



spiritual tourism

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NATURALLY NEPAL
 ONCE IS NOT ENOUGH



NEPAL
 TOURISM
 YEAR **2011**
 NATURALLY NEPAL
 ONCE IS NOT ENOUGH



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Spiritual Enlightenment

A prayer in the ancient Hindu Holy Scripture, Rig Veda, entreats upon God, "*Tamaso Maa Jyotirgamaya, Asato Maa Sadgamaya, Mrityor Ma Amritam gamaya*" or 'Lead Us from Darkness (Ignorance) to Light (Knowledge), from Falsehood to Truth, from Death to Immortality'.

Every human being on earth is in relentless pursuit of love, mental peace and spiritual happiness. According to *Sanatan Dharma*, the eternal religion, the proven way to overcome the tensions, stress and strain that one faces in daily life is faith in spiritualism (*adhyatma*). Spiritual practice (*sadhana*) casts 'light to do away with darkness' and liberates a person from sorrow, gloom and despondency. Spiritual enlightenment leads to blissful inner peace (*samadhi*).

Traveling across Nepal can be not only a fascinating physical and visual journey through high mountains, cascading rivers, pristine forests and unexplored landscapes, but also a spiritual journey as well. Viewing the country through the spiritual lens will help see the people and land in that extra dimensional element that one might have missed otherwise. Among the myriad and diverse attractions that have drawn people from far and abroad to visit Nepal, one aspect that is unique to this country, but has often been either overlooked or remained scantily noticed, is the exalted standing this country holds in spiritualism.

For many, Nepal remains a mystical land with its harmonious blend of two of the world's prominent religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, its incredibly tolerant people living through a fascinating religious-cultural milieu and its amazing landscapes that in ancient times drew *rishis* (sages), ascetics, mystics and yogis who wandered in a spiritual mission in search of *tatwa gyan* (supreme truth), *nirvana* (enlightenment) and divine grace, and today draws spiritual seekers, aspirants of a new bewildered generation seeking tranquility, mental peace and answers to questions that people had long forgotten to ask.



Why Nepal?

Perched along the foothills of the mighty Himalayas, *Himabatkhand* Nepal, as described in the ancient Holy Scriptures, has since time immemorial been a *punyabhumi*, a holy land recognized for its sacred status as the Abode of the Gods. Many holy sites and shrines associated with persons, places or events in the Epic Ramayana and Mahabharata and even dating back to the creation of the universe as narrated in the Hindu holy Scriptures, *Upanishads* and *Puranas*, abound in this land. Prominent pilgrimage sites such as Barah Kshetra, Mukti Kshetra, Baidyanath Kshetra, Pashupat Kshetra and numerous other holy sites recounted in the *Upanishads*, *Puranas* and *Swasthani Brata Katha*, sprinkled across the geography of the country lend credence to the fact that Nepal remained blessed as a spiritual land.

The isolated and inaccessible snowy Himalayas, the confluence of holy rivers, the sacred lakes, the pristine dense forests and the solitary mountain caves were the



preferred destinations of sages, ascetics and yogis whose quest for *nirvana* (spiritual enlightenment) and *mokshya* (salvation) led them to places of serene solitude unperturbed by mundane distractions to engage in meditation, penance and self-realization.

Great sages of ancient times like the *Saptarishi* (Seven Superior Sages) - Kasyap, Bhardwaj, Biswamitra (Kaushik), Vashistha, Atri, Gautam and Jamdagni - and others like Bhrgu, Rishya Shringa, Ved Byas, Balmiki, Jad Bharat and Pulatsya made their dwelling and meditated by the mountain caves, deep forests and confluences of the holy rivers in *Himabatkhand* Nepal. Profound thinkers that they were, it is their sermons, discourses and utterances on spirituality that have made Hinduism the enduring and encompassing faith that it is.

In 623 B.C., in the southern plains of Nepal on a full moon night in the month of Baisakh (May), a baby born of royal blood in the hallowed gardens of Lumbini, as the Blessed Mother was on her way to her maternal home to give birth to the child as was the prevalent custom then, gave the world a new philosophy of life, a new awakening with a message of universal brotherhood and non-violence. Nepal and the world have joined hands in cooperation to restore the sacred site where Siddhartha Gautam was born to its ancient glory, sublime grandeur and serene tranquility. For the faithful, a journey to the sanctified site, before which other sites pale in religious significance, is a profound spiritual experience. Today, Buddhism, the way of life Lord Buddha propounded, has over a billion adherents and followers spread across the entire globe.

