

THE GIFTS OF THE NAGAS



Serpent Spirits and their
role within the Shamanic
Traditions of Nepal

Bhola Banstola



Nagas are a class of long-lived, serpent-like, semi-divine, awakened spiritual beings, highly revered as masters of wisdom by shamans and spiritual practitioners. They are respected for their healing powers, their magical skill, and their great courage; but sometimes they are feared for their violence and quick tempers. Nagas vary in their types of perception and also vary in their levels of wisdom.

Nagas can transfigure into other forms at will, but mostly they appear snake-like, typically depicted as attractive beings, richly adorned with jewels. They are awe-inspiring, their upper bodies appear human, either male or female, but they have a serpentine tail below their waists.

They are deeply connected to the earth, water and the other realms, and nagas are seen as protectors and the bestowers of abundance, both material and spiritual.

The word 'naga' is Sanskrit for cobra, and in most of the languages of Nepal and India the word *nag* means snake, especially a cobra. The word can be used for nagas of either gender, but often a female naga will be called a *nagini*. The word naga is also the name of the forest-dwelling people of north-eastern India and Myanmar.

Naga practices have been a living tradition in Nepal from time immemorial.

In the Himalayas, some of the most powerful deities and spirit beings are depicted with crowns, necklaces, bracelets and anklets in the form of serpents, nagas, and a strong serpent cult is present in all the leading religious practices of Asia, such as the Vedic religion, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and the Bön practices. This importance of nagas is also found within the prevalent myths, rites, rituals, and healing practices of the dharmajhankri (shamans) of Nepal and the Himalayan regions, as nagas are primal spirit beings who play a dominant role.

Nagas are considered to be present in all of the phases of the creation, nurturance and final termination of the universe, and they play the same role in all of the life phases of individual living beings too.

Left:
Bronze Cobra
Northern India
C18th

The realm of the nagas is called naga loka, and it is the lowest part of the Lower World realms. From there, the nagas command and rule the whole universe. They are also thought to inhabit the underworlds below the land and the sea, as well as being in rivers, lakes, wells and oceans, as well as inaccessible caves and caverns. They can also be where there are geothermal vents and hot water springs, which provide pockets of warmth to protect them from harsh weather conditions. But they are not just thought of as physical beings, as they are also considered to be unseen spirits, associated with space, air, fire, water and fluidity.

There is an archetypal image of Shiva and Shakti - the primordial male and female aspects of creation - as two mating serpents, interwoven to form a caduceus symbol. This is an image found in esoteric tantric art, and symbolises complete union; the great naga, kundali.

In this form the great Shiva and Shakti nagas are at the centre of the naga universe, at the centre of the naga loka.

Flanking these primordial male and female aspects of creation, and all around them, there are said to be the eight Naga Raja [naga kings] and Naga Rani [naga queens] with four Naga Dikpala [guardians] - at the four quarters of the circle of the universe.

The Naga Raja can be recognised by a glowing gem, which is found on the top of his head, or on his forehead, or in his mouth. This gem can grant wishes and manifest the power of the



There is a special naga, called Naga Kanya. She is called the 'virgin naga,' which means she has no family and lives on her own

Naga Kanya lives beyond the boundaries between realms, and has no single domain to which she belongs. She takes care of the earth, the waters and the atmosphere

nagas. This is called the *naga mani*, and it is one of the most precious things that a naga holds.

In our tradition, we say that when a shaman journeys to the lowest part of the Lower World, it is not dark, deep down there, because of the light that the naga-mani radiates, making everything luminous instead of dark. So we say the naga mani is one of the most precious things that the world has ever had.

There is also a special naga, called Naga Kanya, or sometimes Naga Kumari. Naga Kanya is the 'virgin naga,' which means she has

no family and lives on her own. Naga Kanya lives beyond the boundaries between realms, and has no single domain to which she belongs. She takes care of the earth, the waters and the atmosphere.

