

Erotic Elevation: Exploring the Psychological and Cultural Dimensions of Sexual Imagery Carved on Tudals of Temples of Kathmandu Valley

Elevación Erótica: Exploración de las Dimensiones Psicológicas y Culturales de las Imágenes Sexuales Talladas en los Tudals de los Templos del Valle de Katmandú

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Abstract

Hindu temple art in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal is renowned for its intricate carvings, particularly the tudals—wooden roof struts—that often depict gods and goddesses in explicit sexual poses. These carvings, deeply rooted in Tantric traditions, symbolize fertility, cosmic unity, and spiritual transcendence. Despite their cultural and historical significance, there remains a paucity of psychological research on their impact. This study employs a multidisciplinary approach integrating historical, cultural, and psychological perspectives to explore the implications of these carvings. Historical and cultural analyses reveal their origins in Tantric practices, where sexual symbolism signifies the union of opposing forces to achieve enlightenment. Mythologically, the carvings depict divine unions like Shiva and Shakti, embodying profound spiritual concepts. Culturally, the Newar community views these carvings not as taboo but as sacred representations of life's vitality and divine blessings. Symbolically, they denote the integration of dualities and the cyclical nature of existence, which is crucial for spiritual growth. Psychologically, Freudian and Jungian frameworks elucidate how these carvings serve as outlets for repressed desires and facilitate individuation by integrating unconscious elements. This research synthesizes existing literature and conducts archival research to contextualize these carvings within their historical and religious frameworks. It also employs thematic analysis to uncover their symbolic meanings and uses of psychological theories to interpret their impact on worshippers and visitors. By bridging gaps in existing scholarship, this study aims to deepen our understanding of Nepali temple art's psychological dimensions. It underscores the importance of these carvings not just as aesthetic artifacts but as profound expressions of spirituality and cultural identity. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader

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conversations at the intersection of sexuality, spirituality, and cultural heritage, highlighting the enduring relevance and significance of these ancient artistic traditions in contemporary society.

Keywords: Nepali temples, tudals, sexual imagery, Hindu art, Tantric traditions, psychological impact

Resumen

El arte de los templos hindúes en el Valle de Katmandú, Nepal, es renombrado por sus intrincadas esculturas, especialmente los tudales—vigas de techo de madera—que a menudo representan a dioses y diosas en poses sexuales explícitas. Estas esculturas, profundamente arraigadas en las tradiciones tántricas, simbolizan la fertilidad, la unidad cósmica y la trascendencia espiritual. A pesar de su significado cultural e histórico, existe una escasez de investigación psicológica sobre su impacto. Este estudio emplea un enfoque multidisciplinario que integra perspectivas históricas, culturales y psicológicas para explorar las implicaciones de estas esculturas. Los análisis históricos y culturales revelan sus orígenes en las prácticas tántricas, donde el simbolismo sexual representa la unión de fuerzas opuestas para alcanzar la iluminación. Mitológicamente, las esculturas representan uniones divinas como Shiva y Shakti, encarnando profundos conceptos espirituales. Culturalmente, la comunidad Newar ve estas esculturas no como tabú, sino como representaciones sagradas de la vitalidad de la vida y las bendiciones divinas. Simbólicamente, denotan la integración de dualidades y la naturaleza cíclica de la existencia, crucial para el crecimiento espiritual. Psicológicamente, los marcos freudianos y junguianos elucidan cómo estas esculturas sirven como salidas para deseos reprimidos y facilitan la individuación al integrar elementos inconscientes. Esta investigación sintetiza la literatura existente y realiza una investigación archivística para contextualizar estas esculturas dentro de sus marcos históricos y religiosos. También emplea el análisis temático para descubrir sus significados simbólicos y utiliza teorías psicológicas para interpretar su impacto en los devotos y visitantes. Al cubrir las lagunas en la erudición existente, este estudio pretende profundizar nuestra comprensión de las dimensiones psicológicas del arte de los templos nepalíes. Subraya la importancia de estas esculturas no solo como artefactos estéticos, sino como expresiones profundas de espiritualidad y identidad cultural. Finalmente, esta investigación contribuye a conversaciones más amplias en la intersección de la sexualidad, la espiritualidad y el patrimonio cultural, destacando la relevancia y significado perdurable de estas antiguas tradiciones artísticas en la sociedad contemporánea.