While sages and mystics are now pages of legend or history, yet *saadhaks* (aspirants) from abroad on their spiritual odyssey to Nepal are likely to come across *sadhus*, or holy men, who can be faintly described as the contemporary *avatar* (reflection) of the ascetics of ancient times. With their scant physical attire or ash-powdered body, *sadhus* reveal sacred symbolism. They are believed to have renounced the world, their kith and kin and worldly possessions in search of *adhyatma gyan* (spiritual awakening), God and answer to the question, 'Who am I in God's creation'?

They are wanderers, mystics and yogis choosing lone sanctuaries, deep forests or secluded caves far from the madding crowd for their dwelling that often makes access and contact with them challenging. They shun human company and publicity. In the not too distant past, ascetics addressed reverently as Mahatma, Baba or Swami like Khaptad Baba (who made his dwelling in Khaptad, Achham district in far western Nepal) and Shivpuri Baba (who dwelt in the Shivpuri Hills north of Kathmandu as well as in Pashupat Kshetra) earned enduring devotion from the Nepalese people and abroad for their profound knowledge, sermons and spiritual practices.

The spiritual quest and mental tranquility that people around the world come here to seek have been complemented by the socio-religious-cultural rhythm of the people of Nepal that has remained largely undisturbed over the ages. The spontaneity, hospitality and friendliness that the people of this country display towards visitors reflect the true ethos and spiritual essence of Nepal. It may be difficult for many visitors from abroad to comprehend how despite their hard life and lack of basic amenities, people could still remain content, cheerful and unprejudiced. The answer could somewhere lie in their abiding faith in spiritualism as has been practiced over the ages.

Things to engage in:

Yoga

The word 'Yoga' comes from the Sanskrit word "Yuj" meaning 'union' or to join. Yoga is a spiritual science that has been practiced and developed by the *rishis* and sages of India over thousands of years. Yoga implies harmoniously integrating the body, mind and soul to attain a balanced life and spiritually uniting the individual with the supreme. Yoga is the symphony of life.

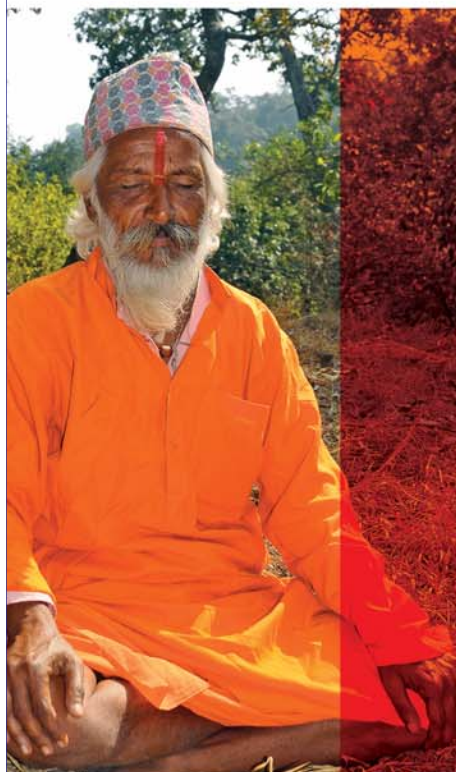
The various assortments of asanas, or postures, works with the body on a structural level providing enhanced physical strength, endurance and the resistance to diseases. At the mental level, it strengthens concentration and resilience raising the consciousness to a level where one can perceive the spiritual dimension. Yoga aims to attain the state of "*Kaivalya*" (emancipation or ultimate freedom) by means of its eight paths which in sequential order consist of *Yama* (self-restraint), *Niyama* (self-observance), *Asana* (body postures), *Pranayama* (breathing control), *Pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses), *Dharana* (concentration of mind), *Dhyana* (meditation) and *Samadhi* (self-realization, super consciousness). Yoga is, therefore, a spiritual quest whereby the aspirant attains health, happiness, mental peace and knowledge.

Nepal offers a number of places in the capital city, Kathmandu, and elsewhere to practice yoga and meditation. Among the prominent Yogic schools where Yogic *Asana* (postures), *Pranayam* (Control of breathing) and *Dhyana* (Meditation) are taught and practiced are the *Yog Ashrams* or *Peeths* as they are called. Yoga is immensely popular and practiced in Nepal.



Meditation

There is a close inter-relationship between yoga and meditation. Ancient Yogis maintained that in order for a person to be in harmony with oneself and one's environment, there is a need to balance the body, mind and spirit, that is Yoga and *Dhyan* (meditation). The tensions and strain of living in a hectic world create conflicting thoughts and actions that leave negative imprints in our mind. Meditation is an effective way to combat stress and tension in life. The Yogis claim that in human spiritual evolution, a stage comes when relationships and material wealth lose a sense of purpose, and a confused and weary person becomes disillusioned with the ephemeral nature of worldly possessions and sensual pleasures.



