

SHRINES AS THE FOCAL POINT OF BUDDHIST COMMUNITIES

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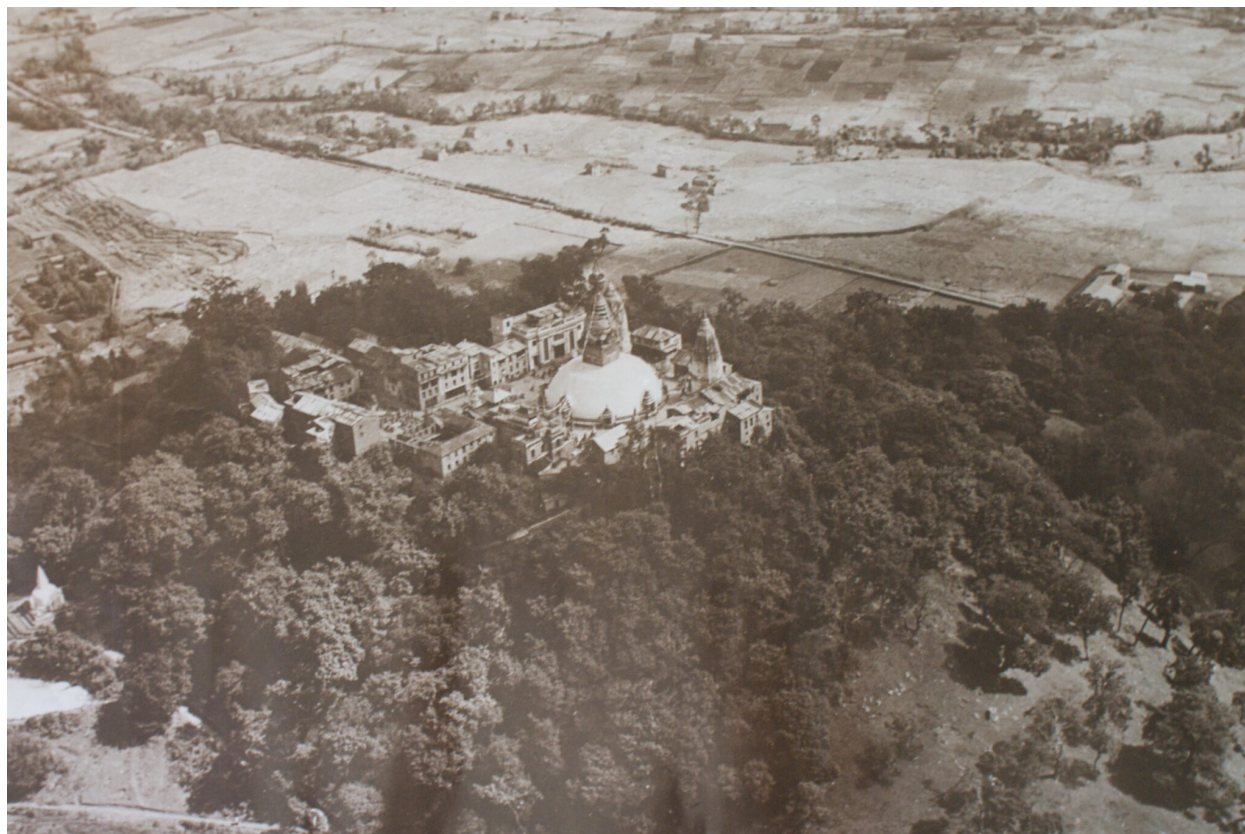


Fig. 1 Swayambhu Chaitya, Kathmandu, Nepal, aerial photograph taken from the southwest, with surrounding shrines, residential buildings, and the Drukpa Kagyu and Karmapa Karma Kagyu monasteries, summer 1955; photograph by Ganesh Man Chitrakar

THE SVAYAMBHU CHAITYA OF KATHMANDU

Kathmandu, Nepal

founded ca. 5th century or earlier

SUMMARY

The Svayambhu chaitya (stupa) is the most important religious site for Nepalese Buddhists. This chaitya is built atop a sacred stone, empowered as a tantric mandala, and the centerpiece of legends about the origin of the Kathmandu Valley itself. Scholar of Newar Buddhism Alexander von Rospatt explores the structure, history, and renovations of Svayambhu, showing how ritual and donor communities united local Hindus with Nepali and Tibetan Buddhists into vast international networks.

