared sense of *communitas* that is vital to their Buddhist faith and identity" (2010: 93).

In contrast with Bangdel and Brown, my analysis of the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* stresses the liminal character of *communitas*. As Turner emphasizes, *communitas* is the result of the temporary reorganization of a community, which occurs in pilgrimages like the *Saga Dawa Kortsay*. In such ritual events, lay Buddhists are reconstituted as a distinctive lay sangha in terms of the self-transformation usually reserved for monastic practitioners, as I will explain further. By returning to Turner's *communitas*, I hope to open dialogue about the experiences of the lay sangha on its own terms, rather than as symbiotic support for the spiritual aspirations of the monastic community. I also hope my discussion of the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* will help us to understand the essential

role of the lay sangha in preserving and transmitting dharma, especially in their own sense of belonging to a non-monastic Buddhist community. Through discussions of the Swayambunath complex, pilgrims' efforts toward self-transformation, and their practice of Buddhist perfections through donations to mendicants, I will use the example of the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* to explain how a distinctive lay Buddhist community is formed by pilgrims through the situation of *communitas*.

## Pilgrimage in Buddhism

The role of pilgrimage in Buddhism can be traced to the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, a Pali text that recounts the final days of the Buddha. In this text, the Buddha emphasizes that the highest homage his followers can make to his memory is for them to continue their practice of his Dharma teachings. But in response to his auditors' concerns that the sangha may dissolve without the Buddha's presence and that followers may not have the opportunity to be inspired by devout Buddhist monastics, the Buddha ultimately identifies four sites at which Buddhists may gather to commemorate his life and influence. These became the sacred places for Buddhist pilgrimage: Lumbini, where the Buddha was born; Bodhgaya, where he attained enlightenment; Sarnath, where he gave his first teaching on the Dharma; and Kushinagara, where he attained *parinirvana* (nirvana after death). According to the *Sutta*, upon visiting each of these sites with a reverential state of mind, confidence in and inspiration by Buddhist teachings is sustained; in addition, according to the Buddhist law of karma, the merit attained by such visits will result in a fortuitous rebirth in a good place.

As Buddhism continued to attract followers after the death of the Buddha, more sites were added to the four that were listed in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, especially places where relics of the Buddha were distributed and encased in architectural structures known as stupas. In addition to visiting and viewing sacred sites, at some point it became conventional for Buddhist devotees to cultivate a reverential state of mind while walking clockwise on a well-trodden path, or circumambulation (Tib. *skor ra*; Skt. *pradakshina*), around the stupa. As an act of more intense commitment and devotion—and perhaps to fulfill a vow to a spiritual teacher, a divine figure, and/or oneself—a pilgrim might circle the stupa through consecutive prostrations: laying out her body on the ground, prone, and with arms stretched overhead, then getting up and repeating the action from the place her hands reached in the previous prostration.

A traditional account of making offerings to stupas attributed to the eighth-century South Asian master Padmasambhava explains the significance of the experience:

[T]his great stupa like a precious wish-granting jewel is called “liberating by seeing, hearing, and remembering.” Anyone who sees the stupa with their eyes closes the door of rebirth in the lower realms. Anyone who hears about the stupa with their ears leaves the seed of supreme enlightenment. Anyone who remembers the stupa is saved from the harms of craziness and paralysis and generates a special concentration in their mental continuum.... All those who circumambulate the stupa will achieve the seven qualities of the higher realm (race, form, wealth, power, wisdom, long life, no disease) (2013: 3-4).

Lars Fogelin argues that since the second century BCE, if not before, stupas have been sites for pilgrims to perform ritual circumambulation with the intent to accumulate merit (2015: 96).

Over time, stupas multiplied throughout the Buddhist landscape, often enclosing copies of the Buddha's teachings or other Buddhist texts that are regarded as relics of the Buddha's enlightened speech. The stupas themselves came to be interpreted as symbolic of the Buddha's body.<sup>1</sup> Through the process of circumambulating stupas, practitioners invigorate the sangha, remember the teachings of the Buddha, and accrue karmic merit (Tib. *bsod nams*; Skt. *punya*), thus fulfilling the injunction of the Buddha to visit sacred sites to recreate community, to commemorate the life and teachings of the Buddha, and to generate merit from dedicating themselves to intentional virtuous activity. By participating in the *Kortsay* during the auspicious period of *Saga Dawa*, Buddhist pilgrims deliberately aim to create the conditions for attaining more auspicious rebirths in the future in which not only they, but all sentient beings, will attain enlightenment. More specifically, lay Buddhists participating in such pilgrimages invigorate the sangha as a whole by experiencing a sense of belonging to a lay Buddhist community.