This awakening breeds in a person a quest for life that is eternal, one that is detached from the infatuation of the ephemeral and the blind pursuit of material possession and pleasure. It is then that the person starts looking for a meaningful life and a way to attain mental peace and permanent happiness. Such a state of mind is the ripe condition for the practice of *Dharma*. Meditation is a state of consciousness that cultivates a calm and positive state of mind and awareness. Through regular practice, the energy of the body and mind is liberated with a feeling of bliss that Yogis say, can only be experienced and not described.

In Kathmandu, meditation is taught and practiced in the Yoga camps Osho Tapoban, Vipassana Center, Kapan Monastery and Art of Living Foundation, among others.



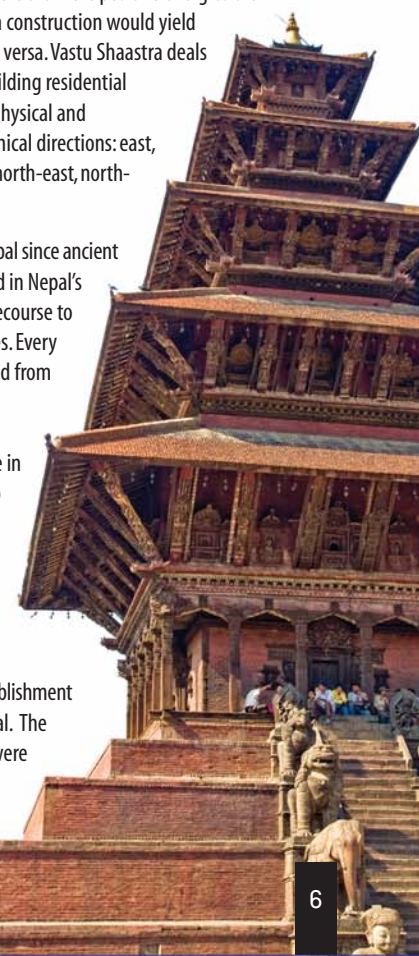
Vedic Vaastu Shastra

The word 'Vaastu' originates from the term 'Vastoshpati' uttered in the Rig Veda. Vaastu Shastra is an ancient science that originated in India in the Vedic age where the sages reflected on the effects of sunlight, gravitational and magnetic forces flowing from the different geographical directions and sub-directions. They sought to stabilize the nature's five elements, also known as pancha tatwa or Paanchbhoota, namely Akash (sky or ether), Prithvi (earth), Jal (water), Agni (fire) and Vayu (wind) in a proportionate way so as to bring about a harmonious balance amidst natural energies like cosmic, solar, lunar energy, etc. The proper combination of these five elements, life-force energy and geo-magnetic energy is believed to produce positive bio-electro-magnetic energy which moulds the natural environment, creating congenial living conditions for the inhabitants leading to a life of concord, happiness, harmony and peace.

According to Vaastu, two forces "positive" and "negative" are constantly interacting with each other on the surface of the land. These forces get disturbed whenever any structure is erected on a vacant land. If there are more positive energies than the negative energies, the result of such a construction would yield more benefits to the inhabitants and vice versa. Vastu Shastra deals with various aspects of designing and building residential structures that are in harmony with the physical and metaphysical forces in the eight geographical directions: east, west, north, south and the sub directions north-east, north-west, south-east and south-west.

Vaastu Shastra has been in practice in Nepal since ancient times dating back to the Lichchhavi period in Nepal's history when the Lichchhavi kings took recourse to this erudition to build the famous temples. Every detail of Vaastu was meticulously followed from determining the site and direction of the complex to the positioning of the deities within and in the periphery of the temple in their respective geographical positions to bring about the most harmony in its worship. They also followed Tantric principles and rituals in determining the location and in the construction of the temples.

Vaastu played an important role in the establishment of settlements and towns in ancient Nepal. The ancient towns in the Kathmandu Valley were designed in certain shapes with the gods and goddesses (*Shakti Peeths*) being established at certain locations



along the periphery surrounding the towns according to Vaastu and Tantric principles in such a way that the people dwelling in the center remained protected by them. Among such *Shakti Peeths* (places of worship consecrated to the goddess Sati) in Kathmandu are Swet Kali, Kankeswari, Rakta Kali, Shova Bhagwati, Pachali, Raj Rajeswari, Bhadra Kali, Sankata, Dakshin Kali, Guheswori, to mention a few.

