

# Kālī the Dark Mother

Irina Kuzminsky

## Abstract

**K**ālī—the most powerful and most misunderstood of Indian goddesses, she is an Image of Divinity whose roots extend well into the ancient Goddess worship of prehistory to reemerge in the Purāṇas and the Tantras. Under her name of Kālī, the Black Goddess rapidly ascended to the status of Alpha and Omega, the Ultimate Source itself in the Śākta stream of Indian religion. This article traces some of the history of her evolution, examines the legacy of the Tantras and of Śaktism, and touches on her current renaissance among certain segments worldwide. It suggests that Kālī could be morphing into an image of the Divine more in tune with our current search for the feminine face of God in our religious traditions, as well as embodying a cosmic image of divinity more in accord with the demands of ecospirituality, with its acknowledgement of a spiritual connection between human beings and the environment, and the most recent discoveries of the new physics. In the final reckoning, Kālī is seen to be an image of the Divine which cannot be disregarded or dismissed lightly.

## Introduction

**K**ālī—a word that raises such a broad spectrum of images and feelings, encompassing revulsion, fear, awe, grudging admiration, surrender—and the veneration and passionate devotion of such a one as Sri Ramakrishna. No other Indian deity has been so misunderstood, no other Indian goddess is so powerful or has come closer to representing the Dark Goddess in all her mystery, glory and power. The Black Goddess, the Supreme, the Void, a manifestation of the Divine Mother, Kālī is depicted black and naked, hair unbound and streaming, large red tongue extended. She is girdled with a skirt of human arms, wears a garland of male human heads or human skulls, and carries a sword or a sickle in one of her arms, a severed human head in another, while a third hand ex-

tends, dispelling fear, and the fourth is raised in blessing, bestowing liberation. Kālī stands, or dances, on the prone inert body of the great god Śiva, her consort, who submits himself willingly to her.

It is a terrifying image and one that carries a powerful charge even today. A *mūrti* or idol of Kālī is not what most Indians would choose to place in the centre of their homes, preferring by far the gentle boon-giving Lakṣmī, a form of the Divine Mother associated with wealth, beauty and life's bounty.

In the esoteric community too, Kālī is scarcely the form of choice of the Divine. Indeed, she is sometimes associated erroneously with Kaliyuga, the darkest and most degenerate of the cycle of four yugas, the “winter of consciousness” when people are at their furthest from God.

The reigning deity of Kaliyuga is indeed Kali, the demon Kali (with both vowels short), whose meaning is “discord,” “quarrel” or “strife.” Kālī the Goddess is actually spelt with both vowels long (ā and ī), a distinction which easily escapes the non-Sanskrit speaker. Kālī's own association with destruction as cleansing can only add to the confusion between the two, as it is she who is most likely to come at the end of Kaliyuga to cleanse the world in a cataclysmic fiery act of destruction, a role

## About the Author

**Irina Kuzminsky** gained her doctorate from Oxford University where she travelled on a Commonwealth Scholarship, subsequently being elected Junior Research Fellow in Humanities at Wolfson College. Irina's work encompasses poetry and writing, music and dance, focusing on women's spirituality and the inner traditions of the world's religions. She has been published in the UK, Australia and the US, and her performances and music have been acclaimed in the UK, Germany, NY and Australia.

frequently attributed to her. One of her Names is *Kālarātri*—the Great Cosmic Night of Dissolution. In her cleansing role she is addressed in the “Song of the Hundred Names of Ādyā Kālī” as *Kalikalmaṣanāśini* (She Who Is the Destructress of Evil in the Dark Age of Kali), as *Kalidarpaḡhnī* (She Who Destroys Pride during the Kaliyuga), and as *Kālānalasamadyutiḥ* (She Who Is as Radiant as the Fires that Consume the Universe).<sup>1</sup>

Kālī absorbs all things and beings and the universe itself into herself at the end of the great cycles of time, only to create the next great cycle of existence.

Paramahansa Yogananda, who often spoke of the Divine Mother as Kālī, writes of this aspect of Kālī in the course of “Thou Mother of Flames,” his long hymn addressed to her:

Then the dark night approached,  
And Thou didst wear the grim, dark veil of mourning,  
To put Creation through the terrible but purifying ordeal of destruction's fire.  
The sun burst and belched fire;  
The Cosmic earthquake broke the vase of the sky, dropping embers of stars;  
And all Creation was a furnace of flames.<sup>2</sup>

— only to be reborn from the ashes “*with its body of pure flames*,” the flames Kālī herself is also associated with in her iconography.

### On the Search for Kālī

So who or what is Kālī? In her essential being, She is a representation of a universal principle or force that can, and has, had other names. As the poets and mystics know, to approach the mysterious Source at the heart of Being, the Primal Cause of What Is, is to risk getting burnt, is to risk total annihilation. The unfathomable and raw power that Kālī represents allows of only one response in the final reckoning, which is surrender. Fully cognizant of this, Kālī's devotees (such as the Bengali saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa or the poet Rāmprasād)<sup>3</sup> call to her as Ma, preferring to cast themselves in the role of an infant totally dependent on its mother, as they come

face to face with the fearsome and unfathomable Unknown.

“Kālī” in her ultimate form is a Name, a covering, a tracing for SomeThing that is, in essence, Unnameable. But we are human, and in order to approach the Unapproachable we seek to give it a more human dimension, even one as terrifying in its aspect as Kālī. Our need is to perceive it as a Thou, however tenuously. We need to Name It—even as we realize that the Ineffable and Limitless is beyond the limitations of any name.

#### Names of G-d

Some call You the Unknowable  
Some speak of You as Dark  
While others dance in drunkenness  
Seek You in grapes, in pressing and in Wine  
Still others sense your mysteries in the Way  
Or speak of Wisdom and unfathomable Space  
The One from Whom all Buddhas know their birth  
While prophets speak of the supreme I AM  
And mystics probe into Your darkness  
But sweetest to my heart  
Most piercing is Your Name of Kālī  
Your Naked IS-ness scarcely covered by this Name  
— Thus do I simply call You  
— Mother.<sup>4</sup>

And even if we know that the Ineffable—the Is-ness—is barely covered by this Name, yet we need it, for as long as there is an I and a Thou, for as long as we are separate from the great I AM.

### What's in a Name?

As a name, “Kālī” has constellated a lot of raw power and mystery around itself. It is potent with an archetypal pulsing energy that carries a constellation of fears and longings and a reaching of man to God. Given that names, and words, are symbols that can be imbued with tremendous power, we would do

well to listen to them and to seize their potency. The Word as energy, as Consciousness made manifest, is said to be the basis of Creation. (It is worth pointing out that the Word or *logos* in the Western Christian tradition is understood not as a literal “word” but as the Word or Cosmic Vibration at the origin of Creation, and is thus akin to the Indian conception of the Aum.) The Word brings into being, the Word vibrates and creates, and it is this power of the Word as Aum that Kālī herself has become associated with. Paramahansa Yogananda writes of Kālī as the representation of Aum, the Cosmic Vibration in whom the invisible Spirit takes a visible form as the Divine Mother: “The Spirit was invisible and took the shape of a visible / Mother Divine;”<sup>5</sup> while David Frawley, a prominent Western Vedic scholar, writes of her: “Kali is the beginning and the end of everything. She has the first and the last word, as she is the Divine word in its primal essence before and beyond any particular expression.”<sup>6</sup> Abhinav Gupta affirms in his *Tantrasāra* (a condensed version of his magnum opus, the *Tantrāloka*) that all vowels are an emanation of the power of Kālī and capable of creating all things, another way of acknowledging her power as the creative Word.<sup>7</sup>

In the strand of Hinduism known as Śaktism, which gives primacy to the Feminine face of the Divine, it is Kālī herself who is the Supreme Being, both *nirguna* (without form) and *saguna* (with form), both Brahman—ultimate truth and reality, genderless and bodiless—and creator, preserver and destroyer of form. The Goddess as Mahākālī (“mahā” meaning “great”) thus takes on the attributes assigned to the male trinity (the Trimūrti) of Brahmā (creator), Viṣṇu (preserver) and Śiva (destroyer), roles that they traditionally share with their respective Śaktis, Saraswatī, Lakṣmī and Kālī. Sri Ramakrishna affirms:

He who is Brahman is also Shakti. When thought of as inactive, He is called Brahman, and when thought of as Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer, he is called the Primordial Energy, Kali.<sup>8</sup>

But in Śaktism there is scarcely space for even this tenuous separation of roles as the “He” morphs into a “She.” There She is Alpha and Omega, the Absolute and the dynamic potential of the Divine, both the Divine Word as the Aum and the very Ground of Being, the unnameable Source Itself.

The name Kālī derives from *kalam*, meaning black or dark in color, giving rise to another of her names, Kālikā, or “the black one.” The etymological meaning of Kālī is “the dark or the blue-black one” and the word is said in some sources to derive from a Dravidian language,<sup>9</sup> pointing to Kālī’s ancient roots. However, “Kālī” is also the feminine form of the masculine noun *kāla*, derived from the Sanskrit root *kal* which has several meanings, including “time,” and also “fate” or “death.” *Kal* also means to “set in motion,” to “apportion,” to “harmonize,” or “to set and hold in motion all harmony,”<sup>10</sup> and Kālī is closely associated with the apportioning of time which moves and measures change, particularly as time the devourer who brings all things to completion and in which all things change, ourselves and the cosmos itself, coming into and out of being. “Kāla” is also a name of Śiva, who is likewise associated with the cycles of time as Destroyer, pointing to Kālī’s close connection to him. Mahākālī, however, is said to destroy Mahākāla himself as the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* (IV. 30-34) affirms:

At the dissolution of things it is Kala (Time) who will devour all and by reason of this He is called Mahakala and since Thou devourest Mahakala Himself it is Thou who art called the Supreme Primordial Kalika. Because Thou devourest Kala, Thou art called Kali and because Thou art the origin of and devourest all things Thou art called the Adya Kali. Resuming after Dissolution Thine own nature dark and formless, Thou alone remainest as One, Ineffable, and Inconceivable. Though appearing in form Thou art yet formless; though Thyself without beginning, multiform by the Power of Maya, Thou art the beginning of all, Creatrix, Protectress and Destructress that Thou art.<sup>11</sup>

Sir John Woodroffe, the author of this translation of the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* and a scholar whose contribution to Tantric studies can scarcely be overstated, reiterates in his seminal work, the *Garland of Letters*: “Kali is the Deity in that aspect in which It withdraws all things which it had created into Itself. Kali is so called because She devours Kala (Time) and then resumes Her own dark formlessness.”<sup>12</sup> There is an interesting correlation between this description of the Dark Goddess devouring time and the definition in physics of a black hole the mass of which slows down time so much that at its border (or “horizon”) time stands still, effectively ceasing to exist.<sup>13</sup>

For Ramakrishna and her other devotees however, this awe-inspiring goddess is not only the beginning and end of all power, but also the compassionate Mother who imparts wisdom, power and grace, all traditionally seen as attributes of the Feminine Divine. Indeed, Kālī as the feminine face of the Divine incites a powerful erotic longing for holy union in her devotees who long to be consumed and transformed by her and, perhaps surprisingly, features prominently in the devotional *bhaktī* tradition.

