Teachings of Tara
Sacred Place and Human Wellbeing in the Shimla Hills

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ABSTRACT: This article presents the case for a rethinking of the academy’s approach to sacred space through a demonstration of the way that a focus on unskilled actors reconfigures established approaches and interpretations. The article opens with an auto-ethnographic account of the powerful effect of Shimla’s Tara Devi temple on personal wellbeing and from this starting point spirals out to explore how Tara (and her sacred places) are connected to wellbeing both in the Himalayan region of Shimla and beyond. Through this process, arguments that I have previously made, concerning both the relation of sacred places to happiness (2010) and the way that sacred places operate in Himalayan North India (2012), are significantly complicated, leading to a reappraisal of the role that unskilled actors play in the constitution of sacred space. The article concludes by drawing these ethnographic reflections and theoretical considerations together to develop a key set of recommendations that call for policy-makers to engage sensitively with sacred places in the contemporary, post-secular city.

KEYWORDS: Himalayas, sacred places, Shimla, Tara Devi, wellbeing

In February 2009, while the air was still cold enough to show breath, I was huddled under a pile of blankets in our Himalayan home. At that time, my wife and I were two months into a year of fieldwork and had yet to fully understand the way that a combination of lack of movement, freezing temperatures and limited heating has a cumulative effect. We were saved from our lack of skill to operate in this environment when a shout from our neighbour (and landlady) summoned me to the door. She was an impressive, kind and remarkably commanding woman, who worked at the local university. Despite her busy schedule, she somehow found time to make sure that everyone in our homestead was faring well. As both a long-term influential resident of the area and the de facto matriarch of our community it is not surprising that she was our guide to negotiating so much of the reality of life in the hills. On this occasion she informed me, in her typically charming and assertive way, that I should prepare for an outing: her nephew (a local government worker) had come to visit and we were all to make a journey to a nearby Hindu temple.

Moments later we were nauseatingly hurtling around the narrow mountain road, making our way to Shimla’s Tara Devi. This was to be my first visit, but I would be drawn back again and again; each time I visited Tara Devi, my mood lifted, transitory ailments eased and the cares of life evaporated. Distance from the field has brought the curative power of this place into focus, however an intuitive acknowledgement of Tara Devi’s power is clearly perceptible in my earliest field notes. This, over time, turned into the seed of this article’s exploration of Tara Devi’s influence on wellbeing, which opens understanding of the way that sacred space operates more broadly to alleviate suffering. Such considerations connect with both specific work that I have previously undertaken on religion and happiness (2010) and the more general field of the anthropology of wellbeing (Jiménez 2008; Mathews and Izquierdo...
In choosing to use the term wellbeing I am deliberately positioning this contribution in the wake of Mathews and Izquierdo’s influential work, which argues that wellbeing is an optimised state that takes different expressions in different contexts, but is always possessed of a degree of commonality (2009: 5). This article speaks to these previous writings in a way that is unsettling as much as it is reassuring and leads to a reassessment of fundamental assumptions about the role that unskilled actors play in the constitution of sites that promote spiritual wellbeing.

Our exploration of Tara Devi will use auto-ethnography as a key source, alongside archival, geographic and the more usual ethnographic information. There is, of course, an auto-ethnographic element to most classical and contemporary ethnography (Engelke 2002); however, much of this material treats the auto-ethnographic element as a minimal aside rather than a central interpretative driver. This is clearly the way that Geertz (1973: 412–53), for example, used auto-ethnography in his now classic thick description of a Balinese cockfight. The reader is aware that Geertz is in the field (not simply describing it) and that he moves (through the mechanism of the fight) from being ‘invisible’ (1973: 412) to being ‘the center of all attention’ (1973: 418), but there is little suggestion that his emotional response to the fight is of interpretative value (Ewing 1994: 573).

In this article I will take a different route, following instead the rich vein of evocative and analytic auto-ethnographic writings that exist in the established ethnographic record (Csordas 2007; Mitchell 1997; Nelson 1989 et al.). The use of this analytic auto-ethnography (Anderson 2006) is primarily not for reasons of style; rather it is because of the interpretative value of the approach. I will use this ethnography to highlight the role of unskilled actors in sacred spaces, offering both emotional and spiritual reflections from my own apprenticeship, at the same time as acknowledging the ability of those that I met in the field to teach me about both their and my ways of being. This is undoubtedly uncomfortable territory to enter into, but it is uncomfortable precisely because it attempts to unseat the boundaries that our professional status secures. To maintain these boundaries, we have to dismiss our personal experience as at best irrelevant, or at worst embarrassing (Ewing 1994: 573). To do otherwise is to admit to the possibility that ‘the person one is talking to might actually know something about ... an encompassing “reality” that is valid for anthropologists’ (ibid.). However, this article’s aim of exploring the role of unskilled action in the generation of spiritual wellbeing demands such an approach. For, it is only through this uncomfortable process that we can arrive at a new assessment of the role of skilled action, symbolic interpretation and emotion in the generation of wellbeing at Tara Devi.