## Making a Buddhist Pilgrimage at Swayambhunath

The Tibetan word *kortsay* (Tib. *skor tshad*) refers to a pilgrimage that consists of a number of circumambulations around a sacred site. The *Kortsay* I participated in consisted of thirteen circumambulations of the extensive external perimeter of the Swayambhunath Stupa complex,<sup>2</sup> and was made during the full moon evening and the following

day of the month of Saga Dawa. Each circumambulation is about two miles, so the distance covered by each participant who completes the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* is about the same distance as a marathon: twenty-six miles. The *Saga Dawa Kortsay* is primarily a ritual for lay members of the Buddhist sangha, and people of all ages and from all walks of life participate, temporarily generating Turner's "relatively undifferentiated" sense of community.

The most common Tibetan term for a pilgrimage is *né-kor* (Tib. *gnas skor*), that is, 'going around a place'; a synonym for *né-kor* is *né-jal* (Tib. *gnas mjal*), 'visiting a place.' A pilgrim is usually referred to as *né-kor-wa* (Tib. *gnas skor ba*), 'one who circles a place.' This terminology indicates that, at least for Tibetan Buddhists, going around a place is related to visiting a place; significantly, even when Tibetan Buddhists travel distances to a pilgrimage destination, they mark their arrival by circumambulating the site.<sup>3</sup> Pilgrims undertaking the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* expect to experience many of the traditional benefits of religious pilgrimage, including the cultivation of mindfulness, the generation of karmic merit, and the commemoration of the Buddha's life and teachings. But participants also anticipate many non-traditional benefits as well, including sharing conversation with fellow pilgrims, challenging themselves physically, and especially forging stronger community ties through a shared religious identity.

The deliberate traditional intentions of the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* are complemented by more mundane, but not necessarily less important, spontaneous activities related to preserving, modeling, and transmitting Buddhist teachings and values that constitute the Buddhist dharma. As I will explain, through the performance of the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* pilgrimage, lay Tibetan Buddhists constitute themselves as a religious community with vital responsibilities in maintaining and transmitting the Buddhist dharma. In the interaction between deliberate religious intentions and spontaneous social interactions, this event provides lay people with a unique opportunity to preserve and transmit the Buddhist dharma, a responsibility that is often restricted to members of the monastic sangha.

### Charting Sacred Time

In many ways, the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* is a traditional Buddhist ritual activity. The fourth month of the Tibetan lunar calendar, known as 'Saga Dawa' (and corresponding to the month of 'Wesak,' Skt. *vaiśākha*) is a sacred temporal period for Buddhists. During the month of Saga Dawa, the meritorious results of positive karmic actions<sup>4</sup> are multiplied exponentially—as much as one hundred million times—in

comparison to similar actions done at a different time of year. There are prescribed and conventional behaviors and rituals that Tibetan Buddhists make focal points during this sacred time, including pilgrimage, prayer, and charitable donations. In addition to offering the spiritual boon from circumambulating the Swayambhunath Stupa complex, pilgrimage also contributes to the realization of mundane goals, including social interaction, commerce, and assertion of personal and cultural identities. The most auspicious period of this month is that of the full moon, and it is often identified as the date to commemorate the birth of Shakyamuni Buddha, his attainment of enlightenment under the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, and his *parinirvana*—the end of his rebirths in the cycle of samsara.<sup>5</sup> This is the period during which the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* is performed at Swayambhunath.

For the 2014 *Saga Dawa Kortsay*, my companions and I awoke at midnight to travel to the site by taxi, and then just before 1:00 a.m. we began to circumambulate the perimeter of the Swayambhunath Stupa. (I was not initially aware of the vast distance to be covered, and my ignorance was probably a good thing.) When we began walking, there were already hundreds of people earnestly participating in the pilgrimage, though there were also many young people who were watching, chatting, and flirting nearby. The scene was reminiscent of an organized marathon event: there were water and juice stations along the route, and people from various organizations had set up counters to offer the participants food throughout the day. Several booths played music to encourage and energize the pilgrims. Other booths made medical supplies readily available. While many people socialized during the pilgrimage, there were a few devoted participants who quietly prostrated themselves along the entire route. Many of the participants were well-dressed in traditional Tibetan or modern clothing, with some of the women even wearing shoes with high heels. An important part of the ritual for the pilgrims is to give charity to the vast array of supplicants—families, sadhus, monks, and sick and infirm people, many of whom travel from pilgrimage site to pilgrimage site according to festival calendars. Huge numbers of mendicants had set up camps along the circuit and were asleep in the dark, resting before their day would begin in earnest.

