LOVE AND SAKTI: 
Divine Relation At The Kamakhya Temple in Assam, India 

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AN INTRODUCTION

In pursuit of Assam, India, my mentor, and the Goddess Kamakhya, I flew northeast from Delhi. I was going to join Julia Jean, my anthropology professor from Mount Holyoke College, at the Kamakhya Temple, near the capital city of Guwhati in Assam.

What little I knew of the Goddess Kamakhya seemed (perhaps naively) both romantic and mysterious. The bits and pieces that Julia Jean had told me ran through my head—Kamakhya was the Goddess Sati’s yoni (vagina); she manifested herself as a cleft in the rock, where an underground spring ran up; each summer, during the monsoon season, Kamakhya would menstruate for three days, at which time the temple was closed and the water, streaming over her, ran red.

While I had been told that Kamakhya was the main and most worshiped goddess, there were other goddesses near the Kamakhya temple that were also quite significant. I hoped to study one of these deities, the Serpent Goddess Manasa. However, once I arrived in Assam, it became clear to me that my study would be experiential, meaning that the experiences I partook in would dictate the ultimate nature and focus of my study. While I did have a certain amount of influence upon what kind of experiences I had in Assam, I also accepted that my experiences were
significantly and necessarily affected by the experiences and action of those around me, particularly by the close relationships that I formed with others in Assam.¹

Indeed, “Ethnographic knowledge,” as Lamb (2000) writes, “is always influenced by the life experiences of the anthropologist. What anthropologists perceive in the field and what they choose to write primarily about is whatever matters the most to them (2000:xii).” After spending a month and a half during the summer of 2003, and then three more weeks during March 2004, living next to the Kamakhya temple with a Brahman-pundit family, who Julia Jean had met and stayed with during a previous journey to Kamakhya, it was clear to me that what mattered the most were the relationships that I was able to form through my participation in the family’s spiritual practice and through a certain love that was extended toward me.

OVERVIEW

Therefore, this text has developed into an exploration of my experiences in Assam, revealing the potential of human relation, as a manifestation of divine-love, and focusing on the threads of connection, weaving in and out of the spiritual practices at the Kamakhya temple. Specifically, I have been influenced by my relationship with members of a Brahman-pundit family, who I lived with while in Assam, and our shared spiritual-life practice, as it was transmitted from person to person. Predominantly, I write about my experiences as both a student of anthropology and an initiated disciple, who found herself wholly in relation with a parampara (spiritual family) and a Guru. Attempting to unfold elements of this experience, I discuss notions of embodied energy; the powerful effect of energy transfer and initiation into a spiritual lineage; the connection and responsibility that relation entails; and the influence this relation can

¹ Here, I understand and use these experiences in terms of what Michael Jackson calls, “a radically empirical method,” (1989:4) where an anthropologist’s experiences are considered primary data. Personal experience becomes a forum for relation, where the anthropologist can explore the ways that her experiences connect with those of her collaborators (Jackson 1989:4).
have on our understanding of self. These subjects overlap and intertwine, creating an overarching theme that often pronounces itself as a study of the transcendent quality of love and devotion between persons.

NOTES ON MY METHODOLOGY

Trawick notes, “Learning a culture, like learning a language, is largely an unconscious process, which means precisely that one cannot control it (1990:50-51).” While attempting to control one’s experience is foolish at best, I found that being receptive, flexible, curious, and open to those around me, was frequently the best way to take-in my surrounding experiences and learn from them.

During my first visit to Kamakhya, rather than conducting formal interviews with relative strangers, using a tape-recorder, or the like, I simply attempted to create friendships, building respect, intimacy, and trust with those I lived with. My approach was largely intuitive. As a participant-observer, I attempted, to the best of my ability, to be receptive to the various forces (desires, discomforts, etc) around me. No doubt, if I had felt an overwhelming force from myself and others to conduct interviews, I would have happily done so, but for a variety of reasons, ranging from the pace of the daily religious practices to my specific role as a junior in the family, I did not feel comfortable, at least during my first visit, formally interviewing my collaborators. Nevertheless, I did ask many questions, though they were, in most cases, context specific, relating to conversations or events that were currently happening or being discussed. Because it

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2 While Trawick (1990) uses the term, “culture,” I prefer to adopt the notion of a network or web, avoiding notions of a bounded system that have often gone hand and hand with “culture.” Likewise, I understand “culture,” networks, and the like, as a series of relationships. Therefore, one could read Trawick’s quote as follows, “Learning [about a person], like learning a language, is largely an unconscious process, which means precisely that one cannot control it.”

3 Again, Trawick (1990) notes that structured interviews can be problematic for anthropologists. She explains that there is nothing to stop an individual from lying, and that if the conversation is of any importance, it is quite likely that she will lie. It is also easy to create leading-questions, or fail to ask context specific questions. During interviews, Trawick notes, though, that the relationship between the anthropologist and the collaborator is of utmost importance, determining the nature of the response and communication.
was not my priority and ability to record every incident that occurred while I was in Assam, many of the details that I recall here are selected pieces of events that had a particular significance or impact on me.

Throughout my March 2004 visit to Assam, though, I was able to have a laptop computer with me. In the middle of the day, or after we ate dinner in the evening, I sit down on the floor with the computer over my lap, and begin to record different conversations that I had engaged in during the day. Often, while I was typing on my computer, Ram, a member of the family that I spoke with most, largely because of his comfort with the English language (in comparison to other members of the household), would look over my shoulder and read what I had written, responding to questions that I had typed on the screen. These interactions would generate other, often related, conversations that I would try and record on my computer as soon as possible. Often I was able to do this almost immediately, because the computer was sitting right on my lap. These instances provided a situation where both the collaborator and the anthropologist were influencing and were influenced by the text.

In addition, other materials have also influenced this text, as well as my understanding and experiences in Assam. Prior to both of my visits to Assam, I performed textual research, studying the work of contemporary scholars in both anthropology and religious studies. While these texts have had a significant influence on my work, my primary objective here has been to remain faithful to both my lived experiences and those of my collaborators as they influence one another.