Aspects of Tara Devi

Tara Devi is both a general name for an important and widely revered Goddess and the name of a particular place in Shimla, North India, where the Goddess has been housed in a temple complex for the last 200 years (Buck 1925: 243). There is considerable debate about the origin and development of the worship of Tara (Jordaan 1997; Regmi 1987; Shastri 1925 et al.). However, it seems that the tantalising connection of the Celtic Tara and the South Asian Tara (Chaplin 1935) is a fairly late one that is based upon a false cognate (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 208). The dominant view is that while one etymology is terrestrial (Slavin 1996) the other is celestial (Johnson 2009: 322). The South Asian Tara is commonly said to derive from the word for star; there is however an older (and still well represented) tradition that interprets the name as deriving from the word for ford (or crossing) and signifying salvation (Foulston and Abbot 2009: 118; Regmi 1987: 6; Shastri 1925: 16 et al.). This second etymology is found not only in etic accounts but also in both Buddhist and Hindu emic accounts, suggesting that the idea of Tara as someone who can help us overcome our obstacles is a more valuable insight into the contemporary worship of Tara than the star definition.

The idea of Tara as the remover of obstacles is particularly stressed in the Buddhist traditions of Tara, which are most well known in this region of India, where she is a popular focus of devotion. The Buddhist Tara is herself complex and multiform, appearing in a range of different colour-coded manifestations, each with their own iconography, rituals and mythologies (Bokar 1999). However, the most popular form of Tara is the Green Tara, whose accompanying mantra invokes both bodily healing and spiritual salvation. To recite this mantra is to ask Tara (through her compassion) to remove the obstacles to our attainment of a deep contentment and serenity (Hale 2007: 114). This serenity is captured wonderfully in the popular iconography of the Green Tara.

The traditional interpretation and depiction of the Buddhist Tara lends itself well to a discussion of wellbeing. However, Shimla’s Tara Devi is described as a Hindu temple and Tara also features in Jain-
ism. While it is almost universally agreed that the Jain Tara is a later adaptation (Shastri 1925: 9–11), there is a serious contestation around the question of whether Tara is originally a Hindu or Buddhist deity (cf. Dhavalikar 1963: 64; Shastri 1925: 12–14). There are, in early Brahminical texts, what can be interpreted as brief mentions of Tara, and in the ancient iconography of Western India she appears as a patron of seafarers (Regmi 1987: 7). Although fascinating, this debate fails to grapple with the real issues that surround Tara, for it misses the fact that a symbol is best understood in relation to both how it is used and how it relates to other surrounding symbols (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 209). It can be said with some certainty that a focus on a deity readily recognisable as our Tara occurred among Buddhist populations in the northwest of India around the seventh century (Shastri 1925: 15). Shimla, nestled in the foothills of the northwest Himalayas, can therefore claim a long connection with the Goddess. This however conceals the important Bengali connection to both this site and Tara devotion, which we must now turn to explore.
Hindu Foundation Mythology

It is commonly believed that Tara worship became a key part of Tantric practices in the state of Bengal during the height of the Sena dynasty (Shastri 1925: 21–23; Kinsley 1988: 165). It is probable that Tara came to the Sena dynasty through trade connections with Himalayan Buddhists (Shastri 1925: 21–3), where she was already a popular focus of devotion. The Hindu Tara became incorporated into the tantric, syncretic, Mahavidya system, which attempts to make sense of the plurality of Hindu goddesses by positing them as different aspects of the same deity (Kinsley 1998). The Mahavidya system retains the sense of Tara as the remover of obstacles but makes her far fiercer than the Buddhist green Tara (Kinsley 1998: 98). In popular depictions of the ten Mahavidyas Tara is blue in colour and bears a striking resemblance to Kali, who is the primary deity (McDaniel 2004: 256). In the Tantrisara, for example, Tara is described as ‘advancing aggressively … [carrying] a skull, bowl, scissors and a sword’ (Kinsley 1998: 98). In this form Tara is clearly more challenging, but despite the great differences in iconography and ritual the basic association of Tara with wellbeing remains. The Buddhist Green Tara leads us to serenity by example, and the Hindu Blue Tara opens the path to the violent annihilation of ego (Kinsley 1998: 104).