Let us begin by tracing the history of this powerful word, “Kālī,” insofar as it is known.

## A Brief History

How did this equation of Kālī with the Supreme Being come about? We do not really know, but we do know some of the history around it. The first written mentions of Kālī are scarcely on the same level as she is depicted in the great subsequent outpouring of Śaktism, although the name may well be based on much earlier ancient sources not known to us at present. Śaktism flourished from around the 6th century CE well into the 1700s and installed the Divine Feminine squarely at the centre of its cosmogony as creator, origin and supreme unchanging Reality itself (Brahman). Kālī is seen in this tradition as the primal, universal cosmic energy, and as the formless dark void from which this energy arises. The gods themselves, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, are said in the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* to arise from her as

bubbles arising from the sea, while she herself is the great ocean.

The first mention of Kālī in Indian Sanskrit sources is in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1:2:4, an early Upaniṣad embedded in the *Atharva Veda*, where she is one of the seven tongues of Agni (the god of fire), hence a flame, or an aspect of the god or principle of Fire. Kālī is listed first among the flames, the deepest blue flame of fire, but is still just an aspect of fire. That said, she has retained a strong association with fire iconography, sometimes being portrayed with flames for hair. Taking the imagery to a deeper level, she is seen to be the one who burns away all negativity and karma if we submit ourselves to her cleansing flames. She is also associated with the indwelling *kuṇḍalinī śakti* who purifies the bodily sheaths in her fiery ascent, as well as being the One who presides over the conflagration of the universes at the end of the cycles of time.

By the time of the Puranic literature, the worship of a single Supreme Being had come to be favored, be it Viṣṇu, or Śiva, or Devī. The Purāṇas are often given a divine origin, emanating from the breath of the Great Being. At the same time Vyāsa, the narrator of the *Mahābhārata*, is credited as the compiler of the original text into 18 Purāṇas. It is hard to give exact dates for what most likely started out as an oral tradition that may go back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE or earlier. The Purāṇas were collected a second time during the reign of the Gupta kings (4<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) but the editing and expansion of the texts continued in the post Gupta era, so that the texts continued to grow over the following several hundred years. In either case, post-Buddhist Puranic Hinduism stressed *bhaktī* or devotion to God, and Śaktism, the worship of Devī, the Feminine Divine principle, as Creator and Source, was one of the powerful religious currents to emerge (or reemerge) from it.

In Puranic literature Kālī first appears around 300 CE (in written sources at least) as being born from the locks of Śiva alongside her brother, Vīrabhadra, and fulfills her appointed task of destroying Dakṣa’s yajña or fire sacrifice after Dakṣa snubs his daughter Satī for

marrying the ascetic Śiva, and Satī immolates herself in the sacrificial fire. Bhadrakālī is dark-hued and dreadful, the dire aspect of the Devī Ādi Parāśakti, of whom Satī herself is a luminous or benign incarnation. (Prior to this, Satī manifests her fearsome Kālī form to Śiva when he dares to forbid her to go to the yajña without him, having forgotten who his sweet wife really is.) Together with Vīrabhadra, Bhadrakālī wreaks destruction on all present at the yajña including Dakṣa himself.<sup>14</sup>

In the *Mahābhārata*, “Kālarātri” or “Kālī” as the “black one,” carries away the spirits of dead warriors and animals, like a latter day Vulture or the Irish Morrigan. Her most dramatic and celebrated appearance though, her “birth,” as it were, in her current aspect, occurs in the *Devī Māhātmya*, the great Hindu epic of the fifth or sixth century CE in which the Great Goddess arises in a form commonly interpreted as Durgā in answer to the gods’ entreaties to do battle with the evil that threatens to overpower them.<sup>15</sup>

Kālī emerges from Durgā’s brow, one could say her third eye, and this occurs whenever the Goddess is moved to anger and blackens her countenance:

Thereupon Ambikā became terribly angry with those foes, and in her anger her countenance then became dark as ink.

Out from the surface of her forehead, fierce with frown, issued suddenly Kālī of terrible countenance, armed with a sword and noose. (*Devī Māhātmya* 7:5-6)

Kālī comes in her terrifying aspect—gaunt, emaciated, clad in a tiger skin, and wearing her garland of human heads. She makes short shrift of the army of the Asuras, slaying Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa, and thus allowing Durgā to kill the demons Śumbha and Niśumbha. In a further encounter, when Durgā is invoked to do battle with the demon Raktabīja, it is Kālī who again appears to defeat him. Raktabīja had been given a boon by Brahmā that whenever he is struck every spilled drop of his blood would sprout into a replica of himself when it fell to earth. Kālī deals with this problem by using her tongue as a weapon and drinking every

drop of Raktabīja’s blood before it falls to the ground so that Durgā is able to slay him.

But who is Kālī really in the *Devī Māhātmya*? Is she a separate entity or is she essentially a particularly fierce warrior aspect of Durgā, summoned forth to deal with the most intractable asuras or demons? And, for that matter, who is Durgā? Most commentators, such as Ajit Mookerjee in his classic *Kali - the Feminine Force*,<sup>16</sup> start from the premise that Kālī is one of the names of the Great Feminine, and also thus one of her manifestations as a “separate” goddess. In his article *The Word “Kali” in the Devī Mahatmya: A new look at an old book*,<sup>17</sup> Colin Robinson approaches this question from a subtly but significantly different angle. Robinson points out that Sanskrit does not have capital letters and that the distinction between names and descriptions is therefore not clear-cut. Hence the word “Kālī” in the text (in chapters 7, 8, 9) can mean “dark lady,” “dark female,” “lady of time” or Kālī, a proper name. The same applies to the words “kālīkā” (see chapter 5:87-88) —“the black one,” “bhadrakālī” (11:26) —“she who is gracious and dark,” “cāmuṇḍā” —“she who slays the demons caṇḍa and muṇḍa,” or “durgā” — “inaccessible.” Durgā is usually seen as the primary goddess of the *Devī Māhātmya* who slays the buffalo demon Mahiṣa, but she is only called by that name a few times in the text (see 4:11, 5: 2, 9:31, 10:1, 11:24, 11:50). In the last of these (11:50) the Goddess promises to return to slay yet another demon named Durgama, in honor of which feat she will be called Durgādevī in this future embodiment. In 4:11, the first mention of the word “Durgā” in the text, she is designated as the “boat for crossing the perilous ocean of being,” while in 5:12 she is again the one who “takes one across in difficulties” and who is “blue-black” or “smoke-like” in complexion, pointing to her continuity with Kālī:

Salutation always to Durgā who takes one across in difficulties, who is essence, who is the author of everything; who is knowledge of discrimination; and who is blue-black as also smoke-like in complexion. (5:12)

In fact, the Goddess is far more often referred to in the *Devī Māhātmya* as Ambikā, Caṇḍikā, Kātyāyanī or Mahādevī than she is as Durgā. In Chapter 5 of the *Devī Māhātmya* the gods again praise the Great Goddess, “mahādevī,” in a hymn and entreat her aid in their war against the demons. Pārvaṭī hears them and emanates two beings—the beautiful golden Ambikā also called Kauśikī who is Pārvaṭī’s outer layer or sheath, and the dark Kālikā who remains:

Because that Ambikā came out of Pārvaṭī’s physical sheath (Kośa), she is glorified as Kauśikī in all the worlds.

After she had issued forth, Pārvaṭī became dark and was called Kālikā and stationed on mount Himalaya.” (5:87-88)

The beautiful Ambikā or Kauśikī is the lion-riding goddess whose beauty first seduces the demons and who goes on to kill Śumbha, Niśumbha and Mahiṣa. Her anger and her frown give birth to “kālī karālavadanā.” “Durgā” is thus above all an epithet of “kauśikī” who emerges from “pārvaṭī,” “lady of the mountain,” as the “fighting lady.” Kālikā is equally Pārvaṭī and issues forth from the golden fighting goddess as Kālī to take on the demons in her most frightening aspect. As Robinson skillfully demonstrates, there is a deep continuity in the text between “bhadrakālī,” who is also “durgā,” and “kālī karālavadanā”—and, ultimately, “pārvaṭī” or “Mahādevī.”

Alongside these manifestations in the *Devī Māhātmya* the Great Goddess, who is later named Mahākālī (12:38), is first present invisibly at the beginning as the “yoganidrā” or mystical sleep of Viṣṇu as he lies on the back of the serpent floating in the cosmic ocean. She appears, withdrawing herself from Viṣṇu’s body into a visible form, in answer to the entreaty of Brahmā, who prays to the goddess to awaken Viṣṇu and help him fight the two demons, Madhu and Kaiṭabha. In answer to his prayer, she transforms into Mahāmāyā, named also “tamasī” or “dark Goddess.” As Mahāmāyā she is the Enchantress wielding the power of illusion and delusion to enchant the

demons, making it possible for Viṣṇu to kill them. In the course of his prayer to her, Brahmā describes the various attributes of the Great Goddess and depicts her carrying every conceivable weapon—sword, spear, club, discus, conch, bow, arrows, slings, and mace (1:80-81). This “tamasī,” or dark Goddess, is demonstrably the “great dark lady” herself or Mahākālī.

Mahākālī is praised again in the *Devī Māhātmya* in 12:38-39 where she is seen to pervade the whole universe:

By her, the Mahākālī, who takes the form of the great destroyer at the end of time, all this cosmic sphere is pervaded.

She indeed takes the form of the great destroyer at the (proper) time. She, the unborn, indeed becomes this creation (at the time proper for re-creation), She herself, the eternal Being, sustains the beings at (another) time.

This is the Great Goddess in all her glory, creator, preserver and destroyer, beside whom the Hindu trinity of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva are mere drops in the ocean, as Brahmā affirms in his opening prayer to her:

By you, even he who creates, sustains and devours the world, is put to sleep. Who is here capable of extolling you? Who is capable of praising you, who have made all of us—Viṣṇu, myself and Śiva—take our embodied forms? (1:84-86)

This is the Goddess we encounter in the Tantras and in Śākta religion as Kālī.