She is always depicted with several small serpents rising above her, growing out from within her, and forming a canopy over her head. When she has a five hooded

Above: painted and gilded five hooded Naga Kanya statue Patan, Nepal late C20th



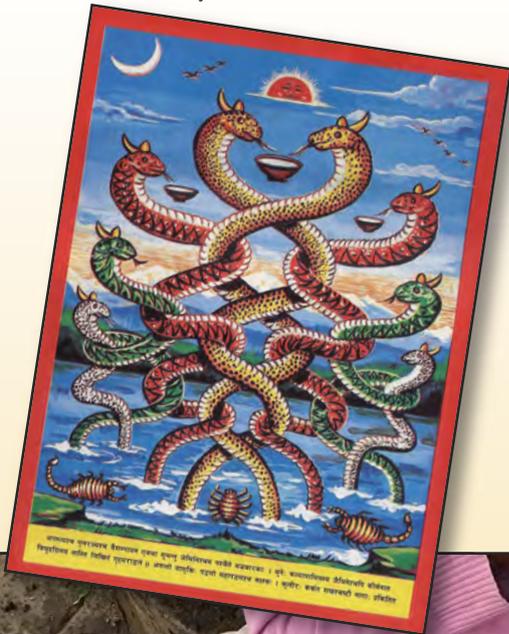
Far left: Shiva and Shakti. Temple Carving Kathmandu

Left: male and female snakes entwine during their mating

Every household pastes pictures of nagas above the door to their house and give offerings of milk and other foods to the pictures. There is a belief that making offerings protects the house from lightning and fire, and the family from snakes and scorpions

This page: posters sold for the annula Naga Panchami day festival in various forms

snake canopy she is Pancha Kanya Devi; when she has a seven serpent canopy she is Sapta Kanya Devi, and when she has a nine serpent canopy she is called Nava Kanya Devi.



The lower half of her body is shown as a serpent, and the top half of her is shown as a woman, and she also has wings. The wings are essential, because they symbolise that she has no limitation to her domain.

In her hands, she holds a white conch shell, which recalls all the primordial memories.

The naga loka is where many types of nagas dwell, and some traditions say that there are eight different kinds of nagas, collectively called the *aasta naga*, but some cosmologies say there are nine or even twelve different types.

Shesha - who is also known as Ananta - is said to be the supreme of all the naga kings. Lord Vishnu rests upon him, the naga taking the form of a sacred couch. He represents the concept of 'endlessness,' and he is said to support the entire weight of the earth.

Nagas can have either a beneficial, hostile or neutral influence on human beings.

They can suffer greatly because of humanity's carelessness and our ignorance of the proper conduct towards nature, as well as all our disrespectful actions towards environment. When this happens, nagas often retaliate towards humans, especially when their environment is polluted such as



when disrespectful humans urinate or defecate in the place of a naga. These kinds of actions can result in the manifestation of emotional imbalance, physical diseases, or various natural calamities.

Nagas are closely associated with the earth and the water. They are protectors or guardian spirits of rivers, lakes, reservoirs and seas,



swamps and forests. They also control rainfall, and thus affect the fertility of the land.

Because they bring rain, they may also cause a drought. That is why during the annual Nepalese Naga Panchami naga festival, they are celebrated as the Naga Raja and Naga Rani, in recognition of their many attributes.

NAGA PANCHAMI FESTIVAL

The Naga Panchami or Naag Panchami Festival is celebrated on the fifth day after the new moon in the lunar month of Srawana (July or August) to honour the nagas.

Every household pastes pictures of nagas above the main entrance door to their house, traditionally using cow dung as a paste, and give offerings of milk, rice and other foods to the pictures. There is a popular belief that pasting the picture above the main door and making offerings protects the house from lightning and fire, and the family from snakes and scorpions.

Snakes are often welcomed if they venture into a Nepali home, and are given a saucer of milk to encourage them to stay. There is a belief held by many rural people that snakes drink milk, and cobras are therefore often given milk-offerings, especially during Naga Panchami. But snakes, being reptiles, cannot digest milk.