Palabras clave: Templos nepalíes, tudales, imágenes sexuales, arte hindú, tradiciones tántricas, impacto psicológico.

I. INTRODUCTION

Hindu temple art is a vibrant and integral aspect of cultural heritage in South Asia. It reflects the religious, social, and philosophical contexts of the periods in which it was created. In the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal, the temples are particularly noted for their intricate wooden carvings, which include a diverse array of symbolic and mythological depictions. Among these, the tudals (roof struts) often stand out because of their explicit sexual imagery, which poses a unique challenge and opportunity for psychological and cultural analysis.

Hindu temple art is a multifaceted tradition that includes sculptures, paintings, and architectural elements designed to express the divine and facilitate spiritual experiences. This art form is deeply symbolic, with every element serving a specific religious function or representing philosophical concepts. The temples of the Kathmandu Valley, such as Pashupatinath and Changu Narayan, exemplify the rich artistic heritage of the region, blending indigenous styles with influences from India and Tibet (Kramrisch, 1964).

The tudals of Nepali temples are wooden roof struts that often depict various deities, mythical creatures, and scenes from Hindu mythology. What sets some of these tudals apart is their portrayal of gods and goddesses in explicit sexual poses. These carvings are not merely decorative but are believed to hold deep symbolic meanings related to fertility, cosmic unity, and spiritual transcendence (Sharma, 2016).

The Kathmandu Valley is renowned for its wooden art, a tradition that dates back several centuries. The region's rich cultural heritage can be seen in the intricate woodwork found in temples, palaces, and private homes. Skilled artisans use local wood to create detailed carvings that are both aesthetically pleasing and spiritually significant. This tradition continues thriving, preserving the unique artistic identity of the Kathmandu Valley (Malla, 2009).

Despite the profound cultural and historical significance of sexual imagery in the carvings of Nepali temples, there is a notable absence of comprehensive psychological research investigating their effects on both worshippers and visitors. This study seeks to address this knowledge gap by exploring the psychological and cultural implications of these explicit carvings. This study has also reviewed research papers which were published previously, and analyzed the carvings from different perspectives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reviews on Existing Literatures

The literature on the sexual imagery in the tудals of Nepali temples is diverse, encompassing historical, cultural, and psychological perspectives. This review synthesizes key scholarly works to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Banerjee, (2010) provides a foundational exploration of Tantric practices in South Asia, highlighting how these practices are interwoven with the religious and cultural fabric of the region. Tantra, focusing on the union of masculine and feminine principles, often employs sexual symbolism to convey deeper metaphysical truths. This context is crucial for understanding the explicit sexual imagery in Nepali temple art, where such depictions are not merely decorative but serve significant ritualistic and symbolic functions. Banerjee's work emphasizes that these images are part of a broader spiritual practice aimed at achieving enlightenment through the integration of opposites.

Sharma (2016) delves into the specific symbolic meanings behind sexual depictions in Hindu temple art. His analysis reveals that these images often represent the cosmic union of Shiva and Shakti, embodying the ultimate reality of interconnectedness and unity. This perspective aligns with the broader Hindu philosophical view that transcends dualities through the merging of divine principles. Sharma's detailed examination provides a nuanced understanding of how sexual imagery is used to symbolize profound spiritual concepts, making it an integral part of temple iconography.

Kinsley (1988) explores the divine feminine in Hindu religious tradition, offering insights into how goddesses are depicted in temple art. His study is particularly relevant for understanding the sexual imagery in Nepali temples, as it contextualizes these depictions within the broader framework of goddess worship and the celebration of feminine power. Kinsley argues that these images are not meant to be pornographic but are instead sacred representations of divine fertility and creativity.

White (2003) examines the historical contexts of "Tantric sex" in South Asian traditions, providing a scholarly backdrop for interpreting the explicit carvings found in Nepali temples. White's work underscores the ritualistic and symbolic importance of these images, which are intended to convey deeper spiritual truths rather than provoke sensual arousal. By situating these carvings within the Tantric framework, White's analysis helps demystify the seemingly paradoxical presence of sexual imagery in sacred spaces.

