

GIVE & TAKE

The Economy of the Divine

From time to time, humans need otherworldly assistance in life. The agencies addressed in this case vary from religion to religion. In return for aid, deities, saints, and spirit beings demand respect and worship. But a guarantee of help is never part of the deal.

FACING THE DIVINE

Believers are called to make an "advance payment" – in the form of worship, sacrifices, and the observance of religious rules – in the hope of being granted "otherworldly service" in return. However, they are also aware that gods and spirits are not open to deals and that, in the end, they have no other choice than to hope for divine grace.

THE WORLDLY ASPECT

Theological philosophies and emotional religiosity come along with a comprehensive worldly infrastructure comprising temples and shrines, but also shops and even all-inclusive shopping malls, which have on offer everything people require to perform their religious duties. Religious institutions train specialists who cater to the needs of the believers, while transport networks ensure that they also reach their sacred destinations.

MODERNITY, REASON, AND RELIGION

Today it is common ground: scientific rationality, technological innovation, and industrialization have not resulted in a linear shift from the religious to the secular, and modernization has not supplanted belief. Moreover, the secular and religious tend to intermingle, and not face each other in contradiction, to the effect that the religious is always co-present in public space. What forms this can assume in various Asian religions is subject of the present exhibition, which comes as a complement to the show on European pilgrimage.

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RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION AND ECONOMIC SUCCESS

This portable winged altar, or polyptych, is dedicated to the god Vishnu in his manifestation as Jagannath, to his sister Subhadra, and to his brother Balabhadra (from left to right). On the outside, the wings show Garuda, Vishnu's mount, and the monkey king Hanuman, respectively. The numerous spaces within the altar display well-known tales from the Ramayana epic and Vishnu's ten principle incarnations (avatar).

In Hinduism Vishnu is the embodiment of pure goodness and grace, making his appearance every time the world is threatened by evil. In his fourth incarnation Vishnu appears as a man-lion for the purpose of defeating two demons that had enticed Brahma to grant them invulnerability. Allegedly they could not be harmed, neither by man nor beast, neither by night nor by day, neither indoors nor outdoors, and by no weapon, however powerful. To rid the world of this threat, Vishnu sprang from a column on the veranda of a house in the shape of a man-lion and tore them apart with his claws whilst dawn was breaking. **In his ninth incarnation Vishnu is shown either as Buddha, as the mythical hero Rama, or, as in this case, as Jagannath.** 

Winged altars are commonly used by professional storytellers throughout northern India. With the altar placed in front of his chest the narrator recounts the legends to his audience by means of the illustrations, thus providing important religious instruction. Storytellers are usually found in rural areas but during important religious events they also perform in the towns. Before setting off to work in the morning, the narrator conducts a simple puja, a ritual offering, in which he prays for a successful day's work by placing flowers and some cooked rice in front of the domestic altar. Success, in this case, means a large paying audience and a convincing performance on his part.

The winged altar is dedicated to the deity Jagannath. Rajasthan, India, 2nd half of 20th century. Wood, painted. Ila 11492

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SACRIFICIAL OFFERINGS

The range of sacrificial offerings is large and varied. It includes money, ancestral money, flowers, garlands, foods of all kinds such as rice, coconut and banana pieces, whole fruits, leaves of certain plants, sandalwood or cinnabar paste, drinks, oil lamps, incense sticks, as well clothing or even living animals.

Amount, size, and kind of offering depend on the preferences of the deity being addressed, but also on the occasion, the concern, and the financial standing of the performing believer. Usually sacrificial offerings are subject to strict rules as far as preparation, participants, and purity are concerned.

Offerings of worship: foodstuffs, drinks, flowers, garlands, clothes, money, light, water, incense sticks, pastes, ritual objects, votive tablets, and figurines. India, Tibet, Myanmar, China, 19th/20th centuries. Metal, brass, yellow metal, copper, bronze, silver, clay, wood, paper, plastic, colour. IIa 535, 560, 600, 901, 8418, 8438, 8443; IIb 1368, 1395, 1401, 1441, 1445, 11941, 13216, 14336, 14875, 14877, 14878, 14959, 15006 and private loans

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COMPANIONS AND HELPERS IN DISTRESS

Vajrayana Buddhism features a rich tradition of rituals and visualizations, practised in monasteries as well as by believers in everyday life in diverse locations.

