

## **Teachings of Tara: sacred place and human wellbeing in the Shimla hills**

### **Abstract**

*This paper opens with an autoethnographic account of the powerful effect that Shimla's Tara Devi temple has on wellbeing. From this starting point the paper spirals out to explore how Tara and her sacred places are connected to wellbeing in the Himalayan region of Shimla and beyond. Through this process arguments that I have previously made about 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. Out of these ethnographic reflections (and theoretical considerations) emerge a key set of recommendations and a call for policy makers and planners to sensitively engage with sacred places in the contemporary, postsecular, city.*

**Key Words:** Tara Devi, Sacred Places, Wellbeing, Himalayas, Shimla

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, while my wife, Sukanya, made some hot tea. At the time we were two months into a year of fieldwork and had yet to fully understand the way that a combination of freezing temperatures and limited heating has a cumulative effect on the mind and body if you remain stationary for long enough. 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. An impressive, kind and remarkably commanding woman, she was then in the latter part of her middle age and still working at the local university. Despite her busy schedule, she somehow found time to make sure that everyone in our homestead was faring well. A long term, influential, resident of the area and the *defacto* matriarch of our more limited 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 son (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 winding around the hills towards our destination, Shimla's Tara Devi. This was to be my first visit, but I would be drawn back again and again, as on this first occasion, each time I visited Tara Devi, my mood lifted, transitory ailments eased and the cares of life evaporated. An instinctive acknowledgement of

the importance of Tara Devi for my wellbeing can be observed running through my field notes and over time that turned into the seed of this consideration of how a journey to Tara Devi could have such a powerful effect on the wellbeing of both myself and others. This consideration connects with 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 & Izquierdo 2009). 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 be seen as an optimised state that takes different expressions in different contexts, but is always possessed of a degree of commonality that stretches across both space and time (2009: 5). The 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.

This exploration of Tara Devi will use autoethnography as a key source, alongside archival, geographic and the more usual ethnographic information. There is, of course, an autoethnographic element to most classical and contemporary ethnography (Engelke 2002), however much of this material treats the autoethnographic element as a minimal aside rather than a central interpretative driver. This is clearly the way that Geertz (1973: 412-453), for example, uses autoethnography 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 autoethnographic (Anderson 2006) writings that exist in the established ethnographic record (Csordas 2007, Mitchell 1997, Nelson 1992, *et al*). Analytic autoethnography (Anderson 2006) is employed in this article for interpretative rather than stylistic reasons.

By offering both emotional and spiritual reflections from my own apprenticeship I hope to highlight the role of unskilled actors in sacred spaces at the same time as acknowledging the very real ability of those that I met in the field to teach me things that were not just about their way of being, but also about my way of being both in what we term the field and beyond. This is no doubt uncomfortable territory to enter into, but it is uncomfortable precisely because it attempts to unseat the comfortable 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.*). 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 (Shastri 1925, Regmi 1987, Jordaan 1997, *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). Although etymologies of both of the two Taras are contested, I am aware of no serious attempt by a linguist to link the two; the dominant academic view has it 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 (Shastri 1925: 16, Regmi 1987: 6, Foulston & Abbot 2009: 118, *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 an 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, undoubtedly, the most popular form of Tara is the Green Tara, whose accompanying mantra, *Om Tare, Tutare, Ture, Soha*, (an invocation for both bodily healing and spiritual salvation), echoes around the hills wherever a large Himalayan Buddhist population is found. 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 2013: 114). This serenity is captured wonderfully in the popular iconography of the Green Tara.

(Insert here figure 1 - Image of Green Tara).