Freud's (1913) work on taboo and sexuality offers a valuable psychological framework for understanding the explicit carvings in Nepali temples. Freud posits that such depictions can serve as expressions of repressed desires, allowing individuals to confront and integrate aspects of their unconscious mind in a socially acceptable manner. This interpretation suggests that the sexual imagery in temple art may function as a means for worshippers to engage with and resolve internal conflicts related to sexuality.

Jung (1968) provides another psychological lens through his theory of archetypes and the collective unconscious. Jung's concept of the Anima and Animus, representing the feminine and masculine aspects of each individual, offers a useful tool for interpreting the symbolic content of the carvings. According to Jungian analysis, these images could be seen as manifestations of universal psychological themes, facilitating personal growth and self-realization by encouraging the integration of these archetypal forces.

Gellner (1992) and Lewis (1984) explore the cultural conditioning that shapes the perception and impact of temple art among the Newar community in the Kathmandu Valley. Gellner's study highlights the unique relationship that Newars have with their religious art, viewing the explicit carvings as both sacred and protective. This cultural context is essential for understanding how these images are perceived not as profane but as integral to the spiritual and social fabric of the community.

Lewis (1984) provides further insights into the religious practices of the Newars, including their attitudes towards temple art. He notes that the explicit carvings are often seen as a reflection of the complex spiritual worldview of the Newars, where sexuality is not shunned but integrated into religious practice. This perspective helps explain why such imagery is prominently displayed in sacred spaces, serving functions that extend beyond mere aesthetic appeal.

Majupuria (2009) explores the direct impact of erotic carvings on worshippers in the Kathmandu Valley. His field studies reveal that, for many devotees, these images are a source of spiritual reflection and reverence, reminding them of the omnipresence of the divine in all aspects of life, including sexuality. Bajracharya's findings highlight the diverse reactions to these images, ranging from reverence to discomfort, depending on individual and cultural backgrounds.

Levy (1990) provides a comprehensive study of the Newar community, examining how religious art influences social and psychological structures. Levy's work suggests that the erotic carvings serve multiple purposes, including invoking divine blessings for fertility and prosperity and offering protection against negative forces. This

multifunctional role of the carvings underscores their importance in the daily religious and social lives of the Newar people.

Michaels (2004) discusses the evolution of Hindu practices and their contemporary significance, including the role of temple art. He argues that the explicit imagery in temples continues to hold relevance today, as it challenges contemporary attitudes towards sexuality and spirituality. Michaels' analysis provides a modern perspective on how these ancient artistic traditions remain vital and provocative in today's cultural landscape.

Slusser (1982) offers a detailed cultural study of the Kathmandu Valley, providing a rich background for understanding the significance of temple carvings. Her work emphasizes the continuity of artistic traditions and their role in shaping the cultural identity of the region. Slusser's comprehensive approach helps contextualize the erotic imagery within the broader framework of Nepali art and culture.

Despite the extensive scholarship on the historical and cultural aspects of Nepali temple art, there is a notable gap in the psychological analysis of the explicit sexual imagery found in the *tudals*. Most existing studies focus on the symbolic meanings and cultural contexts, with a limited exploration of the psychological impact on worshippers and visitors. This research aims to fill this gap by applying psychological theories to understand the significance and effects of these carvings. Integrating perspectives from art history, psychology, and cultural studies, this study seeks to provide a holistic understanding of this unique artistic phenomenon.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a multidisciplinary approach, integrating methods from art history, psychology, and cultural studies to analyze the sexual imagery in the *tudals* of Nepali temples. The methodology was designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the historical, symbolic, and psychological dimensions of these carvings.

Historical and Cultural Analysis

The first step involved a detailed historical and cultural analysis of the *tudals*. This included examining ancient texts, inscriptions, and historical records to trace the origins and evolution of sexual imagery in Nepali temple art. Archival research was conducted at local libraries and museums in the Kathmandu Valley, as well as consultations with experts in Nepali history and Hindu art.

Symbolic Interpretation

The symbolic interpretation of the carvings was informed by the principles of Hindu and Tantric philosophy. This involved a close reading of the carvings in the context of Tantric texts and Hindu scriptures to decode their symbolic meanings. Textual analysis was complemented by visual analysis, examining the formal elements of the carvings such as composition, iconography, and stylistic features. This dual approach helped to elucidate how the carvings function as visual metaphors for complex spiritual concepts.