RITUAL AND MEDITATION

The historical Gautama Buddha (around 5th century BC) was strictly against any form of cultic adoration. He believed that it was not up to divine or otherworldly beings to liberate the humans from the endless cycle of incarnation; instead, he taught that the quest for insight and Buddhahood lay inside each and every living being, and that the envisaged state of being could be attained by developing compassion and serenity within. Rituals, meditation, and visualizations provide the means on the path to enlightenment.

BUDDHAS AND BODHISATTVAS

The only way to experience the workings of the – enlightened – Buddhas in spiritual practice is by means of meditation and visualization. In this context the historical Gautama Buddha is regarded as model and proof that Buddhahood actually can be attained.

Bodhisattvas are more world-oriented in their workings, having deferred their own enlightenment for the sake of those who are seeking Buddhahood and require assistance on their quest. Shyamatarā, a female Bodhisattva, is the embodiment of compassion. Her name is derived from the Sanskrit word for "star". This means she represents a beacon in the search for help and liberation as far as secular and material as well as spiritual and religious assistance is concerned, depending on what the person seeking the *tara's* help requires. A person's inner attitude as well as his worldly actions leave behind karmic traces and are destined to bring about effect in this or one of the next lives – to the benefit of all living beings, thanks to the aid of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. While the Buddha is commonly depicted on a lotus throne lost in meditation, the Shyamatarā statue displays more worldly presence. She is wearing a crown and pieces of jewellery, her right hand is expressing the *varada mudra* gesture, the sign of welcome, charity, and offering, while her body is fixed in the *ardhaparyanka* posture, signalling that she is willing to provide assistance to all people in need.

EVERYDAY PRACTICE

People never turn to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for help empty-handed, no matter how petty their concern. The simplest offering when seeking aid or expressing gratitude for help received is a bowl of water, but sacrifices also include incense sticks, seeds of specific plants, butter for altar lamps, rice, fruit, occasionally even gold leaf. In monasteries, the images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas also serve educational purposes and help to explain difficult religious writings.

Sacrificial offerings are usually accompanied by the recitation of mantras associated with the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in question. Mantras are words or syllables which, when repeated in succession, are used for the invocation of a deity and as an aid in spiritual training. One of the most famous mantras – om mani padme hum – is dedicated to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara and is, today, known well beyond the Asian continent. One often finds this mantra inscribed in stone by the wayside or in shrines. It is intended not only for one's own salvation, but for the wellbeing of all sentient beings.

Statue of crowned Buddha Shakyamuni, the historical Gautama Buddha, in a wooden altar including sacrificial bowls and butter lamps. Tibet. 16th century. Yellow metal, gold, semiprecious stones, wood, silver, colour. IId 13889, IId 14308a-1

Statue of Shyamatarā in a wooden altar including sacrificial bowls and butter lamps. Tibet. 19th century. Yellow metal, gold, semiprecious stones, wood, silver, colour. IId 13961, IId 14309a-m

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VILLAGE GUARDIANS

Ayyanar is the name of a village god common to Tamil Nadu in southern India. At the entrance of every village in Tamil Nadu there stands a shrine dedicated to this deity. He stands in no relationship to the principle Hindu gods and goddesses, and only rarely one finds a temple in his name. Instead, statues of Ayyanar and other regional deities, of his companions, his steeds or his elephants are placed at the entrance of the village – preferably close to a pool or a small lake. His tutelary services are required especially after dark. Every night he patrols the boundaries of the territory he is responsible for to protect the fields and crops and to drive off evil spirits and demons. The villagers try to avoid meeting up with him, lest he mistakes them for malevolent spirits.

Ayyanar is also responsible for the fertility of the crops and helps to prevent, or at least mitigate, natural disasters; he sees to the villagers' wellbeing and occasionally he helps recover lost items. Apart from that, he cares for people's individual needs. When turning to him for help, villagers write down their worries on a note and stick it to his sword. In answer, Ayyanar appears to them in a dream and suggests a solution or else he conveys his advice through the priest of the local shrine.

