

# GENDER AND CASTE IN THE PERFECT BUDDHIST GIFT THE SAMYAK MAHADANA IN KATHMANDU, NEPAL

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*"How are we to conduct ourselves, Lord,  
with regard to womankind?"*

*"Don't see them, Ānanda".*

*"But if we should see them,  
what are we to do?"*

*"Abstain from speech Ānanda"*

*"But if they should speak to us,  
Lord, what are we to do?"*

*"Keep wide awake Ānanda."*

(conversation at the Buddha's deathbed, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (MPNS) V 23, translated by T.W. Rhys Davids)

## **Introduction**

The reluctance of the Buddha to admit women into his order is amply attested in the Buddhist canon. The reason often given for his initial rejection of the request thereto is that the itinerant way of life of the early *saṃgha* made a separation of men and women impossible. As Mrs Rhys Davids already has it, women's quarters became feasible only after the emergence of fixed settlements and expanded *vihāras* (monasteries). Yet, after having become a widow, Sākyamuni's stepmother was finally admitted to the order together with her company during the Buddha's lifetime (Rhys Davids 1912/1934:175). The earliest Chinese version of the Buddha's life-story (translated from a lost Sanskrit source), dated by Zürcher around A.D. 200, indicates that there was more at stake than a simple avoidance of seduction, which would, anyway, have been mutual. In the Chinese rendering of the issue (the Zhong Benqi Jing, Ch. IX), the Buddha thrice rejected the request of his stepmother to join the order of monks, the *saṃgha*, with her female company. It is only through the interference of

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Ānanda, the Buddha's cousin and favourite attendant in the last phase of his life, that women are finally allowed to join the order, albeit under strict conditions.

The most hurting condition appears to be that, even if a woman has lived as a nun for one hundred years, she will still owe respect towards a man who has been just ordained, and should behave humbly and respectfully in front of him. On this point Ananda again tries to intervene in favour of the nuns, but this time without success: "If I (Buddha) had not allowed women to lead the religious life, then the true doctrine of the Buddha would have blossomed for one thousand years." The Buddha continued: "But because women lead a religious life my doctrine will decline after five hundred years. Why?" The Buddha then enumerates five states of being which cannot be fulfilled by a woman. Among them is the state of Tathāgata, the most perfect and completely enlightened being which Śākyamuni himself embodies. After the Buddha has said so, the chapter ending phrase is: "everybody was filled with joy and acted accordingly (from Zürcher's Dutch translation, 1978: 176-182).

If we look at the Hindu-Buddhist society of the Kathmandu Valley, monasteries (Skt: *vihāra*, New, *bāhāl*) are nowadays inhabited by married "monks" and their offspring: Although the inhabitants of a *bāhāl* are still called a *saṅgha*, a community of monks, membership is based on hereditary rights and duties. Members include those who have moved outside the residential quarters of a *bāhāl* but who are still considered to belong to it. New residents in the *bāhāl* or outsiders can never become members of the *saṅgha*, nor can they receive the *dīkṣās* or consecrations that turns the true members into monks, and later, priests. To quote John Locke, who made an extensive study of Nepal's monasteries: "Each of the *bāhās* and *bahīs* is still inhabited and tended by a *saṅgha* of *śākya bhikṣus* and *vajrācāryas*, called Bare, who are nevertheless married men with families. They and their families constitute the *saṅgha* of the *vihāra*. Furthermore, under the influence of a growing ascendancy of standard Hinduism and the Hindu caste system, which all informants date to the time of Jayasthiti Malla, the Bare became in fact a caste" (Locke 1985: 3,4). It is this caste which is feasted every twelve years on the *Samyak mahādāna*, a common ceremonial meal in the open air.

Feasting monks, *bhikṣus*, has since the time of the Buddha been a source of merit for the laity, enhancing as it does the giver's virtue. Although, till the end of his life, the Buddha still went out with his begging bowl for alms (e.g., MPNS III 1), it had become usage that he and his close disciples were invited for their meal by kings, but also by a courtesan, and finally by a smith, Cunda (MPNS IV 13-21). The latter meal, which contained pork,

brought about the Buddha's, death. While the Buddha has the foresight that the meat was tainted, the last episode of his life also illustrates that the *sangha* in principle accepted any kind of food given by anybody.

The Buddha, who had already decided to die when he was feasted by the smith Cunda, does not allow his disciples to eat the tainted meat, and later says in verbose phrases that no one should stir up remorse in the smith Cunda, for: "These two offerings of food are of equal fruit and profit, and of much greater fruit and much greater profit than any other and which are the two? The offering of food which, when a Tathāgata has eaten, he attains the supreme and perfect insight; and the offering of food, which, when a Tathāgata has eaten, he passes anyway by that utter passing away in which nothing whatever remains behind (MPNS IV57, transl. T.W. Rhys Davids, 1900:84).

