

Illimitable Kali

My parents named me Kalli when I was born in 1955, and as Eastern religions flooded into Oregon during my adolescence, people darkly intoned that I'd been named after catastrophic Kali, Hindu goddess of destruction. Protecting her honor as well as my own, I'd retort - "goddess of *creation* and destruction" - but this tidy phrase from my encyclopedia never seemed to carry much weight. Our Christian tradition *had* long attested to Kali's identity as a demon, and she *did* come off as the utter antithesis of our own God, who was formless and unrepresentable, yet imaged as male. In absolute contrast, Kali was fabulously embodied, and female to boot. Black, often drenched in blood, minimally costumed in a skirt of human limbs, adorned with a garland of skulls, she brandished a terrifying sword in one left hand and a dismembered male head in the other, and, her red tongue lolling amidst multiple arms and eyes, she posed triumphantly upon the supine body of an apparently dead man. *Mamma mia!* Poised for action, and obviously supreme, Kali was a thrilling antidote to the stings and arrows of female passivity and subordination.

After thirty years, my mood has shifted from defensive militancy to mystic devotion, but I still ponder Kali. In this essay, I invite you on a virtual pilgrimage along the private, silent, secret path that leads in her direction. We will approach her blackness, blood, skulls, sword, and seemingly lifeless male partner – as well as her relationship with time, space, and the emptiness of the void - by respectfully visiting her presence in India at Dakshineswar Temple, a sacred Bengali precinct north of Kolkata (Calcutta). We may encounter dangers - illusory definitions and categories, mirages of religious fantasies and preferences - but as your guide, I intend to steer clear of these by following the example of Ramakrishna, a 19th-century tantric saint who was absorbed in union with Kali for the lion's share of his prophetic life at Dakshineswar. He once advised: "What can human beings understand of Divine Activity? the facets and dimensions of Mother's creativity are infinite. My attitude is simply this: Never attempt to describe or to circumscribe God in any way, through any notion, whatsoever. I do not give a single thought to any structure or procedure of the universe but meditate on the Source of the Universe."¹ Following Ramakrishna's guidance, then, and despite a few irresistible forays into concepts and personal experience, our virtual pilgrimage is intended as a

¹ Lex Hixon, *Great Swan: Meetings with Ramakrishna* (Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1995), 280.

meditation, or inward current of effort, on Kali as Source of the Universe.

In Gratitude to India

Before our departure, we must acknowledge the people of India. As philosophers, householders, fanners, poets, saints, artisans, and politicians, they have long summoned Kali with innumerable names and titles, honoring her as infinite consciousness and primordial energy. Moreover, in a singular feat of non-violent resistance, they remained staunchly loyal to her supreme mother reality under the heavy fires of colonization: for seven centuries, their lands were appropriated, and their labors utilized, by Moslems and Christians who ruled under the aegis of a male deity. Although he would have no other gods before him, the iconoclastic crusades made in his name could not prevail in India, for the people maintained her ritual rhythms in their homes. They prayed, chanted, and sang to her; they served her food; they dressed and adorned her; they bathed her and covered her with flowers; they tended her sacred fires; and above all, they followed the meditative inner spiral that leads in her direction. Today, India is the world's largest democracy, and devotees flood the streets on her holy days, surrendering to the universal female who lifts one from a self-conscious to super-conscious level of awareness. When I step onto this passionate terrain, my body thrills in communion with a etheric river of blood, an ever-nameless current that flows forward and backward in time, its polyphonic heartbeat resuscitating an archaic yet enduring phase of our religious history as a species - before the words of a single male God were written and interpreted to rule the earth - when a dark cosmic mother of genesis and demise was everywhere revered as the entire interdependent cosmos, and as every plane, realm and being beyond. The uncompromising reign of the female principle is still preserved in the Hindu *Shakta* tradition, where her undiluted heritage - blood-red, obsidian-black, ash-white - streams freely up and down the corridors of time. She belongs to us all, but from the vantage point of the 21st century, I admit with gratitude that the people of India cared for her like a newborn babe, and kept her alive.