Although the *Kortsay* is a ritual activity to generate merit for participants as well as all other sentient beings, the atmosphere is generally social and festive rather than contemplative. The duration and rigor of the pilgrimage make frequent refreshment stops necessary. The tea shops along the Swayambhu Circuit Road are sites of commercial,

social, and religious activity, as participants acknowledge fellow Buddhist pilgrims and share their pious intentions and reverence for the Buddhist dharma. The majority of the tea shops along this road seemed to have inflated prices for this event, with some even explicitly noting the special prices on sign boards; however, this did not appear to deter clients, nor did the customers complain about the price increases. The tea shops also serve as locations for *Saga Dawa Kortsay* participants to see and be seen by fellow lay Buddhists.

Combining ritual and social activities, the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* resembles what Justin McDaniel calls sites of Buddhist “public religious culture,” places which challenge the binary of “[t]he secular versus the religious”:

The sites are open to all people regardless of their religious faith, practice, or lack thereof. One does not need any deep knowledge of Buddhist texts, chants, history, and no test of faith is required. People can often participate in activities that may be called explicitly religious such as chanting, prostrating, offering gifts, or meditating, or they can relax, chat leisurely, laugh, or gawk in amazement (2016: 5).

In the *Saga Dawa Kortsay*, however, I would argue that rather than dissolving the categories of secular and religious, as people circumambulate around the perimeter of the Swayambhunath Stupa, they not only map out the liminal space between the sacred and mundane, but they also integrate the two realms by traversing between them.

The Swayambunath pilgrimage also integrates individual and social aims. For Fogelin, there are two distinct categories of rituals performed at stupas. He asserts that circumambulation is an individual activity: “Even when many are engaged in circumambulation, it is ultimately a form of ritual connecting a single devotee and the Buddha” (2015: 96). In Fogelin’s view, collective activities are also associated with stupas, in the forms of “group worship of a stupa”: “[c]ollective rites may consist of quietly listening to a sermon by an officiating monk or more festive, communal worship without ritual leaders.... [T]hey serve an important function in terms of establishing and revivifying a common Buddhist identity” (ibid). In contrast to Fogelin’s distinction, I would suggest that circumambulation at events like the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* combines individual and collective rituals, as pilgrims constitute a lay Buddhist community through the integrated activities of commemorating the Buddha and celebrating the Buddhist collective. While the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* directs lay followers of the Buddha to travel to pilgrimage spots in order to see the

*monastic sangha* gather and to be inspired by their piety, at events such as the *Saga Dawa Kortsay*, practitioners gather as a lay sangha and perform their own piety. In this transitional period of *communitas*, pilgrims acknowledge other lay Buddhists, recount Buddhist teachings with them, share in the activity of making merit, and mutually establish moral status in the *lay sangha*. Through this dynamic of religious and secular motivations and activities, this community of lay Buddhists is strengthened and reinvigorated.

Through the performance of the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* pilgrimage activity, the lay Buddhists of the area temporarily constitute themselves as a distinct religious community. In order to elaborate this construction of community, I will focus on three aspects of the *Kortsay* pilgrimage: the sacred geography of the site, the self-transformation of the pilgrims, and the practice of generosity through donations to mendicants.