Perhaps surprisingly, if we move from these ancient textual descriptions of Tara to the contemporary, oral accounts surrounding Shimla’s Tara Devi then much of the same links remain, albeit in a transformed way. For, Shimla’s Tara has a direct link to the Sena dynasty, both in popular legend and contemporary practice. Many months after my first trip to Tara Devi, I was sitting with Vyasa, a local management student, in a well-known Shimla café. We were sipping coffee and trying to keep cool in the blistering summer, when our discussion of Tara Devi revealed a Bengal connection that delighted me. He related that Tara Devi temple was founded in the eighteenth century after Raja Bhupendra Sen, who claimed descent from the famous Sena dynasty of Bengal (cf. Majumdar 1921), visited the area. Sen brought with him, in a golden locket, a small Tara that he always wore to show his devotion to the Goddess. While out hunting, the Raja had a vision of Tara and two other deities (Bhairav and Hanuman) who were acting as her guards. After seeing this he immediately decided that the land should be dedicated to Tara and a temple built deep in the forest. The legend runs that, around a century later, another Sen, Raja Balbir Sen – this time a clear historical actor (Griffin 1870: 646) – had a vision in which the Goddess appeared and requested that a new temple be built on top of the hill (Mitra 2007); this led to the construction of the current temple and the current murti, or Tara (Mitra 2007).

I would consider the above to be a foundation mythology, not because I believe it to be in anyway untrue, or because I wish to differentiate it from history, but rather because it operates mythically. That is to say, this kind of information gives depth to the experience of the place and communicates something important about local understandings of the sacred site (Kunin 1995: 40). It both moves the Goddess of mythological time into the realm of historical time and positions the Goddess as existing in a complex geopolitical relationship with the rest of Shimla. More importantly, it suggests that the temple exists as a trace of the will of the Divine, which manifests on earth through the actions of humanity. I will return to the importance of this last point later, but first it is necessary to say something about the special nature of the wider region. This is essential if we are to uncover both why the above narrative is key to local wellbeing and why it was initially irrelevant to the many visitors, like myself, who have nevertheless been moved by their encounter with Tara Devi.

Shymla, Simla, Shimla and Tara

The Shimla hills are a series of seven, interconnected, peaks, located at approximately 8,500 feet above sea level in the northwest Himalayas. Today Shimla is the state capital of Himachal Pradesh (a small, largely rural and sparsely populated state), but it was made famous to the world as Simla, the summer capital of British India. Many historical accounts note that the British found the region pleasing because something about its geography reminded them of their land of origin; they set about furthering this link by constructing buildings in a style that deliberately mirrored that of the idealised British town (Bhasin 2009: 87–9). Before this began the region was heavily forested and only a few dwellings, hunting lodges and temples existed (Kanwar 2003: 16). BJ Buck reported in 1925 that one of these was a Goddess temple of great antiquity, dedicated to the Goddess Shymla (Buck 1925: 243). Buck simply identifies the site as a Kali temple (ibid.); he could however have been using Kali as a translation for a local Goddess (Tara/Shy[im]la) and a link between Tara and Kali is well established through the Mahavidyas (Kinsley 1998). Therefore, based on the historical documents, the
connection of the Goddess in general (and Tara in particular) to the precolonial landscape of Shimla is an easy argument to make; in this, the written history resonates with the oral history.

Just as the mythology of Shymla Devi anchors Shimla in a pre-British world, which is both dominated by the Goddess and the natural world, so too the origin myth of Tara Devi places the development of the Tara temple in the period before most of the British development of the region. What is more, through the link to the Sena dynasty of Bengal the myth takes the practice back into the earliest days of clearly documented Hindu Tara devotion. The myth however suggests that the movement to the mountain top, and the construction of the contemporary murti, are both firmly located in a period of development that runs parallel to the colonial construction of Shimla. This development places Tara in relation with the colonial construction, but also sees it resist the colonial attempts to encroach on land that has been put aside for the Goddess. Thus, Kipling could write, around the turn of the century, that life in the hills was in balance ‘so long as Tara Devi sees the lights of Shimla town’ (Kipling 2001: 62). Yet, the attempts to construct a railway tunnel at Tara Devi were said to be resisted by the Devi, who sent a giant snake to fight the construction (Bhasin 2011: 131). The place of Tara Devi therefore both speaks to traditions that are far older than colonial Simla and remains relevant throughout the colonial period.

What is important in the above narrative, for understanding the contemporary, postcolonial period, is not so much whether the ‘facts’ can be historically corroborated, or if we can pin down an authorised iconography (or history) for Tara devotion, rather it is the way that the above details both shape people’s expectations and direct people’s experiences. For, as I have argued elsewhere (Miles-Watson 2012), it is through the processes of these implicit mythologies (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 668–9; 1996: 83) that space is made meaningful, sacred and relevant (Miles-Watson 2012). Tara Devi emerges in the above descriptions as a place that exists in tension with colonial Shimla, a tension that is essential to the knotting together of past and present (Ingold 2015: 16). It exists in conversation with the colonial city at the same time as acting as a bridge (tirtha) from the colonial, historical town, to the trans-historical, sacred peaks of Hinduism that lie beyond the city.