Some people are fearful that milk is harmful to the snakes and, might even cause death to them, but milk, as a universal nurturing offering, is given to most deities and spirit beings as a sign of honour and auspiciousness, and in reality the snakes don't drink it.

Killing, or even harming a cobra, is dreaded and thought of as the deadliest of sins. It is feared that the wrath of the snake will haunt generation after generation, and the remedial rituals needed in order to mollify this wrath are quite elaborate. It is said that a cobra can nurture a grudge against any injustice meted out to it and take its revenge, which is in part cobras are placated by giving them these offerings.

The power to resurrect the dead is also attributed to snakes, along with their power to break droughts, a vital ability in monsoon-dependent Nepal. Traditionally, on this day of Naga Panchami, the



Left: giving a milk offering to a carving of a naga on a building in Kathmandu



Left: giving a milk offering to a carved naga at the sacred Naag Pokhari pool



Left: a carved naga festooned with offerings during the Naga Panchami day festival

Erecting carvings and statues of nagas, and special naga poles, in order to worship them has been done since time immemorial

are connected with the nagas and the major gods of the Hindu Vedic pantheon; for example Vishnu and Shiva are frequently shown wreathed in, or protected by a multi-headed snake.

The celebrations of Naga Panchami are especially intense in the Kathmandu Valley itself, which both local tradition and geologists agree was once a large lake. Legend holds this to have been the snake gods' earthly seat, and so every riverside shrine, lake and artificial pool in Kathmandu, and throughout much of Nepal in general, has images of nagas, and are considered sacred to them.

Wells and fountains are also normally marked by snake carvings, and can only be cleaned once a year, at a time when the snakes are believed to be away worshipping their ancestors.

And so each year Nepalis offer prayers to the nagas in their gardens and near water courses and pools, and farmers will pour milk into the sacred Bagmati River for the nagas too.

Virtually every house and commercial building is blessed by cleaning its entrance with a mixture of water and cow dung, and then one of the brightly coloured images of the snake deities will be pasted there. Very often a *tika* - a spot of rice mixed with vermilion powder - will be placed on the images to adorn the snakes, and family members will offer flowers, herbs and incense to them.

The practice of erecting statues and carvings of nagas in order to



Above: the sacred Naag Pokhari pool

Right: a naga-kastha pole at sacred Naag Pokhari pool



monsoon rains are considered to be over, and in order to thank the serpent deities - as the protectors of earth and bringers of timely rain for the planting season - they are honoured with special *pujas* [ceremonies] and rituals.

People believe that worship of nagas ensures that there will be no drought, and every household will offer prayers and rituals in their own ways throughout Nepal. Devotees also often gather at places considered sacred to the nagas to pay homage to them;

such as Naag Bahal in the city of Patan, and Basukithan - in the temple of Pashupatinath - and Naag Pokhari, both of which are in Kathmandu.

Naag Pokhari is a pool or small lake sacred to the nagas, within Kathmandu, and a special ceremony is held there to mark the festival; just as special ceremonies are held at other *naaga kunda* - pools dedicated to nagas - throughout the whole country.

Many legends and stories associated with water and miracles

Below: offering milk to a snake during the Naga Panchami day festival

Below right: a carved stone Naga in Kathmandu



worship them has been practiced since time immemorial. There is also the practice of erecting special naga poles, called *naga-kastha* which have a snake-shaped image at the top, in order to mark the occasion of Nag Panchami.

Because nagas are considered to be the closest allies of Bhumi Devi (the sacred Earth

Mother), they are thought to be everywhere; and so, before the planting of a new rice crop in a paddy field, before planting a tree, before starting the building of any new structure, the shamans and astrologers are consulted in order to find the most auspicious moment for beginning, and also to find the location of the abode of the nagas so as to avoid disturbing it.

On the day of Naga Panchami, and also on the day of Vasanta Panchami¹ - which is dedicated to the Mother Earth - we do not work on the land, no tilling, or ploughing, or cutting down trees. We avoid these jobs as a sign of respect, so the nagas and the earth are not disturbed.