BELIEF

Aligned with my experiential orientation, my phenomenological perspectives and this text have largely been influenced by an overarching methodological concern of

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4 See Works Sited.
mine, regarding anthropology’s refusal to believe, which has recently been addressed by a number of anthropologists: ⁵

Specifically, within the discipline of anthropology the traditional notion of “culture” is characterized by inherent distinctions between the Self and Other that have been historically present in the western-anthropological analysis of the non-western Other. Anthropologist Katherine Ewing (1994) has pointed out that despite current criticisms of the constructed division between Self and Other, few anthropologists are truly willing to adopt “native” beliefs, refusing to let the ideas of their collaborators change their understanding of reality. Ewing links this refusal to believe with anthropological professionalism and the taboo of “going native.” Fundamental to the identity of the anthropologist are distinctions based on perspective and history that create a bisection of Self-Other. As long as the discipline of anthropology subconsciously believes that distance provides perspective, there will remain an acted refusal to believe, reinforced by notions of what is credible within anthropology. ⁶ This refusal, held in place by the doctrine of cultural relativism, suggests that the relationship between the anthropologist and her collaborators will be shaped by a western discourse, leaving western hegemonies unchallenged (1994:579).

While living in Assam, my field experiences were undoubtedly shaped by my interest, devotion, love and belief in the spiritual practices and those who practiced them at Kamakhya. Like Favret-Saada’s admission (1980) that it was only by believing in the practice of witchcraft in rural France, where she did her fieldwork, that she was able to see the practice at all, I consider my own spiritual participation at Kamakhya to have greatly affected both how I understand the practice and how I understand and relate to those who practiced with me. It is the nature of these relationships that I find so interesting and essential to the practice. Clearly, without belief, trust, and relation, my experiences and this text would be quite different. And although my field study may have been less invasive, personally and otherwise, if I had adopted a “stance of

⁵ See Ewing (1994) and Jean-Guy and Young (1994).
⁶ The controversies and hasty dismissals centered around both Castaneda (1968) and Donner (1982), within the anthropological community, demonstrate the affect of the taboo against “going native.”
neutrality,” it also would be, as Ewing suggests, unlikely to challenge my own set of beliefs and expectations, and ultimately “unlikely to challenge Western hegemonies (1994:579).”

RELATIONSHIP

Although each individual—the anthropologist and/or the collaborator—clearly assumes different historical and political positions, effecting how and what determines meaning, I find the relationship between individuals to be an equally significant source of meaning-making. By acknowledging not only a historic relationship, but also the present and future relations, the anthropologist and the collaborator break down notions of “native” and “non-native,” or Self and Other, drawing attention to the substance they create together.

Regarding the relationships formed during fieldwork, Dwyer writes, “each [person] changes and develops while interacting with the other…each creates himself [sic] in part as a reaction to the other (1982:xviii).” It is this creation, occurring everyday, whether an anthropologist is present or not, that is an essential source of meaning. Thus, during my fieldwork and in this text, I have attempted to understand my position as a disciple, within the Guru-disciple relationship, as it illuminates both positions. Mutually influential and mutually revealing, both the anthropologist and the collaborator, or the Guru and disciple, change and learn from one another. Although my beliefs are invariably different from the beliefs of any one individual from my parampara (spiritual lineage) in India, or my family in the United States for that matter, I do not exclude the influence of their beliefs upon mine, and visa versa.

I find that we all inhabit multiple positions and/or identities. These identities are not fixed. Instead, as Stuart Hall (1989) has written, “…[identities] undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture, and power (1989:70).” Our identities are influenced and transformed by the experiences and relationships that we engage in. Each person I meet makes an impression, leaving a piece of herself or himself with me, forming a new aspect of myself, a new identity. This meeting of people, whether in terms of “history, culture, [or] power,” is the source of interwoven identity and meaning. Tracing the path of identity and meaning-making
through relationships is a method that I use that acknowledges the *Sakta* nondual perspective, present at Kamakhya, where everything is essentially interconnected.

**ABOUT ME**

If “culture is always created in relationship (1999:11),” as Hallstrom writes, both the anthropologist and her collaborator, for example, co-create meanings and experiences. As an actor in this creation, my life-perspectives and experiences become central to this text, demanding a certain self-reflexivity.

Much of my life has been colored by my experiences attending and living within anthroposophical realms. As a child, I went to a Waldorf school based on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, which emphasized a holistic approach to educating the person and living in the world. The integration of the spiritual-self within the world created for me a relationship of intrigue with those things that were mystical or possessed a certain magic.

By the time I entered Mount Holyoke College, and began to develop an overly robust, feminist-sense, I was quite interested in spiritual practices that centered around the divine-feminine. I was curious, what kind of relationship does God, as mother, lover, and/or daughter, have with the women and men who worship her? This curiosity lead me to an anthropology course, exploring various contemporary Goddess traditions of South Asia, and my professor and advisor, Julia Jean, who taught the course.

After taking several other courses with Julia Jean, and visiting India within another academic course, which focused on the assorted arts of India, Julia Jean asked me to accompany her to Assam, India, where she had been doing fieldwork at a temple for the Goddess Kamakhya for several years; I would come as her research assistant and companion.

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7 See footnote number 1, concerning the term “culture.”
My fascination with South Asia, the Goddess, the discipline of anthropology and the unknown, motivated me to go with Julia Jean, feeling tremendously excited by the prospect of releasing myself from the known and controllable, and entering the nameless. These are some of the factors that brought me to India, and influenced me while I was there. While there are surely many other aspects of my personal history that affected my experience and relationship in India that I have not identified, once I arrived in Assam, in addition, I was significantly influenced by the individuals and circumstances that I encountered there.

KAMAKYA

The Kamakhya temple is located on the Nilacala Hill in Assam, with views of the Brahmaputra River, winding around the hill’s base. According to my collaborators, as well as tourist information made available to pilgrims at the temple, Kamakhya is one of the major sakta pithas (seat of the Goddess), where many believe the Goddess Sati’s yoni (vagina, womb, or alternatively vulva) fell.

According to tradition, the Goddess Sati committed suicide by throwing herself into a fire because her father, Daksa, had greatly shamed her by refusing to invite her husband Siva to the fire sacrifice. When Siva learned of Sati’s death, he was filled with great sorrow. He took her body over his shoulder and began a dance of destruction around the cosmos. As Siva danced, pieces of Sati’s body fell to earth. Depending on which source you consult, there are four, 51, or 108 locations where pieces of the Goddess fell; these sites are powerful Sakta centers called sakta pithas (Sircar 1973).