Just as mythology leads to the potential for more skilful and meaningful engagement with place, so too a greater symbolic knowledge leads to a more profound engagement with material culture. In the now classic Hero’s Journey Joseph Campbell captured the spirit of mainstream symbolic analysis when he succinctly stated that a symbol that has to be explained to the brain does not work properly (Campbell et al. 1990). Yet, how are we to account for the fact that much of the symbolism that I encountered in 2009 had to be explained to me? This was a process that continued on subsequent visits and was only really codified when I sat down to write this article; yet the place still worked on me: it still brought me well being, still gave me peace. This is not to dismiss the rich symbolism of the site, or its value to other visitors. For, the temple presents a tangle of important symbolism that even I would have appreciated as distinct from either the Buddhist or Hindu idealised iconography sketched above.

**Tara Devi’s Symbolism**

Back in February 2009, we zig-zagged up the hill as a steady breeze caused low-lying clouds to swirl around. There was a feeling of ascendancy and a growing sense that as we climbed the imposing landscape of Shimla town was both softened by the wispy clouds and recontextualised by the broad expanse of deodar-clad mountains. As the temple finally swung into view I found myself confronted with an unimposing (and yet delightfully proportioned) small, one-story, white, brick and cement building (depicted in Figure 2). It seemed to grow out of the mountain that it surmounted: human-crafted brick blurred into nature-hewn rock on the two sharply descending sides, and here, both of these fixed, solid terrestrial materials acutely contrasted with the ever-flowing, ephemeral, celestial clouds. Although the building was largely rectangular (and its roof angular), at its heart lay a small white dome, which seemed to speak to the famous, white-domed, Tara Pith temple of West Bengal (McDaniel 1989: 88). However, this in no way distracted me from the surrounding horizon, or the sense that I had left the heavily constructed landscape of Shimla behind.

I was here confronted with what we may, from a distance, see as a range of constructed and natural symbols, which when taken together suggest a hybridity of form that arises out of the harmonious connection of opposites: celestial/terrestrial; angular/domed; stability/ fluidity. Such symbols seem to speak in ways that transcend localised interpretative systems and rely instead on experiences of human existence that are widespread. However, it is precisely this sort of transcultural assumption that Mary Douglas cau-
tioned against in *Natural Symbols* (1996: xxxii) and Lévi-Strauss passionately attacked in his refutation of psychoanalytic interpretative theories (1996: 185–206). We are told clearly by both Douglas (1996: 91) and Lévi-Strauss (1963: 208–9) that such symbols are always to be interpreted culturally, however natural they may seem. In Lévi-Strauss’ argument there is however perhaps a bit of ambiguity (cf. 1963: 228) and he later suggested that the sort of oppositions that I have drawn here are valid insights regardless of if they take shape in the mind of the skilled narrator or the skilled mythographer (1970: 13), but what of the unskilled anthropologist? What are we to make of the engagement (and subsequent joy) of someone who stumbles across these symbols, while fleeing from the cold, following his landlady, up into the clouds?

Before reaching the temple, I passed through a threshold area, which was marked by large elaborate gates, guarded by a modern sculpture of a lion. In the alcoves above the gates lay an image of the Goddess riding a lion and wearing a bright red dress. Below (and either side) stood images of her two guardians, Bhairav and Hanuman, who also feature in the temple’s founding mythology. I stopped to ring the large gold bell that hung from these gates and looked up at the guardians. I did not know at that time the founding mythology that connects Hanuman and Bhairav to the site, but was used to seeing multiple divinities at Himalayan temples and so thought little of it. I was a little more puzzled by what I took to be Durga, in such a prominent position at the top of the gate; however, as someone with strong links to Bengal I found this comforting rather than disturbing.