After the first harvest of the season - especially the rice harvest - a *nuvagi puja* [ceremony to offer the first harvest] is performed, to thank Mother Earth and the nagas. In this puja we express gratitude for the timely rain, the fertility of the fields and the crops, and the help and importance of the ancestors.

The ceremony consists of collecting the first rice from the harvest, which is prepared by thrashing it to remove the husks, and the chaff, and then cooking it and offering it both to the fire and also out in nature, where it is offered, along with milk and colour pigments, at special stone shrines decorated with colourful stripes of cloth.

HEALING AND HARMING

Nagas can be seen as both auspicious and inauspicious by different traditions. This is, as I said above, because if they are not happy they can create disharmony within our bodies, our minds or our environment.

They are also considered the most important archetypes of change and transformation,

because they shed and change their skins for their renewal - which is the beginning of all new life.

Because of this, they teach us to let go of old things, unhelpful memories, trauma, grudges and anger about the past, and so give to us a new beginning. If we cannot let go of our old patterns, our past thoughts, our old stories - all the things which are unhealthy - we cannot begin new projects.

That is why nagas are revered as primal spirits, beings who teach us about change, because change is inevitable; we are all perishable beings, not immortal ones.

But although all things change, at the same time the nagas are thought of as the 'spirits of immortality.' This does not mean they are immortal and do not die, it merely means they have a very highly developed consciousness; and their consciousness and wisdom are helpful for us because we can learn to understand things from them.

Our myths tell us that at the foundation of all things is a conch shell, and above the conch shell is a naga, and above the naga is a turtle, and above the turtle there are eight elephants, and above the elephants is the earth herself.

The naga who supports the turtle is called Seshha-Ananta Naga Dev; and this naga holds the whole world on its nine heads. Our stories say that if this naga is unhappy and moves one of those nine heads, an earthquake happens, and when it spits out its venom a volcano erupts. Seshha-Ananta Naga Dev holds up the sky too and is known as the pillar which holds up everything, everywhere.

It is so important that we remember these serpentine beings. If we look at the ancient

Shesha is said to be the supreme of all the naga kings. Lord Vishnu rests upon him, the naga taking the form of a sacred couch. He represents 'endlessness,' and is said to support the entire weight of the earth

civilizations of the world - such as the Sumerians and the Mesopotamians of the Middle East, or the Mayan culture of Central America, or the ancient Indus valley civilizations - we see the presence of sacred serpents beings in different forms.

Some of these beings are precisely like serpents, but some are half-

Above: a statue of Naga Kanya designed to be fixed to a wall or a door

Below: the naga Shesha in the form of a couch, with Lord Vishnu standing upon him



Left: offerings on stone carvings of cobras in Kathmandu



both human and serpentine qualities. They have a peculiar shape, can move swiftly in their mysterious gliding motion without the aid of any limbs or wings. They have unblinking mesmerizing eyes that holds one spellbound. They have their peculiar tongue; and perhaps most importantly they cast off their skin, seemingly rejuvenating themselves each time. This practise of skin shedding suggests longevity, or even immortality. It also suggests a sense of freeing oneself from burdens and ignorance, and progressing towards freedom from mundane existence.

These spirit beings were envisioned and understood by our ancestors, who saw and comprehended how the world was created and what role these serpentine beings have in it; and so, because of this awareness, they understood how important it was to honour them

Snakes seem to have a powerful hold upon the imagination of people, a great allure, perhaps because of the mysteries and symbolism they hold. They are undoubtedly unique creatures; decidedly un-human and yet exhibiting a bewildering blend of

But of course, not everything about nagas is positive. There is a belief that through the mere fiery blast of their nostrils an angry naga can cause destruction. Such 'ill-wind' can also pollute the air and bring about diseases.