### Mapping Sacred Space

Swayambhunath is located on a hill in the Kathmandu Valley, the entirety of which is considered to be a ‘power place’ (Tib. *gnas yul*; Skt. *pithasthan*) and a divine realm. The Valley is a sacred destination for Buddhist, Newari, and Hindu pilgrims throughout the annual ritual calendar. The name ‘Swayambhu,’ which means ‘self-created,’ refers to the belief that the site self-generated from the cosmic ocean that underlies the Kathmandu Valley. Swayambhunath has been a pilgrimage site for at least five centuries. The *Svayambhu Purana*, a text dating to the 15th century, provides a narrative of the origin and development of the Kathmandu Valley. It describes the history of the Swayambhunath complex and the first Buddhists who came to the area.<sup>6</sup> Swayambhu Stupa is the central focus of the complex. This Stupa is one of the most important sacred Buddhist sites in the Kathmandu Valley, second only to Boudhanath Stupa. The historical origins of the Stupa itself are uncertain, and there are no sources prior to the 5th century CE that attest to its existence. Scholars including Alexander Von Rospatt (2009: 46) have posited that it was built on a pre-Buddhist sacred site as many as two thousand years ago as part of a program to introduce Buddhism to the area. As Bangdel (2010: 66) has noted, a watercolor painting on cloth dated from the mid-16th century “depicts a kind of ‘pilgrim’s map’” of sacred landscape of the Kathmandu Valley.<sup>7</sup> The Great Swayambhu Stupa is clearly represented in the upper-middle register of the painting, and the Stupa is surrounded by a path populated with pilgrims. In addition, other notable sacred sites are depicted along with the routes to them.

In C. J. Fuller's sense, Swayambhunath is a "pilgrimage center," or "crossing place between different worlds": "as a link between worlds, the pilgrimage center is also conceptualized as an *axis mundi*, the central pivot of the cosmos, which is outside mundane space and time, even though it is a visible site on earth as well. Such a center, particularly a mountain site, may even be identified with the mythical Mount Meru rising at the central point of the cosmos" (2004 [1992]: 208). For Buddhists, Swayambhunath is seen as a mandala, a microcosmic mirror of the macrocosm of the universe. The dome of the *stupa* represents the *axis mundi* of the world, with the Buddha's eyes painted at the top, evoking the wisdom and compassion of his enlightenment. The thirteen rings of the pinnacle represent the thirteen stages of spiritual realization for sentient beings to attain. The mandala surrounding the *stupa* is devoted to the Five Buddha families in Vajrayana Buddhism: Akshobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, and Vairocana.

Until recently, pilgrims would ascend a staircase with 365 steps in order to reach the Swayambhunath Stupa, which, as I mentioned earlier, is set on top of a hill. This physical engagement with the sacred space ideally produced a humble state of mind in the exhausted pilgrim and prepared her to be awestruck upon reaching the top. Due to severe deterioration of the staircase, this entrance was not accessible to pilgrims when I was there in 2014. Upon arriving at the site, the pilgrim is greeted by the 'masters of the place' (Tib. *gnas bdag*) who take the form of large monkeys and are considered by some to be deities of the locale. These ubiquitous monkeys—the source of the alternate name by which the Stupa is known, namely 'Monkey Temple'—are ever watchful for edibles that they can liberate from distracted humans. While pilgrims are no longer faced with the daunting ascent of the hill, the sacred geography of the site multiplies the benefits of their pilgrimage and orients pilgrims toward participation in a religious community.

By circumambulating the Swayambhunath Stupa, practitioners not only commemorate the Buddha's life and teachings, but they also obtain *jin lap* (Tib. *byin rlabs*; Skt. *adhiṣṭhāna*): spiritual empowerment considered to provide the charismatic inspiration to transform one's consciousness in order to realize one's highest potential. Through the effort expended during the *Kortsay*, a practitioner aims to receive the inspiration to rededicate herself to living according to Buddhist principles. Practitioners thus cultivate the traditional benefit of mindfulness along with generating merit and commemorating the Buddha and his teachings. All of these actions are understood by Buddhist pilgrims as ways to purify their mental and physical being.

## Self-Transformation into a Pilgrim

In the context of the sacred geography of the area, participation in the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* serves to transform the religious identities of the individual pilgrims and the community. Perhaps because it does not require a particular skill or social status, pilgrimage is a popular Buddhist religious activity. Toni Huber (2010: 101) observes that "[p]ilgrimage in Tibetan societies can be usefully considered as a form of asceticism that can be undertaken by all lay persons." I would extend this argument to suggest that a religious pilgrim aspires to a status that is between an ordinary lay person and a renunciant. The act of pilgrimage requires a deliberate commitment to temporary asceticism typical of renunciants. That is, similarly to those whose life is defined by asceticism and renunciation, lay persons on pilgrimage often made a temporary choice to live a more self-disciplined and austere life, including willingly waking earlier, undergoing physical hardships, giving away possessions (*dana* in the form of money or other material goods), and chastity. Such choices to circumscribe one's conventional activities coincide with the anticipation of attaining the traditional benefits which correspond to self-transformation.