Private residents in the olden days too followed the Vaastu while constructing their buildings. Vaastu was applied mainly in the orientation of the house, during the *jag puja*, meaning ritual foundation laying, and the alignment of the house interior with the cosmological position of the '*grahas*' (planets, constellations) and deities. Vaastu in recent years is witnessing its renaissance in Nepal, as is seen in the construction of the new high rise apartment complexes in Kathmandu. They claim to observe Vaastu in their design and construction. There are well known Vaastu pundits rendering advice on the subject.

Jyotish (astrology), Tantra, Vaastu and Yoga, constitute the four fundamentals that are said to influence a man's life from birth to death. Peace and harmony can be attained if one pays attention to these four fundamentals. Astrology determines the value and timing to do any work. Tantra mitigates things that could go wrong and makes the situation favorable. Vaastu balances the five basic elements and geographical directions. Yoga makes for a healthy body and mind. Combination of these four fundamentals is thus deemed necessary for a balanced happy life and peace.

Astrology and the Occult

As Hindus, the people of Nepal put faith in rebirth and *karma*. They believe that the constellations of the planets (*graha* – *nakshyatra*) exert certain influence over the destiny of a person, which is decided by the alignment of the stars at the precise time of his/her birth. As such, they have a horoscope (*janma patrika*) made by learned astrologers that is said to interpret the guideline of the life of the person, the highs and lows and important incidents in his/ her life. Nepalese people in general have fair amount of trust in the horoscope, astrology, palmistry and such other occult sciences when it comes to matters deciding important occasions in life, and especially when going through a difficult phase in life. There are learned astrologers who make horoscopes of persons if given the precise time and place of birth. It may be worthwhile to know what the future has in store for the uninitiated.

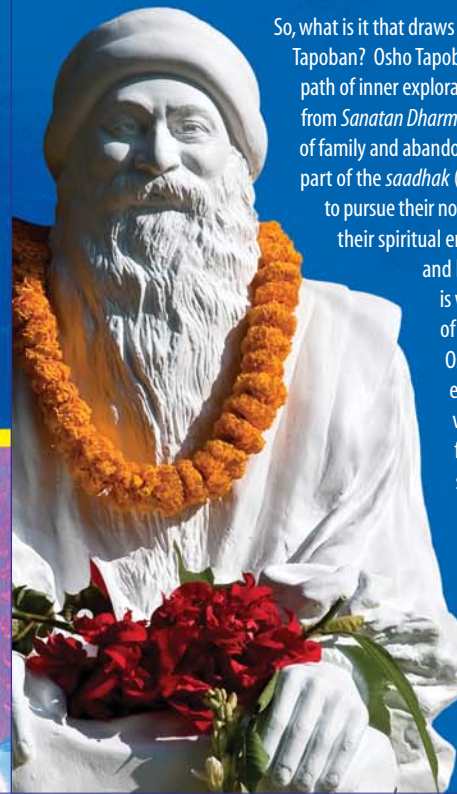


Where to go:

Osho Tapoban

"Tapoban" in Sanskrit means a forested place for *sadhana* (meditation). Located in the wooded Raniban in the Nagarjun Hills at Balaju, some 12 kilometers west of Kathmandu, Osho Tapoban, the "forest retreat" is an international commune that came into existence through the joint efforts of Swami Anand Arun, an intimate disciple of Osho (who is also the coordinator of Osho Tapoban) and Osho disciples or *sanyasis* as they are called. Osho desired to live his last days in the Himalayas, but that wish remained unfulfilled. However, the 'Osho Samadhi' at the Tapoban contains the sacred mortal remains of the Guru. The Tapoban has turned into an increasingly popular destination for meditation and Osho teachings.

The Center has meditation camps, a meditation hall, common rooms, dormitories and deluxe rooms to accommodate the guests. The sylvan surroundings, serenity and scenic beauty of the place provide a peaceful environment of inner tranquility where one can explore oneself in meditation. This retreat offers the perfect opportunity to reflect on one's life. Osho Tapoban conducts *Satsang* (group discourse in righteous company) programmes and meditation camps of varying durations every month. Satsang, Yoga and meditation are aspects of the healing process from anxiety, depression and mental stress.