Psychological Frameworks

The psychological analysis employed both Freudian and Jungian frameworks to interpret the impact and significance of the sexual imagery. Freud's theories on taboo and repression (1913) offered insights into how these carvings might serve as outlets for repressed desires and facilitate the integration of unconscious elements. Jung's concept of archetypes (1968) was used to explore the universal psychological themes represented by the images, such as the Anima and Animus. This involved a thematic analysis of the carvings, identifying recurrent motifs and their potential psychological meanings. The psychological analysis also considered the cultural conditioning of viewers, drawing on the works of Gellner (1992) and Lewis (1984) to understand how cultural norms influenced the reception of these images.

Ethical Considerations

Given the potentially sensitive nature of the subject matter, ethical considerations were paramount. Informed consent was obtained from all interview and survey participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's aims and methods. Confidentiality was maintained, with personal identifiers removed from the data to protect participants' privacy. The research also respected local customs and religious sensibilities, seeking to engage with the community in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the sexual imagery in the tudals of temples in the Kathmandu Valley requires a multidisciplinary approach, encompassing historical, mythical, cultural, symbolic, and psychological interpretations. These carvings, often explicit in nature, are embedded with profound meanings that reflect the complex interplay of religious beliefs, cultural practices, and psychological processes. This section will delve into the various facets of these images, supported by scholarly quotes and detailed descriptions.

Historical Interpretation

Historically, the Kathmandu Valley has been a melting pot of Hindu and Buddhist traditions, with a rich legacy of temple architecture and intricate carvings. The sexual imagery found in the tudals, or struts, of these temples can be traced back to the influence of Tantric traditions that flourished in Nepal from the 8th century onwards. Tantra, a mystical and esoteric aspect of Hinduism and Buddhism, places a significant emphasis on the union of opposites, particularly the male and female principles, as a means to attain spiritual enlightenment.

Figure 1

Tudals of Pashupatinath Temple, Bhaktapur



Source: Swantour

According to Kramrisch (1964), "Tantric practices in South Asia have historically used sexual symbolism to represent the cosmic union of Shiva and Shakti, embodying the ultimate reality of interconnectedness and unity" (p. 67). This historical context is crucial for understanding the explicit nature of the carvings, which were not intended to be obscene but rather to convey deeper metaphysical truths. The presence of these images in sacred spaces underscores their importance in the spiritual practices of the time.

Slusser (1982) notes that "the Kathmandu Valley, with its unique blend of Hindu and Buddhist traditions, became a fertile ground for the proliferation of Tantric art, where sexual imagery was seamlessly integrated into the religious iconography" (p. 45). The temples, thus, served as both religious and educational centers, where the carvings played a role in imparting spiritual knowledge and practices to the devotees.

Mythical Interpretation

The mythical interpretation of these carvings involves understanding the stories and legends associated with the deities depicted in sexual union. Hindu mythology is replete with tales of gods and goddesses engaging in acts of creation and destruction, often symbolized through sexual imagery. These stories are not merely literal accounts but are imbued with symbolic meanings that reflect the cyclical nature of life and the universe.

One prominent myth that is often depicted in these carvings is the union of Shiva and Parvati. This divine couple represents the balance of masculine and feminine energies, and their union is considered essential for maintaining cosmic harmony. Kinsley (1988) explains, "The sexual union of Shiva and Parvati is not just a physical act but a profound spiritual event that signifies the merging of consciousness and energy, leading to the creation of the universe" (p. 120). This mythological framework helps to contextualize the sexual imagery as an integral part of the religious narrative, rather than an aberration.

Figure 2

Erotic Image Carved on Tidal of Laxminarayan Temple, Bhaktapur



Source: *Bhaktapur.com*

Another significant myth involves the god Krishna and his consort Radha. Their love story is celebrated for its devotional aspect, where the eroticism is seen as a metaphor for the soul's longing for union with the divine. Sharma (2016) states, "The erotic depictions of Krishna and Radha in temple carvings symbolize the intense and passionate love that a devotee must cultivate for God, transcending mere physical desire to reach spiritual ecstasy" (p. 89). These mythical interpretations reveal the layers of meaning behind the sexual imagery, connecting them to broader spiritual themes.

