



The Goddess
of Radical
Transformation

awakening to

Kali

sallykempton

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The Goddess of Radical Transformation

Sally Kempton

Excerpted from the book
*Awakening Shakti: The Transformative Power of the
Goddesses of Yoga*

Sounds True
Boulder, Colorado

Wild women don't worry.
Wild women don't have no blues.

IDA COX

Contents

CHAPTER 1 A Crown of Feminine Design

CHAPTER 2 Kali: Goddess of Radical Transformation

APPENDIX I Which Goddesses Are You?

Notes

About the Author

About the Illustrator

About Sounds True

Copyright

A Crown of Feminine Design

The Goddess Incarnates

I am the sovereign queen, the treasury of all treasures, whose breathing forth gives birth to all the worlds
and yet extends beyond them—so vast am I in greatness.

DEVI SUKTA (Praise Hymn of the Goddess) from the Rg Veda

If there is to be a future, it will wear a crown of feminine design.

AUROBINDO GHOSE

ONE OCTOBER NIGHT IN RURAL INDIA, I fell in love with the Goddess. It happened on the second night of a festival called Navaratri, which celebrates the divine feminine as the warrior Durga, slayer of the demons of ego and greed. Like so many festivals in India, Navaratri is both a big party and an occasion for mystical communion with the divine. Women put on their most gorgeous clothes; temples overflow with worshippers. Nights are filled with dancing and storytelling. People have heightened, even visionary, experiences of the energy that the festival invokes.

That night, several hundred of us had gathered amid a blaze of candles next to a huge statue of Durga, eighteen feet high in her red sari, seated on top of a white tiger, arms bristling with weapons. I was supposed to tell one of my favorite mythological tales, the story a romance from one of the goddesses in the Hindu pantheon.

I was thrilled by the opportunity to tell a story—something I love to do—in such a heightened atmosphere. But when I stood up to speak, I was seized by a feeling much bigger than excitement. It was a kind of ecstasy, a deep pulsing joy that nearly undid me while I tried to form the words of my tale. Later, I would learn to recognize this feeling as one of the characteristic signatures of the

Goddess's presence. The divine feminine has a thousand names and a thousand moods, but when she chooses to show up for you, she very often shows up as ecstasy.

Ecstasy is a feeling that is hard to convey and impossible to ignore. Every few minutes, I had to stop talking because tears kept threatening to break through my voice. When it was over, I knew that something had just happened which would change my life.

It wasn't just the story that did it. But I'll tell you the story anyway.

Back at the dawn of time, the Great Goddess, who creates the world and then lives as the world, is asked to incarnate as Sati (She-Who-Is) in order to make the sacred marriage with her eternal consort, Shiva. Without her presence, Shiva cannot act in the world. He sits on a mountain, lost in meditation, disdaining to perform his cosmic function. This creates havoc in the cosmos. So, the great deities Brahma the Creator and Vishnu the Sustainer approach the Goddess on their knees. They beg her, for the sake of the world, to take the form of a woman and lure Shiva out of his yogic trance. Daksha, a mind-born son of Brahma, will be her father.

The Goddess agrees, but only on one condition. She has seen that men and gods have begun to treat women as property, lesser creatures in the cosmic hierarchy. "If I agree to become your daughter," she tells Daksha, "you must promise to honor me as the Great Goddess. If you do not, I shall instantly leave my body, for I will know that the time is not yet right for me to act fully in the world."

Daksha humbly agrees, and Sati is born in his household. At the age of sixteen, she marries Shiva, drawing him out of meditation through the allure of her irresistible beauty and her power of creating bliss. Shiva is the primal outsider of the Hindu pantheon, the lord of thieves as well as yogis. The original shaman as well as the primal yogi, he resides in the deep forests and mountains, attended by ghosts and goblins. He refuses to change his homeless lifestyle just because he has a wife. So for eons, Shiva and Sati make passionate erotic love under trees and beside streams, in subtle realms beyond the clouds, and in secret mountain caves. They adore each other with cosmic passion.

Then the trouble starts. A few thousand millennia have passed. Daksha has worked his way into a position of power as the leading deity of religious orthodoxy. In the process, he has forgotten his promise to the Goddess—and forgotten his daughter's real nature. He disapproves of Shiva's rebel status and feels personally threatened by Shiva's obvious disdain for convention. Daksha

plans a huge cosmic fire ritual, which will establish for all time the religious structures of the universe. He invites every god, titan, celestial musician, snake deity, and nymph in the universe. But in a fit of celestial malice, Daksha deliberately sends no invitation to his daughter and her consort.

Sati hears the news on the day of the sacrifice. She is stunned beyond measure. Daksha has done the unthinkable. Not only has he grievously insulted her beloved, he has dishonored the World-Mother, the power of life itself, without whom religion is meaningless. Sati knows she cannot remain in a world that does not recognize her. She sits in meditation, summons her inner yogic fire, and sends her life-force into the ether, leaving her body behind.