Kālī’s emergence as an independent Goddess appears to have been complete by around 1,000 CE. In the eyes of many Śāktas she became the purest and most perfect representation of Devī in her primal form. She is often called Mahākālī or also Ādyā Kālī to distinguish her from “other” Kālīs, such as the Kālī who is one of the ten Mahāvīdyās or feminine Great Wisdoms (the others being Tārā, Tripura Sundarī, Bhuvaneśvarī, Bhairavī, Chinnamastā, Dhūmāvatī, Bagalāmukhī, Mātāṅgī, and Kamalā, each of whom embodies a different aspect of Wisdom teachings), or the Kālī

linked to Śiva in a more traditional union as his consort and Śakti in Śaivism.

Stories of Kālī abound, particularly in Bengali literature. In some she is so intoxicated by her bloodletting dance of destruction upon conquering the demons that the gods fear the annihilation of the cosmos itself and of all life. Śiva stops her violence by lying on his back in her path. So transfixed is she by his beauty that she stops, wanting to make love to him straightaway. Thus the balance of the world is restored. In other versions of the story, Śiva transforms himself into a crying infant whom Kālī hears and immediately takes to her breast to comfort.

In line with this story, in Śākta literature Kālī always dominates Śiva or Bhairava. Hers is the dominant stance standing with one foot or both feet on a prone Śiva, or sitting on top of him in the act of copulation. He is her husband whom she awakens making him God, turning the lifeless inert corpse, Śava, into the “auspicious one” Śiva, through the addition of her feminine “i.”<sup>18</sup> She is power, both outside of culture and encompassing culture. In Śaivite literature the order of dominance is reversed, and it is Śiva who is given the upper hand, for instance in the dance competition between the two which Kālī is said to lose because she is too modest to raise her leg as high as Śiva. But this reads like a poor attempt at bringing the story into line with a patriarchal culture in which women must be seen to be subservient to their husbands. It is difficult to imagine the ferociously untamed Kālī, primal as Nature itself, primal as the beginnings of the cosmos, to be much bothered by modesty.

Another instance of trying to “tame” and domesticate the image of Kālī occurs in the popular interpretation of her iconography, particularly her stance on top of Śiva and her long protruding red tongue. In the story it takes Śiva throwing himself underfoot to calm Kālī’s frenzied bloodletting dance. To put her at least partially in line with the ideal of the husband-worshipping wife in Bengal, Kālī is said to be so ashamed of finding that she has stepped on her husband’s chest that she sticks her tongue out, thereby exhibiting the emotion of shame

or *lajjā*, which reads like a tenuous interpretation at best. However, this is the version still most widely known and accepted in Northern India.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, going to a different extreme, Western psychoanalysts have sought to interpret the long lolling tongue as a phallic symbol. In yet another interpretation, some Tantrics on the Kaula path see the tongue as signifying the moment Kālī takes her pleasure with Śiva and, taken by surprise, thereby discovers her capacity for absolute love.<sup>20</sup> The fact that her tongue points towards her heart seems to inspire this similarly rather forced interpretation. The more likely explanation is a reference to the tongue Kālī manifests in the *Devī Māhātmya* to drink up all of the drops of blood of the self-propagating demon Raktabīja before they fall to earth and create more versions of himself, thus enabling Durgā (or Ambikā) to kill him. The *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* asserts, however, that Kālī’s red lolling tongue represents the passion and creativity of nature, and that when she stands on the pale lifeless corpse of Śiva it is to awaken him in her capacity as giver and destroyer of life.

## Iconography

The iconography of Kālī is rich in symbolism, which encompasses everything from an ancient gory warrior goddess of blood, war and destruction to the Image of the Ineffable Absolute Itself. Amongst Indians there has been a strong tendency to contain the explicit violence of her imagery and downplay her socially and culturally transgressive or antinomian (against the law) aspect, a move however which risks negating the absolute freedom of the Divine from human constructions and norms that Kālī represents. In its way, her mūrti is fully as confronting and off-putting an Image of the Divine as that of Christ suffering a horrific death on the cross. Yet, as the Episcopalian priest James Hughes Reho points out, both images can and do bypass the rational intellect and become doorways for their devotees into “boundless love, attraction, and devotion.”<sup>21</sup>

Many of the more popular symbolic interpretations of Kālī’s iconography (one of the best known being that of Paramahansa Yoganan-

da),<sup>22</sup> are so keen to sanitize and rationalize her—no, we do not worship some murderous savage deity!—that her raw archetypal power can become muted. That said, her imagery takes a lot to tame: the garland of skulls, the skirt of severed arms, dead infant embryos for earrings, a protruding bloodied tongue, a severed head, a cup made out of a human skull, not to forget the male weapons of power Kālī wields—sword, sickle, trident.

Naked and blue-black, she dances on a prone Śiva, her breasts covered in blood. The red hibiscus flowers associated with her worship are themselves a cipher for menstrual blood, signs of fertility and death and woman's power, and seen by Tantrics as a divine nectar. Her long unbound hair signals her freedom from social norms. She is often accompanied by jackals, crows and snakes, betraying an affinity with the Greek Hecate, and is said to favor crossroads, again like Hecate, and cremation grounds, where dedicated Tantrics go to practice ultimate detachment from the ego. In the presence of corpses and death they seek to experience dissolution back into the elements that make up our bodies and face the forces of time and death head on.

All of the images making up her iconography possess, or have accrued, further meanings, beyond the raw power of the battle goddess swooping on her prey, or the death goddess of time and change none can avoid. Skyclad, her nudity is a sign that she is space itself, ultimately without form and beyond all names, devoid of *māyā* as a covering, or indeed of any illusion as to what constitutes the Real. Kālī literally takes the life energy out of delusions, able to do so because it is she who has imbued them with life energy in the first place as Mahāmāyā. When she drinks Raktabīja's blood she is again symbolically seen to take the life force (blood) out of the self-

***[Kālī] is ... the one who burns away all negativity and karma if we submit ourselves to her cleansing flames. She is also associated with the indwelling kundalinī śakti who purifies the bodily sheaths in her fiery aspect, as well as being the One who presides over the conflagration of the universes at the end of the cycles of time.***

propagating demon and destroy the desires, or copies of himself, he continually creates.

She is black or blue black because she is unknowable, the “Not This Not That” of the mystics, and her blackness is also a sign that all names and forms and colors disappear in her, as does duality itself, just as all colors mixed together resolve into black. But if you approach her you discover both her luminosity, as did Ramakrishna, and her transparency, for being without form she is also ultimately without color.<sup>23</sup>

She is wild and “dark as storm clouds” because she is Great Nature the Creator, as it says in the *Chudamani*

*Tantra*: “I am Great Nature, Consciousness, happiness, the quintessential.”<sup>24</sup>

The severed heads of her necklace are said to signify the “Garland of Letters,” that is, Sanskrit letters symbolizing the creation of language, hence, the root sounds and forms of thought and creation of names and forms. Because she gave birth to these she can also free us from them by removing their life force and leaving them as “skulls.”<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the heads can also signify the severing of the ego from bondage and ignorance, and the single decapitated head Kālī holds likewise symbolizes this freeing from the delusions of the ego.

When Kālī decapitates the ego with her sickle or sword, she allows silence to replace mental chatter and Wisdom to arise. Forms, attitudes, beliefs with their limiting structures are all cut through and shown to be the constructs that they are. Once dualism and all limits are cut through we are radically freed—free to experience union with the Infinite Consciousness just as Kālī unites with her consort Śiva. The snakes encircling her limbs are ancient symbols of wisdom and the indwelling energy of the divine as *kuṇḍalinī*. With one of her right



hands she dispels fear, with the other, offers blessing.

The severed arms of her skirt symbolize the cutting of the connection to karma allowing for spontaneous and truly free action as part of the cosmic dance.

The best-known image of Kālī is probably Dākṣiṇa Kālī, literally Kālī who comes from the South, the South being the land of Yama, the god of death (note that it is Yama who is the god of death, not Kālī). This is the image favored by most householders. There is another, Śmaśāna Kālī, worshipped by certain Tantrics on the left-handed path and considered the far more frightening image. In the former image, Kālī (also known as Bhadrakālī) steps on Śiva with her right foot, signifying preservation, while as Śmaśāna Kālī she steps on him with her left foot, signifying destruction. Śmaśāna Kālī is the Kālī of the cremation grounds and to witness her is considered a truly heroic act in which one risks total annihilation. This is Kālī as the Baba Yaga of Russian folk tales who consumes the unworthy hero, eats him and spits out his bones, but grants boons to the worthy one who passes her tests.

The whole imagery of Kālī points to confronting the Real, Isis Unveiled to use a different Image, to see who is to die. Kālī invites us to experience this death while still physically alive in the body in a heroic act of courage which she rewards with her extreme compassion and mercy once we make that leap.

### The Purāṇas and the Bhaktī of the Poet-Saints

The Purāṇas contain key Śākta texts such as the *Kālikā Purāṇa*, *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*, and the *Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (also known as the *Devī Purāṇa* and the *Śrīmad Devī Bhāgavatam*). All of these texts stress the centrality of the Goddess as the origin of all and address the problem of how the featureless, formless, changeless Brahman can become the changing universe, or how the One can become Many, through envisaging Śakti/Kālī as the kinetic aspect of Brahman, not different from the Absolute but issuing forth from that Absolute in manifestation.

Some scholars trace this back to Southern Indian traditions in which the feminine Prakṛti represents the active principle, while the masculine is the passive witness.<sup>26</sup> The *Devī Purāṇa* accordingly portrays Śakti as the first and foremost of deities, creating Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva and allocating out their roles.

In the Purāṇas the essence of all male gods is seen to be female, but the opposite is not true, affirming the primacy of the feminine and also the primacy of the archetypal connection of the Sacred to the Feminine. Thus Durgā never becomes male yet when the gods release their inner power it is female. Essentially, it is understood that the Goddess can exist without the God but, and this is a big but, She will not be perceived as there will be No One to perceive Her. The God as Śiva is Mind or Consciousness, which is needed to perceive and contain Her play. Thus God and Goddess are interdependent: Kālī bears Śiva but then they switch roles and Śiva becomes the support for her and the witness to her *līlā*, holding her up so she can dance and he can take delight in it.<sup>27</sup> Using more current language and terminology this can be seen to echo the observer/observed interdependence of quantum physics. In Heisenberg's classic experiment, it is the observer, i.e., consciousness, that influences the perception of the observed, and whether waves or particles are seen. Could it be that the archetypes of Kālī and Śiva form an image of the Divine more in tune with the only just intuited revolution in perception coming into being through the discoveries of quantum physics? There is an echo in Kālī's dance of the whole dance of atoms in creation, or quantum grains as they are called now according to the most recent scientific speculations.<sup>28</sup> These grains dance in a field of space forming patterns that ultimately result in life itself. The patterns of the grains are "grounded" by the observer just as Kālī's dance is grounded by Śiva's consciousness containing that dance. Could Kālī in her dance with Śiva be an image of the Source more in tune with the information being revealed through investigation of the quantum world?