The Svayambhu chaitya (in modern times also known as Svayambhu-nath) is the most important shrine for the tradition of Indian Buddhism that survives in the Kathmandu Valley among the original inhabitants, the Newars—a unique survival on the South Asian subcontinent, where otherwise Mahayana Buddhism had all but disappeared by the thirteenth century. (Chaitya is the term commonly used in the Nepalese tradition instead of “stupa,” the standard term for the massive, hemispherical buildings enshrining the relics of the Buddha and worshipped through circumambulation.) Svayambhu, located about a mile west of Kathmandu on top of a hillock, is accepted by all Newar Buddhists, beyond the borders imposed by locality and caste as the center of their religion (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Buddhist devotees in the early hours for their daily worship of Svayambhu, Kathmandu, Nepal, during the “month of virtue” (*gumla*), dedicated to the pursuit of meritorious action, August 1996; the Drukpa Kagyu monastery is seen at right, facing the western side of the chaitya; photograph by Alexander von Rospatt

The Kathmandu Valley is located on the southern flank of the Himalayas, sandwiched between the Gangetic plane of India and Tibet, along major trade routes—a situation that made it an important conduit for the transmission of Indian Buddhism to Tibet. Across the centuries Tibetan pilgrims and translators of Buddhist scriptures have stayed at Svayambhu. The chaitya repeatedly attracted major donations from Tibetan Buddhists, including sponsorship of renovations, the most recent example being the regilding of the chaitya’s spire (fig. 3) and niches undertaken by the Nyingma Institute of Berkeley, California, from 2008 to 2010.¹ Since at least the early nineteenth century the Tibetan tradition has also been present in the form of Drukpa Kagyu and Karma Kagyu monasteries in the immediate vicinity of the chaitya.



Fig. 3. The western side of the *harmika* of the Swayambhu chaitya, Kathmandu, Nepal, on conclusion of the renovation in June 2010 showing workers hoisting an honorific banner, executed in gilded brass, in the name of Tarthang Tulku, Head Lama of the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center at Berkeley, which sponsored and oversaw the chaitya's renovation from 2008 to 2010; photograph provided by California Nyingma Institute

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SVAYAMBHU CHAITYA

Despite the role Tibetan sponsors have played in its history, the Swayambhu chaitya has retained through the ages its characteristic Nepalese form and appearance (fig. 4).² The massive dome, almost 28 feet (8.5 meters) high, is surmounted by a cuboid structure (*harmika*) some 16½ feet (5 meters) high. From the center of the harmika rises the upper part of the massive wooden pole (*yashti*) that extends through the whole structure vertically, from the dome through the harmika, and through the series of thirteen gilded rings (*chakravali*) up to the structure supporting the finial (*gajur*) and crowning parasol

(chattrā). The portion of the yashti rising above the harmika measures nearly 40 feet (12 meters), giving the chaitya a total height of more than 82 feet (25 meters). Each side of the harmika is adorned by a pair of eyes (fig. 5); the nose-like curl, a derivative of the tuft of hair between the eyes of the Buddha (urna) and the light it emits, was not added until the early twentieth century.³



Fig. 4 The northwestern face of the Swayambhu chaitya, Kathmandu, Nepal, with the niches of the Buddha Amoghasiddhi in the north, Amitabha in the west, and the goddess Aryatara in between, 2002; photograph by Manika Bajracharya, Lotus Research Centre, Lalitpur



Fig. 5 The western side of the *harmika* of the Swayambhu chaitya, Kathmandu, Nepal, adorned by a pair of eyes and other facial features, as is each side of the harmika; here, the gilded copper is lit up by the setting sun, June 2010; photograph by Alexander von Rospatt