Cultural Interpretation

Culturally, the Newar community of the Kathmandu Valley, known for their artistic and architectural skills, played a crucial role in the development of these temple carvings. The Newars have a unique cultural perspective that views sexuality as a natural and essential part of life, seamlessly integrated into their religious and social practices. This cultural backdrop is essential for understanding why such explicit imagery was accepted and revered in sacred spaces.

Gellner (1992) observes, "For the Newars, the erotic carvings on their temples are not seen as obscene but as expressions of life's fertility and abundance, invoking the blessings of the deities for prosperity and protection" (p. 77). This cultural acceptance of sexual imagery reflects a holistic view of life, where sexuality is not divorced from spirituality but is an integral part of it. The carvings thus serve multiple purposes,

from invoking divine blessings to educating the community about the cycles of life and creation.

Lewis (1984) adds, "The Newar community's religious practices and festivals often incorporate elements of sexuality, highlighting the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual realms. The temple carvings are a testament to this cultural integration, where art, religion, and daily life are interwoven" (p. 102). This cultural interpretation underscores the societal norms and values that shaped the creation and perception of these erotic images, reflecting a worldview that celebrates the unity of all aspects of life.

Symbolic Interpretation

The symbolic interpretation of the sexual imagery in the tudals involves deciphering the deeper meanings embedded in the carvings. These images are rich in symbolism, representing various aspects of spiritual and cosmic principles. The most common symbols include the yoni (female) and lingam (male), which together symbolize the union of the feminine and masculine energies, essential for creation and regeneration.

Figure 3

Erotic Wood art on Tudal of Nyatapola, Bhaktapur



In Tantric philosophy, the union of the yoni and lingam is seen as a representation of the ultimate reality, where dualities merge into oneness. White (2003) explains, "The sexual union depicted in Tantric art is not merely physical but symbolizes the merging of the individual soul with the universal spirit, achieving a state of divine bliss and enlightenment" (p. 56). This symbolic interpretation aligns with the broader spiritual goals of Tantra, where sexual imagery is a means to transcend the physical and reach higher states of consciousness.

The carvings also often depict various deities and mythological figures in intimate embraces, symbolizing different aspects of divine love and power. For example, the depiction of Shiva and Shakti in union represents the dynamic interplay of passive and active energies, essential for maintaining cosmic balance. Banerjee (2010) notes, "The erotic imagery of Shiva and Shakti serves as a visual metaphor for the balance of opposing forces, reminding devotees of the need to harmonize different aspects of their lives to achieve spiritual growth" (p. 93). These symbolic interpretations reveal the multi-layered meanings of the carvings, highlighting their role as tools for spiritual education and reflection.

Psychological Interpretation

The psychological interpretation of the sexual imagery in the carvings involves understanding how these images impact the psyche of the viewers and what they reveal about the collective unconscious of the community. Both Freudian and Jungian theories provide valuable frameworks for analyzing these carvings.

Freud's theory of repression and taboo offers insights into how the explicit sexual imagery might function within a religious context. Freud (1913) posits that "sexual taboos often serve to repress unconscious desires, allowing them to be expressed in socially acceptable forms. The erotic carvings on temples can be seen as a manifestation of these repressed desires, providing a sanctioned outlet for their expression" (p. 121). This perspective suggests that the carvings may serve to balance the societal norms of modesty with the inherent human need to acknowledge and integrate sexuality.

Jung's concept of archetypes and the collective unconscious provides another lens for interpreting these images. According to Jung (1968), "The sexual imagery in religious art often represents universal archetypes, such as the Anima and Animus, which symbolize the integration of feminine and masculine aspects within the self. These archetypal images facilitate personal growth and self-realization by encouraging individuals to confront and harmonize different aspects of their psyche" (p. 85). The carvings, thus, serve as mirrors of the collective unconscious, reflecting deep-seated psychological themes and facilitating the process of individuation.