As stated previously, the Puranic literature introduces bhaktī as a path of devotion to God, a

path of devotion embraced by Śaktism, and many ecstatic texts have sprung from this tradition in a passionate outpouring of veneration and love for the Goddess. Particularly noteworthy are the great poets such as Kālidāsa, Rāmprasād and Kamalākānta. Kālidāsa, who possibly lived in the fifth century and whose name means “slave of Kālī,” was, according to one legend, introduced to the worship of Kālī by the highly cultured Princess of Benares. Kālī granted him extraordinary poetical power and inspiration and he became one of India’s greatest Sanskrit poets and dramatists, writing of love and longing unbound by the strictures of caste, hierarchy, or other rules.

The great 18th century Bengali poet Rāmprasād Sen was another who dedicated his life to writing impassioned devotional poetry in praise of Kālī. He sings:

The most exalted experience of bliss  
in any realm of being  
is directly knowing the universal Mother,  
the supremely blissful one.  
Ecstatic lovers of Kali the Sublime  
are not pilgrims to sacred shrines,  
for they hear all existence  
singing the glory of the Goddess.<sup>29</sup>

Gaze intently into the blazing heart of joy  
and you will perceive my blissful Mother,  
matrix of all phenomena.

The vision of Kali  
kindles the fire of unitive wisdom,  
burning down conventional barriers,  
pervading minds and worlds with light,  
revealing her exalted beauty  
as universal flower garden  
and universal cremation ground,  
where lovers merge with Mother Reality,  
experiencing the single taste of nonduality.  
...

My sole refuge, O Goddess, is your sacred  
law,  
spoken timelessly by Shiva,  
one teaching that manifests  
through all the scriptures of humanity,  
unveiling our supreme identity.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed there is a whole musical genre of Bengali devotional poetry in praise of Shyama or

Kālī, “the dark one,” called Shyama Sangeet. Here Kālī is the mother who loves and grants wisdom to her children by making them confront terror and fear. Kamalākānta Bhattacharya was another Bengali Śākta poet and yogi (c.1769–1821) who modeled himself on Rāmprasād. “Is my Mother Really Black?” is a fine example of his work:

If She’s black,  
How can She light up the world?  
Sometimes my Mother is white,  
Sometimes yellow, blue, and red.  
I cannot fathom Her.  
My whole life has passed  
trying.  
She is Matter,  
then Spirit,  
then complete Void.  
  
It’s easy to see  
how Kamalākānta  
thinking these things  
went crazy.<sup>31</sup>

The widely revered saint, Ramakrishna, and his disciple Vivekananda, are also part of this devotional bhaktī stream of Kālī worship.

## **Kālī and the Tantras**

The Tantras and Tantrism have become quite controversial topics in the West, embraced by some who see them as a road to spiritual enlightenment through sexual liberation, denounced by others who see them as a road to licentiousness. Of course, to equate Tantrism with sex, and sex only, is fundamentally to misunderstand this whole philosophy. As James Hughes Reho writes, “In the West, Tantra often conjures up pictures of arcane mystical practices or acrobatic sexual escapades. In reality, Tantra is a philosophy of life, love and being ... grounded in practice.”<sup>32</sup> At the core of Tantrism lies the acceptance of all manifestations of life through the senses as a means of encountering the divine. Nothing is omitted, nothing is to remain untransformed, nor is life there to be fled from in isolated retreats in caves and on mountains. Matthew Fox emphat-

ically states: “We do not have to flee this world to experience the Divine; rather we have to travel deeper into our deepest Selves, the “cave in the heart” where God and human interact.”<sup>33</sup> Soul is seen to be embodied in matter and therefore dualism can and must be truly and radically transcended. The root of the word “tantra” is the “weaving loom” and Tantra is above all a recognition of the interconnectedness of the fabric of reality. As Reho writes, “According to Tantra, the Divine not only resides inside us but is about the transformation and divinization of every part of us: the physical, the emotional, the intellectual, the sexual and the spiritual.”<sup>34</sup>

The *Visvasara Tantra* puts the core of this philosophy simply and succinctly:

“What is here is elsewhere. What is not here is nowhere.”<sup>35</sup> And yet another catch phrase of Tantra could well be: God is in all and all is in God.

The primary difference between Tantra and Advaita Vedānta is the absolute non-hierarchy existing in Tantra between Satcitānanda, Śiva and Śakti, all parts of the One with no dichotomies and no separation (akin to the Christian Trinity). *Māyā* in Tantric thought is illusion only in the sense that it creates a veil of separation within the one dynamic reality. Advaita Vedānta, on the other hand, tends towards seeing *māyā* as the illusion of the world which must be overcome, and giving primacy to spirit over matter. In Tantra the world is perceived as both real and good, and spirit and body (matter) are not separate. The body is not synonymous with pollution but is a holy vehicle for the light and energy of the Divine. And Eros or Desire is the foundation of realization.

Tantra is essentially a Goddess-centered theology and philosophy, one that emphasizes the immanence of the divine alongside its unknowable transcendence and recognizes the ultimate identity of both. And the worship of Kālī or Kālī-like goddesses is central to it. However, among many Indians too, it is perceived as a marginal religious stream. In its famous five rituals, Pañcamakāra or the five M’s, Tantrism sets out to transgress against the codes and tenets of Brahmanical Hinduism,

codes of vegetarianism, abstinence, and strict caste divisions. True Tantrism will have none of that. That said, if the codes were not in place and did not carry a powerful charge there would be no transgression, so Tantrism’s transgressive nature is dependent on the existence and enforcement of Brahmanical strictures of diet, purity and caste.<sup>36</sup>

The “left-handed” Tantric path, or “*vāmācāra*,” is particularly famous, or infamous, in this regard for its antinomian character, and comes in for the severest criticism from the conservative and orthodox minded. It is worth remembering that “*vāmā*,” which means “left,” also means “woman” (when spelled with two long “a” vowels as it is in “*vāmācāra*”).<sup>37</sup> Thus though *vāmācāra* is usually translated the “left-handed path” it is also really the “path of woman,” or the “Śakti path.” Given its emphasis on women as teachers and as carriers of Śakti or divine energy and creative power, it is perhaps not surprising that it has in many cases been denigrated and censored, both in itself and as a path to spiritual attainment. And yet it remains possible to unpick something of what appears to be the remnants of a very ancient Goddess-centered tradition in this path, also known as the Kaula Path, or Kālīkula. *Vāmācāra* honors women, and the body, and nature, as paths to spiritual attainment, and imposes no caste or dietary restrictions. It also insists on the primacy of the Feminine Divine principle and on respect for and even worship of women as representations of the Goddess. It is therefore markedly egalitarian by comparison with other Indian religious traditions. All of this would immediately favor its suppression in a strongly patriarchal hierarchical culture in which women are praised mostly for being loyal and subservient to their husbands. In stark contrast to this, the *Yoni Tantra* states: “Women are divine, women are life, women are real jewels.”<sup>38</sup> And the *Śaktisaṅgama Tantra* affirms:

Woman is the foundation of the world ...  
 Whatever form she takes,  
 Whether the form of a man or a woman  
 Is the superior form ...  
 There is no jewel rarer than a woman,

No condition superior to that of a woman.  
There is not, nor has been, nor will be  
Any destiny to equal that of a woman”  
(II.52)<sup>39</sup>

Not surprisingly, women embraced Tantrism wholeheartedly during the early Tantric period in India. Miranda Shaw writes in *Passionate Enlightenment*, “the women pioneered this new embodied spirituality. Their goal was to be inwardly disciplined and outwardly untamable; to be erotically alive and totally free.”<sup>40</sup>

It is hard to give an exact date for the origin of the Tantras. The fact is that while Westerners try to date such texts to the earliest extant manuscripts discovered, the yogis and yoginis who are part of the living tradition of Tantric lineages consider oral transmission to be the purest way to retain and pass down this knowledge. The Tantric initiate Aditi Devī confirms this view, writing: “The oral traditions have precedence, and then the Tantric liturgies are brought into play to support the oral traditions and practices.”<sup>41</sup> Scribes can make mistakes, insert their own additions, alter passages (as has most certainly happened in the New Testament tradition for instance),<sup>42</sup> whereas the transmission from master to disciple in a lineage is considered the most reliable way to pass down a sacred text. According to this view, texts can predate their earliest written recorded versions by several centuries. This, and the fact that most Tantras are anonymous, leads André Padoux to comment, “The history of Tantrism is impossible to write.”<sup>43</sup> The consensus though is that most Tantras were written down between the sixth and tenth centuries CE in Kashmir and Nepal, though some are as recent as the 18th century.<sup>44</sup>

What is sure, though, is that in many of the Tantras Kālī figures prominently as the supreme deity. Among these are the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* (which includes the hymn, *The Hundred Names of Kālī*), the *Kāmadā Tantra*, *Picchilā Tantra*, *Nigama Kalpa Tantra*, *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra*, *Kāmākhya Tantra*, *Yoginī Tantra*, *Kulārṇava* (Ocean of Kula) *Tantra*, *Kālī-Kula Tantra*, and the *Nirrutara Tantra* (which is considered by some Tantric

practitioners to contain the oldest and most superior version of the Kālī ritual).

The Tantras are often structured in the form of dialogues between Śiva and Śakti (Pārvatī), and cover topics such as ritual worship, mantras, dharma and theology. One of the best known in the West would be the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*, written down in the late 18th century and stemming from Bengal. It is best known in a translation by Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon) from 1913.<sup>45</sup> In chapter 7 of the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* Kālī is addressed as “the supreme yogini who at the end of time devours Śiva himself, the devourer of time.” Śiva then recites a hymn of praise to her, the Hundred Names of Kālī, *Ādyā-Kālī-Svarūpa*, in which every name begins with the letter “Ka.” In chapters 12 and 13 Śiva goes on to tell Pārvatī that all beings have qualities of Kālī, another way of reinforcing her divine immanence in her creation.