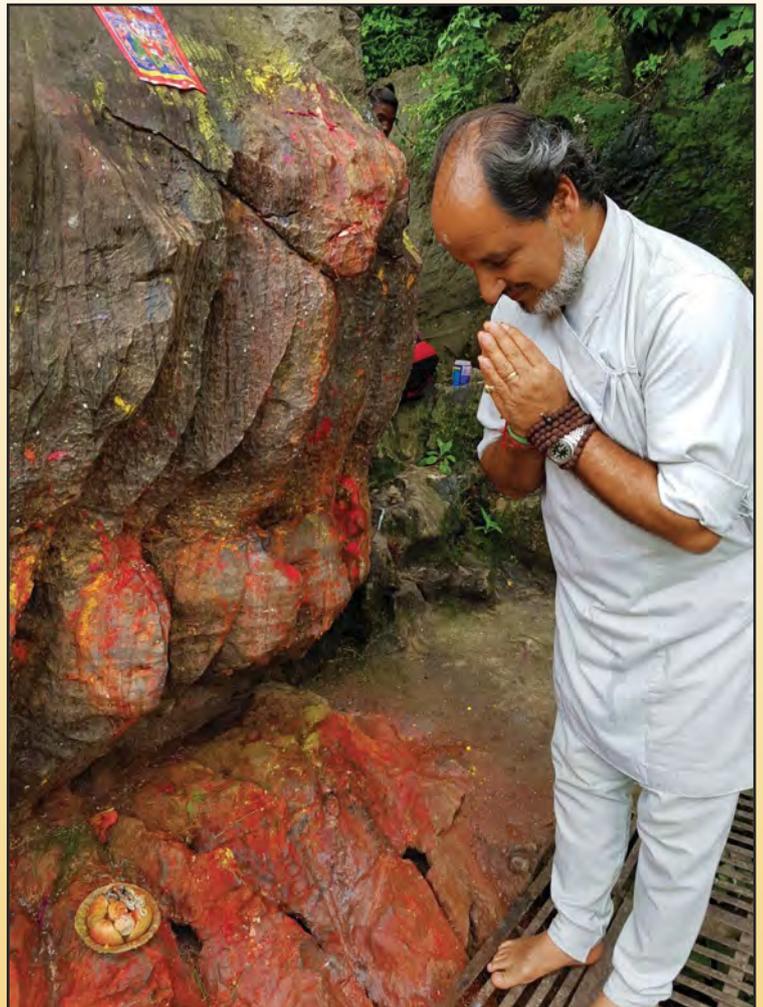
We have a term, *naga dosha*, which means the negative effect that a naga can have on someone,

Right: the author making offerings to the nagas at a sacred site in Nepal

serpent and half-human, some are half-serpent and half-bird, and some are half-serpent and half another animal of one kind or another.

These spirit beings were envisioned and understood by our ancestors, who saw and comprehended how the world was created and what role these serpentine beings have in it; and so, because of this awareness, they understood how important it was to honour them.

Below: offerings on carvings of cobras and a naga in Kathmandu





person is not in harmony with the nagas in some way.

But it is not only human reproduction that they can affect. We have another term, *kala sarpa dosha*, which is the adverse effect of a naga on the course of a person's life. In our life, we may have things we want to do, but we are blocked from doing them. It is not enough that we want to do something, it is not enough that our ancestors approve, or our family approves, or our spirit helps approve; something happens all the time which blocks us.

The nagas have a significant role to play in the cycle and path of all our lives, and we believe that the naga serpents can cause these types of obstacles.

NAGAS WITHIN OUR BODY

As we know, caduceus, the famous symbol of medicine the sign - which many pharmacies and hospitals have outside - is a staff with two serpents, two nagas winding up it and looking at each other.

Nagas are the symbol of medicine, because we have nagas inside us, and the caduceus sign - the two snakes and the central staff - represent the three energy channels we have in our bodies. The nagas represent two aspects, one female and one male - called

ida and *pingala* - and the central staff - called *sushumna* or *meru-danda* - as well.

Sushumna is a neutral channel, neither male nor female, and it carries all of the memories from our previous existences. In our tradition, at the base of the sushumna, the nagas coil three and a half times around it. This coil is called *kundali*.