Most sources acknowledge that Sati’s yoni is at Kamakhya in Assam. Sati’s yoni is not considered to be a relic of the Goddess, housed in an Assamese temple; rather, her yoni is the Goddess Kamakhya. Likewise, Kamakhya, the yoni and the Goddess, lives within the main shrine of her temple as a large cleft in the bedrock, covered by water flowing upward from an underground spring; she is literally also the earth. Interestingly, it is the same bedrock that Kamakhya consists of that forms an island in
the Brahmaputra river, where a form of Siva, Kamakhya’s husband, lives, illustrating the *Sakta* notion of an ultimate unity and oneness of all things. Both the God and Goddess are literally connected by the same bedrock.

Hundreds of pilgrims visit Kamakhya daily. Additionally, thousands of people (of which I was one) specifically come to the temple during the summer monsoon session in the lunar month of *asadha* (June-July), for the Ambuvaci festival, where for three days the temple is closed. Throughout this time the Goddess is understood to be menstruating. For the duration of the festival, pilgrims camp at the temple, occupying every available inch, celebrating the Goddess. On the forth day the temple is opened, and with great devotion all of the pilgrims rush to see Kamakhya.

**SAKTA TANTRA**

As a *Sakta Pitha*, the traditional spiritual practice at Kamakhya, from within recorded history, is predominantly *Sakta* Tantrism. Representing one of three (*Sakta, Saiva, Vaisnava*) contemporary branches of the Hindu tradition, the *Sakta* practice acknowledges that the Goddess is the supreme-divine unifying force in the universe (Woodroffe 1975:21). Practitioners recognize their existence as radically non-dual (*Advaita*: lit. ‘not-two’). “In fact [they understand that]…All is the Mother [the Goddess] and She is reality itself. “Sa’ham” (“She I am”), the Sakta [practitioner] says, and all that he [sic] senses is She in the form in which he [sic] perceives Her (Woodroffe 1975: viii, 18-20).” Ultimately, it is understood that the Goddess is neither female nor male, and yet, not neuter either. The Goddess is void of duality, pervading everything.

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8 The Saiva tradition understands Siva to be their God-head, as the Vaisnava tradition holds Visnu to be their supreme unifying force.
LIVING WITH THE GODDESS

Over two hundred Brahman families live on the hill where Kamakhya is located, many of them depend directly on the temple and the industry that pilgrims bring for survival. While Ram, the son and male head of the Sharma family, who I lived with at Kamakhya, also had a job in the city of Guwahati, he explained to me that his job as a pundit (priest) and his connection with the Goddess is primary. Ram told me, “If I ever had to make a choice between the rice I eat by working in Guwahati and the rice I make doing puja as a pundit, I would always choose the rice from the puja. It is the first rice that I ate, because my father and his father also earned their rice from the Goddess (Kamakhya, March 2004).” For most individuals living on the hill, their relationship with the Goddess is principal, outweighing other relationships and obligations.

Each individual, and family for that matter, expresses their spirituality and connection with the Goddess in a different manner. For the Sharma family, their spiritual practice, for at least the past three generations, has been influenced by their role as gurus (spiritual guides) and the formation of a spiritual lineage. Ram’s grandfather, respectfully called Gurubaba by his family and disciples, was a powerful guru, with disciples from various parts of South Asia, who built a temple on the Hill in his honor; this temple is located in the place where he had performed the majority of his sadhana (spiritual practice), and is now kept and maintained by the Sharma family.

A short while after I arrived at Kamakhya, I went to the family temple with Julia Jean and Rishiji, Sharma family’s disciples. Both Julia Jean and Rishiji were actively focusing on their own individual sadhana in the temple and I was excited to join them both there. Going to this temple, which was only a ten-minute walk from the family home, soon became a daily routine during my time in Assam.

In many ways the temple itself represents for me the spiritual practice at Kamakhya, as it is manifested in the guru-disciple relationship. Not only did disciples,
in honor of their guru, build the actual structure, but I was also initiated, soon after my first visit to the location, into the spiritual lineage by Ram, who then became my guru. This relationship, between the guru and the disciple, represents a significant location of interpretation for me. Indeed, the experience of initiation, as the beginning of a powerful connection between people, embodies an ideology of relational liberation that was both central to my daily, lived experience at Kamakhya and to the way the Sharma family lived and conducted their lives.

**MY COLLABORATORS**

My core collaborators for this study were the individuals who I lived with and created intimate relationships with while I was in Assam. Namely, the Sharma family and their disciples, whom I met and practiced with, deeply affected my experiences in Assam and have, therefore, made themselves present in this text.

Living in a modest house that has provided shelter for several Sharma generations, and has clearly been divided and reworked through the years, four members of the Sharma family resided in the house when I came with Julia Jean and Rishiji to visit during the summer of 2003. At one point in time, in the not so distant past, eleven individuals (two parents and nine children) lived in the house together, but as the eight daughters were all gradually married, the household size decreased. Several of the daughters have married into families that live nearby, and one daughter, who I called Didi (sister), moved back to the Sharma house with her son when her husband died several years ago.

The youngest child of the nine siblings, and the only boy, Ram, who turned 31 years old in 2003, assumed a great deal of responsibility for the household when his father died, five years ago. At that time, Ram had decided to delay his imminent marriage until he had taken care of his most pressing responsibilities and felt secure as
the male-head of the household, which included his mother (Mataji, 55 years old), his sister (Didi, 35 years old) and her son (Babu, 13 years old).

While the Sharma family certainly would not claim to be rich, maintaining a lower to middle-class lifestyle in India, they were able to afford outside help in their home and temple, as well as begin major renovations and construction on their home while I was visiting in March 2004. Ram had a government job in Guwhati in addition to the work he did at the temple as a priest. Moreover, his sister, Didi, also had a job at the nearby elementary school, as a kindergarten teach, which contributed to the family income.

Predominantly, though, the Sharmas identify themselves as a family with a sacred and powerful legacy, rooted in the spiritual practice and lineage that Gurubaba, Ram’s grandfather, established. A certain upper status is drawn from the family’s identity as Gurus and maintained by their disciples. I was often told that money was insignificant in comparison to the relationships one creates and maintains with one’s disciples. While they certainly valued economic success, spiritual success appeared far more prestigious to the Sharma family. Because of their commitment to their parampara, the Sharma family openly welcomed Rishiji, who was a disciple of one of Gurubaba’s disciples from Himalchal Pradesh, and Julia Jean, who had been initiated by Rishiji, and by extension, myself, into their household. Maintaining their relationships with their parampara was clearly a priority.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The Sakta-Tantric practices, which are present at Kamakhya, have been written about widely, both in traditional texts (tantras) and within contemporary works; yet, the tradition, on the whole, is highly esoteric, guarding much of its most sacred knowledge and keeping it secret. While many individuals consciously kept their knowledge their own, there were also events, where an individual, who put his trust in me, clearly requested that I omit the information that was communicated in our conversation or an event from my text. Under these circumstances, I
have done as my collaborators have requested and excluded secret information. Additionally, because of the personal and esoteric nature of the practice, I have either used generic kinship-terms or given my collaborators pseudonyms.