The points of contrast between the ancient Buddhist gift and the Samyak Mahādāna—"the perfect great gift"—are salient. It is not only that monks who are no longer monks are invited from monasteries that are no longer monasteries. Among the indigenous population of the valley, the Newars, one does not find true monks any more, apart from a few entries into Tibetan monasteries and into the Theravāda school—which was revived in Nepal during this century. The vajrācāryas and śākyabhikṣus are then the living legacy of Nepal's monastic past. The turning point has not yet been historically established; the only certainty is that monastic life had come to an end in the late Malla times (Locke 1985:3), that is before Prithvi Navayan Shah's conquest of the Kathmandu Valley in 1768. The greater part of the still extant monasteries has thus been built or rebuilt as residential quarters for householders, albeit always with a Buddha or Bodhisattva shrine at the core, just opposite the entrance of the *bāhāl*'s courtyard, and a secret shrine for initiates on the second floor of the compound. Furthermore, the initiated members of a *bāhāl* can like brahmins act as priests for other householders, who are not necessarily Buddhist.

The dichotomy between Buddhism and Hinduism is not at all clear with regard to the population of Kathmandu Valley. The Jyāpu or Farmers, the most numerous caste in the Valley, mostly employ *vajrācāryas* as their household priest (*purohita*), but this does not mean that they contrast themselves as Buddhists with Hindus. Likewise people employing Brahmin *purohitas*, such as the second largest caste of Shresthas, do not consider themselves as Hindus in opposition to Buddhists.

The mixture, rather than being the result of syncretism, reflects an ancient configuration in which Buddhism was the refuge it was meant to be, but not a religion completely separate from Hinduism. A number of high castes of artisans and merchants yet make the distinction and profess to be Buddhists.

They are together called Urāy, a composite caste within which intermarriage is allowed.

The Urāy are the main actors in serving the Samyak Mahādāna to the monks, the gods and the king alike. Although various Urāy subcastes serve different items of food (Shrestha 1993), the Tulādhar, the Merchants, are the ones designated to prepare cooked rice and serve it to the Bare. Accepting cooked rice from other castes is a most precarious thing in Newar caste society. In the twenties of this century it even led to a split among the *vajrācārya* officiants, the priests who carry the title *gubhāju*. The rift has been excellently described by Collin Rosser (1966,1979); it centred on the issue of the *gubhājus* accepting cooked rice from their Urāy patrons.

In a meeting in 1926 it was decided no longer to do so, because ...."conditions have now changed. To maintain the Gubhāju's prestige and authority over society, we should not take food from Urāys. Those who violate this rule will be expelled from the caste". Accordingly a number of dissident *gubhājus* were expelled, but their leader took the case to court. "From time immemorial we Gubhājus have been taking cooked rice from our Urāy *jajmāns* (patrons). In the Samek (=samyak) ceremony it is the Urāy who cook the rice and distribute it among the *gubhājus* and Bares present" (Rosser 1979:107-109). Here, in the petition to the court ("to punish those who expelled me") the Samyak Mahādāna was thus brought up as an argument in case. The rift lingered on for a long time and of course stirred up bad feelings among the Urāy patrons too—who felt degraded by the *gubhājus*' refusal to accept cooked rice from them.

The Tulādhar continue to serve cooked rice in the twelve-yearly *samyak* ceremony. Samyak Mahādāna can be organised in between by private persons, who acquire great merit in arranging the costly affair. The so-called optional *samyak* has not been performed since 1950. If the organizer is not a Bare or Urāy, boiled rice cannot be served on the occasion. Suvarna Man Tulādhar (1993) mentions two examples: Samyak Mahādāna performed by a member of the Oilpresser's caste (Mānandhar) in which the boiled rice was replaced by parched rice, and a *samyak* organized by a Ranjitrkār (Dyers' caste) in which only *gulmari*, a confectionary item made from rice flour, was offered in place of boiled rice.

The rise and development of the Samyak Mahādāna is as untraceable as the of monasticism. No animal sacrifices take place, no blood is being shed at all, and the meal itself is vegetarian. Some informants like to place the origin of the Samyak Mahādāna in the time of the Buddha himself, or at least to track it to the time of Emperor Aśoka. Tantric aspects are minimal when compared with the elaborate rituals and sacrifices which the *gubhāju* mostly perform on behalf of their patrons. Samyak may well be older than

historically traceable regulated albeit not in its present, form. At present, the king presides over the Samyak Mahādāna more like a guest than as the host that he would have been in ancient times. The invitations are sent out (to gods and humans alike) by the greater *sangha* and are the special responsibility of the śākyabhikṣus themselves. In sending the invitations as well as in cooking the radish curry to be served in the mahādāna, they play the double role of givers and receivers.