The traditional interpretation and depiction of the Buddhist Tara lends itself well to the discussion of wellbeing. However, Shimla's Tara Devi is described as a Hindu temple and this reminds us that Tara appears in Jainism and Hinduism. 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 (cp Dhavalikar 1963: 64; Shastri 1925: 12-14). There are possible brief references to Tara in early Brahminical texts and in the ancient iconography of Western India, she appears as a patron of sea farers (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 both in relation to 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 that would in these terms be readily recognisable as Tara today occurred among Buddhist populations in the North West of India around the 7th Century (Shastri 1925: 15). Shimla, nestled in the foothills of the North West Himalayas, can therefore claim a long connection with the goddess through geographical proximity. 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: 21-23), 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 *Tantrasara*, 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 idea of Tara leading to wellbeing remains. For, if the Buddhist Green Tara leads us to serenity by example, then the Hindu Blue Tara opens the path to the violent annihilation of ego, which is a necessary precursor to the bliss of unity (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, all-be-it in a transformed way. Shimla's Tara has a direct link to the Sena dynasty, both in popular legend and contemporary practice (Shimla District 2015: ix). Many months after my first trip to Tara Devi, I was sat with Vyasa<sup>i</sup>, 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.<sup>ii</sup> He related that Tara Devi temple was founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century after Raja Bhupendra Sen, who claimed descent from the famous Sena dynasty of Bengal (cf Majumdar 1921), visited the area. He 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,<sup>iii</sup> 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 geo-political 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 8500 feet above sea level in the North West 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: 87-89). Before this began the region was heavily forested and only a few dwellings, hunting lodges, and temples existed (Kanwar 2003: 16). BJ Buck, the major authority on Colonial Simla, suggested in 1925 that one of these was a Goddess temple of great antiquity, which it is popularly believed was dedicated to the Goddess Shymla, who lends her name to Shimla (Buck 1925: 243). Buck simply identifies it as a Kali temple (*ibid*); he could however have been using Kali as a translation for a local goddess and Kali is anyway the first of the *Mahavidyas* and very closely connected to Tara (Kinsley 1998). Therefore, based on the historical documents, the connection of the goddess in general and Tara in particular, to the pre-colonial 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 to 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.

For understanding the contemporary, postcolonial period, what is important in the above descriptions is not so much whether they 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: 668-669; 1996: 83) that space is made meaningful, made sacred and relevant (Miles-Watson 2012). Tara Devi emerges in the above descriptions as a place that exists in tension

with colonial Shimla, but in a sort of 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 (a sort of *tirtha*) from the colonial, historical town, to the trans-historical, sacred peaks of Hinduism that lies 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 captures the spirit of mainstream symbolic analysis when he succinctly states that a symbol which has to be explained to the brain does not work properly (Campbell, J., Cousineau, P., & Brown, S. L. 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 paper; yet the place still worked on me: it still brought me wellbeing, 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, along with my wife, our landlady and her son I 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 image 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's architecture of West Bengal (McDaniel 1988: 88), but 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 assumptions that Mary Douglas cautions against in *Natural Symbols* (1996: xxxii) and Lévi-Strauss passionately attacks in his refutation of psychoanalytic interpretative theories (1996: 185-206). We are told clearly by both Douglas (1996: 91) and Lévi-Strauss (1963: 208-209) 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 suggests 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?

(Insert Here Image 2 - Exterior of Tara Devi Temple, Shimla)

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 wide-spread 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. My eyes drifted from the temple to the horizon and Tagore's words came to me 'the soles of the feet should not be deprived the education of nature' (2011: 79). 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 blood thirsty 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, which I later learned are 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 until its path took me into the vision of a second temple that lay ahead of us (depicted in Image 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.

(Insert Image 3 Here – Second Tara Devi Temple)

This temple was raised up from the mountain top 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 like I was stood in the top of 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 would have hidden from only hours before (as it whistled around our room) I now embraced; my reaction to this physical environment had been 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 that can either be comforting or unsettling. In noting this, 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; Hildebeitel 2001: 297; Hsu & Low 2002: 3).