**RELATIONAL BODIES**

*...every conscious experience has a physical-perceptual component that plays a key role in the way the world and the self are fashioned. The Hindu bather who goes in the river at daybreak does not leave his body in bed (Glucklich 1994:7).*

Prior to my fieldwork at Kamakhya, and as a result, during my time at Kamakhya as well, I have understood my embodied experiences, manifested in a hybrid\(^9\) body and mind, as representing a primary site of relation and interpretation. Moreover, it has been my intention to express the fluidity and non-duality of both body-mind and mind-body, or m-b-i-o-n-d-d-y, which is largely based on the m-b-i-o-n-d-d-y’s relationality. My experiences and understandings are not limited to personal, isolated, cognitive processes; but rather, my reality is created and maintained by each individual I encounter. With this approach as a methodological guide, I have considered the various ways that the body in relation is understood both by anthropological scholars and in practice at Kamakhya.\(^{10}\)

**SUBSTANCE.** Several contemporary studies, focusing on the nature of South Asian personhood and kinship, have adopted the notion of *substance* as a lens through which they might explore the relational aspects of personhood and the body. Carsten (2003) notes that the term, substance, has been adopted by many anthropologists

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\(^9\) My use of the term “hybrid” refers to the multiple identities (woman, American, academic, feminist, anthropology student, daughter, etc.) that collectively represent both my mind and body; my self.

\(^{10}\) See Csordas (1990) for a discussion on "embodiment as a paradigm for anthropology."
precisely because of its versatility. Therefore, the term is often used to describe a number of different substance concepts that many or may not relate to one another.

Frequently notions of substance have been aligned with conceptions of both open and fluid persons. Both Marriott and Inden (1976, 1977) write about substances, based on ethnographic and textual research, as coded-particles, flowing through South Asian persons, who have variously open bodily-boundaries. Rather than conceiving oneself as a contained “individual,” Marriott and Inden suggest that South Asian persons often view themselves as “dividual.”

According to Marriott, South Asian thinking demonstrates a “systematic monism,” where the code (for conduct) and the bodily substance are considered inseparable (1976:109). Interpersonal exchanges of substance, whether it be sharing of food or coresidence, are also understood to involve the transfer of moral qualities, implying an essential linkage of the physical and the moral, or the body and spirit (Carsten 2003:117).

Additionally, Daniel (1984) has written about his experiences doing fieldwork in a Tamil village, where fluid substances were in constant flux, mixing with all things and inevitably creating intersubstantial relationships between persons (and more-more-than-persons). Kakar (1982:233) and Zimmermann (1979) both write about the fluid character of the world found in Ayurvedic texts and practice. Zimmermann, specifically, has noted that the human body in Ayurveda is in a state of fluidity (snehatva), composed of a network of channels and fluids that flow both in and out of persons.

Lamb (2000), who has also used the concept of substance, in order to illuminate her ethnographic research in a Bengalese village, identifies a number of ways that one may transfer substances. On a primary level, substances, such as saliva, hair, sweat, as well as more subtle substances that may be difficult to perceive, can be transferred via direct contact with another individual, by touching a person’s arm for example. On a

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11 In the English language, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the meaning of substance can range from “essential nature” and “matter or subject matter” to “a solid or real thing” and “any corporeal matter,” to state only a few examples of the numerous meanings.
secondary level, substances can pass from one individual, through another object, and continue on to another individual, who is also touching that object (2000:33). While this occurs often, a secondary transfer of substance is generally less potent than a primary transfer.

I also found, while I was in Assam, that the character of the object conducting one’s personal substance often affected the quality of the transfer. For example, I found it curious that Ram, one of my collaborators, would opened up a bag of potato chips and pass it around to all that were present, while during dinner there were clearly strict rules prohibiting the touching and sharing of other’s food (depending on one’s relationship). When I inquired about his sharing of food, Ram explained to me that potato chips were different than the rice and dhal, which we ate for dinner, because they were dry.

INTERPERSONAL SAKTI. While many scholars, as we have seen, make use of the substance concept, the discipline of anthropology, for the most part, has neglected the interpersonal, energetic force called sakti. This is interesting to me, because during my time in Assam, I found that an exchange of substance was often synonymous with an exchange of sakti. Essentially, I found that substances act as vehicles or containers of sakti, carrying sakti with them as they flow.

The concept of sakti, in relation to substance, is a subtle one. At Kamakhya, sakti is understood to pervade all things, as a divine-energetic manifestation of the Goddess. From a western perspective sakti can be described as:

…an all-pervading energy that flows through every aspect of both the cosmic and the social order…It is the kind of power that breaks down usual western dichotomies such as politics and religion, the worldly and the transcendent dimensions of experience (Urban 2001:783).

Although largely intangible, sakti can be felt, seen, and manipulated, as it is embodied by the practitioner. Sakti is not an abstract concept, but rather, an essential energetic force of relationship that can be transmitted, stolen and shared between persons (as well
as non- or more-than-persons). While living at Kamakhya, many curious pilgrims would approach me, wanting to know who I was and why I had come to the temple. No doubt, as a young white, American woman, I was a bit of an unusual sight at the temple. But instead of engaging in endless questioning, my Assamese family strictly instructed me to say a simple, “Namaste” (a common greeting), and walk on. These instructions were based on the notion that individuals have the capability to steal or take, often unconsciously, one’s sakti. It is best, therefore, to avoid jeopardizing encounters, not to mention endless questions, with unknown individuals if possible.

Generating, controlling and maintaining one’s sakti is a central aspect of the spiritual practice at Kamakhya. Therefore, women, who are understood to have more sakti, must also guard it more carefully. On my first day in Assam, I began what Delaney (1991:29) has referred to as the “bodily training” that most anthropologists go through. As I rode away from the airport in the taxi-van, Julia Jean, my professor, asked me whether I had a dupata (shawl). I felt a little embarrassed. I had tried my best to dress appropriately, wearing a salwar-kurta (loose pants and tunic), but I had not liked any of the dupata’s that had gone with my suits. They were think, synthetic, and ugly, besides the fact that it was a hot day, and I didn’t cherish the idea of wearing something over my neck. But when Julia Jean suggested that I pull one of my dejected dupatas out of the suitcase, I knew that it was of some importance. Had I been making a fool of myself, walking around without a dupata? Was it immodest...did I look naked? These were my thoughts. I was unaware of the relational qualities of sakti and substance, which can be transferred via sight, especially sight of a female body that is charged with sakti.