When we do sacred breathing exercises, and when we stimulate our base - our genitals - through breathing processes of contraction and relaxation, consciously for sacred self-regeneration but not for sexual pleasure, we generate harmony within us, which maintains our inner body temperature, enlivens our cells and our tissues, and gives life to our organs. This is the same naga, Sesha-Ananta Naga Deo - the mighty naga who holds up the earth and the sky - within our own body.

When Sesha-Ananta Naga Deo within our body contracts, it is like a serpent going in a cave, or a hole in the ground.

Like the realm of the nagas in the lowest of the Lower World realms, naga loka, the domain of the nagas within the human body is at the lowest part, the base of the vertebral column. In that space the serpent rests, all coiled up. But when it moves out on its own, or

Right: stone carving of writhing snakes in Kathmandu



or something, if we do not respect them and so pollute their sacred places etc..

In Vedic astrology, snakes are symbolically related to the invisible planet Rahu - which is identified with the head of the snake - while another invisible planet, Ketu, is identified with the snake's tail. When the other planets in a person's horoscope fall in between these two invisible planets, it is said to give rise to naga dosha. When this is determined astrologically, a set of special prayers and rituals are recommended to get rid of the ill effects of the dosha.

We also speak about something we call *sarpa dosha*, which is the negative effect a naga can have on a woman. We believe that the nagas are responsible for fertility and that they are the protectors of the human race.

Nagas bring abundance, and nagas also give progeny to people, they are responsible for human pregnancy. Even today, rural women who wish to have offspring often make offerings to nagas and worship them in hope they will help them conceive.

So nagas affect the ability of a woman to conceive a child, and because of this, they may give a woman a series of miscarriages, or they may cause problems with a woman's menstrual cycle, or create physical issues in a woman's sacred reproductive organs: and of course, they affect male reproduction too. When those things happen, we say it is *sarpa dosha*, because the

Below: Tibetan thangka painting of a naga and a dragon





This page: dough nagas on an altar, so that offerings of rice and other things can be made to them

because of certain spiritual practices, it goes out in a zig-zag line with its head raised.

This is the same way that a *thala naga* [earthbound serpent - physical snake] remains coiled up in a crevices in the earth, and comes out from time to time.

nagas within ourselves, and this process of contraction and relaxation is called *shesha-ananta*.

We say that sneezing, and the blinking of our eyes, our heartbeat, our breathing, the sacred fire in our belly, knees, calves, under the soles of our feet; every place, every house, every space within us, every important spirit point in our body, these are all governed by the naga.

So nagas are not something that we have to go to look for somewhere very far away from us, we can reflect upon ourselves, because we are the carriers of the nagas, deep within us in an unconscious form.

The nagas are the most excellent teachers and mentors to humans. A snake will not attack any being, unless it perceives that it is in danger, but once there is a danger then a snake will attack quickly.

And nagas teach us about our course through life too. Serpents move in a zig-zag way, showing their connection to the earth, because nagas collaborate with the Earth Mother; they work together.

So when a serpent moves in a zig-zag manner, it is a lesson for those of us on a spiritual path, as the nagas tell us that one single track, one direction, one way, may not have the answer. We cannot remain fixed on one path alone; we have to look for opportunities; we have to look for different resources.

WORKING WITH THE NAGAS

After having understood the healthy and unhealthy aspects of

When a serpent moves in a zig-zag, it is a lesson as the nagas tell us that one single track, one direction, one way, may not have the answer. We cannot remain fixed on one path alone; we have to look for opportunities; we have to look for different resources

nagas, the question comes, how do we appease them, interact with them, and generate a healthy relationship with them?

Approaching a naga with an open heart, clear understanding, and lack of greed or desire should bring positive results to you. Nagas prefer respectful human relations and being given the appropriate offerings, and it is good to request their intervention on auspicious days like Mondays and Thursdays or on the day of Naga Panchami.

To perform a naga puja, a simpler one is generally more effective.

You will need a picture, or a statue of a naga, or anything that represents naga or serpent world. This could be a long stone or a wavy stick or anything that makes you think of a serpent.