I soon would learn that what I had assumed was Durga was a widespread representation of the Goddess in Himachal, where she is nearly always depicted in the way that she is at the entrance to Tara Devi and the way that she is described in the temple origin myth. On my second visit to Tara Devi, my
father-in-law and I both picked up medallions of the Devi, which clearly show her in the Durga-like, or
(amba) lion-riding, form. In such a manifestation she is beautiful, fair skinned and compassionate (Erndl 1993: 4). The popular Devi Mahatmya captures this sense well: ‘O Goddess, remover of affliction ... be gracious, O Mother of the entire world’ (Erndl 1993: 18). This perhaps suggests an understanding of the Goddess that is closer to the Buddhist Tara than the tantric Kali, which is perhaps not surprising given that it is undoubtedly mainly Himachalis that wind and knot around the Tara Devi temple today. The iconography of Tara at the threshold fits well then with wider understandings of the Goddess/bodhisattva in this region, where she is seen as both a source of devotion in her own right and a key source of wellbeing. Leaving behind the lion-riding Goddess of the gate, I also left my shoes and felt the smooth stones of the floor beneath my feet. Inside the small temple I received darshan and came face to face with the main murti of Tara. Up to this point I had thought of Tara as primarily a form of Kali, following roughly in the tradition of the Mahavidyas. However, any trepidation I might have had at meeting the bloodthirsty Goddess vanished when I came face to face with the bright shining Tara. A golden and beneficent face looked at me from between a bright red dress and a sparkling, large headdress; although she held the implements of war in her eighteen hands, I did not feel as though I was about to be beheaded. After receiving darshan (and while a feeling of elation remained), we walked behind the temple, past trees tied with bright ribbons, and two faceless forms of local tribal deities. We moved quickly beyond these, across a narrow strip of land, with a spectacular view of the valley below and left the other pilgrims behind. A bird of prey hovered on the wind and I let my eyes follow it as it glided over to a second temple that lay ahead of us (depicted in Figure 3). This temple looked newer and, while a temple has stood on this site for over a hundred years (Gazetteer of the Simla Hill States, 1910: viii–ix), it was clearly newly renovated. The temple was obviously Himachali in design: its soaring, angular, slate-coloured roof mimicking the natural landscape that lay all around. The roof floated on solid, wood beams that evoked the forest and were skilfully carved with a leaf motif. In this temple lay another murti of the Devi, this time serenely riding a lion, and a non-anthropomorphic representation of the god Shiva, which is commonly known as a linga. This temple was raised up from the mountaintop and seemed to float in the air. Its sharply angular slate roof mirrored the bare, distant, Shakti peaks, while its untreated wooden structure, carved with leaf motif, made it feel as though I was standing atop one of the many trees that covered the mountains below. The wind here was stronger, but the strengthening sun and the exertion of climbing made it feel comfortable. Quite remarkably, something that I had hidden from only hours before (as it whistled around our room) I now embraced; my reaction to this physical environment transformed by both my active state and the context of my surroundings. This was not the only occasion that I had felt a connection to the force of wind and perhaps there is something in the nature of the way it moves over and into the body, as though reminding us that our being is both fluid and open-ended, that lends itself to a feeling of loss of the self, which can either be comforting or unsettling (Ingold 2007). In noting this slyphic quality of spiritual experience, I am not alone; reflection on the way that different kinds of winds connect us to different aspects of the Divine is common in traditions separated by both time and space (cf. Dallaire 2011: 53; Hiltebeitel 2001: 297; Hsu and Low 2008: 3); it is precisely through such connections that we begin to
understand something of the puzzle of particular and trans-cultural experience that we are unravelling.

As morning turned into afternoon, I lost myself in the landscape of the temple complex; in doing so I found a source of wellbeing. For, it was here, with the wind slowly moving though my hair and the sun shining on my face, that I felt all traces of remaining tension disappear. I knew that the city of Shimla lay beyond the small white dome of the main complex, but all I could see were the mountains and the trees, all I could hear was the wind and the fluttering of the red prayer ribbons. From that moment, Tara Devi had become part of me and I knew that I would return.

Looking back, it is clear to me now that I was somewhat symbolically illiterate at the time of this first encounter. This should be highly problematic; the history of the interpretation of symbols tells us that they are both polysemic (that is, allow for individual difference) and culturally united, but not universal (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 186–206). This is precisely why the previously discussed attempts to locate an authoritative history of Tara Devi run into trouble when we encounter images that are presumed to be like Tara Devi but appear in a radically different context, or radically different images that are named Tara Devi. It is also one of the reasons why recent, politically motivated attempts in India to standardise both the representation and interpretation of Divinity is so problematic. For, it is only when we realise that symbols are both culturally contingent and operate in relation to surrounding symbols that we can arrive at a rich understanding (ibid.). But what of the actor who is from another culture and yet is still both effecting the arena of symbolic revelation and patently affected by it?

Symbolic theory has little time for the actions of unskilled actors and the practice of ethnography in general has tended to obscure the value that insights drawn from the researcher’s personal experience of the sacred have in the formulation of interpretative theory (Engelke 2002). While this approach helps to preserve the ethnographer’s own sense of specialness (Ewing 1994: 571) it can also lead to ethnographic distortion (Turner 1993). Mitchell has convincingly argued that emotional, religious responses to fieldwork stimuli are both the natural outcome of the doing aspect of fieldwork and the gateway to insight (1997: 93). This means that although it is tempting to avoid the embarrassment and difficulties that arise from confronting my unskilled actions, it is only through considering them that we will successfully complicate models of emplaced spiritual wellbeing.