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12 I have borrowed/adapted the term more-than-persons from David Abram’s discussion of human worlds and more-than-human worlds in The Spell of the Sensuous (1996).
13 While a typical woman may individually possess more sakti than the average man, sakti is a relational force, which means that those individuals, who you share substance and sakti with, are affected both by your accumulation of sakti and your loose.
WOMEN, FOOD, AND HEAT. Like Osella’s (1993) observation that women in Kerala are conceived to have much more innate ‘heat,’ which was evidence of their greater power, or sakti, I found that women at Kamakhya also are understood to possess more internal potential than men, naturally having more sakti.

While I was in Assam, slowly my understanding of the female body and gender grew, and I began to see a very interesting relationship unfold between notions of the female, open and sakti-flowing body, the food she consumes, and the heat (which is often potentially sexual) that she generates.

Though my family at Kamakhya never told me that my female body was naturally hotter than the body of a man, I was often, quite specifically, told that certain foods were hot or cool. I was informed of this fact because of the effect hot foods, like mangoes or meat, can have on an upset stomach, which I was often afflicted with. Eating hot foods, while your stomach is also upset and hot, is like feeding the fire. Likewise, when I was menstruating, a hot period, I was not allowed to eat meat, because of its hot character. During my second visit to Kamakhya, while I ate dinner with Mataji and Didi, something I had done countless times during my first visit, I noticed for the first time that they served me meat, without taking any meat for themselves. Without thinking, I asked Didi why she was not eating any meat. She explained to me that after her son’s father died, she abstained from eating meat. Both Mataji and Didi were widows, and as widows, it was their duty to remain abstinent. By eating a hot food, like meat, they would generate a certain sexual heat within themselves, which could sexually attract them to others, as well as attract others to them.

For Mataji and Didi, the sexual, heated aspect of sakti should be avoided, to the best of their abilities, because they were no longer planning on having children. However, sakti, in its sexual, heated form, is both auspicious and essential for those

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14 Lamb (2000), among others, writes about conceptions of female heat in Bengal. When Lamb’s collaborators spoke of heat, they generally were referring to female sexuality. Women apparently possessed more sexual heat than men, at least during their reproductive years, “demonstrated by menstruation, which results from an over-abundance of hot blood... (2000:188).”
women, who wish to generate life. Therefore, a woman, during her reproductive years, is both powerful and vulnerable due to the relational character of her *sakti*.

**CONTAINING AND SHARING SAKTI.** Because of the dangers associated with the loss and transfer of *sakti*, many women at Kamakhya find ways of containing their energy by means of external, as well as internal, enclosures. For example, while many individuals wore western clothes in Assam (especially in the city of Guwhati), most female pilgrims who came and lived at the temple, who were sensitive to *sakti* flow, dressed in Saris or salwar-kurtas. These women dressed modestly in order to protect their *sakti*, which could be transferred visually. Modest clothing provides protection, in the form of a barrier, as a boundary between those near her. Clothing protects both from the outside and from the inside. Likewise, binding one’s hair, an especially powerful site, and wearing bangles around one’s wrists, as well as practicing a specific menstrual seclusion, during one of the most energetic times of the month, were ways that woman at Kamakhya contained *sakti*.

While containing one’s *sakti* is important, I found that individuals also intentionally mixed *sakti* and substance with one another at Kamakhya as a form of affection. For example, Ram, one of my collaborators, told me that visitors, even disciples from their *parampara* (spiritual lineage), were generally entertained in their drawing room on the first floor of the house, and were not invited into the main living space upstairs. Likewise, when guests would come and eat a meal at the families house, Ram told me that the family may be present, being good hosts and entertaining the guests, and they would not eat with the guests, but, he stressed, that because of the immense affection and love the family had for me, they welcomed me into their home, allowing me to eat with them, take naps with them, and live in their home.

After staying at Kamakhya, though, mixing substance and *sakti* with my family there, we created together a bittersweet connection. Both Mataji and Ram told me that my departure would be particularly painful for them. They explained that they both were content before I came and lived with them, but after staying at Kamakhya for a
time, we had all created an attachment that would be painful to unbind. By letting me go, essentially, they were letting a piece of themselves, their substance, go.

At Kamakhya, I found that substance and *sakti* were present, flowing in and out of multiple realms and creating powerful interpersonal relationships.

*INITIATION AND RELATION*

He who takes his stand in relation shares in a reality, that is, in a being that neither merely belongs to him nor merely lies outside him. All reality is an activity in which I share without being able to appropriate for myself...The more direct the contact with the Thou, the fuller is the sharing (Martin Buber 1937).

At the Kamakhya temple, I found that the concept of *sakti*, as divine energy, represents the meeting or attachment of persons, as demonstrated through bodily-relational connections. While *sakti* is present within intersubstantial relationships, connecting and linking individuals, specifically, the Guru-disciple relationship practiced at the Kamakhya Temple represents a directed meeting with an ultimate goal of relationship. Within the Guru-disciple relationship, we find a non-dual metaphysical love, which rises above the ego, where the relationship between people is the Goddess.

At Kamakhya, as in the larger Tantric tradition, the guru is a central and necessary aspect of one’s ultimate spiritual practice. The guru is a spiritual teacher, who has sufficient knowledge and accumulated *sakti* (energy) to competently initiate and guide a disciple.15

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15 Ideally, both men and women can become gurus. Yet, at Kamakhya, I found there to be far fewer visible or proclaimed female gurus. Nevertheless, a collaborator of mine told me that at the Kamakhya temple, and within the Tantric tradition, every disciple wished to have a female guru.
A GURU’S LOVE. Ideally, the guru is not only a spiritual teacher, but also a function (Feuerstein 2000). As a function, the guru represents a divine force, guiding the disciple towards moksa (enlightenment). Those who embody and communicate this force are called gurus. Because the guru is not a singular person, but a force and function, an individual can have more than one guru.