Shiva goes mad when he finds her. He takes himself to the ritual ground and destroys the sacrifice. He then takes Sati's body in his arms and begins to careen through the worlds. Wherever he carries her body, earthquakes and volcanoes, tidal waves and forest fires erupt. At last, the gods do the only thing they can do to save the universe. They send the great wanderer, Saturn, to cut Sati's body into pieces. As the parts of her body fall to Earth, they become physical pockets of sacred ecstasy, earth shrines. For eons, in hidden caves and beside trees, near bodies of water and at the heart of villages, people will find the goddess enshrined in the soil and rock itself. Her body is the sacrifice that infuses the divine feminine into the earth.¹

The story, as I told it, comes from the Shakta tradition, the branch of Hinduism that worships the Goddess as the ultimate reality. In the more traditional version, Shiva is the main figure in the story, and Sati is depicted as a submissive Indian wife who leaps into the sacrificial fire because her husband has been insulted. (In fact, this version has a dark side. It became a model for Hindu widows, who were often encouraged to immolate themselves on their husband's funeral pyre in imitation of Sati.) The Shakta version reveals a far more interesting take on the story. As the Great Goddess Herself, Sati has the power to choose life or to depart it. She doesn't leave her body because her husband is insulted. She leaves because, like so many fathers and the conventional world he represents, Daksha has failed to honor her power and independence. He embodies patriarchy's inability to see the primal divinity of the feminine. She leaves because she knows that if the dignity of the feminine is not recognized, true union of the masculine and the feminine is not possible. The story reveals, more clearly than any in Eastern mythology, that moment when the patriarchy removed goddess worship from conventional rituals, leaving the Goddess to hide in the secret places of the earth.

Because the Goddess understands deep time, she also knows that her death is not really an ending, because one day the time will be right for her to reincarnate and once again marry her consort. This time, perhaps, the world will be ready for her.

CONNECTING TO THE ENERGY IN THE MYTH

There is a form of myth that is subversive. This version of the Sati story speaks for a hidden voice within its traditional culture: the voice of primal feminine dignity. Such a powerful myth interacts with the psyche and connects us to the deep structures of the universe. Sati's gesture, her willingness to immolate herself to call attention to injustice, called out an answering recognition in me. It had something to do with romance, with the power of doomed love, with Shiva's grief, but it was more a recognition of the deep feminine capacity for passion, for feeling itself, for the kind of love that cares nothing for safety or conventional wisdom. That kind of love, I saw, is a quality of the universe itself, which is willing to destroy its own life-forms when the conditions of life become untenable. The divine feminine knows that a birth sometimes demands a death, and that the personal self sometimes has to die if the world is to be made sacred.

It wasn't only the content of the story that moved me. It was the energy itself, the pulsing, love-saturated, subtly sensual energy that rose in the atmosphere that night in India as we invoked the Goddess. That energy seemed to be telling me that there are secrets, ways of being in the universe such that only the divine feminine can reveal. After that night, I began to "see" her everywhere, almost as if she were pursuing me. I went about my normal existence, which was highly scheduled and mostly work centered. But every now and then, "she" would show up. Once as a palpable presence who seemed to hover in the air next to me emanating soft waves of, yes, maternal tenderness. More often, I would sense her as a subtle sensation of luminosity that would infuse the air, or as an inner feeling of joy, or a sensation of being surrounded by a soft, embracing awareness.

One effect of all this was to make me fall in love with the natural world. My new awareness of the Goddess spilled over as a new awareness of trees and landscapes, so that what had seemed matter of fact and dull now began to vibrate with sentience. I would find myself staring up at a eucalyptus tree as if it were a lover, or looking out over a landscape with a feeling that it was alive and breathing. I began to practice a meditation where I imagined that the trees and the air were "seeing" me, and when I did that, the borders of my skin-

encapsulated sense of self would soften, and I would “know” that the world and I were part of the same fabric. Goddess awareness literally put me in touch with something that felt like the soul in the physical world.

WHERE IS THE GODDESS?

The story of Sati’s disappearance tells a mythic version of a historical process that kept the Goddess underground for several millennia. We know from Marija Gimbutas’s archaeological studies that many Neolithic cultures in Europe and in the Indian subcontinent worshipped a mother goddess, and that the worship of the feminine was displaced in the Bronze Age, especially in Europe and Asia Minor. In Celtic lore, there’s a story about a culture that lived in Ireland before the warrior tribes arrived. It’s said that when their land was invaded, these folk—goddess worshippers, artisans, and craftspeople—dressed in their finest costumes and arrayed themselves in battle to meet the invading tribes. Then, when the opposing warriors rode down on them, these beings “turned sideways into the light” and disappeared.² Legend says that they entered into the cracks between the visible and invisible worlds, where it is thought that they still reside, in what is called the land of faery.