## The Kaula Path

One of the better-known transmitters of the Kaula Path in the West is Daniel Odier, who was himself initiated into it by a yogini master. *Tantric Quest* tells the story of his initiation.<sup>46</sup> A Western female initiate to write with a lot of depth and insight about it is Aditi Devī whose perspective as a woman gives a different angle missing in much of the literature. Aditi Devī recounts her own journey into Kālī and gives a translation of the Hundred Names of Kālī, with added meditations on each of the Names.<sup>47</sup> For an Indian woman’s perspective the relatively recent book, *Yogic Secrets of the Dark Goddess*, by Shambhavi L. Chopra, is an experiential guide to devotion to Kālī.<sup>48</sup> The Kaula Path is essentially a pure Śākta path of allegiance to the feminine principle. It is also, as already stated, a path that deliberately sets out to break the taboos of its social context in its embrace of non-vegetarianism, alcohol, sexual union outside of marriage and, perhaps even more scandalously, outside of the rules of caste. The famous (or infamous) five M’s of tantric ritual—*madya*, *māṃsa*, *matsya*, *mudrā*, *maithuna* (wine, meat, fish, parched grain, sexual intercourse)—are a way of ritualizing the transgression. The body

is explicitly made sacred in the rite of sexual union, which is either accomplished mentally, or physically, or both. Music, dance, poetry, wine, the senses and the life of the senses are not puritanically prohibited and contained. On the contrary they are celebrated and found good (which does not equate to hedonistically indulged in!).

Everything is stood on its head in terms of traditional social structures, no system is respected as such, customary distinctions of pure/impure, good/bad, ignorance/knowledge are not made in a radical rejection of duality, but nor are other practices condemned. There is nothing to defend or justify in the state this path aspires to realize, as Odier says.<sup>49</sup> Shambhavi L. Chopra concurs: “Tantra has no techniques, dogmas or beliefs. It is an expression of divinity, which unites each being to the reality within.”<sup>50</sup> She elaborates, “A tantrika evolves her consciousness through the deeper symbolism of the union between Shiva and Bhairavi, searching the limitless, timeless totality of the Divine self.”<sup>51</sup> The *Kaula Upaniṣad* states, amongst other similar principles:

Do not condemn other practices.

Take no vow.

Impose no restriction on yourself.

Limiting yourself does not lead to freedom.

Practice innerly.

This is freedom.<sup>52</sup>

Freedom and personal responsibility are the subtext of Tantra, as they are perhaps of the spirituality coming to the fore in our own time. However, the Tantric path is anything but permissive, as all must be done while maintaining full consciousness, humility and purity of heart. Freedom is understood to imply and require responsibility and discipline, and indeed cannot truly exist without these, as the powerful practices of Tantra can open the door to the slavery of compulsive behavior and ego inflation.

Odier gives a good succinct outline of the Kaula path teachings.<sup>53</sup> To paraphrase him, the path involves: freedom from all rules and rituals (this includes the Brahmanical Hindu prac-

tice of finding auspicious times for certain rituals or events);<sup>54</sup> freedom from the physical enactment of rites, such as chanting, mantras, ritual cleansing and other ceremonies, which can all be performed mentally; freedom from classifying things into pure or impure (a great transgression in Hindu cultural and religious terms as well as a radical affirmation of non-dualism); this also applies to food—thus abstinence from alcohol, vegetarianism or other dietary restrictions are no better or worse than eating meat or drinking wine (in the words of Jesus, a great Tantric Himself, it is not what comes into you that makes you impure, it is what comes out of you in the form of negative thoughts, bad words, hatred, envy, pride that renders you such). And, importantly, women are to be respected and worshipped as representations and even as incarnations of the Goddess—no small ask in a society which prizes women for their subservience, humility, obedience, loyalty and general repression.

In addition, a path such as the Kālī-Kula Tantra explicitly involves confronting one’s deepest fears in order to become *vira*, the hero, and *rasa-siddha*, the alchemist. Needless to say, this is all written from the point of view of the man. However, it pays to remember that in this tradition, women are not only worshipped and respected but are also often the initiators and the teachers.

As said, the Tantric rites as transgression only make sense within the context of Orthodox Brahmanical Hindu culture which is being transgressed against. If the Tantrics break taboos, there must be taboos to break in the first place, against female sexuality and power, for example. The breaking of the caste taboo in attributing power to lower caste women in particular further reinforces this specific transgression. But the broader point which the rites require is the final understanding of Tantra that the Divine, while being Beyond all, is also immanent and present in everything—the mind, all elements, all actions, and the body itself, which is capable of awakening to its own vibration or *spanda* as part of the Om of Creation. Thus the body and the senses do not need to be rejected to attain realization – they themselves can become the direct path to reali-

zation once one becomes aware of their true nature. As Reho maintains, Tantra is the “path in which nothing is left behind. All serves the unfolding of the Divine in our consciousness and in our world.”<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, according to this philosophy, where Kālī is to be found, Śiva is never far away, for the two belong together. When they are at one, are One, melded into each other as Brahman, all is at rest. When they are separate, they long for each other with such passion that they initiate the dance of creation and dissolution (the *tāṇḍava*), which brings them to ecstasy.

In Śākta (as opposed to Śaivite) literature both Śiva and Kālī (Śakti) perform the great ecstatic *tāṇḍava* dance of creation and dissolution, but it is Kālī who vanquishes Śiva at the end, Mahākālī devouring even Mahākāla, the Devourer of Time himself.

Together those two are one, one being, one body, one self; separate, their dance of intimacy and desire is enough to create and destroy worlds. This ecstasy is sought by Tantrics who experience it as the rising of the serpent power, kuṇḍalinī, which seeks to unite with Śiva in the lotus chakra of the head—the sahasrāra, or, according to other traditions, in the Great Heart which is the ultimate abode of Kālī herself. With the help of kuṇḍalinī śakti, the body can become aware of its innate divinity and awaken more of the potential locked inside it.

Esoterically Kālī is said to reside in the central heart chakra, as well as in the physical heart on the left, and the spiritual heart on the right sides of the body respectively. Together these form the Great Heart or “holy of holies” where divine union takes place.<sup>56</sup>

Using Western terminology, one might speak in this context of the sublimation process as understood by Freud, who attributed creativity and the arts to a sublimation of sexual or erotic power, its potency rising from the base to the head. And in some understandings of Tantra too, the semen is said to rise into the head giving the practitioner siddhis or supernatural powers. But that would constitute a limiting and potentially dangerous misreading of the

true teaching of Tantra which goes far beyond that.<sup>57</sup> The literature stresses that kuṇḍalinī only rises safely insofar as the psychic/physical centers of the body are sufficiently purified to offer it a “safe” container and passage, as this is literally the energy of the immanent Divinity awakening in the physical vehicle and flooding consciousness. Without such rigorous purification (physical, mental, supramental, spiritual), this powerful energy, if prematurely and forcibly awakened, can wreak havoc with the vehicle of the body and the personality and literally destroy them. The genius succumbing to madness, individuals subject to grandiose ego inflation, or those suffering from drug abuse are examples of how the process can go wrong.

### Śakti as Holy Spirit

In a certain way, Śakti is akin to the Holy Spirit of Christianity which blows where it will and acts as a vehicle for the immanence of God in Creation. Kuṇḍalinī śakti purifies and blesses and empowers, imparting its energy through the human body, physical and subtle, and through objects such as mūrtis, icons, statues, flowers, holy oil, holy water—all may be imbued with the presence of the Holy Spirit or of Śakti, all may become manifestations of it, as may we ourselves.

Unlike the Holy Spirit though (apart from some interpretations of the Holy Spirit as Sophia), Śakti is definitely conceived as feminine and personified as such: either as Śakti/ Devī who is the ultimate creator Goddess; the Ādyā Kālī who is also Brahman; or as the divine consort of a god whom she animates and empowers through her divine energy. And, like a prism, She can manifest through a multitude of refractions or goddesses, each one embodying a part of the spectrum of energy as it were—Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, Mariamman, Kālī, Durgā, Pārvatī and many others can all be seen as such refractions.

The greatest power of this conception of the Feminine, of the Goddess, of whom Ādyā Kālī or Mahākālī is perhaps the most striking example, lies in her ability to reconcile paradox and move beyond duality. Thus, She is at the same time the source of illusion or *māyā*, and

the *jñāna* or knowledge which liberates us from illusion. If She is immanent in all, if She creates all and consumes all, how can there be, ultimately, pure and impure, good and evil, life and death, order and chaos—and this is what Tantra, at its deepest, acknowledges and attempts to live and to embody.<sup>58</sup>

### Kālī and Black Wisdom

For the Jungians Marion Woodman and Elinor Dickson,<sup>59</sup> Kālī's blackness equates her with Wisdom, producing equivalence around "black" and "wise," as in the "black arts" signifying originally the "wise arts." Black is the color that all other colors are part of. Hence everything is included in her blackness, all colors and all things. For Woodman and many others who personally encounter the Dark Goddess, Kālī means the acceptance of death out of which comes the acceptance of perpetual becoming. Kālī creates and destroys in a ceaselessly renewing dance. Woodman and Dickson write in deeply poetic imagery:

She is black, dark as the matrix, dark as the vortex, from which all creation comes and to which it returns. To her devotees, she is like a black sapphire; radiance shines through her blackness. She dances and laughs with abandon, intoxicated with the mystery she is.<sup>60, 61</sup>

The following poem attempts to give voice to an encounter with Kālī's all-embracing black radiance:

#### DarkTalk grown Darker

Darker than soot  
than raven's wings  
than bowels of earth  
Black holes in sky  
mean nothing here  
Black vortex spinning  
its substance swirled  
sensuous black  
A danger a threat  
A wild wild dark joy  
at palpitant warmth  
a luminous dark

so dark that dark glowed  
so black that all else was unseen  
black presence moved  
brushed past in dance  
gasps . raced . intense .  
reckless . blood laughs .  
Mother .  
Space laughs at such words.<sup>62</sup>

In true keeping with the Wisdom tradition, Kālī is said to embody the principle that without darkness nothing comes to birth or to light, without darkness there can be no roots, and without sacrifice there can be no enlightenment. Kālī helps us to understand the true nature of reality itself—the dance of destruction and creation, of the negative and positive polarities—this dance which is at the heart of evolution and transformation.

### Kālī Today in the West and the East

In Sanskrit texts there are no capital letters. Is Durgā in the *Devī Māhātmya* a distinct individual Goddess or is she, rather, "durgā," a particular quality or manifestation of the Divine? This lack of proper nouns in Sanskrit allows us to depersonalize these beings, and perceive them as forces, as principles. In the West, we have often emphasized gender and its biases in approaching goddesses such as Kālī. This is understandable as it is difficult not to see gender as the primary motivating force behind the numerous stories of the goddesses and gods. Yet the Goddess is perhaps best understood outside the limits of gender.<sup>63</sup> Kālī after all is also the genderless Brahman, All That Is, the indivisible which is complete and whole, and if the complete and whole is taken out of the complete and whole it still remains complete and whole. (This statement, paraphrasing an ancient Sanskrit prayer, *Om pūrṇamadah*, can be understood in a holographic way as well if we wish to adopt more current scientific language.) The Western way of viewing these perennial images and stories often distorts their meaning, slanting them towards an oppositional war of the sexes. Not that this does not exist within Indian culture

itself with its ongoing deeply patriarchal biases. Yet the archetypal stories of the goddesses and gods are more than that, and they provide us with different interpretative models of reality. We see two principles, two forces, not at war, but existing in deep non-hierarchical complementarity and acknowledgement, one of the other. Is not that the interpretation we should choose to explore in moving forward and in our own Western attempt to understand an Eastern culture?