Although the development of the Samyak Mahādāna from a pristine form is not traceable, there is, according to Suvarna Man Tulādhar, evidence that "the ceremony of Samyak was first started in the 15th century by Golchandra of Itumbahāl. The 'Samyak Celebrations Trust' was gradually established over time and plots of land were placed under its trusteeship to ensure sustainability in the celebration of Samyak once every three years." As such it seems to have fallen into decay at the time of King Prithvi Narayan Shah's conquest of the Valley: "Historical records illuminate that King Prithvi Narayan Shah the Great ensured the celebrations of Samyak on a regular and continuing basis once in twelve years by institutionally consolidating and streamlining the organisation management and resources of the "Samyak Celebrations Trust" (Tuladhar 1993).

Today the Palace is contributing Rs 200,000 (f 8,000,-) to sustain the Samyak performance, "hardly enough to buy the wood for the cooking fires," according to some informants. Income from land resources has dwindled since the land reforms thirty years ago: many tenants no longer hand over part of their produce to the trust. It has thus become hard again to sustain the Samyak Mahādāna, and rumours have it that the 1993 celebration could very well have been the last of its kind.

More mysterious is the origin of Misā Samyak, the *samyak* of women on the day following the great *samyak*, and little has been written about it. That lack of attention, even for the separation of the women as such, may well be related to the position of women in the *sangha* from ancient times. No king or other dignitaries come to grace this occasion, and the statue of the main Buddha ("Svayambhu Dyo," considered to be the Buddha Amitābha) has just returned to his "godhouse" (New: *dyochem*) when the women's *samyak* is about to start. However, at the moment that Svayambhu Dyo has been carried back to his abode on Svayambhu Hill, a brass statue of the powerful goddess Hāritī Ajimā is brought down to grace the women's *samyak*, in the company of a few select Dipankara Buddhas who welcome the goddess at the foot of Svayambhu Hill—at the site where they had bidden farewell to Svayambhu Dyo just before. Among all divinities and Buddhas who were carried to the field of the Samyak Mahādāna the day before, Hāritī was the great absentee.

Unlike the other goddesses whose shrines surround Kathmandu, Hārītī Ajimā has no yearly procession. The brass procession statue is only brought down for the occasion of Misā Samyak: In the *samyak* of women Hārītī seems to occupy a position comparable to that of the king the day before. Hārītī Ajimā once was, according to legend, a demon queen who was converted by the Buddha himself. Misā Samyak is thus presided over by one of the most fearsome goddesses of the Valley, who appears to change place with the peaceful image of the Buddha Amitābha.

Surprisingly, the women are not only given the same food, the remainder as it were, which the men have eaten the day before, but are also served by the same Urāy castes who served the king, the divinities and the men on the previous day. This bifurcation will be further investigated in this paper, as well as the tail-end of the Samyak Mahādāna, Daru Samyak, which is celebrated one year later and which, at a smaller scale, brings together elements which were so strictly separated the year before. Most notably, in Daru Samyak men and women come together, and Hārītī Ajimā and Svayambhu Dyo likewise.

### **The Samyak Mahādāna**

The prelude to the Samyak Mahādāna starts one year before the performance proper. The ritual of *gway dām tayegu*, which is carried out in front of Amitābha on the hill of Svayambhu, serves to announce the Samyak Mahādāna one year later—according to the solar calendar. The ritual, which has been described by Sumon Kamal Tuladhar (1978/80:47-70) is also the first invitation for the king and the divinities to attend the *samyak*. *Kisali*, consisting of *gway* (areca nut), *dām* (a coin) and husked rice, is brought to the main divinities around the stupa of Svayambhu, to the palace, and to the most important *bāhāls*. There are, at least since the time of King Prithvi Narayan Shah, three *bāhāls* which carry the ultimate responsibility for the organisation (the *guthi* or trust) and for the performance of the Samyak Mahādāna: Itum and Vatu Bāhāl in the northern part of the inner city of Kathmandu, and Lagan Bāhāl in the southern part. The latter *bāhāl* supplies the Pramukh Mahāsthavir, in common parlance the eldest (*thakāli*) of the Samyak Trust, who is the leader of the organisation.