The *Saga Dawa Kortsay*, in particular, requires considerable self-discipline, and the pilgrimage is often combined with vows to abstain from various activities—including drinking alcohol, eating meat, and having sex. Such vows are believed to amplify the karmic merit of one's pilgrimage activities as long as they are fulfilled. In addition to renouncing certain things during the pilgrimage, a pilgrim demonstrates faith, devotion, and pure motivation through making a vow to finish a pilgrimage. As Donald S. Lopez has noted, according to Buddhist doctrine, a vow "assumes a subtle physical form inside the body...[and] [a]s long as the vow is present in the body, the person accumulates merit for maintaining the vow" (2009 [2001]: 167). As a karmic action of body and mind (and often speech), a vow is integrated into the physical and mental constitution of the practitioner. Such a vow, in itself a virtuous act of intention (Skt. *cetanā*), supports the cultivation of virtuous action by the practitioner. This interconnection is explained in the *Nibbedhika Sutta* (*Anguttara Nikaya* 6.63, PTS: A III.415), where the Buddha teaches: "Intention (*cetanā*) is kamma. Intending, one does kamma (actions) by way of body, speech, and intellect." Through the intention required to make a vow and the effort of completing the *Kortsay*, pilgrims' karma is 'ripened' or reaches maturation (Skt. *vipaka*), and it creates an effect or 'fruit' (Skt. *phala*)."

Pilgrimage is undertaken for a variety of overt reasons, but the overriding motivation is to work on one's own self-transformation within the Buddhist doctrinal worldview. For lay people, pilgrimage is one of the most explicit acts of practicing the Buddhist virtues of discipline and fortitude in public. In the transitory act of pilgrimage, lay people also visibly contribute to the transmission and maintenance of the Buddhist teachings, a responsibility that is usually limited to the domain of Buddhist monastics. Participants in the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* at Swayambhunath also undertake a physical act of self-transformation: they vow to circumambulate the perimeter thirteen times—for a total of twenty-six miles—in one day in order to accumulate merit on the most auspicious day of this auspicious month. By gathering together in a large number on this particular day each year and circumambulating this sacred site, the pilgrims draw attention to their religious identity and their devotion to the Buddhist dharma, temporarily constituting themselves as a distinct lay sangha.

The twenty-six mile journey around the perimeter of the Swayambhunath Stupa complex provides an opportunity for self-transformation through the necessary interconnection of internal and external discipline that is required to complete the journey and fulfill the vow. While I have not been able to ascertain the reason for thirteen circuits being the standard number of rounds for this activity at Swayambhunath, Huber (2010: 101-102) notes that “not only does a higher number of circumambulations of a holy place yield more religious benefit, but the fulfillment of such vows is considered to be a strong demonstration of pure motivation by the pilgrim. Without such motivation, ritual action is considered to be purely mechanical and of no particular religious value.” The combination of the physical effort of pilgrimage and the mental act of pure motivation yields an activity that is considered to be highly meritorious within the Buddhist economy of karma. The *Saga Dawa Kortsay* is capable of transforming the pilgrim's moral status in the short term and soteriological status in the long term. Moreover, a vow fulfilled reaps additional positive karmic merit as it cannot be broken or undone. Yet, because the conceptual model of the law of karma and the workings of merit is somewhat abstract, Tibetan pilgrims often explain their ritual practices in more mundane terms.<sup>8</sup> For example, one of my companions was explicitly motivated by religious reasons to undertake the pilgrimage, but her motivation was often manifested in physical competitiveness. Much like a marathon runner, she was pleased by how quickly she completed each circuit. Another of my companions was likewise devoutly motivated, but she concentrated on how many butter lamps she lighted at the end of her final circumambulation. While lighting the

votive lamps is meant to commemorate fulfilling the vow of circumambulating the stupa, she was enthusiastic to light more lamps than her fellow pilgrims and emphasized this fact in later conversations with others.