The images of Ayyanar and his mounts are produced by the Velar, that is, members of the local potter caste who also serve as priests of the shrine. The fact that the functions of priest and craftsman are performed by one and the same person, is an indication that we are dealing here with a regional tradition and not a trait of mainstream Hinduism where the two spheres are usually kept separate. In their function as priests, the Velar are also responsible for organizing the annual spring ceremony, which lasts for three days. It is staged in every village and is an elaborate affair including dance performances as well as blood sacrifices and food offerings in honour of the deities. Goats serve as sacrificial animals: the heads and legs go to priest-cum-potter, the remaining parts are distributed among the audience.

Usually the entire village population participates in these ceremonies. Furthermore, the village community as such, resident kin groups, or even single individuals can make additional sacrificial offerings, for example, for the purpose of expressing gratitude when prayers have been answered or a long-lasting problem has been resolved, for instance, a successful recovery from illness. In this case the commissioning client asks the priest-cum-potter to create a new animal figure, occasionally even a new Ayyanar statue. When the sculpture is finished it is carried in a procession from the potter's house to the shrine where it is consecrated and placed at Ayyanar's side.

The potters' skill is truly breathtaking: the size of the figures ranges from half a metre to roughly four metres; they are produced by hand, without any help of tools. At times, the craftsman's mastery even becomes part of the veneration.

The materials required for the statue are paid for by the commissioning client, the potter's work with money, the priestly duty performed by way of land. However, since the Velar have little knowledge of and experience in agricultural matters, they usually lease the land. Even though this sounds like a princely salary, the potter-priests often complain about their low income, but at least in their role as mediators between the village and the deities they enjoy high esteem.

The god Ayyanar with his consorts Purani and Puskula and six votive steeds. Tamil Nadu, India. End of 20th century.
Clay, fired. Ila 11494 – 11511

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THE BLACK ONE – DRUNK ON ENEMY BLOOD

The goddess Kali, literally the Black One, is worshipped across India. Originally the ceremonies staged in her name were domestic affairs, but over the last few decades the sacrificial rituals, puja, held in her honour have become more public events. The growing significance of this goddess is also shown by the fact that several temples now boast Kali as their principle deity. Kali is the subject of many legends and tales: sometimes she is described as a female cosmic force and pure energy from which emerged the principle male gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva; elsewhere she springs from the forehead of the goddess Durga during battle and leads the gods to victory over a host of demons, thanks to her incredible power. However described, Kali is always seen as the goddess who brings forth life, only to devour it again; as a threat to order and stability; as the source of fear, terror, and death. In earlier days, Kali was worshipped above all by marginal groups in society. But since Kali flouts all forms of order, this manifestation of the great goddess (devi) forces one to incorporate the forbidden in order to recognize truth and bring about change. Believers turn to her in her role as mother, and – given the appropriate form of worship – she in fact does grant protection to all her children.

Kali is conventionally depicted naked, blue-skinned, with black hair and with four arms. In her left upper hand she wields a scimitar, ready to strike, while her lower left hand grips the hewn-off head of a man; her right upper hand shows the gesture of protection. Head, neck, breast, arms, and legs are richly decorated. Around her neck she wears a garland of hewn-off male heads, her hips are covered by an apron of human arms. In wild rage she dances on the body of her consort Shiva. The myth explains the scene as follows: On the battlefield, drunk on the blood of her victims, Kali is said to have lost all control over herself, inducing her husband Shiva to lie down on the ground among the many corpses to bring her to her senses. It was only when Kali in her frenzy touched Shiva's chest that she recognized her husband and desisted from further carnage. To express her shame, she stuck out her tongue.

Expert craftsmen produce sculptures like this one for the annual Kali puja, a complex ritual that is performed by priests. The painting of the eyes is accompanied by a simple puja, the eye opening ceremony. Only when sacrificial offerings have been made, the red dot on her forehead has been placed, and the black eyeliner has been applied, the image is complete and the goddess is ready to enter her statue. The deity is then taken to a predestined, purified location. The main ceremony that follows lasts for hours and includes the recitation of mantras, ritual ablutions, and more sacrificial offerings. Typical for Kali are the red hibiscus flowers strung to a garland and placed around her neck or laid out at her feet. A key element in the process is the so-called darshan, the moment the goddess "takes sight of" the sacrificial offerings. Through this act the goddess consecrates the offerings so that her blessings pass over to the worshippers who consume the offerings later in the day. Finally the divine statue is taken down to the river and committed to the waters.