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 through 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. Moreover, my interpretative framework was unusual, certain things came to me that were far from typical (such as Tagore). Such symbolic illiteracy 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 to Tara Devi 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 then 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 ethnographers own sense of specialness (Ewing 1994: 571) it can also lead to ethnographic distortion, as Edith Turner has dramatically argued it was the case with her and her husband's early work (1993). Indeed, Mitchell argues 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 who were operating within similar frames of reference. 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, but beyond this, the relation of the temple to the surrounding landscape, (especially the forested hill-slopes), 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 virtually in contact with the temple. I, along with 1100 other 'visitors' travelled to the temple's page recently and noticed that it is almost universally praised by its cyber visitors. In fact, 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 reviews are exclusively done by Indians and seem to largely written by young Indian 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 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 to first 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 intensification of meaning and consequently relations (Miles-Watson 2014). In part, I suggest that this is because of the way that engagement with (and narrativization of) any given space, transforms space into sacred place, making it a gateway to existential experience (Miles-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 therefore may 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 and the place was far from meaningless. 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 more of my own memories became bound up with it, much in the way described above. Indeed, when I encounter Tara Devi today, even through this writing 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). As I have previously discussed (Miles-Watson 2012) sacred places weave historical time, cosmological time and personal time together in a powerful way that transforms the experience from an individual, time-bound, meaningless one, to a collective, infinite, meaningful one (Eliade 1963, Griffiths 1982, Malinowski 1926, et al). 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 for some pan-Hindu cosmology. Indeed, this does not do justice to the great emotional surges of joyful peace that I felt stood on Tara Devi. This was 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 the atheist and anthropologist Gregory Bateson describes as a sense of grace (Bateson & Bateson 1998).

This could be read as suggesting that I had a more secular, or spiritual, experience and that the sense of wellbeing draws from this. Furthermore, such spiritual accounts it could be argued both sit well with India, where religion is a contested term (Bloch 2010) and the modern West where large numbers of people describe themselves as spiritual, but not religious (Sheldrake 2007). This is, 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 Giovine 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 understandings are always socially constituted. I was not alone on the mountainside, I went, from the beginning, with my neighbours, friends and family all of whom are practicing Hindus; I moved over the place with them, in part experiencing the place through their guided movements. I also engaged in ritual activities in the sacred space (*darshan* and *puja*), 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 phenomenology to the place, which goes beyond the 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 activated within them a sense of wellbeing, drawn from a sense of peace. Davies (2015: 121) suggests that this is because the phenomenology of sacred places triggers deep seated feelings of security in those that enter them. In a similar vein it is possible to argue that the memory, or trace, of past actions 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 landscape they were certainly part of the place, suggesting a symbolic resonance between creative acts (both human and non-human) and Divinity. The temples then pointed to the Divinity of the mountain top and this resonated with my own understanding. For, just before 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, Jakhoo temple, in contrast to Christ Church, can’t really be seen from the Mall, or the lift, because it is hidden 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 engulfed 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 perception that we were in *Dev Bhoomi* (the Land of the Gods), or perhaps more accurately the Land of the Goddess. For, in Himachal devotion to the Goddess (often riding a lion and nearly always alone) is widespread (Erndl 1994: 4), she can appear in iconographic form, but also as a tree or a natural outcropping known as *Pindi* (Wangu 2003: 161). This understanding, combined with the ritual actions of others, and the general phenomenology of the place, were sufficient 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 sacred 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 to adequately appreciate the importance of the intimate connection of person, action, and place in the generation of wellbeing. I have previously argued that these places are also not simply performative 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 key generators of happiness and suggests that sacred places are sites for intensification 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 place to act in multiple ways with multiple people. This means that we cannot think of sacred place as working in a singular way to enhance 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 place 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, though not only, 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 to both 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 as part of development plans and the tourist board's plans to build a nearby theme park, risk endangering, rather than enhancing the importance of this place. Our discussion of Tara Devi also suggests that developers and policy makers should resist the temptation to only contact the most knowledgeable members of a perceived religious community when developing plans and instead should engage with unskilled actors. Similarly those anthropologists who seek to bridge the gap between ethnography and policy should consider 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.

The story of sacred spaces is of course not universally and unreservedly positive. It is well-documented (Hasner 2009) that sacred places can act to oppress wellbeing and religious places are well-known (Balzani 2001) as places that aggrandise one group at the expense of others. However, 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 by providing connection to crosscutting elements of existence in the world. 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.

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<sup>i</sup> I have used pseudonyms for all informants

<sup>ii</sup> I have a family connection to Bengal.

<sup>iii</sup> 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).