Kālī is no feminist figure for the average Indian worshipper, nor an emblem of women's sexual liberation, but more of an embodiment of a universal force of creation and destruction, and of Nature itself. In the West though, she has become for many a symbol of women's autonomy and completeness, as one who does not heed the male gaze.<sup>64</sup> This feminist Kālī embodies women's freedom and unfettered female energy and sexuality. She has also come to represent for many women the unleashing of feminine fierceness and rage. She becomes, in this context, a kind of conduit of the pain and anger of the wounded and suppressed feminine and of women themselves throughout history. This is, in many ways, the direct opposite of the Indian attempt to interpret her in such a way that she can be made part of the fold of goddesses who conform to Brahmanical norms of female behavior. And yet, there have been stirrings of revolt in India too, as witnessed by the recent "Smash Brahminical Patriarchy" campaign on Twitter with its calling out of the caste distinctions and gender inequality at the heart of the Brahmanical social order, and Indians' embrace of the #MeToo campaign which is surely more needed there where violence and abuse of women are still endemic in the culture in parts of the subcontinent. Yet again, in Sri Lanka Kālī has become a powerful symbol of resistance for the Tamil population and her worship has

*She is black, dark as the matrix,  
dark as the vortex, from which  
all creation comes and to which  
it returns. To her devotees, she is  
like a black sapphire; radiance  
shines through her blackness.  
She dances and laughs with  
abandon, intoxicated with the  
mystery she is.*

flourished in this context.<sup>65</sup> She has also become for some in the West an emblem of Nature, exploited and abused for too long, and ready to take revenge in violent eruptions. And yet she is limited to none of these roles, but, in true non-dualist fashion, can encompass all of these and more.

On the whole though, apart from in her domesticated version, Kālī does not figure prominently as a role model for Indian women, nor are they encouraged to find out much about her. Śaktism is a minority religion even though there is a popular saying which goes something

like: "One behaves like a Vaiṣṇavite in public, a Śaivite at home, and a Śākta in secret (or in one's true heart)."<sup>66</sup> Goddesses such as Kālī or Durgā, powerful, and potentially disruptive and dangerous, are seen as an aspect of the feminine archetype best kept under control and outside of the boundaries of civilized society and acceptable social behavior. However, there are glimmers of change. In a recent book addressed specifically to Indian women, *Awaken the Durga Within*, Usha Narayanan<sup>67</sup> calls on women to free themselves of the submissive roles and behavior imposed on them by the patriarchy, taking the figures and stories of the Indian goddesses for their role models and inspiration. By her own admission, these stories of powerful goddesses, though widely present in the Indian scriptures or Purāṇas, are not widely known or disseminated, giving a false idea of the religion itself and of the relationships between goddesses and gods. Although Narayanan does not go as far as advising women to emulate Kālī and her free, wild and dominant behavior, she does call Kālī the "embodiment of true feminine power."<sup>68</sup> She also points out that Sītā, worshipped as the perfect self-sacrificing wife of Indian mythology, has another face, that of Bhadrakālī. Indeed, Bhadrakālī (or Parameśvarī) is her true inner self and her secret form, even though she



only reveals it when Rāma has been killed by the great 1,000 headed demon Sahasranana Ravana, and he and the gods need rescuing—yet again. At other times Sītā is happy for Rāma to play his heroic role while restraining and concealing her own powers, but faced with the death of her beloved and the rout of his army of gods and men, she chooses to show her true power and nature. Like Kālī following her victory on the battlefield, Sītā as Bhadrakālī has to be placated by the gods so that her rage will not destroy the worlds. Faced with his wife’s true omnipotence and glory the resurrected Rāma recites the *Kālī Sahasranama* (The Thousand Names of Kālī) in her honor. This is the story as related in the supposedly full *Rāmayāna* of Vālmīki, the *Adbhut Rāmayāna*, which Narayanan retells in her book.<sup>69</sup>

Interestingly, Vālmīki foreshadows some famous lines from the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the *Adbhut Rāmayāna* with a significant amendment—whenever dhārma declines, it is Prakṛti (not Kṛṣṇa (Krishna) as in the *Gītā*) who appears on earth to destroy adharmā.<sup>70</sup>

### A Little More History

In truth, however, Kālī is an ancient goddess, more ancient than her current forms, with roots that extend into pre-Vedic times. As Narayanan affirms, “folk traditions and rural India have a rich tradition of goddess-worship, which precedes the worship of male gods. The deities worshipped were called Amman, Amba or Mata” and they had both destructive and protective powers.<sup>71</sup> Vestiges of these deities survive in Kālī’s retinue of Matrīkās and Yoginīs. Kālī clearly has links to the *grama-devas* or village deities of prehistory and their rural shamanic cults, as she does to the Harappan Indus Valley civilization with its veneration of the Great Goddess. There are terracotta statues of the Goddess dating back to 4,500 to 5,500 BCE. Looking even further back, there is evidence of Goddess worship in the Indian subcontinent in Upper Paleolithic times more than 20,000 years ago where she is represented as a rounded rock or stones marked by triangles (a possible precursor of the yantras used in Tantric Goddess worship such as the Śrī Vidyā).

The earliest Goddess figurine unearthed in the Indian subcontinent also dates back to that era (c.20,000 - 23,000 BCE).<sup>72</sup> N. N. Bhattacharya is another scholar who sees the worship of the Great Feminine as a major element in the Dravidian civilizations of South India, seeing the Dravidian concept of Śakti as the dynamic active principle eventually associated with Pārvatī, Durgā and Kālī of the Puranic tradition.<sup>73</sup> Vedic times saw a partial eclipse of Goddess worship with goddesses made subordinate to male gods, but it reemerges in subsequent periods in texts such as the *Lalitā Sahasranāma*, *Devī Māhātmya*, the *Saundaryalahari* of Shankara, the *Devī Gītā* (part of the *Devī-Bhāgavata Purāna*), and, of course, the *Tantras*.

Taking a different route into prehistory, Great Kālī also possibly harkens back to ancient Neolithic symbolism linked to Goddess worship in the Middle East, such as that found at Çatal Hüyük in Turkey with its images of vultures and decapitated torsos. Heads were apparently removed from the bodies of corpses and the skulls kept separately, while the bodies were offered to the vultures for “sky burial” or decarnation. The mythology behind this practice appears to hint at the belief that the spirit is free to leave the body once the head has been removed. It is then able to fly up on its homeward journey into the stars, guided by the vulture, who now acts a kind of psychopomp and liberator. The skull meanwhile would become part of a cult of ancestor worship. Thus, the skulls adorning Kālī’s necklace could well be yet another possible link into an ancient prehistoric past which this goddess’s imagery has carried into our present across the millennia.

Arising from such atavistic ancestral memories, Great Kālī is the Great Mother who destroys and saves, Devourer and Liberator at once.

Of necessity, this is all speculation, but there are many instances in history of images and symbols being retained across millennia though transformed in meaning, mutating subtly and not so subtly from positive to negative, the paradisaical Garden with its Trees of Knowledge and of Life and its Serpent (chang-

ing from symbol of Wisdom and power to symbol of deceit and temptation) being one such well known instance.

Kālī is an archetypal force and as such holds deep links to other powerful goddess and shamaness figures from prehistory. Apart from those already mentioned, such as Hecate and Lilith, there is another figure she has a deep kinship with—the Slav foremother Yaga, or Baba Yaga, the witch of countless Russian fairy tales. Baba Yaga is most often portrayed as supremely ugly and supremely terrifying, echoing the portrayal of Kālī as ugly, emaciated and terrifying. Her anarchic hut never stands still but dances its way on chicken legs through the deep forest which is her natural abode. The forest is wild and untamed and therefore dangerous to human social order and civilization. It is outside the village or settlement and marginal to it. In a similar way Kālī dwells on the margins of society and order, in cremation grounds, on crossroads, and in the realms of wild untameable nature. Skulls and bones are the sacred symbols of Baba Yaga—the fence to her dwelling is often constructed of human bones, while human skulls adorn its posts and double as flaming torches lit from within. Similarly, skulls adorn Kālī in the shape of the necklace she wears. Quite apart from the later symbolic association of these skulls with the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, in the dawn of history skulls carried an extra and more powerful charge. It was not just in the Middle East that the skulls of the ancestors (and later in history, of powerful enemies) were imbued with a powerful numinosity. Through the medium of these skulls the priestess or shamaness could initiate a direct link to the spirits of the ancestors and their wisdom. The word “witch” is directly linked to the knowing of “Wicca” and to Dark/Black Wisdom. Similarly, the Russian word for witch, *ved'ma*, has a strong association with the verb *vedat'* —“to know,” also to know in a deep prophetic sense. Add to this the suffix “ma” = “ma” and you have the “mother of knowing,” knowingness, the mother of Wisdom herself.

Both Baba Yaga and Kālī could feasibly be said to derive from the figure of the frightening masked shamaness who performs powerful

initiatory rituals involving the spilling of blood. Young initiates would have been subjected to an encounter with the terror of Death in a sacred enclosure, an encounter which was most likely intended to free them of that terror for life. Young males were also often required to spill blood in order to enter the bloodline of their spouse and her kin. Not surprisingly, such a female figure would have constellated a high degree of male anxiety and fear around herself, an anxiety that has survived in the fear surrounding powerful female archetypes such as Baba Yaga or Kālī.