Larger than him or herself, the guru represents a unity apart from the dualistic categories of teacher and student. The guru uses wisdom and compassion to guide the disciple toward a universal Self. This labor of love should not be confused with other forms of what we call love. The guru is not trying to emphasize your ego by loving you as an individual. In fact, the guru is trying to do the exact opposite, and ultimately the guru, as a force driving you toward a certain Unity, can potentially be found in oneself as an inner principle (Feuerstein 2000a).16

CHOOSING A DISCIPLE. Once while I was at the Kamakhya temple, I asked a pundit (priest), who was also a guru himself, “How does a guru choose a disciple?” ignoring what I thought was the point of my question, he responded, “Exactly, the guru chooses the disciple,” implying that the disciple does not choose the guru. The guru comes to the relationship with knowledge and understanding that he or she may use to judge whether the potential disciple is going to respond and grow from his or her guidance.

Before initiation, the Guru examines and tests the intending disciple for a specific period…[Ideally, the good disciple] is he [sic] who is pure minded, self-controlled, ever engaged in doing good to all beings, free from false notions of dualism, attached to the speaking of, taking shelter with and ever living in consciousness of, the Supreme Brahma (Woodroffe 1975:335).

It is important for the guru to take this time to examine the disciple, because after the guru initiates the disciple, the guru becomes responsible in some form for the “sins” (pap) or misdeeds of the disciple on both a social and an energetic level. The energetic connection between the guru and the disciple lasts a lifetime and beyond.

16 Ultimately, the “Guru function” should not be understood as an exclusively inner principle, but a principle that in its “ego busting” nature illuminates the interconnection of all things that are present everywhere, including in yourself.
DIKSA. Initiation (diksa) in the Sakta tradition entails the transfer of sakti (energy) via a mantra from the guru to the disciple. More exactly, “divine Sakti consisting of Mantra is communicated from the guru’s body to that of the Sisya [disciple] (Woodroffe 1975:336).” Mantra is not a prayer, or simply a string of letters and sounds; it is a form of sakti (Mantra Sakti) possessed by the guru. The Sakta tradition, as practiced at Kamakhya, clearly understands the guru, the mantra, the mala (rosary), and the Goddess (or Sakti) to be one.

While at Kamakhya, my guru explained to me that each time he gave a mantra, he physically felt the lost of some sakti he had been accumulating and had to rebuild what he had lost. Conversely, the transfer of the mantra from the guru to the disciple can be so powerful that the disciple collapses under its weight. Completely unaware of the depth and significance of initiation, it was my reaction, after being given a mantra, to feel enormously tired, as though I had just run a marathon, and to cry as a result of pure exhaustion, because the burden of this energy was entering my system.

I found that the mantra that is given to a disciple is useful precisely because it comes from another human being, not a text. A text cannot transmit sakti. It is only because the guru, who has an understanding of the oneness of all things, of sakti, intentionally chooses the disciple, chooses to initiate, and has the ability to give the disciple a mantra, that the mantra is powerful. The interaction and the relationship between the Guru and the disciple illustrate the energetic levels of reality, especially as they concern human interaction. The guru meets the disciple, understanding their oneness, and helps the disciple, by sharing sakti, to reach a point where the disciple can also understand this unity. Ultimately, “the goal is not being swallowed by the teacher’s personality but merging with her or his true nature, which is the singular Reality that also is one’s own true nature (Feuerstein 2000b:94).” When spiritual Siddhi (spiritual insight or power) is achieved by the disciple, the distinction between guru and disciple disappears, along with all other distinctions.
MARTIN BUBER AND RELATION. Before and during my fieldwork at Kamakhya, where I was initiated into a spiritual lineage and established an intimate relationship with my Guru, I was enormously influenced by the ideas of the German philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965). Buber composed the text *I and Thou* (1937), which identified essentially two ways that we can engage the world, through “experiences,” or *I-It* relations, and through “encounters,” or *I-Thou* relations. *I-It* relations are characteristic of western rationality, our dominant mode, where the *I* observes the *It* from a distance, as an object, analyzing the quantifiable and qualifiable characteristics of the *It*. Buber warns, “without *It* man [sic] cannot live. But he who lives with *It* alone is not a man (1937:233).” Yet, Buber suggests another mode of relation, which is often neglected, the *I-Thou* relation. When we enter into an *I-Thou* relationship, the element that the *I* is engaging with, the *Thou*, is not distant from the *I*, but seemly represents the entire universe. He calls this relationship love.

Buber notes, though, that *I-Thou* and *I-It* relationships shift back and forth. By practicing *I-Thou* relationships, though, one readies oneself for an encounter of pure relation, a divine encounter or an encounter with the divine. One cannot seek this event, but only prepare, knowing that an encounter of pure relation has happened by its effects, not its occurrence. The transformation that occurs after a pure encounter is marked by a loving responsibility one feels for the world, as a result of seeing everything as a *Thou*, interconnected, related.

This loving responsibility motivates the continual practice of the *I-Thou* relationship, where one approaches each relationship as an *I-Thou* relationship. Similarly, I have found that the Guru, who understands the pervasive quality of *Sakti*, also sees the world’s interconnectivity, and therefore approaches the disciple as a *Thou*, encouraging the disciple to see their divine oneness in relation.

Similar to Martin Buber’s notion that the divine can be found in the moment or meeting between two people, the guru at Kamakhya meets the disciple, creating a connection. This connection is expressed both emotionally and energetically. The transfer of a mantra from the
Guru to a disciple acts as a divine link between both parties. Their relationship, while rooted in a specific spiritual path, holistically encompasses all experience. The transfer of energy between two people, as a manifestation of divine relation, emphasizes the divine nature of the universe in the meeting, which can be understood as love. It is this power, the transcendent power of a universal love, extending beyond the self, which is divine. A passage from the Mahanirvana-Tantra exclaims:

One enjoys liberation when one knows that the Self is the Witness, the Truth, the Whole (*purna*), all pervasive, nondual, supreme, and though abiding in the body, is not body-bound (Mahanirvana-Tantra 14.6).

While the emotional qualities that accompany paternal or romantic love, and the like, may be present in the divine-meeting between the Guru and the disciple, this relationship and realization of divinity is not simply a psychological encounter; rather, this love is a ‘metaphysical’ reality. Buber aptly states, “Feelings accompany the metaphysical fact of love, but they do not constitute it (1937:14).” While feeling are something that one individual can possess, divine-love is the act of meeting, connecting. This love in-relation occurs through transfer, which can ultimately become mutual. Divine exchange is a gift, a connection and a responsibility for both the Guru and the disciple.
RESPONSE-ABILITY

For numerous anthropologists, the concept of reciprocity, as an analytic tool, has been used widely. Reciprocity can be understood, for example, as the act of “doing or rendering something in return for a good received, an act committed, or an evil inflicted [creating an exchange between parties] (Van Gorcum, 1975).” I have found that the Guru-disciple relationship, as practiced at Kamakhya, represents what can be understood as a form of nonmaterial reciprocity.