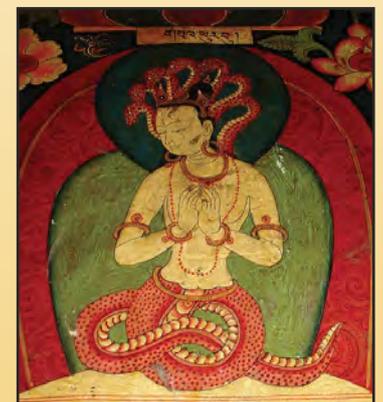
It is perfectly possible to make your own nagas, two serpents - male and female - from a dough made from wheat flour. Make them in a zig-zag shape, with three or five curves along their body, and



Right: a wall painting of a naga in a Buddhist temple in Nepal

When we are in a state of low energy; of slow motion; when we do not see the light of life; when we do not know that the door of life is opening; when we do not see the opportunities of life coming; then we become like the coiled naga. When this is the case, we do not move, and we remain locked down.

This contraction makes time shorter, and when - through healing and ceremonies and rituals and sacred practices - we start to make things happen, we are no longer stagnant, and the naga opens up itself, and this prolongs time. So, we are governed by the





Left: an altar for making offerings to Naga Kanya

pouring milk from the milk bowl into the empty bowl in front of the statue and scattering rice grains over the statue too.

When you have finished cleanse the statue or picture by sprinkling a little of the clean water on to it.

The next day, after the puja is completed, some of the fruit offering can be eaten as a sacred food, and the rest of the fruit and the other offerings - including the milk and water - need to be taken to a local river, pond or natural spring and left there. If this is not possible, placing them under a tree will be fine. Please be respectful when you leave offerings, don't leave a mess that other people may be upset about.

with their heads in upright position, not flat to the ground.

You will need some white or yellow flowers, or even green leaves if flowers are not possible, to be given as an offering.

A banana or an apple, either the whole washed fruit, or peeled and sliced. Put these on a small saucer or in a bowl.

Some milk in a cup, glass or bowl. Sometimes ground rice flour is mixed with water, to make a white liquid instead of using milk.

It is good to offer saffron water, yellow water made by soaking saffron in water; or if you do not have saffron, you can make yellow powder out of a mixture of turmeric powder and water.

A spoon and a small empty cup, saucer or bowl. Put this in front of your naga statue or picture, or object that represents the nagas to you, and you will spoon milk from the big bowl of milk to this empty bowl, in order to make offerings to the nagas.

A glass, or cup of clean water for cleansing the statue, or whatever represents nagas, after the ritual has been completed.

Some coins and precious, or semi-precious stones, and ideally some silver jewellery. All of these need to be washed before they are put into the sacred ceremonial place.

Some grains of uncooked rice.

Some natural incense, as much as possible. Traditionally a mixture of cow's butter and crushed juniper are used, but if this is not possible regular incense is good. It is possible to buy specific Tibetan naga incense for use in naga pujas, if you look for it online.

A white unscented candle, or an oil burner with a wick.

Strips of clean yellow or white cloth, which are used to decorate the statue, or picture of the naga.

Ideally one should wear yellow or white clothes while performing the puja, but if that is not possible clean clothes of any colour will be acceptable. It is recommended that you maintain a fast on the day of the puja until after you have completed it. If you are unable to fast eat only vegetarian food.

When all of this is set up and you have made your special altar for the naga puja, sit facing the east while doing the actual ceremony. Now you recite the naga mantra and make your offerings,

Bhola Banstola is a traditional long lineage carrier Jhankri-shaman from Nepal. He travels worldwide to share his tradition and has organised experiential shamanic learning trips and pilgrimages to Nepal and the Himalayas for more than two decades. He is documenting the shamanic healing practices from different communities of Nepal for the benefit of the next generation.

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NOTES:

1: Vasant Panchami is a festival which marks the preparation for the arrival of spring, celebrated forty days before spring officially arrives. It is celebrated in the lunar month of Magha, which falls in late January or February.

Below: an altar made for a naga puja made by the author on a recent visit to England