The invitation ritual will be repeated next year eight days before the actual ceremony, which is always performed on Māgh Samkrāntion the 14th or 15th of January. Formerly all *bāhāls* of the Valley received a writ invitation as well, which in 1992 was replaced by an announcement in the country's government newspaper, the Gorkhāpatra, as well as in a broadcast by Radio Nepal. This method gave rise to confusion at the entrance to the field because the *vajācārya*, *śākyahikṣus* and other invitees could not (apart

from the VIPs and the organisers) be properly identified as such. The open field, Bhuikhel, which had already shrunk during the last decade, must give place to all divinities and priests or lay monks as well as to the temporary stage with the king's throne and the VIP tribune. Space would appear insufficient to accommodate all rightful recipients of the mahādāna.

Locke (1985) draws a comparison between the Samyak ceremony and the yearly *pañcadāna* (New: *panjārām*) which is annually given by common people to visiting lay monks and priests on a day in the summer month of Guṃlā: "On the appointed day the Buddhist lay people prepare a sort of altar at their home adorned with any Buddhist images they have upon it. In front of the altar they place baskets with four kinds of grain and salt. Throughout the day any of the Bare (Śākyas and Vajrācāryas) of the city come and collect their share of offerings (...). The whole custom is intimately connected with Dipankara, and in each of the three cities the main image put out on this day is that of Dipankara (who is) one of the earlier Buddhas who came before Śākyamuni and is supposed to have predicted his coming. He attained a great popularity in Malla Nepal and there are images of him at almost every *bāhā* or *bahī*. The images are donated by individuals who have the image consecrated and then usually install it in one of the *vihāras*. All of these images are brought out in procession at the time of the *samyak* ceremony which is held every five years at *Kvā Bahā* in *Pātan* and every twelve years at Bhuikhel below *Svayambhu* in Kathmandu. The ceremony is a sort of general *pañcadāna* to which are invited the *sanghas* of all the *bāhās* and *bahīs* in the area" (Locke 1985:11, 12).

A few remarks have to be made with regard to the connection between the yearly *pañcadāna* and the twelve-yearly *mahādāna* in Kathmandu. The *Dipankaras* may well have gained popularity during Malla times (from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century) in Nepal, but *Dipankara* is also a very old image in the legend of the Buddha, whose life-story, 91 eras ago, appears to be reflection of the life of Śākyamuni himself: A crownprince leaves his home to become a Buddha. The first part of the *sūtra* on "the origin of divine life," the *Xiuxing-benqi jing*, starts with "the famous episode in which, 91 cosmic eras ago, the then living Buddha *Dipankara* revealed to a young Brahmin student that he would once become the Buddha Śākyamuni..." (from Zürcher 1978:16, 44-51).

Regarding the appearance of the former Buddha *Dipankara*, a similarity may be observed between the yearly *Pañcadāna* and the *Samyak*. However, while *Dipankara* may have gained popularity in the time of the Malla kings, his general representation as the revealer of the future Buddha goes back to at least more than a millennium before Malla rule in Nepal. The similarity in this respect between *Pañcadāna* and *Samyak* may rather point to a

common source than to a straight connection. And, if any such connection is sought for, it exists in the obligation of any private performer of the Samyak Mahādāna to have an image made of the Dipankara Buddha. For, as Suvarna Man Tuladhar has it, "one of the ideas behind Mahāyāna Buddhist ritual is the identification of the worshipper with the deity." Some of those individual Dipankaras remain in private hands, but should nevertheless participate in the Samyak ceremony. This can give rise to considerable effort, for in Samyak the Dipankaras have to move about the city. Beign more than twice a man's height, these hollow wooden structures (with a shiny metal face in case they are "yellow-faced") have to be carried by someone creeping inside the statue and carrying it—looking through openings in the belly of the statue, and supported by attendants.

The most significant contrast between the Pañcadāna and the Samyak Mahādāna is that the former is a matter of individual families and the latter an organized affair of the whole *sangha*. Pañcadāna is also given by families who do not necessarily profess Buddhism, and accepted by the "monks"—the vajrācāryas and the śākyā—bhikṣus—from such households as they choose to visit on their round. The food does not contain cooked rice, but it may have more ingredients than indicated by the word "pañca", five (see, e.g., Lewis 1993:337). Pañcadāna and Samyak Mahādāna share the virtue of alms-giving, but in the twelve-yearly Samyak the tasks to be carried out are rigorously divided by caste and location. The two main items of the meal, the radish curry and the rice, are prepared by respectively the Sākyabhikṣus of Itum Bāhāl and the Tulādhar (Merchants) of Neta quarter, and cooked on the spot, sparate from the household sphere.