TRANSFER AND EXCHANGE. During the disciple’s initiation, the Guru gives the disciple a mantra. This mantra, as a verbal form of divine energy, is generated within the Guru’s body and passed on to the disciple. As with Mauss’ gift, which carries some part of the giver with it as it is given away (1924:158 f.), and the notion of interpersonal substance exchange present at Kamakhya, the mantra that the Guru gives the disciple represents the transfer of the Guru into an embodied place of relation, where the Guru’s sakti is transferred into the disciple’s body. In this way, the Guru and the disciple meet.

Describing reciprocity, Levi-Strauss writes, “[It is] the most immediate form under which the opposition between the I and the other can be integrated (1949:98).” Once a Guru initiates the disciple, placing both parties in direct relation, a bond between the two is created that integrates the I and the other.

At Kamakhya, I was told that once a guru gives an individual diksa (initiation), both the guru and the disciple share each other’s good and bad karma. Therefore, the failing of the disciple is also the failing of the Guru, as the success of the disciple, in any

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17 This title, “Response-ability,” refers to both the responsive, transactional aspect of a reciprocal relationship, as well as the essential duty and responsibility that individuals in this relationship have to one another.
18 Classical and contemporary social theorists, such as Malinowski (1922), Mauss (1924), Levi-Strauss (1949) and Sahlins (1965) have all written about reciprocity and gift exchange in various ways.
19 While the transmission of mantra sakti is largely nonmaterial, and the relationship that is formed between the Guru and the disciple often avoids material transactions, sakti and relation, within a non-dual system, exist everywhere, both in the material and the nonmaterial, in the body and the spirit.
20 Hallstrom (1999) defines Karma as “[action, the result of action, or] the moral law of cause and effect by which one reaps what one sows (1999:225).” Lamb (2000) writes, “...karma may be shared among members of a family or community, making it not always simply an individual affair...[For example,] When a father does sin, his sons have to eat the fruits (2000:39-40).”
realm, is also the success of the Guru. This relationship implies a connection and responsibility to one another that spans lifetimes.

A LOVE-RELATIONSHIP. The guru-disciple relationship at Kamakhya, which is characterized by an initial gift-exchange, manifests and is spoken about in terms of a love relationship. The guru and the disciple are intimately and necessarily connected. My guru, Ram, said, “the guru-disciple relationship is the most important relationship. It is not an economic relationship. It is a relationship of love (Kamakhya, March 2004).” He continued to explain to me that a Guru should never be given money by his or her disciple, because this complicates and can potentially create tension within their relationship.

On my second visit to Kamakhya, I brought multiple gifts with me for each of my family members in the household. It irritated me that my Guru kept looking at the gifts and exclaiming that they were all so expensive, and that I clearly spent a large amount of money. While I kept telling him that the money was not important and that they were just gifts, evidently, the expense of each piece shown more than its intent as a gift. There are no simple gifts, and what I brought to Assam was seen in terms of its monetary value.

Again, when I attempted to give the family a gift of money from my mother, I found myself confronted with tensions. In many ways I found myself pulled and pressed between two opposed forces. My mother had wanted to both thank the family for the various blessings they had imparted upon me and cover some of the costs for pujas (rituals) that had been performed in my name. For safety purposes, she had asked me to get the money from an ATM when I arrived in Assam. At Kamakhya, though, I was a member of a family, and I had relatively little individual freedom to leave the house without full explanation and certainly I could not go to the city of Guwhati alone. Therefore, when I asked my Guru whether we could go to an ATM in Guwhati, I was told that it was not necessary; it was not a good thing for me to give them money.
I felt so torn. My mother had given me very specific instructions to give this money to them; it was important to her. I tried my case over and over again, but Ram would reply, “What, are we a hotel? Do you have to pay us? Don’t you love us? You are like our family. We love you.”

I struggled, trying to make them understand that I did not think of them as a hotel service. I said that I understood how money complicated relationships and can separate individuals, but this money was not coming from me. This was a gift from my mother, because she could not be with them in person to thank them. Ram answered, “Is there any difference between you and your mother? You are the same.” Although it is true that my mother and I are essentially linked and one, it became doubly hard for my family in Assam to take the money from my mother because it came directly from my hand.

Regarding the difference between economically motivated trade and gift-exchange, Van Gorcum (1975) writes:

> …in the case of traders…the relationship remains commercial, distinct from the personal ties that have developed in the course of prolonged contacts. But a gift-exchange obliges the givers to continue their relations and to behave not like individual parties, but as partners (1975:40).

While I assured Ram that I had enough money to travel safely whether I gave him my mother’s gift or not, a subtler level of this struggle had very little to do with my financial status. As my Guru’s disciple, I was engaged in a familial relationship of love. By giving my guru money, whether it was directly from me or through me from my mother, I was creating an economic, separated relationship that could potentially break down the relationship of love that we had created. The presence of money within the relationship invited objectification and acquisition. Ultimately, maintaining the guru-disciple relationship is of utmost importance, and this is why the transaction of money is relatively prohibited.
RELATION AND RESPONSIBILITY. Nevertheless, there is a transactional dynamic within the Guru-disciple relationship. The intimacy that is developed and maintained, by emphasizing the character of love within the relationship, creates and enforces a close bond and sense of responsibility for one another. Korsgaard (1992) explains, “To hold someone responsible is to regard her as a person—that is to say...capable of acting both rationally and morally...with whom you can enter into a kind of relation...a relation of reciprocity (1992:306).” In order to maintain and develop the guru-disciple relationship, as a reciprocal relationship, both individuals must trust and love one another. Aptly, Kant writes:

If I am to love him as I love myself I must be sure that he will love me as he loves himself, in which case he restores to me that with which I part and I come back to myself again (1775-1780 [1930]:202).

A sense of moral responsibility and connectedness is needed and ideally results from the guru-disciple love relationship, which is reinforced by the notion of karmic boundedness.