I did, of course, have a pre-existing knowledge of the wider religious framework that I was stepping into. My engagement lacked the skill of my neighbours but was not that far out of step with Hindu visitors from other regions. This was confirmed through discussions with my own family as well as visitors from different regions of India. What is more, even some locals narrated their connection to the temple in terms that strongly resonated with my own. On one visit to the temple I had the chance to talk with Vayu, a young academic at one of the local universities. As we stood under a tree garlanded with red ribbons that fluttered in the breeze he remarked to me: ‘what a wind … this wind will always recharge you’. That we both noticed the importance of the wind is striking; beyond this, the relation of the temple to the surrounding landscape (especially the forested hill-slopes), which he later highlighted, is reminiscent of my own remarks. In this he was not alone and the importance of the temple’s relationship to its surroundings features strongly in the accounts of the many local and national Hindu pilgrims who extort the value of this place.

Once I had returned to Europe I remained in contact, through Facebook, with many people that I met in India, and Facebook has also allowed me to remain in virtual contact with the temple. I, along with 1,100 other ‘visitors’, travelled to the temple’s page recently and I noticed that it is almost universally praised by its cyber visitors. In fact, at the time of writing, it is listed as one of the highest rated temples in Himachal, receiving a ranking of 4.5 stars on the basis of over 800 reviews. The reviewers are exclusively Indian and largely young Hindus. Reading through these ‘reviews’ and ‘comments’, I was struck by the strong focus on the importance of the relationship of the temple to the natural environment: people comment, again and again, on the sense of peace and happiness that they get from considering the temple architecture in relation to the surrounding countryside and there is very little comment about either the murtis or the temple mythology. Therefore, despite my lack of skill and knowledge I seem to have had an emotional experience at this sacred place that (at least on one-level) is in keeping with that of other devotees. This observation calls for a deepening of the argumentation around skilful practice and wellbeing at sacred sites in both the Himalayas and beyond.

**Place, Wellbeing and Skill**

Following de Certeau (1988) and Ingold (2000) I understand place as somewhere that is made mean-
Meaningful through the knotting of various individual actors, human and non-human, around certain discernible features, which both shape the place and the people. In this way place and people are deeply entangled and constantly, mutually, becoming. I have previously argued both that it is precisely these relationships that are the key to human wellbeing (Miles-Watson 2010) and that the skill to engage meaningfully in these environments is of paramount importance (ibid.). I favour thinking about this as the acquisition of skill (rather than say culture) because the focus is very much on the ability first to discern and then engage with the environment in a meaningful way. I have previously suggested that sacred places demand high levels of skilled engagement because of the way that they operate as sites of, what Davies (2008) terms, ‘intensification’ of meaning and consequently relations (Miles-Watson 2015). In part, I suggest that this is because of the way that engagement with (and narrativisation of) any given space, transforms into a sacred place by making it a gateway to existential experience (Milles-Watson 2012).

Following Basso (1996), I argue that engagement with place recalls past engagement on two levels: personal history and collective mythology (Miles-Watson 2012). Meaningful engagement with Tara Devi, it may therefore be argued, is built upon the prerequisite of both being aware of the site’s foundation mythology and having had previous, personal encounters with the site, which together provide a guide for skilful engagement with the space. It is this skilful engagement that generates meaning and makes the space into a meaningful place (Tilley 1994: 27), and that (depending on the individual’s positioning and prior experience) has the power to both enhance and destroy wellbeing.

I had neither of these prerequisites and yet I still experienced a profound sense of wellbeing during my visit. What is more, my experience had a great resonance with the experience of others, suggesting that skilful engagement does not necessarily change the fundamental substance of the experience. For sure, each time I returned to the place I knew a little more about it and my own memories became more entwined with it, much in the way described above. Indeed, when I encounter Tara Devi today, even through this ethnographic exercise, I do so through the interpretative lens of both my own past encounters and other past encounters that have been related to me. This undoubtedly adds something to my experience, but the change is more in the realm of accretion than essence. For, I did experience a very real sense of wellbeing at that first visit, which leads to the question: how is it that an alien place promotes my wellbeing? In answering this I will be led to question many of my previous assumptions about how sacred space operates both in these hills and beyond.

**Secular, Spiritual and Religious Places**

It might be assumed that perhaps the answer to my earlier question lies in the sacrality of the place. For, sacred places add a third element to the historical and personal interpretative weave of experience: that of the cosmological (Miles-Watson 2012). It is a widely commented feature (Eliade 1963; Griffiths 1982; Malinowski 1926 et al.) of sacred places that they weave historical time, cosmological time and personal time together in a powerful way that transforms experience from an individual, time-bound, meaningless one, to a collective, infinite, meaningful one. They therefore spring the individual from both the traps of time and themselves, entering them into a collective, meaningful world that claims to have eternal significance. Sheldrake (2001: 8–11) argues that it is precisely these processes that makes space into sacred place.