These eyes are often identified with the Buddha and his compassionate and all-knowing gaze, and the copper shields mounted above the *harmika's* sides, which give the impression of headgear crowning the *harmika*, reinforce this identification. Fittingly, the Newari language designates the dome as belly (*pvata*), and the *yashti* can be equated with the spine, as happens in the Tibetan tradition, which refers to it as life tree (sok shing). However, such an identification of the structure with the body of the Buddha, including his eyes, is not presumed in the corresponding mythological narratives, nor is

it enacted in ritual, where the eyes are instead equated with the sun and moon—as are the sides of the *harmika* elsewhere in the Buddhist world.⁴

Inside the dome, the *yashti* rests on a rock protruding 11 feet (3.3 meters) above the otherwise level surface of the hilltop. This rock, entirely encased by the dome, is invisible, but architectural drawings and ritual chronicles attest to its existence, as do measurements of the overall length of the *yashti* (that is, just over 72 feet, or 22 meters), which bear out that it does not reach all the way down to the level of the ground. The chaitya attained the measurements given here only in the seventeenth century, when it was enlarged by roughly a third,⁵ but the rock has always been encased in the dome. Given the sanctity the Nepalese attribute to rocks, particularly those in a prominent position, we may conjecture that the protruding rock had been worshipped even before the advent of Buddhism, and that the chaitya was built above it so as to incorporate this autochthonous site into the fold of Buddhism.⁶ Certainly the site is much more than a holy place dedicated to Buddhahood. Adjacent to the chaitya is a temple dedicated to the mother goddess Hariti (fig. 6 and 7), whom the Newars worship here to assure the health of their children.



Fig. 6 Swayambhu chaitya, Kathmandu, Nepal, as seen from the northeast, with the tiered temple dedicated to the goddess Hariti in the foreground on the right, September 2003; photograph by Alexander von Rospatt



Fig. 7 Ferdinand Bellermann; Swayambhu's northeastern side with the two-tiered Hariti temple in the foreground on the right; ca. 1845; image after Prince Waldemar of Prussia, *Zur Erinnerung an die Reise des Prinzen Waldemar von Preußen nach Indien in den Jahren 1844–1846*, Berlin, 1853, pl. 18 The volume's section pertaining to Nepal has been translated from the German original into English by Per Kvaerne in *Kailash*, vol. 7.1 (1979), 35–50.

Also, the chaitya is supplemented by a tantric temple (fig. 8) and surrounded by four shrines (fig. 9) dedicated to the elements, namely, earth, wind, fire, and water, which are propitiated to gain protection and prosperity.



Fig. 8 Lord of Dance, detail of a mural painting in Shantipur, a tantric temple adjacent to the Svayambhu chaitya; Kathmandu, Nepal; photograph by Stanislaw Klimek, fall 2002. Shantipur is dedicated to a form of Chakrasamvara and often identified with ether as the fifth element. As the elaborate secret rituals carried out in the temple may entail the performance of tantric songs and dance, the Lord of Dance, a form of Lokeshvara known as Padmanrityeshvara, presides over the mural paintings adorning the inside walls (see Rospatt 2014).



Fig. 9 Vasudhara, in the shrine known as Vasupura adjacent to the Svayambhu chaitya, Kathmandu, Nepal; height from its lotus base to the apex approx. 29 ½ in. (75 cm); photograph by Manika Bajracharya, 2002, provided by Lotus Research Centre, Lalitpur. This image of the Buddhist goddess of fertility and plenitude is seen here as it appears after it has been worshipped by the faithful as part of their circumambulation of the chaitya.