Her Dagger Dance

With this tribute to the people of India, the dark channel of consciousness that leads to Kali's dazzling core has dilated nicely, however, before soaring to her temple at Dakshineswar, did I mention that on this pilgrimage, there's just one catch? If you want to worship her, *you must become her*; moreover, since our female warrior of wisdom - sublimely beautiful, tender, playful, brilliant, and fierce - is essentially indistinguishable from her entranced cosmic twin and lover, Lord Shiva, *you must become him as well*. For starters, since Kali stands in a sword dance, I suggest that we invoke

the presence of women who wield daggers, beginning with our gypsy sisters, whose swords twirl along Kali's untamed chutes of time, skirts swirling as they belly dance the jubilant truths of female cycles. Bearing their desert disciplines in mind, slowly follow the three classical steps of Kali's dagger dance:

1) ***Kali is the cosmos.*** Her loving consciousness - an infinitely electrifying, yet soothing energy of awareness is the omnidynamic power through which she projects, sustains, and dissolves all space and time. Her sublimely ordered immanence, flowing from its source code within her consciousness, includes innumerable living beings and planes of existence. She consists of the intimate interplay between an aspect of space and time — subatomic particles, galactic clusters, fractions of nanoseconds, billions of years — as well as their inherent cosmic principles, her natural laws of genesis and demise. At her first exquisite step, then, her infinite consciousness — outside, yet the root, of space and time - becomes the body of all flowering and decay. This is Kali's lunar frequency, and following her first step in time and space, we are born, we are nourished, we die and regenerate.²

2.) ***Kali is transcendence.*** Since Kali has no limits whatsoever, at the second prancing step of her female depth, her dagger dance dissolves awareness, space, and time, effortlessly destroying the forms of consciousness and cycles to which we cling. Reposing as the void of absolute emptiness, dwelling formlessly in each particle, and timelessly in each moment, she erases the rounds of birth, death, and regeneration. Within the darling transparency of her motionless dreamtime, she is the essential stillness of consciousness and the perfect peace of transcendence, and her silent cosmic hum might be translated as the pure fearlessness of love. This is Kali's solar, or stellar, frequency. Since time stops at the speed of solar or stellar light, we mirror her second step in an eternal present, where we are never born, and never die.

3.) ***Kali is the fusion between the cosmos and the transcendent.*** She destroys the apparent opposition between the space and time of the cosmos, and the formless, timeless void of transcendence. She fuses the Moon and Sun together. At her third step, her frequency on our planet joins her lunar and solar frequency. Her left-handed path mediates between the

² In philosophical terms, Kali's first step is the relative realm, or reality with attributes. Similarly, her second step is the absolute realm, or attributeless reality.

sun and moon, from the perspective of earth. This mediation in astronomical terms is the solar and lunar eclipse cycle, which is formed by the periodic alignments of the primordial holy trinity: earth, moon, and sun.

Her wisdom medicine eclipses our worlds

Admittedly, Kali lives large, and *is* a hard act to follow. It's definitely a stretch to fuse space and time with the emptiness of the void, actively resolving any tension between the two! However, at this point, you've at least a ringside seat at her spectacular performance, and may well sense the unifying drumbeat of her maternal theology.

- Her consciousness gives birth to, sustains, and destroys all time and matter.
- Kali eclipses the principle of oppositional duality at every level, consistently giving rise to an inconceivable fusion of absolute oneness at every point, in every direction and dimension. She vaunts four arms, three eyes, and two sides, but is still indivisibly whole, and always communicates nondualistic truth, and therefore, her mother reality is always unitive and benefic.