So, what is it that draws people from around the globe to the Tapoban? Osho Tapoban is a place for those who seek the path of inner exploration. Osho's way of life is a departure from *Sanatan Dharma* and does not demand renunciation of family and abandonment of worldly possessions on the part of the *saadhak* (disciples). This freedom or flexibility to pursue their normal regular lives in conjunction with their spiritual endeavor and an innovative, practical and honest interpretation of love and sex is what appeals to people from all walks of life to Osho's teachings. Osho teaches that "spirituality contains everything about life. Love and sex are vital elements of life. Unless they are first settled, nobody can follow a spiritual path. Love is not enough, awareness is needed. If love is there without awareness it becomes imprisonment, and if love is there with awareness it becomes a freedom".



Kopan Monastery

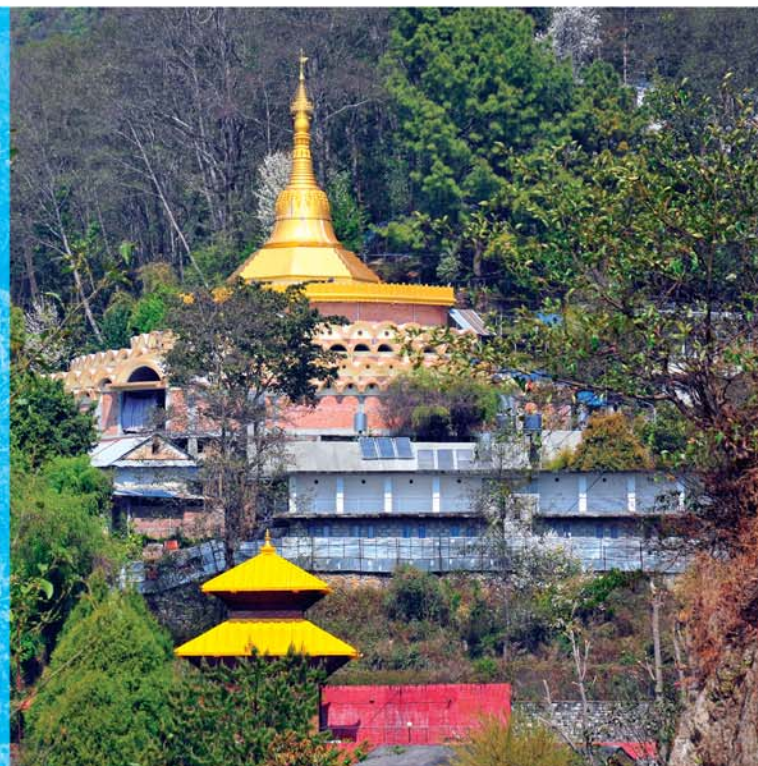
Kopan Gumpa is situated on the outskirts of Kathmandu, near Bouddhanath Stupa in Bouddha. It is about 8 km from the airport and 12 km from downtown city.

Kopan was conceived by Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche as a place of study and meditation for students from the Himalayan *sangha* (fraternity) and foreign countries. It started as a monastic school for the local children in the Solu-khumbu region (route to Everest base camp); the monastery was later shifted to Kopan, Kathmandu in 1971 to escape the high altitude harsh climate which made study in winter well-nigh impracticable. Hence, the name Kopan. Nearby is the Khachoe Ghakyil Ling Nunnery for nuns. When started in 1979, it was an uncommon practice in Tibetan monasteries at that time to admit women to monastic education. Khachoe Ghakyil Nunnery opened the doors of classical Buddhist education to the nuns.

Monks and nuns from the age of seven come from all over Nepal and the Himalayan periphery countries to receive a classical monastic education. Education at the monastery is totally free for all monks and nuns, financed through meditation courses for foreign visitors as well as through a sponsorship scheme in which people supportive of the monastery sponsor the living cost of a monk or nun.



Today, Kopan has become a unique meeting place between the East and West. Kopan draws large numbers of foreign visitors every year, mostly those seeking mental peace, a meaningful life and inner happiness. Regular month-long introductory sessions in Buddhism and meditation are conducted. Course participants are supposed to strictly observe certain house rules of austerity, appropriate dress codes, adherence to time schedules and respect for the monks. According to monastic rules, accommodation for male and female visitors is segregated.



Vipassana

Vipassana is a form of meditation propounded by Lord Buddha some two-and-a-half millennia ago. Vipassana meditation is at the heart of Buddha's teachings. Though the practice lost way in the course of events in history, it was later revived. Vipassana means to see things as they really are. It is an art of living which frees the individual from all the negativities of the mind, such as anger, greed, envy and desire. It is a practice which develops positive creative energy for the practitioner. It includes practices aimed at developing insight and wisdom by seeing the true nature of reality. The path (*Dhamma*) is a universal remedy that can be practiced by anyone at any place at any time.