Ten days before the Samyak Mahādāna, the Sākyā start cooking their radish curry, after they have dug out the radish ceremonially. The cooking session, which will last for six days, starts with the consecration of a sacred hearth, the *dyo bhutu* (god's hearth) which will not be used in the actual cooking. After six days of cooking in large brass vessels on five hearths, the radish curry is stored in a tent erected for this purpose. After consecrating their own unused sacred hearth, the Tulādhar take over the five cooking hearths to boil the rice for four subsequent days. The product must be a little more than half-cooked, such in order to hold the rice durable for the coming days. The half-cooked rice is spread out to dry in one tent, and then taken for storage to another tent. Other Urāy such as Kansahār (Copperworkers) prepare several varieties of lentils (Nep: *dāl*, New: *keṃ*). Likewise sweets are made by the Madhikarmi subcaste of Urāy. Those items are brought to the field of Bhuikhel the day before the Samyak. The cooking hearths on the field, by the way, are made of unburnt bricks by Jyāpu (farmers) and painted with lion figures by Citrakār (painters). And so the



division of labour goes on up to the leafplates on which the meal is to be served; those should be made and presented on the occasion by the Tulādhār of Asan quarter.

On the eve of Samyak Mahādāna Buddhas, Dipankaras and other divinities from all over the Valley are carried to the square in front of the ancient (Malla) royal palace in the centre of Kathmandu. In 1992, 89 divinities paraded into the square and were placed against the walls of the old royal palace. In 1979 (the actual interval was thirteen years), 117 divinities participated (Darasha Nevāmi 1992:35-40). Reasons for the decline are theft and the insufficiency of the invitation by radio and newspapers. The great get-together of the divinities and the site of the royal palace evokes the idea of a royal reception, which it may once have been. Indications are that it once was a reception of the whole *sangha* of Kathmandu Valley by the king, like it has been recorded several times in the legend of the Buddha Śākyamuni's life.

The main god of Svayambhu, the procession image of Amitābha, gets a special reception (New: lasakusa) at the old city's frontiers. Accompanied by music of different kinds, Svayambhu Dyo descends in the company of a caitya as well as the sage Manyūrī (in the form of silver footprints) and is joined by a statue of the goddess Khadga Yoginī from the Bijesvarī temple adjacent to the stairs descending from Svayambhu hill. At the frontier and former gate of the city those divinities are welcomed by the Dipankara Buddhas of the three main bāhāls, preceded by a red Tārā and three boys representing the triratna (the three jewels) of Buddhism, the Buddha, the Dharma (doctrine) and the Sangha (community). The triratna boys are also chosen from the three bāhāls charged with the organisation of the Samyak Mahādāna.

The company then makes a tour through the northern part of the city, touching the central square of Asan quarter and passing Janabāhāl, from where the statue of the most popular god Seto Matsyendranāth (a form of Avalokīteśvara) joins the party. At Hanumān Dhokā Svayambhu Dyo and his company occupy the first places in the row of Buddhas, Dipankaras and other divinities placed along the palace walls. They also be the first ones in the procession of all divinities on the way from the old palace to the field of Bhuikhel next day. If all goes well, the divinities—some of whom are carried by motor-driven carts—will arrive at Bhuikhel before the king of Nepal arrives, a sign that the ceremony must start. Due to delays, a number of Dipankaras arrived late and had to wait outside the sacred enclosure until the royal ceremonies had finished, a procedure which evoked criticism. Another aspect of the 1992 performance did the same: both Svayambhu Dyo and the king of Nepal receive a ritual welcome when entering the sacred

field, but Svayambu Dyo should be served the Samyak Mahādāna. In 1992 the sequence was reversed, with the king receiving the first honours, perhaps due to a lack of coordination in the overcrowded field.

The ruling Shah dynasty of Nepal is explicitly Hindu, a fact which may perhaps explain that the present king, Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Deva, was received more as a divine guest than as a pious host of the ceremony. All different castes participating in preparing the foods made their appearance for the king, who touched the items of food such presented. A great plate (New: *Thāybhū*) containing the rice, the eight kinds of lentils, the radish curry as well as milk, sugar juice and sweets was subsequently presented to and touched by him, before Svayambhu Dyo himself received this mahādāna.

All attention was thus focussed on the king, whose feet were subsequently washed in a brass bowl by the mian Śākya Thakāli, the Pramukh Mahāsthaviza, followed by his wife and the two other Thakālis of Vatu and Itum Bahāl. Only after that the Buddha Amitābha, the main guest, was served with the same foods as the king, placed in front of the statue. The king then dutifully paid homage to Svayambhu Dyo and his company, passing the various other divinities, and hence went his own way.

The Vajrācāryas and Śāyabhiṣṭas had a hard time in obtaining their mahādāna amidst the crowd which circumambulated the field after the king did so. But most of the food is collected by the Bare guests and taken home and abroad (formerly even to Tibet) in its quality of blessed food.