For participants like my companions, pilgrimage offers them the opportunity to participate in religious activity typically associated with renunciants. But pilgrimage stands in contrast to the meditative mind trainings that are often the focus of monastic renunciants given its extreme emphasis on the physical embodiment of the pilgrim. No one I spoke with ‘trained’ to do the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* event at Swayambhunath, though the effort that is required to complete the thirteen rounds of the hill on foot is significant (especially in footwear that ranged from flimsy sandals to sneakers to high heels!). Needless to say, doing this same circling of the site by full body prostration (Tib. *phyag skor*, ‘prostrations and circumambulations’) in the mud during this event—which falls during monsoon season—is even more difficult. Full prostrations take the ascetic discipline of pilgrimage to another level: a pilgrim traveling by full prostration uses the full length of her body to mark out the path in front of her. She begins with a ritualized performance of marking the sites of her body, speech, and mind on her body with her hands in prayer position, then lays her body out full length along the ground and extends her arms, often concluding with a final prayer gesture. Upon rising from the ground, she steps to the point reached by her hands and repeats the prostration. (Interestingly, during the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* I participated in, I saw more women than men performing full prostrations; some of the women were accompanied by male companions ‘looking out’ for them.) The few people that attempt full prostrations are often held in high regard, even if they aim to complete only one or two full circles of the route.

According to Buddhist teachings, all participants in the pilgrimage use their bodies to sacralize this ritual action. Each pilgrim experiences and produces sacred space by traversing the route, a microcosmic mandala that represents the macrocosmic universe. And through enacting the two Buddhist perfections of effort and perseverance, the pilgrim also transforms her own body into a sacred site. Further, through yoking her spoken intention with her pure motivation and her physical movement, an individual connects the actions of her speech, mind, and body. But the experience of the pilgrimage is also marked by the mundane and spontaneous physical challenge it presents to practitioners. The pilgrimage is both an external and an internal journey: through the pilgrimage, internal transformation harmonizes with external transformation

to create individual and communal religious identity. The transient shared physical and mental effort creates what Turner would call a “generalized social bond” among the lay participants, fusing them into a religious community.

### Cultivating the Virtue of Generosity

While pilgrims are engaged in transforming both their external geography and their internal bodies into sacred spaces during the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* at the Swayambhunath Stupa complex, the lay practitioner further transforms herself through the practice of the Buddhist perfections of virtue. According to classical Buddhist teachings such as the *Mula Sutta* (*Anguttara Nikaya* 3.69, PTS: A I.201), in order to overcome obstructions to liberation, practitioners must eliminate the three unwholesome roots (Pali. *akusala mula*; Skt. *akusala mula*), also known as the three poisons (Skt. *trivisa*; Tib. *dug gsum*) of desire, hatred, and ignorance. The antidote for these poisons is developing a twofold capacity for infinite wisdom and compassion. The process of cultivating wisdom and compassion is considered to take many lifetimes of practicing the six virtuous perfections: generosity (*dana*), moral discipline, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom. While the opportunity to practice each of these perfections is present in Buddhist pilgrimage, the necessity of generosity, tolerance, and effort is especially obvious in the actions of participants in the *Saga Dawa Kortsay*.

In addition to the physical and mental effort required for the completion of even one circumambulation of the Swayambhunath Stupa complex, many participants in this pilgrimage consider it an opportunity to practice generosity and compassion in the form of *dana*: they impartially give money to the hundreds and hundreds of mendicants at the event. (Since many of these beggars are quite aggressive, the participants also have the incidental opportunity to practice the perfection of patience.) When I participated, my companions and I carried hundreds of bills in very small denominations so as to give donations to as many individual people as possible. For the pilgrims, the practice of generosity and compassion through giving alms is a deliberate effort of self-transformation, since it signifies their desire to emulate the actions of a realized bodhisattva. Through this opportunity to help sentient beings through the distribution of *dana*, the Buddhist pilgrims pursue traditional pilgrimage goals: they practice their vows to become enlightened beings or bodhisattvas and to simulate the activity of a fully enlightened being who works to benefit all other sentient beings. This intentional practice of what is known in the Mahayana tradition as the ‘Bodhisattva Vow’ thus complements the more spontaneous practice of self-transformation through vigorous effort that is manifested in the circumambulation process.