THE MYTH OF SVAYAMBHU'S ORIGINS

The Svayambhu chaitya serves as the archetype of chaityas in the Newar tradition,⁷ which typically bear marks of the iconography of Svayambhu through the eyes and in other ways. Similarly, scroll paintings and other images generally render chaityas in the likeness of Svayambhu as a default. Besides alluding to the iconic eyes on the *harmika*,

these show the chaitya as resting on a lotus blossom floating on a lake, which references the myth narrated in the Svayambhupurana, a work of seminal importance for the Newar Buddhist tradition.⁸ It relates that in prehistoric times the Kathmandu Valley was a sacred lake on which the primordial buddha principle (*dharmadhatu*) manifested (*bhu*) itself spontaneously (*svayam*) in the form of a light or a luminous crystal atop a thousand-petaled, jeweled lotus blossom. In order to make this sacred manifestation of Buddhahood accessible for worship, Manjushri (who had come for this purpose from “Maha China”) drained the lake, enabling the settlement of the Valley. This left the *dharmadhatu* exposed, and in order to protect it from spoliation at the onset of the period when people become wicked (*kaliyuga*), a physical structure, the chaitya, was built over the self-manifesting *dharmadhatu*. While the enshrined *dharmadhatu* of the mythological narrative might be identified with the rock encased by the dome, nothing in the Svayambhupurana suggests that the chaitya houses the physical relics (*asthi-dhatu*) of the (or a) Buddha or other Buddhist saint, as do stupas. Moreover, the historical records make no mention of any relics or relic chambers. Rather, they bear out that on the ritual plane, the principle of Buddhahood is made manifest by performing elaborate tantric rituals that imbue the chaitya—principally by configuring it as a mandala and infusing it with mantras (*nyasa*)—with the presence of the Five Buddhas of the Yogatantras.⁹ These deity-like buddhas are depicted in niches set in the dome, Akshobhya in the east, Ratnasambhava in the south, Amitabha in the west (fig. 10), and Amoghasiddhi in the north. In addition, the buddha at the center of this configuration, Vairochana, eventually came to be depicted in a niche of his own, installed just to the south of Akshobhya, which defies the logic of the mandala.¹⁰



Fig. 10. The image of Buddha Amitabha set in the western niche of the Svayambhu chaitya, Kathmandu, Nepal, in September 2003; photograph by Alexander von Rospatt. In addition to circumambulation—the standard manner of venerating chaitya and stupas—Svayambhu is worshipped principally through this image.

The presence of these five buddhas turns the chaitya into a “buddha abode” (buddha-alaya); collectively, they embody the qualities of Buddhahood and render it present, just as the self-manifesting, luminous *dharmadhatu* of the Svayambhupurana does. In this, the Svayambhu chaitya represents not an exception but the rule. For, in tantric Buddhism (vajrayana), chaityas (and stupas) are imbued with the presence of Buddhahood mainly through the employment of elaborate rituals and not (or less so) through the enshrining of relics.

PERIODIC RENOVATIONS OF THE SVAYAMBHU CHAITYA

The dependence on rituals for the sanctification of chaityas calls for their (more or less regular) reenactment, since the charge they deliver is understood to wane over time—arguably, in contrast to the Buddha’s relics, which are commonly believed to be immune to decay, persisting unchanged until the end of the present age. In addition to daily worship (*nitya puja*) and annual anniversary rituals, such recharging may include the occasional physical renovation (*jirnoddhara*) of the chaitya, consisting in the extensive refurbishing or even rebuilding of much of the structure, accompanied by the appropriate rituals that culminate in the reconsecration of the chaitya at the end.

Over the course of the one to two millennia of its existence, the Svayambhu chaitya was rebuilt frequently, and at times in the process also modified and enlarged.¹¹ Records beginning in the thirteenth century bear out that between then and the nineteenth century the chaitya was extensively renovated on average twice a century, at irregular intervals. In the course of these renovations, the entire structure of the chaitya above the dome was dismantled and discarded, the dome itself cut open in order to allow for the replacement of the *yashti*, and the chaitya, stripped down in this manner, was then rebuilt with new materials. Such complex and labor- and time-intensive operations included the procurement of the gigantic hardwood (sal) tree, some 82 feet (25 meters) tall, to serve as new *yashti* from the subtropical valley of the Trishuli Ganga River, or one of its tributaries, a few miles to the northeast of the Kathmandu Valley (where such trees do not grow). The enormous trees needed to furnish a new *yashti* were exceedingly rare already two hundred years ago, so that the renovations at the beginning of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries did not entail replacing the *yashti* installed in 1817.