The Inconceivable

Besides following her dagger dance, another big clue to the mystic trick of becoming her is to give up figuring her out! Kali floats elusively and indescribably on the outermost boundaries of all names, thoughts, concepts, images, rituals, and institutions, as her incomparable devotee Lex Hixon attested: "The Divine Mother is not distinct in essence from the inscrutable Yahweh of Jewish tradition, God the Hidden Father of Christianity, or Allah Most High of Islam, who is beyond all conceptions or descriptions."³

Approaching her from a distance on this conscious coil of concentration, to even begin to reach her, you must be willing to go further than you ever thought you would. You must slide off the edge of the known world, and in this spacious, free-falling atmosphere, personality dissolves, and egocentric desires for approval, personal advantage, wisdom, and sanctity are simply ripped away. She beckons you to come closer, and then closer and closer, to be very intimate, not permitting the slightest

³ Lex Hixon, *Mother of the Universe: Visions of the Goddess and Tantric Hymns of Enlightenment* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1994),2.

distance to remain, and finally, to close the gap and unite with her directly, embodying her so that there is no one else. Her bloodstained blade then falls in the ultimate cut of her unitive wisdom nature: suddenly, insistently, she blissfully releases you from all forms of divinity, including her own. Her radiant dark embrace then becomes your own infinite nature, limitless awareness, and intense freedom.

Kali and Shiva at Dakshineswar Temple, Kolkata

"The Divine Mother's magic is as ancient as life itself She existed before gods and mortals, and She will still exist even after the great dissolution. Mother is pure energy in subtle form but, in times of need or just out of a desire to play. She manifests." ⁴

Approaching the temple of her embodiment in Bengal, India, our journey/virtual pilgrimage is well underway. The intention is to meditate upon her as the Source of the Universe, to aspire toward her sacred contact by honoring her prime dimensions -- approaching her features such as her glorious blackness, blood, skulls, and sword, as illustrations of her rulership of time, space, and the void, and her male partner.. Kali floats out, shimmering holographs beamed from her Dakshineswar temple: Kali is indefinable, inconceivable, indescribable, unnameable, unspeakable, unthinkable. Every prayer, poem, chant, ritual, song, mystic diagram, painting, statue, temple, essay or pilgrimage; every expression created in reverence to her ultimately falls short of her identity and scope. Thoroughly and eternally, in her inscrutability, elusiveness, and freedom, she surpasses our understanding. Kali's inconceivability seems to be held very much in mind by her devotees in India, where she seems to have only the vaguest interest in organized religion. Her temples in India and the United States tend to be relatively fluid, anarchical zones, where little if any emphasis is placed on formal membership, systems of collecting dues, authoritative gurus, resplendent architectural facades, impressive grounds, or overt political objectives. Naturally, temple leadership exists, but it is transmitted gently, usually through ties of blood, shared amicably by many people, and exercised so softly that it

⁴ Elizabeth U. Harding, *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar* (York Beach, Maine: Hicolas-Hays, Inc., 1993), xvii. Ms. Harding is also the founder of Kali Mandir, a traditional Kali temple in Laguna Beach, California (www.kalimandir.org). I highly recommend Kali Mandir's annual two-day puja, or flower-offering ritual, where, in a spirit of purity, receptivity, innocence and selfless love, devotees reach naturally and directly toward total absorption in the divine. Every element in the universe is offered back to Kali, since she is their source, and after she enjoys the subtle essence of her gifts-flowers, lights, prayers, songs, dances, sacred foods-she leaves her blessing upon them, and shares them all. Hour after hour, hearts open to her, and when the faith that she is real takes hold, she begins to speak in subtle ways ... "African origins in her body ..."

practically disappears. Ma's style of leadership is the subtle, quiet framework that was, and still is, intrinsic to matriarchal families, clans, and tribes.

I strive to hold Kali's first dimension warmly in my mind, emulating the people of India. Her foremost imperative is ecstasy, and this abandon nourishes the rare bloom of humility. I invoke her, first and foremost, as one who surpasses my understanding.

Kali is inconceivable. This essay, like every form of human expression, cannot even begin to encompass her. On the sacred ground of her Mother Reality, some part of us remains ever-unknowing.

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REFERENCES CITED Harding, Elizabeth U. *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar*. York Beach, Maine: Nicolas-Hays, Inc., 1993. Hixon, Lex. *Great Swan: Meetings with Ramakrishna*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995. *Mother of the Universe: Visions of the Goddess and Tantric Hymns of Enlightenment*. Wheaton: Quest Books, 1994.