World religions use key texts, architectural conventions and symbolic representations to convey this cosmological level to a wide-range of believers and it is often this level of engagement that an adherent to a religion can experience when visiting a sacred place for the first time (Miles-Watson 2012). I, however, am not a Hindu and therefore find it hard to suggest that the affective power of the place came purely from my appreciation of pan-Hindu cosmology. This does not do justice to the great emotional surges of joyful peace that I felt stood on Tara Devi. These were not born so much of an experience of *communitas* (Turner 2012) as of communion. The central point of the experience involved losing myself in a series of nested places as I looked out on the hill, which is perhaps akin to what Bateson describes as a sense of grace (Bateson and Bateson 1987).

The above account could be read as suggesting that I had a more secular, or spiritual, experience that my sense of wellbeing draws from. Furthermore, such spiritual accounts, it could be argued, sit well both with India, where religion is a contested term (Bloch et al. 2010), and the modern West, where large numbers of people describe themselves as spiritual, but not religious (Sheldrake 2007). This is, however, as Sheldrake shows (2007: 2), a rather unhelpful division, which perhaps mirrors the famous tourist/pilgrim divide that has been the focus of many
studies on sacred places (Di Gioivine 2011). In the
realm of South Asian studies, Shalini Singh (2005)
has attempted to undermine the distinction through
inversion, suggesting that the true pilgrims of our
age are not people who go on traditional pilgrimages
but rather those who strike out on their own into the
Himalayas to commune with nature.

There is definitely a sense of what Singh is calling
the ‘spiritual’ in my account, but I do not believe that
I would have had the same experience in just any
natural space. There was something about the sacred
nature of the place that both shaped my experiences
of it and its ability to provide for my wellbeing. That
sacred nature was to do with communal activity and
identity and so can be perhaps more comfortably
called religion than spirituality. What is more, as
both Ewing (1994: 578) and Mitchell (1997: 83) stress,
seemingly individual experiences and understand-
nings are always socially constituted. I was not alone
on the mountainside; I went with my neighbours,
friends and family, all of whom are practicing Hin-
dus; I moved over the place with them, in part expe-
riencing the place through their guided movements.
I also engaged in ritual activities in the sacred space
(darshan and pujā), which shaped my appreciation
and meant that I became part of the sacred place at
the same time that I let it become part of me.

This suggests that there is a general phenomenol-
ogy to the place, which goes beyond recognition
of symbols and can be appreciated by people from
diverse backgrounds, partly because it draws upon
universal human experiences. Tied to this is clearly
the importance of the emotional charge, or feel, of
the sacred place. In my work on churches in North
India (2013), I found that the many non-Christians
who would frequent them commonly commented
on the way that the church would make them feel.
They suggested that something about the place activ-
vated within them a sense of wellbeing, drawn from
a sense of peace. These sentiments resonate well be-
ond Shimla and connect with the findings of Davies’
work in the UK, where he has been led to suggest
that the phenomenology of sacred places triggers
deep-seated, universally held, feelings of security in
those that enter them (2015: 121). Similarly, it is pos-
sible to argue that the memory, or trace, of past ac-
tions in a place gives them a certain memory, which
operates at the level of human universals and so is
immediately recognisable to even unskilled actors.

Perhaps the largest trace of past activity in the
area is the construction and ongoing modification of
the temple buildings; while not dominating the land-
scape they were certainly part of the place, suggest-
ing a symbolic resonance between creative acts (both
human and non-human) and Divinity. The temples
pointed to the Divinity of the mountaintop and this
resonated with my own understanding. For, just be-
fore this visit I had written the following in my field
journal:

Although Christ Church Cathedral is clearly the
most famous icon of Shimla it is dwarfed by the
mountains all around, the geography of Shimla mall
soars up behind Christ Church, making it appear
backed by a wall of green trees. Just behind Christ
Church, although you wouldn’t know it until you’re
there, is the beginning of a winding footpath that
leads to Jakhoo peak, home of Hanuman. Now, Jak-
hoo temple, in contrast to Christ Church, can’t really
be seen from the Mall, or the lift, because it is hid-
den behind a covering of sacred deodars … Jakhoo
temple then does not stand proudly for all to see
(as Christ Church does); a man-made construction
that reminds us of Divine creation; rather, it sits en-
gulfed in the Divinity of creation. As such it mirrors
the mountains that are visible surrounding Shimla,
many of them topped with temples.

