

4

Manifestations of Kālī

*Thou art the seed of the universe,
And the supreme Māyā.
All this universe has been bewitched by Thee.
Thou, when pleased, art the cause of
salvation to human beings.*

Devī-Māhātmya

Kālī, one of the most intoxicating personifications of primal energy in the cosmic drama, gained an extraordinary popularity in Śaktism and is the object of fervent devotion in tantric forms of worship. She is a power-symbol embodying the unity of the transcendental. As we have seen, she makes her 'official' début c. AD 400 in the *Devī-Māhātmya*,²³ where she is said to have emanated from the brow of Durgā during one of the battles between the divine and anti-divine forces. In this context Kālī is considered the 'forceful' form of the Great Goddess Durgā.

In Mahākālī (the Great Kālī of the *Devī-Māhātmya*) there is an overwhelming intensity, a mighty strength, a force to shatter all obstacles. She is there for swiftness, for immediate and effective action, for the direct stroke, the frontal assault that carries everything before it. Awe-inspiring, determined and ruthless, she destroys evil force.

At the moment when Kālī sprang forth as the Primordial Śakti we are told that she filled the skies with her roar. This is not, as some commentators have suggested, to be interpreted as a 'savage cry'. As C.G. Jung has pointed out, 'the impact of an archetype, whether it takes the form of immediate experience or is expressed through the spoken word, stirs us because it summons up a voice that is stronger than our own. Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices . . .'.²⁴

The name Kālī has been used generically from antiquity. It has been the practice in India to attribute the achievements of one goddess to another. The idea is that the different manifestations are for a certain definite purpose, and in reality there is one Devī who assumes various forms to fulfil various purposes. Sometimes she assumes a frightening form and sometimes a benevolent form.

*Folk-painting of the dancing
Kālī. Orissa, contemporary
version of traditional form,
colours on lacquered cloth*



Image of Kālī encircled by purifying flames, AD 1000, Malangi, gilt-bronze

Smashānakālī in union with Śiva. Rajasthan, 18th century, brass



Kālī's fierce appearances have been the subject of extensive descriptions in several earlier and later tantric works. She is most commonly worshipped nowadays as Dakṣiṇakālī – the south-facing, black Kālī. Though her fierce form is filled with awe-inspiring symbols, their real meaning is not what it first appears – they have equivocal significance.

The image of Kālī is generally represented as black: 'just as all colours disappear in black, so all names and forms disappear in her' (*Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*). In tantric rituals she is described as garbed in space, sky-clad (*digambarī*). In her absolute, primordial nakedness she is free from all covering of illusion. She is Nature (*Prakṛiti*), stripped of 'clothes'. She is full-breasted; her motherhood is a ceaseless creation. She gives birth to the cosmos parthenogenetically, as she contains the male principle within herself. Her dishevelled hair (*elokeshī*) forms a curtain of illusion, the fabric of space-time which organizes matter out of the chaotic sea of quantum-foam. Her garland of fifty human heads, each representing one of the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, symbolizes the repository of knowledge and wisdom, and also represents the fifty fundamental vibrations in the universe. She wears a girdle of human hands – hands are the principal instruments of work and so signify the action of karma or accumulated deeds, constantly reminding us that ultimate freedom is to be attained as the fruit of karmic action. Her three eyes indicate the past, present and future. Her white teeth, symbolic of *sattva*, the translucent intelligence stuff, hold back her lolling tongue which is red, representing *rajas*, the activating quality of nature leading downwards to *tamas*, inertia. Kālī has four hands (or, occasionally, two, six, or eight). One left hand holds a severed head, indicating the annihilation of ego-bound evil force, and the other carries the sword of physical extermination with which she cuts the thread of bondage. One right hand gestures to dispel fear and the other exhorts to spiritual strength. In this form she is changeless, limitless primordial power, acting in the great drama, awakening the unmanifest Śiva beneath her feet.

Black Kālī is worshipped in cremation grounds as Smashānakālī. She makes her abode there to receive those who come to take rest in her.