Finally though, Kālī, or all She has come to represent, both encompasses and transcends our history as well as pointing us towards our future. Who better than one of the foremost Western scholars of Tantra, David Frawley, to sum up? Frawley writes:

Kali is not some mere folk deity, some ancient Goddess, or a strange object for intellectual curiosity or cultural image. She is the Supreme Power of the magical, awesome, cataclysmic universe in which we live, of which we are all but brief expressions, and to which we must all bow down in reverence in the end.<sup>74</sup>

### **Kālī and the Raj and Since**

Kālī worship and Tantra were most prevalent in Northern India in Odisha, Bengal and Assam. That is not to say she is not a powerful presence in the South of India in Tamil Nadu and Kerala as well. Quite the contrary. Kālī worship is strong in South India, particularly so among women and tribals.<sup>75</sup> Mata Amritanandamayi from Kerala, revered by many as a living saint, is said by many of her devotees to be an incarnation of Kālī, and, having experienced her transformative powerful energy and ruthless compassion at close hand, I would agree. That is not to say that Kālī worship is not marginalized and regarded with some suspicion still in India, despite all the domestication her image has undergone. She carries in a very real way male anxiety in front of female sexuality and power. Hence, the numerous attempts at toning down her image. Hence, also, a deep-seated ambivalence towards her and her worshippers, which still sur-

vives and which the British made full use of during the colonial era.

An example of how certain customs came to be distorted under the British Raj can be furnished by the caste of female temple dancers in Puri, Odisha, highly cultured women who performed in the temples and had a measure of independence, being attached to no man. The incoming British perceived them as prostitutes, and the designation stuck, their status rapidly dropping amongst Indians as well. Similar things happened with Tantric rituals and with the figure of Kālī herself, who was particularly shocking to the British of the Raj—an unfettered, worse still, sexually unfettered wild woman demanding blood. Kālī became for the Europeans the epitome of the uncivilized native, terrifying, savage, demanding human sacrifice. The upper class Indians, educated in a Western context, recognized that image as not so far removed from their own prejudices and sought to distance themselves from it, or explain Kālī away in highly metaphorical terms.<sup>76</sup> The fact that Tantric rituals were largely esoteric and occult, therefore secret, played into the detractors' hands. These rituals were seen as forbidden and forbidding, and all sorts of fantasies accrued to them, partly in the interests of giving the British more ammunition in justifying their civilizing mission. In this way, for instance, the Thuggee legend came into being. The Thuggees (or Thugs) were said to be a group of highway robbers in Northern India who sacrificed their victims to Kālī. A Captain William Henry Sleeman wrote a highly influential anonymous letter and reports on Kālī worship and the Thuggees based on very little factual evidence, and what there was was grossly distorted.<sup>77</sup> The legend, however, gained much traction and persisted well into its more recent manifestations such as the popular film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. However, according to recent research it is highly doubtful that the Thuggees ever existed. In fact, their existence has never been proven. What is more likely is that bands of thieves worshipped Kālī like everyone else did in that region. But this sensationalized image was a useful one for Imperialist purposes and it stuck. Sleeman, in particular, had used the

Thugs as justification for the imposition of British law and order which he considered an “imperious duty.”<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

Kālī as the Great Goddess spans human history, connecting us to the wildness of nature and to the very cosmos itself. She is there at the beginning of human history and she is there now, still connecting us to our own nature and the world we are part of and from which we come, wherever we may go next. In all her forms, throughout human history, Kālī has been and remains a call and challenge to the soul.

Kālī gives us a glimpse into ancient history and prehistory, that is to say pre-Aryan and pre-Brahmanical history, pre-Sanskritic history with its ancient tribal goddesses and clan mothers. She has an affinity with ancient goddesses such as Lilith, the Morrigan, Hekate, Baba Yaga and the Morrigan-like tribal Indian goddess Kottavai. Because the ambivalence with which she is regarded and her marginalization are part and parcel of the marginalization of lower caste Dalits (Untouchables), tribals, aborigines and women, who all figure prominently in her worship, the current Western fascination with her also serves to bring the issues of marginalized groups into the open. On another tangent, it is the balance of the powerful Feminine that is needed now to bring balance to the Earth and to our attitude towards exploiting the resources of Nature available to us, and Kālī certainly fulfills that role. And finally, in an age marked by the discoveries of quantum physics maybe we need an archetypal divine image such as Kālī, personal and impersonal at once, horrifying and exhilarating, a figure who contains the swirling atoms and cosmoses and invites us to delve into her mystery, a figure who holds paradox and transcends dualism.

Kālī is essentially unknowable and unfathomable, like the God of Job. She does not correspond to any of our human intimations of how the divine should comport itself. Who are you to question God's ways and God's work, the long suffering Job challenges his friends, remaining true to his faith even through what

appear to be the unfairest trials and tribulations he undergoes. Like Job who chooses radical surrender, that is the only sensible path open to those who encounter Kālī, the mysterious impersonal force which causes the universe to be, and yet is capable of a mother's love for each one of her creation, just as God cares for Job, even while allowing (and abetting?) his trials.

In truth, it is not through the rational mind that we will come to know Kālī. Poetry and mystic thought can bring us closer to comprehending some of what she represents. She challenges us somehow to get up the courage to plunge into her mystery, plunging through our deepest fears, as well as all the places where we want to hold on to certainty and changelessness, in order to dissolve in her radiant blackness. Hers is the irresistible black portal which calls out to us if we are to reach the highest wisdom. And hers is the teaching that no transformation is possible without the sequence of life – death – and rebirth.

Kālī is considered by many (not least by Sri Aurobindo) to be the most direct and uncompromising manifestation of the Divine Feminine. According to her devotees one of her most dominant characteristics is her lightning fast and ruthless mercy. She both demands sacrifice and transforms that sacrifice. If you want something to happen rapidly and are prepared to have your personal ego uprooted (or be-headed!), turn to Kālī and her direct power. On the other hand, not many are prepared to risk such direct divine intervention in their lives, or handle such raw power.

With Kālī there are no easy answers, no easy solutions to the enigma of life. But there is a promise of liberation—if we but have the courage to seize it and want it more than anything else while submitting ourselves to her liberating sword.

For most, Kālī's archetypal image is as the goddess of destruction, garlanded with skulls, clothed with severed limbs, drinking her enemies' blood, her destructive dance only cut short when she encounters Śiva, who lays himself prone across her path. Faced with his all-encompassing still consciousness she stops, for him she cannot and will not trample and the

universe catches its breath and lives another day.

And this image is key to all—to our evolution, to our survival even. Faced with consciousness and surrender the universe breathes out love.

***Black Thou***

A black hole  
Your Body  
I long  
to be consumed  
Compress  
And eat me whole  
I shall not care  
What time or space  
You will expel me into  
If this black moment  
of your Presence  
Is the narrow gate  
To lead me through.

Unfold your limbs  
And decongest your atoms  
That I might pierce  
an opening inside  
Which you've prepared for me  
since the commencement  
of your Centres.

Reflect no longer  
Choose now to absorb me  
And I'll dissolve and freeze  
Freeze and dissolve  
And arch  
All strings and strands of my cells' memories  
Into the dizzy magnet  
Of your dancing body.

And only then –  
Full conscious of your matter and abyss  
Will I breathe essences  
of you  
– all-self-transcending.<sup>79</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> As translated in Aditi Devi, *In Praise of Ādyā Kālī* (Chino Valley, AZ: Hohm Press, 2014), Names 27, 6 and 10.
- <sup>2</sup> Paramahansa Yogananda, “Thou Mother of Flames,” <https://thecosmicmother.org/home/kali/thou-mother-of-flames/> (Last accessed February 4, 2019).
- <sup>3</sup> Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Bengali saint and mystic famous for his worship of the Divine Mother as Kālī (1836–1886). Rāmprasād Sen, Bengali Śākta poet and saint, famous for his poetry addressed to Kālī (C.1718/1723 – c.1775).
- <sup>4</sup> “Names of G-d,” Irina Kuzminsky, unpublished manuscript.
- <sup>5</sup> “Thou Mother of Flames,” <https://thecosmicmother.org/home/kali/thou-mother-of-flames/> (Last accessed February 4, 2019).
- <sup>6</sup> David Frawley, “Foreword” to Shambhavi L. Chopra, *Yogic Secrets of the Dark Goddess* (New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2007), xiii-xiv.
- <sup>7</sup> Abhinavgupta, *Tantrasāra*, as cited by Lokesh Chandra, in “Introduction” to Shambhavi L. Chopra, *Yogic Secrets of the Dark Goddess*, xxiv. Abhinavgupta (c.950-1016) was a Kashmiri polymath, philosopher and mystic, and master of Kashmiri Śaivism whose writings influenced the Śaivite and Śākta schools for centuries.
- <sup>8</sup> Sri Ramakrishna quoted in James Hughes Reho, *Tantric Jesus: The Erotic Heart of Early Christianity* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 2017), 44.
- <sup>9</sup> This is according to the entry for Kālī in: [https://www.etymonline.com/word/Kali#etymonline\\_v\\_1770](https://www.etymonline.com/word/Kali#etymonline_v_1770), an online etymology dictionary (Last accessed May16, 2019).
- <sup>10</sup> Shambhavi L. Chopra, *Yogic Secrets of the Dark Goddess*, 118.
- <sup>11</sup> The *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* (IV, 30-34) as translated by Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon), *The Garland of Letters*, (1922), 220-221. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.274061/page/n229> (Last accessed April 3, 2019). Sir John Woodroffe (1835-1936) (better known under his pen name of Arthur Avalon) is an author whose importance as one of the foremost Western scholars of Tantra can scarcely be overstated. His translations and understanding of ancient Tantric texts have furnished the most important source and foundation for subsequent Western interest in Tantric yoga and Śaktism. His translation of the *Mahanirvana Tantra* was first published in 1913. Other important texts include *Serpent Power, Śakti and Śākta, Hymn to Kali and Garland of Letters*.
- <sup>12</sup> Woodroffe, *The Garland of Letters*, 220.
- <sup>13</sup> Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time* (trans; Erica Segre and Simon Carnell; Allen Lane, Penguin Books, 2018), 49.
- <sup>14</sup> One of the best retellings of this story I have come across is that of Usha Narayanan in Usha Narayanan, *Awaken the Durga Within* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2018), 35-39.
- <sup>15</sup> I primarily refer to the text of the *Devī Māhātmyam* as translated by Svāmī Jagadīśvarānanda who based his work on the translations of Manmathanath Dutta and F. K. Pargiter and who aimed to be as literal as possible: *Devī Māhātmyam* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1953). The *Devī Māhātmyam* (or *Glory of the Divine Mother*) is found in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* LXXXI-XCIII. There are other versions of the killing of Mahiṣasura by the Goddess in the *Devībhagavata Purāṇa* and the *Oriya Chandi Purāṇa*.
- <sup>16</sup> Ajit Mookerjee, *Kali – the Feminine Force* (New York: Destiny Books, 1988).
- <sup>17</sup> Colin Robinson, “The Word “Kali” in the *Devī Mahatmya: A new look at an old book*,” <https://thecosmicmother.org/home/kali/2007>, revised for web 2010 (Last accessed April 7, 2019).
- <sup>18</sup> The vowel “i/ ī” is often the feminine ending in Sanskrit nouns, as in Kālī, Pārvaṭī, Saṭī.
- <sup>19</sup> Paramahansa Yogananda resorts to this explanation in his discussion of Kālī’s iconography, see <http://thecosmicmother.org>. “Dominating Kālī” by Usha Menon and Richard A. Shweder is an interesting and well-researched account of how the image of Kālī has been domesticated in traditional Hindu culture. See Usha Menon and Richard A. Shweder, “Dominating Kālī: Hindu Family Values and Tantric Power,” in: Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal (eds), *Encountering Kālī: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 80-99.
- <sup>20</sup> Daniel Odier, *Tantric Kali: Secret Practices and Rituals* (trans; Jack Cain; Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2016), 9.
- <sup>21</sup> Reho, *Tantric Jesus*, 50. Woodroffe, in the *Garland of Letters*, 219-220, made a similar argument very early on in reference to the