In the practice of Vipassana, the devotees or pupils are first taught to see things dispassionately so that one is not emotionally involved. The very first thing they learn is to create a mental space, so that what happens to oneself, pleasant or unpleasant, is seen objectively. The pupils are taught to realize, understand and see the "three marks of life", i.e., suffering, impermanence and selflessness. Understanding of the impermanence or transient nature of pleasure is of utmost importance because it is the very craving for those worldly pleasures and the urge to cling to it is what takes away the mind from the goal. When a person sees pleasure for what it is, impermanent and transient, for him worldly pleasures become worthless and the person assumes a state of dispassionateness and detachment. Vipassana teaches one to see and feel this truth with full concentration of the mind.

Vipassana was introduced in Nepal in 1981. Nepal Vipassana Center is situated at Dharmashringa, Mohan Pokhari, Budhanilkantha, some 16 kms from downtown.

Satsang (Group discourse in righteous company)

Satsang is attending and joining a group discourse with like-minded aspirants where *bhajans*, spiritual discourse and recitation of the Holy Scriptures take place. Religious gatherings are a common and regular phenomenon in Nepal's towns and villages where pundits, ascetics and spiritual personalities render sermons, sing *bhajans* and recite the Holy Scriptures like the Puran and Shree Madbhaagvat. Devotees in hundreds and thousands throng such gatherings to listen to the discourses on spiritualism and offer *puja*. Devotees are seen to donate freely huge sums of money, in cash, kind or land, during such *Puran Baachan* (recitals) for some noble cause.



ISCON Temple, Budhanilkantha

The Sri Radha Krishna Temple in Budhanilkantha is an ideal place for a *Satsang*. This place of worship is a 10-minute walk from the famous Budhanilkantha Shrine, the reclining massive stone idol of Lord Vishnu. The ISCON Temple is situated amidst tranquil countryside surroundings at the foothills of the Shivapuri National Park and on the bank of the Bishnumati River. The temple complex covers an area of 50 ropanis of land that includes the main temple, guest house, garden, *gaushala* (cow-shed) and a restaurant. Daily *bhajans* (chanting of prayers) and *aarti* (offering of lighted lamps) are conducted in the morning and evening with discourses on the life and heroic acts of Lord Krishna.





Lumbini Garden

The Sacred Garden of Lumbini where Siddhartha Gautam was born offers a placid environ for meditation and spiritual quest. Spiritual discourses on Buddhism are offered at the monasteries here every day. It is the ideal setting for meditation and spiritual enlightenment. Countries with significant Buddhist populations have constructed monasteries and stupas in their native design reflecting their art and culture, and they offer space and a tranquil environment for mediation and spiritual quest.

Natural Health Care, Arogya Ashram

Arogya Ashram founded in 1964 is located now at Tangal in Kathmandu. The Ashram offers training in Yogic exercises and services in therapies such as herbal therapy (physical therapy with herbal products, oils, powder, leaves and pastes), massage therapy (therapeutic massage, hard, soft, pressing massage, dry or with oil) and steam bath (which activates the internal immunity system given locally or to the whole body).

Other remedial cures as Reiki (natural force or energy that opens and cleans the blockage and toxins of the body) are offered at the Reiki centers in Kathmandu. Acupuncture and acupressure therapy is available at the Nepal Red Cross Society building at the Baghbazaar Bus Park. The science of acupuncture maintains that the flow paths of life energy in our body called meridians are connected with certain points in the body called acupoints. By injecting needles and pressing those certain points, many health problems can be cured.

Certain places in Nepal are known for natural hot springs that claim curative healing powers for a series of ailments from skin to gastric. The most well-known is the Singha natural hot water spring in Myagdi district in mid-western Nepal. It is a continually flowing hot water spring that has recently been channeled into ponds - separate for men and women. As news of the curative powers of the hot spring bath have spread far and wide, there have been a heavy rush of patients, both local and foreign, to take a dip in the hot waters to heal ailments that patients complain normal allopathic medicine allegedly failed to cure.

Another hot water spring is located near the border with Tibet, China at Tatopani.

Dhaami / Jhaankri or Shamanism

Shamanism refers to beliefs and practices regarding communication with the spiritual world. Practitioners of shamanism, known as shamans, or *dhaami* / *jhaankri* in Nepalese local dialect, engage in alleviating traumas affecting the soul/spirit and in treatment of ailments / illness of humans or domesticated animals supposedly caused by evil spirits. Shamanism believes that the individual as well as the community itself is subject to invisible forces or spirits intending to do good or bad, and that the *dhaami* / *jhaankri* can heal such illness induced by the evil spirits.