As Virgin-creator, Kālī is depicted as *sattva-guṇa*, white;²⁵ as sustaining Mother, *rajas*, red; as the Absorber of all, *tamas*, black. In the equilibrium of the potential state there will always be disturbance arising from the desire for creation – a cycle of Kālī's 'opening' and 'closing'. Her world is an eternal living flux in which all things arise and all disappear again. She is the archetypal image of birth-and-death, giver of life and its destroyer, 'the vital principles of the visible

universe which has many faces – gracious, cruel, creative, destructive, loving, indifferent – the endless possibility of the active energy at the heart of the world'.²⁶

Kālī's origins can be traced to non-Aryan and Vedic sources. Such names as Ambikā, Durgā and Kālī begin to appear in the later Vedic texts; some scholars have suggested that the Vedic goddess Aditi is a precursor. In the view of Swami Abhedananda the Vedic goddess Rātri in the course of time became transformed into Kālī. The conception of *Kāla* – Time – as goddess can be found in the *Mahābhārata*. The name Bhadra-Kālī is first found mentioned in the Vedic hymn the *Grihya-sūtra*. The nakedness of the goddess Vāc in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* may be connected with the nakedness ascribed to Kālī in later days. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣhad* names Kālī and Karālī, but they are described as two of the seven tongues of Agni (the creator-god), corresponding to the Seven Divine Mothers – the Saptā Mātrikā.

Though the Goddess is one, and there can be nothing apart from her, according to the capability and desire of the worshipper she is conceived of in innumerable forms. The *Todala Tantra* gives her well-known forms as eight, while the *Mahākālasaṃhitā* gives the nine names of the goddess Kālī as Dakṣiṇā, Smashāna, Bhadra, Guhya, Kāla, Kāmakalā, Dhana, Siddhi and Caṇḍikā. The black, south-facing Dakṣiṇakālī is usually depicted standing upon the recumbent form of Śiva, while the similar Smashānakālī is often shown engaged in *viparīta-rati* (sexual union in which the female partner is on top) with Śiva, a realization of non-duality in which there is no separation, no linear flow, just fullness, completeness.

The Supreme Goddess is the source of all 'energies', and the feminine divinities are principally her emanations, or her partial archetypal images. The immense array of the goddess-transformations of Kālī are classified in descending order. Certain goddesses are complete manifestations of the supreme feminine principle; some are her partial emanations; some are fractions of her power; mortal women are included as 'parts of parts of fractions' of the Supreme Goddess.

The 'knowledge' aspect of Kālī is represented by a śakti-cluster of ten goddesses known as the Daśa-Mahāvidyās, the Ten Great or Transcendental Wisdoms. The first Mahāvidyā is Kālī herself, as the power of Time, and the other forms are Tārā, the potential of re-creation; Ṣoḍaśī, 'sixteen', the power of perfection, fullness; Bhuvaneśvarī, supporter of all existence, space-consciousness; Chinnamastā, the end of existence, the distributor of life-energy; Bhairavī, the active power of destruction; Dhūmāvātī, the power of darkness, inertia; Bagalā, destroyer of negative forces; Mātāṅgī, the

Dakṣiṇakālī, the 'south-facing' Kālī, energizing the inert form of Śiva beneath her feet. Bengal, c. 18th century, brass



power of domination, dispeller of evil; and Kamalā, the state of reconstituted unity. These nine goddesses are no longer worshipped separately from Kālī, or if they are, their cults are esoteric.

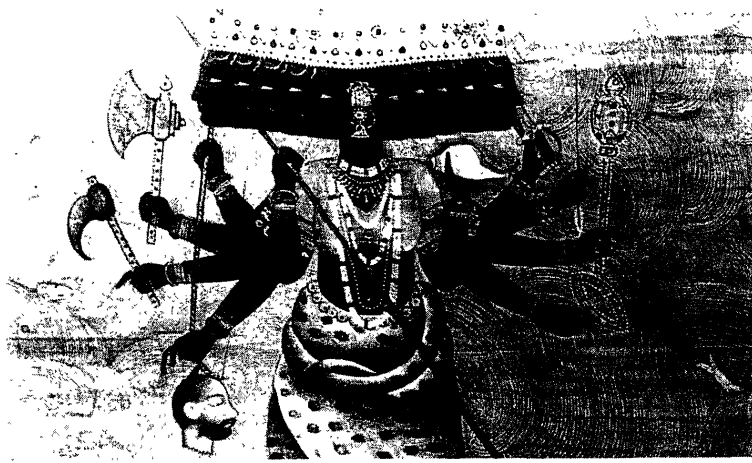
Each of the goddesses has a specific cosmic function. Together, as the power of wisdom, they awaken the worshipper to the illusion of existence. Represented in their yantra, they are the embodiments of human perfections.