Afterwards the guests and divinities disperse very quickly, apart from Svayambhu Dyo who makes a second round through the northern city. Surprisingly the goldpainted statue spends the night in a Shrestha caste home which does not have a Buddhist persuasion. The over-night stay has always been on this spot in northern Kathmandu, is the reason given for the location.

The contents and meaning of the Samyak Mahādāna itself have been elaborately dealt with by Hemrāj Śākya (1980) and will not be treated in detail in the present context. Instead attention will be turned towards the day following Samyak which involves Misā Samyak (the Samyak of Women), graced by the goddess Hārītī Ajimā.

### **Misā Samyak**

Apart from the divine Tārā and the goddess Bijeśvarī who follow Svayambhu Dyo from the sacred hill, the Samyak Mahādāna is a completely male affair. Misā Samyak, however, is not a completely female affair. The same team of people who served the food to the male recipients is, or should be, serving the food to their female counterparts the day after.

Women, who can be seen as almost having a monopoly in cooking and serving food indoors, take no part whatsoever in serving the food of the *mahādāna* outside the house. The contrast between the male Samyak *Mahādāna* and the female Samyak is nevertheless striking. The king, the throne, the VIP tribune and all dignitaries (ministers, mayors, diplomats and even researchers) who showed up the previous day, were remarkable by their absence at *Misā Samyak*. All Buddha figures, caityas and Dipankaras have likewise returned home, except for the ones of the three organizing *bāhāls*.

The presence of the divinities of Itum, Vatu and Lagan *Bāhāl* serves a double purpose. On the one hand they pay a farewell homage to the main deity of the previous day, *Svayambhu Dyo*, who is returning to his hilltop god-house. On the other hand they give a ceremonial welcome to the goddess *Hāritī Ajīmā*, who is descending to attend the *Misā Samyak*. Both movements are equally astonishing. The main Samyak deity is ostentably leaving before the *Misā Samyak* starts and the fearsome goddess *Hāritī*, not invited at the male Samyak *Mahādāna*, is making her rare appearance at *Misā Samyak* only. If there is any idea of compensation (which is not outspoken) in the exchange of divinities, no such compensation is provided for the role of the king of Nepal. The throne is still standing at the place where it was facing the gathering of the previous day, but it will remain empty. The absence of the king is not made up for by the presence of the queen, and the remaining divinities plus *Hāritī Ajimā* will take up their positions on the opposite side of the holy field.

After spending the night in the non-Buddhist *Shrestha* house, *Svayambhu Dyo* can be worshipped there by individual devotees during the greater part of the following day. Most of the devotees make each other's pictures sitting side by side with the divinity. In the afternoon *Svayambhu Dyo* receives worship (*pūjā*: rice, red powder, incense and other ingredients) from the main *Śākya thakāli* and his wife. On the road outside the courtyard the same *Dipankaras* are lined up (including *Tārā* and the *triratna* boys) who welcomed *Svayambhu Dyo* into the city. They follow the latter up to the foot of *Svayambhu Hill*. There the *Dipankaras* circle around the departing *Amitābha* three times, bowing in front of him (except the huge *Dipankara* from *Lagan* quarter, who is not moved by a human being inside the statue but drawn on wheels). *Svayambhu Dyo* also receives a last portion of the foodstuffs prepared by the different castes, and, once uphill, gets a welcoming ceremony in front of his god-house under great public interest. The ceremony is carried out by the wife of the *thakāli* of the *Buddhācārya*, the special group of Buddhist priests who take care of the divinities on *Svayambhu Hill*.

The same group of priests takes out the brass statue of Hārītī Ajimā immediately after the safe return of Svayambhu Dyo. In contrast to the photo-sessions which surrounded Svayambhu Dyo, no pictures of Hārītī Ajimā are allowed to be taken by anybody. Hārītī was first brought to her temple and put in front of her permanent stone representation. The Śākya thakāli from Lagan then made an elaborate *pūjā* of the goddess behind closed doors. Suddenly secrecy prevails. Who is Hārītī Ajimā? Her background is part and parcel of the oral tradition of the Buddhācāya priests.

Hārītī once was the eldest wife of a demon (Yakṣa or Dānava) king, who married five hundred wives in order to get children. When he did not succeed he consulted an astrologer who gave him one big papaya fruit to divide among his 500 wives in order to make them pregnant. The king had to hide the papaya fruit for several days in a secret room to get it ripe. Because his eldest wife Hārītī held all the keys of the palace, he had to take a key from her to store his secret treasure. The missing key, predictably enough, made Hārītī curious, and she took it from her husband while he was asleep. Entering the secret room she saw nothing but the papaya, which she tasted. It was so delicious that she ate the whole of it. When the king discovered the disappearance of the papaya next day, Hārītī confessed to have eaten it. The king was furious and, in spite of the fact that Hārītī bore 505 children, he banished her from the palace.