I was aware therefore of the general Himachali per-
ception that we were in Dev Bhoomi (the Land of the
Gods), or perhaps more accurately the Land of the
Godess. For, in Himachali devotion to the Goddess
(often riding a lion and nearly always alone) is wide-
spread (Erndl 1993: 4); she can appear in iconographic
form, but also as a tree, or a natural outcropping
known as Pindi (Wangu 2003: 161). This understand-
ing, combined with the ritual actions of others, and
the general phenomenology of the place, were suffi-
cient for Tara’s compassion to be activated, for her to
remove my obstacles, uplift my spirit and move me
towards bliss.

Lessons of Tara Devi

The above discussion of Tara Devi suggests that sa-
cred places are central to the wellbeing of people in
the contemporary world. This notion of wellbeing
goes beyond both the physical value of the place and
attempts to value sacred places by their ability to be
exploited by secular activities. These understandings
fail adequately to appreciate the importance of the
intimate connection of person, action and place in
the generation of wellbeing. I have previously ar-
gued that these places are also not simply performa-
tive spaces, where the action is everything and the
architecture the backdrop. It is precisely the skill to
perceive the trace of past action (both personal and
historical) that many people value in these places. This links with Layard’s (2005: 7) suggestion that relationships are a key generator of happiness and suggests that sacred places are sites for ‘intensification’ (Davies 2008) of a complex range of human and non-human relations.

Tara Devi demonstrates that this understanding does not go far enough. We need to acknowledge the ability of sacred places to act in multiple ways with multiple people. This means that we cannot think of sacred place as something that works in a singular way with regard to wellbeing, nor can we think of it operating simply to benefit one religious group or community. Rather, religious places, like Tara Devi are places that are constantly being remade by the people that move and knot around them. This results in a sort of ‘place based consciousness’ (Dirlik 1999), yet with sacred places the issue of transnational religious belonging becomes more relevant. For, while these people are sometimes readily defined as ‘belonging’ to the religion, but often (especially in South Asia) they could be said to belong to a range of religious traditions and none. Thus the reality of lives lived in and around sacred places destroys the rigid (and largely unhelpful) boundaries of formal religious categories, replacing them with a series of complex relationships between the human and the non-human that are essential for a community’s wellbeing.

Policy-makers and town planners should be sensitive both to the connection of sacred places to the animate and inanimate features that surround them and to the people that flow around them. In the case of Tara Devi, this strongly suggests that the recent deforestation of the surrounding hills and theme park development risk endangering, rather than (as is assumed) enhancing, the importance of this place. Our discussion of Tara Devi also suggests that developers and policy-makers should engage with unskilled actors and resist the temptation only to contact the most knowledgeable members of a perceived religious community. Similarly, those that seek to bridge the gap between ethnography and policy may benefit from embracing their own emotional and spiritual responses, as key tools for reaching accurate, collective understanding. Finally, policy-makers should resist easy associations of sacred places with one particular religious group of skilled actors and should instead consider the importance of sacred spaces, beyond requisitioning, for actors of all faiths and none.

Some sacred places act to oppress wellbeing (Chidester and Linenthal 1995), and religious places can, of course, act to aggrandise one group at the expense of others (Philp and Mercer 1999), but it seems to me that places like Tara Devi are not so rare as to be ignored and that in these sacred places diverse actors are drawn together, through their diverse engagement with the place, in a way that builds the collective wellbeing, providing connections to crosscutting elements of existence. This conclusion runs against much of my own previous writings on this topic, where I have stressed the idea of skilled engagement with place as key to the generation of wellbeing. Yet, here, in Tara Devi, the phenomenology of place, combined with its connection to widely experienced realities and widespread ritual practice mean that it has the potential to generate wellbeing even in unskilled outsiders.

The skilled practice of the few adds to the phenomenology of the place without precluding unskilled engagement and, crucially, for Hindu and non-Hindu, Pahari and plains dwellers alike, the essence of the experience of wellbeing is the same, even if the depth of the experience differs. Tara Devi bridges the past and the present, the individual and the collective, the natural and the constructed in a way that reminds us that these binary oppositions are actually dialogues; they are individual threads of rope wound and knotted around the sacred place, pulled only closer together by tension.5

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Notes
1. I have used pseudonyms for all informants.
2. I have a family connection to Bengal.
3. Interestingly there is external historical correlation of a slightly different yet related history in the Punjab Gazette of 1910 (Gazetteer of the Simla Hill States, 1910: viii–ix).
4. I visited the temple’s virtual site several times between May 2014 and September 2015 and this complimented the many visits to its physical site that I made between February 2009 and January 2013.
5. An important discussion of the role that tension plays in social relations in general has recently been presented by Ingold (2015: 18) and this is the inspiration for my development here of tension as a key part of our understanding of sacred spaces.
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