Given the small scale of Kathmandu's traditional economy, these costly renovations proved difficult to fund. As a result, Tibetan lamas, with varied backgrounds and different traditions, often played a dominant role as donors and even instigators of renovations, alongside the local Nepalese population, especially between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries and between the mid-eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, in the process often drawing on their extensive network of contacts, ranging from the western Tibetan regions all the way to Sikkim, Kham, and Bhutan. This transformed these renovations into Trans-Himalayan events that drew different Tibetan Buddhist traditions together and brought them into conversation with Newar Buddhism as well as the kings of Kathmandu, who, while Hindus themselves, bore the ultimate responsibility for Svayambhu, as for all other public religious sites on their territory.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Tsering Palmo Gellek and Padma Dorje Maitland, eds., *Light of the Valley: Renewing the Sacred Art and Traditions of Svayambhu* (Cazadero, CA: Dharma Publishing, 2011).

² Niels Gutschow, *The Nepalese Caitya: 1500 Years of Buddhist Votive Architecture in the Kathmandu Valley* (Stuttgart and London: Edition Axel Menges, 1997), 194ff.

³ Bernhard Kölver, *Re-Building a Stūpa: Architectural Drawings of the Svayambhūnāth* (Bonn: VGH Wissenschaftsverlag, 1992), 129ff.

⁴ Alexander von Rospatt, "Altering the Immutable. Textual Evidence in Support of an Architectural History of the Svayambhū Caitya of Kathmandu," in *Nepalica-Tibetica: Festgabe Für Christoph Cüppers*, ed. Franz-Karl Ehrhard and Petra H. Maurer, vol. 2, Beiträge Zur Zentralasienforschung 28 (Andiastr: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2013), 103.

⁵ Alexander von Rospatt, "Altering the Immutable. Textual Evidence in Support of an Architectural History of the Svayambhū Caitya of Kathmandu," in *Nepalica-Tibetica: Festgabe Für Christoph Cüppers*, ed. Franz-Karl Ehrhard and Petra H. Maurer, vol. 2, Beiträge Zur Zentralasienforschung 28 (Andiastr: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2013), 97–99.

⁶ Alexander von Rospatt, "The Sacred Origins of the Svayambhūcaitya and the Nepal Valley: Foreign Speculation and Local Myth," *Journal of the Nepal Research Centre* 13 (2009): 36ff.

⁷ Niels Gutschow, *The Nepalese Caitya: 1500 Years of Buddhist Votive Architecture in the Kathmandu Valley* (Stuttgart and London: Edition Axel Menges, 1997).

⁸ Alexander von Rospatt, “Local Literatures: Nepal,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Jonathan Silk, Oskar Hinüber, and Vincent Eltschinger, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1: 827.

⁹ Alexander von Rospatt, “Remarks on the Consecration Ceremony in Kuladatta’s Kriyāsaṃgrahapañjikā and Its Development in Newar Buddhism,” in *Hindu and Buddhist Initiations in Nepal and India*, ed. Astrid Zotter and Christof Zotter (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 201ff.

¹⁰ Alexander von Rospatt, “Altering the Immutable. Textual Evidence in Support of an Architectural History of the Svayambhū Caitya of Kathmandu,” in *Nepalica-Tibetica: Festschrift für Christoph Cüppers*, ed. Franz-Karl Ehrhard and Petra H. Maurer, vol. 2, Beiträge Zur Zentralasienforschung 28 (Andiast: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2013), 100–104.

¹¹ Tsering Palmo Gellek and Padma Dorje Maitland, eds., *Light of the Valley: Renewing the Sacred Art and Traditions of Svayambhu* (Cazadero, CA: Dharma Publishing, 2011), 157–206.

FURTHER READING

Gellek, Tsering Palmo, and Padma Dorje Maitland, eds. 2011. *Light of the Valley: Renewing the Sacred Art and Traditions of Svayambhu*. Cazadero, CA: Dharma Publishing.

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