Hārītī and her children thereafter wandered around hungry, and when no food could be found anymore, Hārītī started to steal other children in order to feed them to her own. She became an ogress terrifying the world. The story now takes a turn into the direction of a jataka legend (see also Hemrāj Śākya 1978). In her wanderings Hārītī came to Svayambhu Hill in Kathmandu at the same time that the Buddha Śākyamuni was preaching there. Knowing her identity, the Buddha took away her dearest child, for which, predictably again, Hārītī went to search everywhere. Finally she dared to approach the Buddha with the question of her missing child. "Look", the Buddha said, "she is playing over there", pointing to the courtyard of his monastery. Hārītī was overjoyed, and when Buddha pointed out to her how much grief the loss of only one of her 505 children had given her, she realized her terrible mistake: from an ogress she became a protectress of children.

The story accounts for the fact that the demon queen Hārītī became a devotee of the Buddha and a protectress of children, but it does not clarify some other aspects of her character—which cannot elaborately be dwelt upon here either. Hārītī Ajimā is, or at least was until recently, the goddess of smallpox, whose anger could bring about the disease and whose grace could make it vanish. And, although having no yearly *yātrā* (procession) of her own like the other fearsome goddesses surrounding Kathmandu, she can

be seen incarnated into numerous *dyo maiju*, indigenous healers who treat the patients while being possessed by Hāritī. The *dyo maiju* are mostly female and nearly always act in the capacity of the goddess Hāritī. Another category of healers, the mostly male and high-caste *vaidyas*, often confess to be inspired by Hāritī without sharing the necessity of being possessed by the goddess in the course of their treatment of patients (see also Gellner 1992). The popularity of Hāritī in those circles is often ascribed to her Hindu-Buddhist identity: as a Buddhist convert she is the protectress of children especially; and as the Hindu goddess of smallpox Sitalā she may avert this and other terrible diseases. This current opinion does not appear to be sufficient however, because it does not take account of the original demonic character of the goddess and her affinity with witches. Most often the treatment of both *dyo maijus* and *vaidyas* consists of tracing the cause of a disease to a witch or somebody having the evil eye. The embodiment of Hāritī by different media can be seen as a kind of universal *yātrā*, an aspect of the goddess which will be returned to in the conclusion of this paper.

It is thus not the queen of Nepal but the ancient demon queen who comes to grace the Samyak of Women, as if to indicate the poison in the gift. Not that such a notion is explicit: the Misā Samyak shows, perhaps by the absence of all glamour and publicity, a greater solemnity than the preceding Samyak Mahādāna. Some of the women participating—in this case not all of them are of an explicit Buddhist persuasion—have stayed fasting on the field for the whole day. Hāritī Ajimā is brought down straight and simple, without any detour, and she stays only as long as the Misā Samyak takes; in two hours she is going up again to her god-house. The customary welcome ceremony (*lasakusa*) is carried out both in coming (by the Śākya thakāli) and in returning (by the Buddhācāryas), but in time and in space the visit to the sacred field is kept as short as possible—in striking contrast to the manifestation of Svayambhu Dyo.

Ordinary people; both male and female; come to give alms of money, paddy and sweets to both the divinities and the assembled women, an act of devotion which went almost lost in the crowd during the preceding day. The foodstuffs of the mahādāna, some of them nine days old, are for the most part carried away again by the women to be divided as a holy reminder (*prasāda*) of the occasion or to be used as ingredients for equally holy alcoholic beverages.

After the foods are eaten or collected, Hāritī and the divinities of the three bāhāls go their own way, and the twelve-yearly Samyak may now be said to be truly finished.

### Conclusion

The Samyak Mahādāna has a prelude in the gvay dām tayegu ceremony, the invitation ritual one year before the great performance itself. It also has an aftermath exactly one year later, which seems a small-scale repetition of the great Samyak, but one in which several significant separations dissolve.

The most general divide in Samyak Mahādāna is that between men and women. It is a separation which may date back to the ambivalence with regard to women's participation in the erstwhile *sangha* of the Buddha himself. If so, the distinction is annihilated in the one-year-after ceremony, the Daru Samyak, in which men and women gather at one time in the sacred field of Bhuikhel, because, as the participants say, it is a small-scale affair compared to the Samyak Mahādāna.