Statue of the goddess Kali with her foot resting on Shiva. India. 2000. Wood, gesso, painted; cardboard, paper, plastic beads, sheet metal, artificial hair. Ila 11493

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TAMING THE SPIRITS

In Myanmar *nat* is the term used to describe a large host of spirit beings omnipresent in everyday life: there are *nat* for the family, for single regions, and for the entire Burmese nation; trees have their *nat*, so do the fields and the rivers; household *nat* are extremely important and even treasures are said to have their own *nat*; finally, we have the thirty-seven royal *nat*.

BUDDHISM AND THE BELIEF IN NAT

Eighty-seven per cent of the people of Myanmar are followers of Theravada Buddhism. For the purpose of forging a link between the belief in *nat* and the Buddhist faith, the thirty-six royal *nat* were placed under the supervision of a single, superior *nat* by the name of Indra, a god encountered in both Hindu and Buddhist mythology. The majority of national *nat* trace back to historical figures who once met unnatural, violent deaths. Many of them were members of the royal family. This category constitutes the class of the great *nat*; they are benevolent, rank as protectors of the Buddhist faith and its followers, and do not require appeasing.

THREAT AND APPEASEMENT

The lower *nat* are quite a different matter: they are described as moody, powerful, hostile, and potentially destructive. They have the habit of stalking human beings and making life difficult if they are not rendered the respect they believe they deserve. This respect comes in the form of worship, that is to say, by means of ritual and rich sacrificial offerings.

MAHA GIRI – THE HOUSEHOLD NAT

Maha Giri is venerated in each and every household. Originally this *nat* had a little house for himself in the shape of a small bamboo shrine which stood in front of the dwelling house and where the inhabitants placed small offerings every day. After this form of veneration was forbidden by royal decree and the shrines destroyed, the people turned to using an effigy in the shape of a green coconut which one finds hanging in every household. At the same time the coconut constitutes one of the main sacrificial offerings for Maha Giri. If the residents abide by all the religious rules, for example, those concerning food and purity, Maha Giri will protect them from all harm.

Mount Popa, an extinct volcano near the town of Pagan, is considered a sacred mountain and a place of pilgrimage in the context of the *nat* belief. The mountaintop is said to be inhabited by Maha Giri and his family, meaning his sister, his wife, two sons, and a daughter.

Likewise, the other *nat* have their own specific spheres of responsibility and influence and also claim respect and appropriate worship. The family *nat*, for example, demand to be invited to all family celebrations – births, marriages, funerals, etc. – where they expect to be richly entertained.

WORSHIP

Nat are worshipped in shrines. Some of these are simple abodes, others are richly furnished sanctuaries. The people make small offerings at these shrines but, on occasion, the locations also become the venue for elaborate feasts including rituals as well as music and dance performances, even funfairs. Large feasts are also attended by ritual specialists – male and female – who perform séances in which they become possessed by a *nat* (sometimes even by several in succession) and during which they are able to foretell the future or at least offer advice in difficult situations. During the séance, believers hand over money and other offerings to the possessed medium, including rum and other alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, twigs from special plants and trees, bananas, green coconuts, fried chickens, boiled eggs, scarves, or imported goods such as deodorant sprays or beer.

21 Nat-statues and a Buddha figure with offerings. Yangon, Myanmar. 2000. Wood, tulle, cloth, paper, metal, artificial hair, plastic, and many other materials. Iib 4045-Iib4053

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VIRTUAL WORSHIP

Nowadays it is even possible to perform one's religious duties towards deities or saints by way of virtual reality. At the click of a mouse you can order a puja, go on a virtual pilgrimage, or take a vow. In the age of virtual commerce not more than an online cash transfer is required; some websites still even offer their services for free - distinctly cheaper than the service "in real". Here we have compiled a small selection of virtual worship bargains.