Shamanism is practiced by a large number of Nepal's ethnic and linguistic tribal groups. Shamans function as spiritual leaders of the community and therapeutic healers. Even today when modern medical treatment is comparatively available in most of rural Nepal, illness over a prolonged period of time often prompts the patient's family to seek out spiritual guidance and remedy from the *dhaami* or *jhaankris* (shamanic healers). The shamans try to heal the patient by entering the spirit world into an ecstatic trance, chanting and quivering, being possessed by the spirits which apparently gives them healing powers to drive out the infectious spirit. Most *dhaami* / *jhaankris* are said to possess experienced knowledge of medicinal plants native to their area, and as such also administer herbal treatment for illnesses.



Besides personal illnesses or diseases affecting the community, rural people visit the *dhaami* / *jhaankris* for advice in the event of natural calamities such as floods and droughts, crop failure, unexplained death of domestic animals, even extending to cases relating to infertility in women, and family and community disputes. People believe them to possess the power to appease and calm angry deities and evil spirits, and even help liberate the souls of deceased people from the dead body which has for some reason been deprived of certain religious rituals that were to be performed on death.

On *Janai Purnima* (Full Moon) day which normally falls in the month of August, devout Hindu pilgrims make the arduous mountain trek to the solitary and serene Gosainkunda Lake, situated at an altitude of 4,312 m. amidst the high mountains of Rasuwa district. On this full-moon occasion, the shores of the icy Gosainkunda Lake, the rocky shrine of Risheswar Mahadev in Daman Simbhanjyang, the rugged Kalinchok peak and the mountain of Thulo Sailung pulsate to the sounds of the *jhaankri* drums into the night.

These religious places of pilgrimage are visited by *jhaankris* in their full attire, dressed in long white robes, feather head-dress, body and waist festooned with small round bells tinkling as they dance in a trance to the beat of the *dyangro* (drum), and often armed with a sword and some holding a black rooster.

Hindu religious myth has it that Lord Shiva had wandered to the desolate high mountains in agony to cool his burning throat caused by consuming the *Kalakoot* venom that spewed out in the course of the churning of the celestial ocean (*Samudra Manthan*). Lord Shiva then pierced the mountain cliff with his trident from where burst three streams of ice cold water to form the holy Gosainkund Lake, where he rested to cool his throat. Lord Shiva thereafter has been referred to as also Neelkantha (One with the blue throat).



Tantra

Tantrism, a primeval religion, was in practice as a way of life in pre-medieval Nepal. Tantra antedates probably every major religion that is in practice today. Tantra is evident in Hinduism and Buddhism, the two major religions of Nepal, and Shamanism. This is corroborated by the paintings and sculptures, where deities are often depicted in different postures. The Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu is a prominent center of Tantra worship. Lord Pashupatinath is worshipped according to certain Tantric rites.

Sri Yantra, the main symbol of Tantra, a labyrinthine maze of interlocking triangles, is used in the worship of 'Nath' as the Lord is reverently named. The Yantra is used to establish the deity to envision the presence of God. Temples in Nepal are said to be built according to tantric principles where deities are enshrined there according to Tantric rites. Various deities like Surya, the Sun god, Ganesh, Shiva, Durga and Shakti are placed at precise geographical positions within and outside the temple according to Tantric and Vaastu principles.

More than a religion, Tantra is a lifestyle whose goal is salvation. Tantra has two fundamental aspects. The first aspect is the theory of creation, which postulates that the universe has no beginning and no end, and that all its manifestations are merely the projections of divine energy of its creator.

The second is the belief that the performance of Tantric techniques and rituals facilitates access to this divine energy, enabling their practitioners, or Tantriks as they are called, to empower themselves and others associated with them. The knowledge and correct application of Tantric techniques and rituals are believed to harness the creator's cosmic energies to the promotion of worldly as well as spiritual goals. Tantra upholds the effectiveness of *mantras* (chants) and *yantras* (symbolic diagrams) to attain physical and spiritual fulfillment. Tantra involves Yoga, meditation, hypnosis, asanas, exercises and self-control for the fulfillment of worldly desires and attainment of spiritual experience.

According to Aghoris (a religious sect who are said not to discriminate in eating or drinking anything, considered however defiled or foul), existence is dominated by two powers - light and darkness. Tantra is basically a procedure of progression from darkness (ignorance) to light. The primary difference however between Tantra and most other religions lies in the fact that the source in Tantra is the dark, black force of destruction, Kali.