The divide between men and women in the Samyak Mahādāna extends to the divine and the royal realms. Of the 89 divinities—two-thirds of them being Dipankaras—only six Dipankaras and a Tārā statue attend the Misā Samyak. A royal representative is absent there, unless royalty is seen as an aspect of the identity of Hārītī Ajimā herself, who once was a queen. Since ancient time kings embody a dual identity, with divinity being part of their human identity, or humanity being part of their divine identity (Van den Hoek 1990). The king, the queen and the royal goddess constitute a triangle of which the angular points are incompatible. The central royal goddess, Taleju Bhavāni as she is called in Kathmandu Valley, embodies the very power of the king, the *śakti* of the realm. Only the king can, if he wishes, be initiated into her cult; the human queen can not.

In the legends of Kathmandu the king of Nepal is engaged in an erotic play or a straightforward gamble with the royal goddess. It is a game which he tends to lose. Year after year, until the present day, the king's power has to be sanctioned by the royal goddess, who may wilfully desert him. Like Hārītī, the central goddess Taleju comes down from her high temple abode in the palace complex only once a year during Dasain—not to make a further tour of the city but just to receive sacrifice on behalf of the king and the army (Van den Hoek & Shrestha 1992). Voluntarily or not, the king is dependent on his divine female counterpart. Certainly the relationship between the goddess Hārītī Ajimā and the king is not as direct as the one between the king and the royal goddess Taleju, who is also the goddess of war, the royal duty par excellence. But Hārītī presides over the dangers of pestilence in the kingdom. Centuries ago a Malla king of Nepal is said to have smashed the stone statue of Hārītī after pestilence had visited his own family, but of course, to no avail.

At the divine level femininity is not inferior to masculinity. The difference between the Samyak Mahādāna and the Misā Samyak cannot be

formulated as a straight hierarchical one. It involves a distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric spheres of religious experience. From the exoteric point of view the absence of either the king or the queen at Misā Samyak, as well as the departure of the main divinity, Svayambhu Dyo, just before the women's ceremony starts, may seem almost offensive. From the esoteric point of view they make place for a different kind of power such as embodied by the goddess Hāritī Ajimā.

On the occasion of Daru Samyak, distinctions dissolve, but not completely. Svayambhu Dyo, Manyūrī and Hāritī descend collectively, but the statue of Svayambhu Dyo is not the same one as the gold-painted Amitābha who visited the Samyak Mahādāna. It is a recently made and smaller silver copy of the divinity, who, up to about a quarter century ago, was only represented at Daru Samyak by a begging bowl, a *piṇḍapātra*. The breach with the latter tradition and the joint appearance of Svayambhu Dyo and Hāritī Ajimā is thus a very recent concurrence, springing forth from the donation of a second statue of Svayambhu Dyo by the family of the eldest of the Buddhācārya group of priests. The two characters are in a way incompatible. Hāritī Ajimā can be said to control the very pestilence which the Buddha wants to liberate the world from. She is a recourse for women wanting progeny, a protectress of children and guardian of great illnesses which may ravage the human race in this world. Although no slaughter is allowed on Svayambhu Hill, Hāritī accepts duck eggs and animal sacrifices; the animals are set free after being consecrated. Her cult is esoteric and her coming down is preceded by a secret worship. Among the ingredients of worship is a plate of *samay baji*, a tantric mixture of beaten rice, roast buffalo meat, black soyabeans, ginger and alcohol; which represents the ultimate sacrifice for the initiated ones (Juju and Shrestha 1985:13).

The other-worldly Svayambhu Dyo ostensibly takes his leave just before the women's ceremony starts, but at a more concealed level he makes place for the other, this-worldly power of the goddess Hāritī Ajimā. In the legend of the Buddha as related in the Mahāparinibbāna sutta, the enlightened one tells his disciple Ānanda: "The Tathāgata has no such thing as the closed fist of a teacher, who keeps some things back" (MPNS II 32, transl. Rhys Davids 1900). The other-worldly Buddha has no secrets to hide, but the this-worldly goddess Hāritī certainly has, in the most literal sense. When she descends to Bhuikhel during Misā Samyak and Daru Samyak, the taking of pictures is forbidden and a scarf is put over her face as a security measure.

In Daru Samyak, it seems, everything comes back to normal. Husbands and wives of the Bare caste eat separately, but share the same field. Although the Neta Tulādhār still serve the rice on the occasion, they have their own feast, including meat and alcohol, after their function has been

completed. In contrast with the Samyak Mahādāna, the Daru Samyak appears to be an elaborate family feast of the Bare, and especially of those bāhāls which organized the Samyak Mahādāna. It is in that respect more true to life than the great Samyak itself, and naturally so. The Daru Samyak has no self-existing purpose. What it expresses is the link between ordinary life and the next Samyak Mahādāna eleven years from then. It indicates the unending chain of events which links the one Samyak Mahādāna to the other, just as the chain of lives with its intervals is part of the unending *samsāra*—the circle of rebirths.

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