- Catholic imagery of the “Slain Lamb” and the “Sacred Heart.”
- 22 See Paramahansa Yogananda on Kālī’s iconography in: <https://thecosmicmother.org/home/kali/>. There is a broad consensus though around interpretations of Kālī’s iconography. Most draw to some extent on the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*, with a few variations (such as Kālī’s red tongue). The article by Sanjukta Gupta, “The Domestication of a Goddess: *Carāṇa-tirtha* Kālīghāt, the *Mahāpīṭha* of Kālī” in McDermott and Kripal, *Encountering Kālī*, 60-79, is a good study of the domesticating impact of Vaiṣṇava religion on Kālī and the Kālīghāt Temple in Calcutta.
- 23 Ramakrishna, in Swami Nikhilananda, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Rāmakrishna-VivekanandaCenter, 1977), 271.
- 24 As quoted by Odier in *Tantric Kali*, 10.
- 25 Woodroffe draws attention to this symbolism in the *Garland of Letters*, 222-223: “She wears the letters which She as Creatrix bore. She wears the Letters which, She, as the Dissolving Power, takes to Herself again.”
- 26 See, for instance, Ramachandra V. R. Dikshitar, *The Lalita Cult* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1999), 90.
- 27 Aditi Devi, *In Praise of Ādyā Kālī*, 55.
- 28 I would recommend Carlo Rovelli for his lucid, engaging and succinct explanations of the latest discoveries in quantum physics. See Carlo Rovelli, *Reality is Not What It Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity* (trans; Simon Carnell and Erica Segre; New York: Riverhead Books, 2017). (Also Rovelli’s international bestseller, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*.)
- 29 Rāmprasād Sen in: <https://www.poetseers.org/themes/poems-spirituality/poems-about-kali/> (Last accessed April 8, 2019). There are wonderful versions of Rāmprasād’s poems in Lex Hixon, *Mother of the Universe: Visions of the Goddess and Tantric Hymns of Enlightenment* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1994) (the poem quoted here is to be found on p.141), and Leonard Nathan and Clinton Seely (trans.), *Grace and Mercy in her Wild Hair: Selected Poems to the Mother Goddess by Rāmprasād Sen* (Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press, 1999). Another good source for devotional poetry to Kālī is Rachel Fell McDermott, *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kālī and Umā from Bengal* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 30 As translated by Lex Hixon in *Mother of the Universe*, 83, 95.
- 31 Kamalākānta, “Is my black Mother Shyama really black?” trans. Rachel Fell McDermott, in McDermott and Kripal, *Encountering Kālī*, frontispiece; also in McDermott (trans.), *Mother of my Heart, Daughter of My Dreams: Kālī in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 84.
- 32 Reho, *Tantric Jesus*, 10.
- 33 Matthew Fox, in “Foreword” to Reho, *Tantric Jesus*, xiii.
- 34 Reho, *Tantric Jesus*, 79.
- 35 As quoted by Shambhavi L. Chopra in *Yogic Secrets of the Dark Goddess*, 5.
- 36 At the same time it should also be acknowledged that many of the Tantras contain vestiges of goddess cults from deep antiquity with an emphasis on nature, sex and violence, and the worship of Kālī-like figures who harken back to wild folk deities. The Matr̥kās, the Yoginīs, the Mahāvidyās themselves (such as Tārā, Chinnamastā, Cāmuṇḍā) are all related to these atavistic divinities.
- 37 See the Wikipedia entry for *Vāmācāra* at: <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/vāmācāra> under “Nomenclature and Etymology.”
- 38 Mike Magee, *The Yoni Tantra*, Vol.2 (Harrow, UK: Worldwide Tantra Project, 1995), quoted by Daniel Odier, in Odier, *Tantric Kali*, 12.
- 39 *Śaktisaṅgama Tantra* (dated between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), as quoted in Aditi Devi, *In Praise of Ādyā Kālī*, 42.
- 40 Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 148.
- 41 Aditi Devi, *In Praise of Ādyā Kālī*, p. 60. Daniel Odier, another Tantric initiate, expresses a similar view, see Odier, *Tantric Kali*, 21.
- 42 For a detailed scholarly discussion of scribal transmission errors and alterations in New Testament texts, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperOne, 2005).
- 43 André Padoux, French Indologist, as quoted in Odier, *Tantric Kali*, 98.
- 44 It is important to realize that there are different schools of Tantra—Śākta, Śaivite and

- Buddhist (Vajrayāna). Linking them all though is the fundamental principle of weaving all dualities into non-duality or union. The emphasis on the Feminine Divine principle is another common factor. This article refers primarily to the Śākta school as Kālī figures most prominently in the Śākta lineages.
- 45 Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon), *Mahānirvāna Tantra of the Great Liberation* (Whitefish: Kestinger Publishing, 1913).
- 46 Daniel Odier, *Tantric Quest: An Encounter with Absolute Love* (trans; Jody Gladding; Sydney, London et al: Bantam, 1997). Other books by Daniel Odier on Tantra and the Tantras include *Desire: The Tantric Path to Awakening* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2001), and *Yoga Spandakarika: The Sacred Texts at the Origins of Tantra* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2005).
- 47 Aditi Devi, *In Praise of Ādyā Kālī*.
- 48 Shambhavi L. Chopra, *Yogic Secrets of the Dark Goddess*.
- 49 Odier, *Tantric Kali*, 23.
- 50 Chopra, *Yogic Secrets of the Dark Goddess*, xx.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 *Kaula Upanishad*, as quoted in Odier, *Tantric Kali*, 22.
- 53 Odier, *Tantric Kali*, 20.
- 54 This has not precluded some Tantric practitioners from creating their own rules: for example, worship on a black moon or on a Tuesday night is supposedly more auspicious than at other times. It seems like human beings just cannot take too much freedom!
- 55 Reho, *Tantric Jesus*, 26.
- 56 David Frawley, *Tantric Yoga and the Wisdom Goddesses* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1999), 71.
- 57 Georg Feuerstein coined the term ‘superlimation’ in this context to try to distinguish between Freud’s theory of sublimation and the psychospiritual processes of kuṇḍalinī. See Georg Feuerstein, *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy* (Boston: Shambhala, 1998), 228, quoted in Reho, *Tantric Jesus*, 111.
- 58 Already in the *Devī Māhātmya* Mahākālī is seen to embody all the gunas and qualities and all the powers of good and evil. See DM, 1:78-81.
- 59 Marion Woodman and Elinor Dickson, *Dancing in the Flames: The Dark Goddess and the New Mythology* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996).
- 60 Woodman and Dickson, *Dancing in the Flames*, 14.
- 61 There is a strong similarity between this description of Kālī and Eben Alexander’s experience of the Source, whom he named Om, during his near death experience, as unfathomably dark, inner, yet loving and luminous at the same time. See Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2012).
- 62 “DarkTalk grown Darker”, Irina Kuzminsky, in Irina Kuzminsky, *Dancing with Dark Goddesses* (Bath: Awen, 2009), 59.
- 63 Devdutt Pattanaik makes a compelling argument for transcending gender in discussions of Indian goddesses and gods in Devdutt Pattanaik, *7 Secrets of the Goddess* (Chennai: Westland Publications, 2014); see particularly Chapter 7.
- 64 See Rachel Fell McDermott, “Kālī’s New Frontiers: A Hindu Goddess on the Internet,” in McDermott and Kripal (eds), *Encountering Kālī*, 273-295, for a discussion of Western feminist and New Age depictions of Kālī, comparing and contrasting these with Indian perspectives.
- 65 See Patricia Lawrence, “Kālī in a Context of Terror: The Tasks of a Goddess in Sri Lanka’s Civil War,” in McDermott and Kripal (eds), *Encountering Kālī*, 100-123.
- 66 As given by Aditi Devi in *In Praise of Ādyā Kālī*, 39.
- 67 Narayanan, *Awaken the Durga Within*.
- 68 Ibid., 145.
- 69 See Narayanan, *Awaken the Durga Within*, 141-145.
- 70 As cited by Narayanan in *Awaken the Durga Within*, 143.
- 71 Ibid., 10.
- 72 See the Wikipedia entry on Shaktism (Last accessed April 9, 2019).
- 73 Narendra Nath Bhattacharya, *The Indian Mother Goddesses* (New Delhi: South Asia Books, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1977), 26.
- 74 Frawley, in “Foreword” to Chopra, *Yogic Secrets of the Dark Goddess*, xiii.
- 75 See Sarah Caldwell, “Margins at the Center: Tracing Kālī through Time, Space, and Culture,” in McDermott and Kripal (eds), *Encountering Kālī*, 249-272, in which Caldwell argues that Kālī is central to the marginalized, particularly women and tribals, in Brahmanical Hindu society, and that to see her as the

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peripheral deity of “outsiders” is to endorse the dominant Sanskrit Brahmanical culture.

<sup>76</sup> See the articles by Humes and Urban in *Encountering Kālī* for a discussion of the distortion of Kālī’s image by the British and the Indian response to it. Cynthia Ann Humes, “Wrestling with Kālī: South Asian and British Constructions of the Dark Goddess,” in McDermott and Kripal (eds), *Encountering Kālī*, 145-168; Hugh B. Urban, “‘India’s Darkest Heart:’ Kālī In the Colonial Imagina-

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tion,” in McDermott and Kripal (eds), *Encountering Kālī*, 169-195.

<sup>77</sup> For a detailed account of the creation of the Thuggee (Thug) legend, see Humes, “Wrestling with Kālī” in McDermott and Kripal (eds), *Encountering Kālī*.

<sup>78</sup> Sleeman, as quoted by Humes in “Wrestling with Kālī,” *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>79</sup> “Black Thou,” Irina Kuzminsky, in Irina Kuzminsky and Jan Delaney, *light muses* (Melbourne: Naditu Press, 2011), 23.