Secrets of Tantra are closely guarded and shielded from the outside world. Because of the secrecy, Tantric worship and its rituals are performed in darkness. Tantra can only be practiced through a guru (a consummate teacher). Tantra never was and is not for everybody. It is said that unless one is well disposed towards the occult with a sense of spiritual adventure and a deep desire to probe into the unknown, the advice is to better stay away from Tantra.

Tantrism comprises of obscure techniques, rituals and beliefs which can be said to be both exotic and erotic. Tantriks believe the greatest expression of the deity is feminine in nature. Love and sex form part of the Tantric rituals and is identified as the cosmic union of the individual with the infinite. Tantrism aims to realize the potential power of sex-energy force and to harness it. Tantra asserts that instead of suppressing the sex energy, they should be cultivated and properly channeled. Tantriks state that when the sex energy force leaves the customary seat, it becomes an unparalleled source of pure energy. Tantra advocates the methodical use of sexual union as a yogic process to achieve a state of transcendental ecstasy. It signifies that the ecstasy of sexual union undertaken in the same spirit as worship can help awaken the mind to inner bliss and salvation.

Tantra paintings and sculptures depict deities in the full act of sex. The female god is known as '*shakti*' or power. Contrary to the tenets of Buddhism, it is, therefore, not unusual to see the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas in passionate sexual act with their *shaktis*. Tantra sanctions the five 'm's' - namely *mansa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (coin), *madira* (alcoholic drinks, wine) and *maithun* (sex) along with music and dancing as ingredients / rituals of Tantric rites. Though Tantra consents to sexual union as a means of attaining fulfillment, it may, however, be wrong to judge Tantra solely on this basis.

Temples in the Kathmandu Valley carry wood carvings depicting portrayals of sexual union which have Tantric under meanings. The most prominent site of Tantra in Kathmandu can be said to lie in Swayambhu Hill, to the west of the Grand Stupa known as Shantipur. Only Tantric *Siddhas* - those who have perfected the knowledge of Tantrism - are capable of entering the Shantipur Tantric cave, and this they do only on certain occasions when famine or calamities befall upon the people and country. Without Tantrik Siddhi Yog, it is said it is impossible to enter the mysterious and dark Shantipur cave.

No one knows for sure what lies inside the Shantipur shrine. According to chronicles, the last person to enter the cave was King Pratap Malla. He undertook the audacious journey to bring rain to save the country from drought and famine. It is said, deep inside, a tunnel that is elongated north-south and wide east-west, leads to a three-storied cave with 27 secret chambers and the path is obstructed at each step by supernatural forces and spirits. The king is said to have survived the mission and returned with a consecrated manuscript written in serpent's blood which when exposed to the sky brought in the rains.



History records that Tantrik practitioners were mass executed by orders of a heart-broken but enraged king Rana Bahadur Shah after they failed to cure his beloved queen who succumbed to a disease.

There still exist many sites of Tantric worship in Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan, the three cities inside the Kathmandu Valley, especially the Taleju temples and the Siddhi Laxmi Temple (Nyatapola) in Bhaktapur. The Bhairab Bhadrakali *jatra* (festival), Navadurga Tantrik dance in Bhaktapur or the Gadhimai mela in Bara, famed for the largest animal sacrifice in Nepal and perhaps in Asia, are all conducted and worshipped according to Tantric rites.

What to take home:

- Rudrakshya rosary: Rudrakshya is a round bead with a rough beady surface with faces from one to 29 and is used for making a rosary. It is said that Rudrakshya originated out of the tear of Lord Shiva and is thus a holy item. It is an essential ingredient in a puja for Lord Shiva. It is available at the precincts of the Pashupatinath Shrine. Rudrakshya with a single face is the rarest of the rare and can fetch a price of one's asking. Similarly, a rudrakshya with 29 faces was traded for a whopping Rs. 4 million while one with 22 faces fetched Rs. 2.2 million. Common rudrakshyas come with 3, 4, 5 and 6 faces and are cheap.
- Shaligram: These are black fossil stones (pebbles) found on the banks of the Kali Gandaki River on the way to Mustang. For the Hindus, these are sacred stones as Hindus revere them as the stone incarnation of Lord Vishnu. It is said to protect the home where it is reverently stored.
- Meditation tools such as the Singing Bowl are available at tourist shops and in the Basantpur open market, Kathmandu Durbar Square.
- Audio-visual CDs on Hindu and Buddhist *bhajans* are available at all music CD outlets as well as in shops selling tourist items around Swayambhu and the Bouddha Stupa.
- Books on meditation, Yoga are available at all book stores.