Tantrism shows a preference for a dynamic concept of cosmic unity which implies a harmonization of all differentiations and paradoxes. The Śakti-cluster of the Mahāvidyās as a whole reflects this dynamic unity of existence, in which all aspects of life, the darkest, the purest, the most forceful and the inert, are combined to form a whole, a vision of unity in diversity.

Like all the Mahāvidyās, Kālī is a Great Yoginī. Though countless forms of yoginīs emerged from the body of Kālī, sixty-four of them are named in the *Kālikā Purāṇa* with their prescribed worship, and in the *Bhūtaḍāmara* (a tantric text) eight different methods of yoginī-worship are described.

For ritual worship the yoginī is generally represented by a naked woman. Mircea Eliade comments on the significance of this nudity: 'Every naked woman incarnates *prakṛiti*. Hence she is to be looked upon with the same adoration and the same detachment that one exercises in pondering the unfathomable secret of nature, its limitless capacity to create. The ritual nudity of the *yoginī* has an intrinsic mystical value: if, in the presence of the naked woman, one does not in one's inmost being feel the same terrifying emotion that one feels before the revelation of the cosmic mystery, there is no rite, there is only a secular act, with all the familiar consequences (strengthening of the karmic chain, etc.).'²⁷

Kālī's three manifestations for the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe are represented graphically in the *Kāmakalā-chidvalli*: 'The goddess of renowned form assumes, in time of protection, the form of a straight line; in time of destruction she takes the form of a circle, and for creation she takes on the brilliant appearance of a triangle.' In her yantra form, Kālī is symbolised by the central dot, bindu, the source of objectivization or womb of the world. Her unfolding is represented by the five triangles, which are the five *jñānendriyas* (organs of knowledge) and the five *karmendriyas* (motor organs); the encompassing circle, which is *avidyā* (false knowledge, i.e. knowledge of the illusory world of separate objects); and the eight-petalled lotus, which is the eight-fold Prakṛiti (Nature): earth, water, fire, air, ether, *Manas* (Mind), *Buddhi* (Intellect) and *Ahaṅkāra* (ego-consciousness). Her cosmogonic diagram is imbued with the pulsation of *prāṇas*, the life-force.



Mahākālī, the Great Goddess, with ten heads indicating her all-pervading nature. Kangra school, c. 18th century, gouache on paper

Her creative role as Prakṛiti associates Kālī with the active power of time. She represents the cyclical time-consciousness that transcends individual destiny. Kālī destroys Mahākāla at the time of Great Dissolution: that is, Kālī as the Power-of-Time absorbs Kāla (Time), the All-Destroyer. She is constantly reminding us that we cannot attain liberation so long as we remain within the relative space and time of our planet, in our universe with its billions of stars, galaxies, and nebulae, in our existence for one second of world-time compared with the absolute and eternal.

Kālī, as Durgā in her ‘forceful’ role, is the antagonist of all evil in the eternal cosmic struggle, yet she is herself the personification of all benign and terrible forces. Signifying a vision of the Whole, Kālī becomes the Supreme. ‘He whom you call Brahman [Highest Reality], I call Śakti,’ said the nineteenth-century mystic-saint Ramakrishna.

Of my own free will have I divided my form for the purpose
of creation into the dual aspects of male and female.
As Brahma I create this universe of moving and
non-moving things,
and as Mahārudra, of my own will, I destroy it at the time
of dissolution.

Mahābhāgavata

Kālī is worshipped as Ādyā-Śakti, the Beginning of All. ‘I am Kālī, the Primal Creative Force, as the *Śaktisaṅgama Tantra* states. After the Great Dissolution, Kālī alone remains, as Avyakta Prakṛiti (Unmanifest Nature) in a state of potential power, the Supreme Śakti, the Eternal Feminine.