In contrast to the usual practice of giving alms to the pure vessels of Buddhist monks, donations during the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* are given to non-traditional (and often non-Buddhist) recipients. Most of the mendicants who receive *dana* are from outside the Tibetan community that participates in the pilgrimage: they include Hindu sadhus, mendicant families, and people with special mental or physical needs. The vast majority of these mendicants subsist on charity and donations, and many travel from pilgrimage event to pilgrimage event to make their living. This less common practice of *dana* helps constitute lay Buddhists as a distinct religious community, since this version of the practice is particular to the lay Buddhists that participate in the pilgrimage. By collectively practicing the perfections of generosity, compassion, and tolerance, the lay pilgrims constitute themselves as a religious community. The opportunity for practicing Buddhist perfections in liminal phenomena such as the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* allows for the temporary experience of a lay Buddhist *communitas*.

### Conclusion

Combining the production of sacred space, self-transformation through vigorous effort, and the practices of the perfections through *dana*, pilgrimages such as the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* are the most important constitutive element of lay Buddhist communities in Nepal. Because the pilgrimage literally takes place on the perimeter of the sacred site, and because the pilgrims combine sacred and secular aims, the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* brings into relief the navigation of the mundane and the engagement with the profane that are particular to lay communities. Charles Ramble notes that one of the most important complexities of Tibetan religious pilgrimage is the “superimposition of spiritual and worldly (for example, commercial) interests” at pilgrimage sites (2014: 180). While similar to pilgrimages to sacred sites for interaction with the divine realm, the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* at Swayambhunath is also distinctly characterized by interaction with the profane realm. Gossip, chatter, expressions of friendship, and even flirting are as important as reciting prayers or mantras, especially among the younger pilgrims. In addition to the religious motivation for practicing *dana* during the pilgrimage, participants in the *Kortsay* are also motivated by the desire to preserve their status as good Buddhists within the community. This mundane motivation becomes sacred through the shared experience of practicing the Buddhist moral ideals of generosity, effort, and tolerance, in addition to the affective ideals of compassion and loving-kindness to all beings.

Participants in the *Kortsay* not only interact with non-Buddhist mendicants as fellow sentient beings, and interact

with each other in mundane ways, but they also actively constitute the corporate body of the Buddhist lay sangha. Rather than simply affirming their identity as material supporters of the Buddhist community through donations to monastics, lay pilgrims at ritual performances like the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* cultivate individual and collective identities as members of the sangha in their own right, with their own responsibilities for practicing and preserving Buddhist teachings. I would like to suggest that in rituals like the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* at Swayambhunath, *communitas* is the primary effect of pilgrimage for lay practitioners, and this effect is itself sacred and transformative.<sup>9</sup> In the context of religious devotion, the experiential reality of being interconnected with the community of the Buddhist lay sangha and the community of humanity is the most important transformative experience of the pilgrimage.

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## Endnotes

1. Huu Phuoc Le (2010: 140) identifies five types of stupa classified based on form and function: relic stupas containing the remains of the Buddha or an important Buddhist figure; object stupas containing objects that are sacred due to their believed contact with the Buddha, one of his students, or the speech of an enlightened being in the form of physical texts; commemorative stupas which have been constructed in commemoration of the Buddha and his teachings; symbolic stupas which are heuristic representations illustrating a Buddhist teaching or concept; and votive stupas representing the fulfillment of a vow or to mark an auspicious occasion.
2. Another very popular locale for the *Saga Dawa Kortsay* in the Kathmandu area is at Boudhanath Stupa.
3. *gnas skor mi* is the Tibetan term for pilgrims, that is, multiple people who go on pilgrimage.
4. The demerit from negative karmic actions is also multiplied, although this is discussed less often in Buddhist literature or among contemporary Buddhists.
5. Some Buddhists only recognize it as the month of one or two of these events.
6. Alexander Von Rospatt (2009: 35) has considered the importance of this site from a Newari perspective and notes that this text was composed by Newaris after the disappearance of Buddhism in India. See also Dina Bangdel (2010: 64).

7. An image of this painting, located in the collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, can be viewed at <<https://www.vmfa.museum/piction/6027262-15410272/>>.

8. See Toni Huber (2010: 96) for a brief discussion of this topic.

9. This is in direct contrast with an observation made by Katia Buffetrille (2003; n. p.) in her study of 21<sup>st</sup> century pilgrimages by Tibetans in Tibet: “The quality of *communitas* that Turner (1969, 1974, 1978) observes in all the pilgrimages he studied, is in general not present in the Tibetan world, except during very short periods. Along the ritual path, Tibetan society is present at all levels, but contrary to what one might think, differences of social status persist during the pilgrimage.”

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