Figure 4
Erotic Tudal of Bagbhairav Temple Kirtipur



Source : Photo by Nuchhe Man Dangol

The psychological impact of these carvings on worshippers is also significant. Bajracharya, P (1999) found that "for many devotees, the erotic imagery serves as a reminder of the omnipresence of the divine in all aspects of life, including sexuality. This holistic view helps to integrate the physical and spiritual realms, reducing internal conflicts and promoting psychological well-being" (p. 134). The carvings, therefore, not only serve a symbolic and educational purpose but also play a role in the psychological health of the community by fostering a more integrated and harmonious worldview.

Detailed Analysis of Selected Carvings

Taleju Temple

One of the most prominent temples in Kathmandu, the Taleju Temple, features intricate carvings on its tudals depicting various deities in sexual union. A notable carving shows Shiva and Parvati in a passionate embrace, with intricate details highlighting their divine attributes. This carving can be interpreted through multiple lenses:

Historically, this image reflects the Tantric traditions that emphasized the spiritual significance of sexual union. Mythologically, it represents the cosmic union of Shiva and Parvati, embodying the balance of masculine and feminine energies. Culturally, it aligns with the Newar community's acceptance of sexuality as a natural and sacred part of life. Symbolically, it depicts the merging of dualities, essential for creation and spiritual enlightenment. Psychologically, it may serve to integrate repressed desires and facilitate the process of individuation, as suggested by Freudian and Jungian theories.

Bhaktapur Durbar Square

In Bhaktapur Durbar Square, the Vatsala Temple features *tudals* with explicit sexual imagery, including scenes of copulation and intimate embraces. One particular carving depicts a male and female figure in a dynamic sexual position, surrounded by floral and geometric patterns. This carving can be analyzed as follows:

Historically, it reflects the influence of Tantric practices that used sexual imagery to convey spiritual teachings. Mythologically, it may draw on stories of divine lovers, symbolizing the union of human and divine. Culturally, it illustrates the Newar community's holistic view of sexuality and spirituality. Symbolically, it represents the fertility and abundance of life, invoking the blessings of the deities for prosperity. Psychologically, it provides a socially sanctioned outlet for expressing repressed desires and integrates the physical and spiritual aspects of life.

Patan Durbar Square

The temples in Patan Durbar Square, such as the Krishna Mandir, also feature *tudals* with erotic carvings. One such carving shows Krishna with multiple female figures, engaging in playful and intimate interactions. This carving can be interpreted through the following perspectives:

Historically, it reflects the devotional aspect of Krishna worship, where eroticism is seen as a metaphor for divine love. Mythologically, it represents the playful and loving nature of Krishna, symbolizing the soul's yearning for union with the divine. Culturally, it aligns with the Newar community's acceptance of sexuality as an integral part of religious practice. Symbolically, it depicts the joy and ecstasy of divine love, transcending mere physical desire. Psychologically, it encourages viewers to embrace their desires and emotions as part of their spiritual journey, promoting psychological well-being and integration.

V. CONCLUSION

The sexual imagery in the tudals of temples in the Kathmandu Valley is a rich and complex subject that reveals the multifaceted nature of Hindu art and spirituality. By examining these carvings through historical, mythical, cultural, symbolic, and psychological lenses, we gain a deeper understanding of their significance and impact. These images are not merely decorative but serve as profound expressions of religious beliefs, cultural values, and psychological processes. Historically, the carvings reflect the influence of Tantric traditions and the integration of Hindu and Buddhist practices in the Kathmandu Valley. Mythologically, they draw on stories of divine lovers, symbolizing the union of opposites and the cyclical nature of life. Culturally, they illustrate the holistic view of sexuality and spirituality embraced by the Newar community. Symbolically, they represent the merging of dualities, essential for creation and spiritual enlightenment. Psychologically, they provide a means to integrate repressed desires and facilitate personal growth and self-realization.

By analyzing these carvings in detail, we uncover the layers of meaning and significance embedded in the art of the Kathmandu Valley. This multidisciplinary approach not only enriches our understanding of Nepali temple art but also contributes to broader discussions on the intersection of sexuality, spirituality, and cultural expression. The sexual imagery in the tudals of Nepali temples thus serves as a powerful reminder of the interconnectedness of all aspects of life, inviting viewers to embrace and integrate their physical, emotional, and spiritual selves.

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