Because of the acknowledgement of shared karma and spiritual goals, not only between the guru and the disciple, but also among the members of my parampara (spiritual lineage) at Kamakhya, as we are all closely interrelated, it was the responsibility of each member of a parampara to care for one another. While a guru, or an older, more accomplished member of the parampara, may appear to hold more power within the guru-disciple relationship, instructing the disciple to follow his or her instructions, the guru, in many ways, also assumes more responsibility. It is the guru’s responsibility to guide and care for his or her disciples, as it is the responsibility of a mother and father to care for their children. Conversely, the disciple possesses her own action. As the child, the disciple has the power to demand certain action and care from those who are connected with her. This is the disciple’s power.

Soon after arriving at Kamakhya for the first time, Julia Jean, Rishiji and Ram began to call me Little-Boss. Although I cannot remember who or exactly why they gave me this name, I interpreted it as a title born from a sort of sarcasm and affection. In
many ways I was a small child in Assam. I was the newest member of the household and often ignorant to the flows and conventions of the home. I was aware of this fact, so I tried to happily surrender to the forces I could not control or understand, doing my best to correct the mistakes that I made. The nickname, Little-Boss, as I understood it, was an ironic and contradictory expression. It was fun to call me Little-Boss, because I was just a little one, there was no way that I could be the “Boss” of anyone.

One day, I made a comment to Julia Jean about this name that everyone had begun to call me, explaining my interpretation. She replied that there was also another reason to call me Little-Boss. As the youngest member of the parampara, I was the responsibility of everyone above me. In this way, I was the “boss” of everyone over me. Although they could instruct me and make certain decisions that I could not, one of their top priorities was my welfare. While power and responsibility often appear to be stratified among individuals, both these elements extend outward, as well as flowing up and down.21

*TENSION AND DUTY.* Because of the multidimensional, interwoven quality of a disciple’s responsibilities in a parampara, one’s course of action, as in life, is not always simple and clear. During the end of July 2003, while Julia Jean and I were in India, the Sharma family decided to travel from Assam with Rishiji to his home in Himachal Pradesh. Julia Jean and I were invited to accompany the family and happily took a train to Delhi with the family, continuing on to Himachal Pradesh in a crowded bus and rented van. Sadly, after a week, I had to find my way back to Delhi, a full-day’s journey, in order to catch my plane back to the United States.

As my professor, guardian and guide, Julia Jean felt that it was her responsibility to accompany me back to Delhi. Nevertheless, she felt a certain tension from our guru, Ram, to stay in Himalchal Pradesh, so that she could celebrate Gurupurnima, an

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21 Lamb (2000) identifies a relationship between seniors and juniors, based on her fieldwork in Bengal, that I also experienced while living in my guru’s home at kamakhya. According to Lamb, juniors exchange seva and pranam (respectful devotion and service) for blessings from their elders. This was a necessary relationship, especially for elders, who in their older age needed care from junior family members (2000:62).
important annual celebration of one’s guru, as an embodiment of the divine, with her guru and his family. Additionally, Julia Jean felt another source of tension, pulling her in yet another direction. Rishiji had told her that it would be better for her not to be present for Gurupurnima, because of the undesirable attention she would receive as a foreigner. This attention would weaken her own internal state, inhibiting her sadhana.

While Julia Jean clearly knew that as a disciple it was her duty to please her guru, she also had an obligation to care for me, as a member of the parampara, and an obligation to listen to Rishiji, as another one of her gurus. These seemingly contradictory pulls and tensions challenged Julia Jean to consider the nature and importance of each request that was made of her. Each individual that had a contrasting position was related to Julia Jean in a web of importance and duty.

Because of the nature of the web, Julia Jean acknowledged relations and responsibilities from many directions, as they related to her. These duties seemed oppositional at times, and were difficult for her to understand and react to. Yet ultimately, she felt that as my guardian, she would accompany me to Delhi. While it was clear that she, depending on her connections, was in a position of certain responsibility, the decisions she made could not be decided in terms of a standard mode or course of action. Each situation was unique and required her to think about her responsibility to a specific person, while also making a sacrifice on another level.

Although, ideally each thread could construct and support the web as a whole, clearly, there were multiple expectations of Julia Jean that could or could not have flexibly supported the other expectations. Reciprocal relationships that are rooted in a sense of trust and responsibility for those within the relationship are seemingly complexified and perhaps compromised by multiple relations. This makes me wonder: Is a reciprocal relationship of equal value possible to maintain with numerous individuals?
In Conclusion

During the summer of 2003 and March 2004, my experiences living at the Kamakhya temple with a Brahman family, as well as being initiated into their family lineage, revealed a complexity and multiple dimensional nature of relation between persons. When I returned from India, and was asked what it was that made the most significant impression, I replied, “the overwhelming love and devotion that was unceasingly extended toward me.”

Living at the Kamakhya temple, as well as being given diksa and having the opportunity to practice at the temple, illuminated the substantial and energetic aspects of our relational reality. I found that each element of our relation acts as a step toward an understanding of a deeper connection, where what connects us is a non-dual force— the divine, the Goddess, Sakti, the Universe.

GLOSSARY

bhakti. Lit., “devotion,” or “love.”

chakra. Lit., “wheel”; in Tantrism a energy center in the subtle body.

darsan. Seeing the deity.

Devi. Goddess.

diksha. Spiritual initiation that the guru gives to the disciple.

guru. A spiritual teacher.

guru-purnima. Annual festival where disciples worship their guru.

japa. Mantra recitation.

Kamakhya. A Sakta-Hindu temple that is located in Assam, India, as well as the name of the Goddess for which the temple is dedicated.
*mala.* Garland of flowers given to a deity; garland of mantra-beads for performing *japa.*

*mantra.* a form of *sakti* (*Mantra Sakti*)
possessed by the Guru and given to the disciple, during initiation.

*parampara.* A spiritual lineage.

*pundit.* A priest.

*puja.* Lit., “worship”; worship involving an offering.

*rishi.* Seer or sage.

*sadhana.* spiritual practice.

*sakti.* The Goddess in her energetic form.

*tantra.* Lit., “loom”; a system of spiritual practices.

*Sakta Pitha.* “Seat of the Goddess”; One of several sacred Sakta-Hindu locations, where it is believed that a piece of the Goddess Sati fell to earth.

*Sakta Tradition.* Representing one of three (*Sakta, Saiva, Vaisnava*) contemporary branches of the Hindu-Tantric tradition, the *Sakta* practice acknowledges that the Goddess is the supreme-divine unifying force in the universe.

*Siddhi.* Spiritual insight or power achieved through spiritual practice.

*yoni.* Vagina, womb or vulva.

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