In a sense, the Goddess too turned sideways into the light. She immolated herself—surviving demurely in India as a consort of male deities. She was exiled like the Shekinah, the feminine divine of Judaism. In our time, the Goddess has come roaring out of her hiding places—for it is also the nature of the feminine to roar—and we are beginning to recognize uniquely feminine kinds of power. We sense that something profoundly important is missing from a world in which the power of the divine feminine is not understood and in which women themselves are out of touch with their own Shakti, the force of feminine strength and the flavors of feminine love.

Many contemporary writers—I think especially of Riane Eisler, Andrew Harvey, and Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee—have pointed out to us that our survival as a species may depend on our ability to reengage with the feminine.³ The great evolutionary mystic Aurobindo concurred. He wrote, “If there is to be a future, it will wear a crown of feminine design.”⁴ Whether or not this is true, there is no doubt that at this point in time most postmodern, educated Westerners, women as well as men, are profoundly cut off from the feminine. Women, at least in the developed world, enjoy freedoms and dignities and opportunities that were possible at no other time in history. But very few of us live from our intrinsic feminine strength and intelligence.

MODERNITY AND THE FEMININE

With all its gifts and dignities, modernity has created conditions that weaken our bonds with the feminine. We're born, most of us, in sterile hospital environments, emerging out of the womb to be blinded by bright lights, handed over to large beings who spank us and cut the umbilical cord—and even our foreskin if we happen to be boys. If we are premature or seem weak or sick, we might be separated from our mother or even kept in incubators—in short, abandoned by the feminine. We're often mothered by women who were not mothered themselves and who don't have the deep capacity for relaxed nurturance that lets children trust their place in the world. We grow up into a culture where girls are treated as objects of sexual desire long before they have any true sense of self, and where the secret language of the feminine has been commodified into shared conversations about fashion and nail polish. We become mothers outside a system of social support, often juggling demanding jobs, economic shortfalls, and our own emotional difficulties. As we age, we turn invisible. My friend Penny came home from a trip to New York, where she remembered from twenty years before that every man she passed undressed her with his eyes. She told her husband, "Men in New York have become so much less sexually aggressive." Her husband gave her a puzzled look. "Honey," he said, "You're fifty." The realization sent her into an identity crisis that lasted for several years—during which she spent time observing elderly women she knew, realizing that, rather than becoming true elders, many of them simply devolved into passivity and depression.

To change all this requires a deep turning of the heart, a shift of consciousness that has to come from our connection to the source of life. The sacred technologies of Tantric culture offer us this possibility.

The yogic sages—especially in the branch of yoga called Tantra—anticipated quantum physics by pointing out that a subtle vibratory energy is the substratum of everything we know. Unlike physicists, however, yogic seers experienced this energy not simply as an abstract vibration but as the expression of the divine *feminine* power, called Shakti. The word *shakti* means "power." Shakti, the innate power in reality, has five "faces." It manifests as the power to be conscious, the power to feel ecstasy, the power of will or desire, the power to know, and the power to act. The tantras say that all of these powers come into play in the act of cosmic creativity, when divine intelligence spins a universe out of itself, much the way a human mind creates a dream or a fantasy on its own inner screen. The cosmic creation explodes in a big bang and then evolves over

millions of years as suns, planets, increasingly sophisticated life forms, and, of course, human beings. All of reality, this tradition says, is Shakti's dance. Shakti takes form as the biological processes of our body. She acts through our thoughts and the play of our emotions. She becomes every atom and dust mote in the physical world. We are, in our essence, made of Shakti. Her powers of consciousness, ecstasy, will, knowing, and acting are constantly at play both in ourselves and the world. She is also the force that inescapably nudges us toward the evolution of our consciousness, with which we must align when we seek conscious transformation.

But the Tantric sages weren't content with a generalized vision of energy-as-Shakti. They personalized it in mythic language and in an additional leap of insight, created a science for transforming human energy—by working with the goddess figures of the Hindu pantheon.

MULTIPLE DEITY FORMS

The Hindu traditions are famously comfortable with the idea that the Absolute Reality, while formless and transcendent, is perfectly capable of manifesting in both divine and mundane forms. So Shakti, the formless source of everything, is understood to take forms—as gods and goddesses, personifications of the different energies that make up the multiple dimensions of existence and of our own consciousness.

The Hindu pantheon is complex; every village has its gods and goddesses, while the major deities—Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi, the Great Goddess—have hundreds of names apiece. The great Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva dominate the cosmic hierarchy, along with their consorts Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Parvati. Behind them stands Mahadevi, the Great Goddess, who vitalizes all the other deities and gives them the power to perform their cosmic functions. In Tantra, the goddess-consorts are seen as embodying the *power*, the active energy of each of the male gods. In other words, it is the goddesses as energy, their Shakti, that activates the functions of the male god figures. Brahma's job is to bring worlds into manifestation, and he does it through his Shakti, Saraswati, who is also the energy behind creative speech. Vishnu sustains and protects the worlds, empowered by his Shakti, Lakshmi, the energy of nourishment and abundance. Shiva dissolves structures and also oversees the practice of yoga, by which seekers attempt to merge into the formless essence beyond all that is. His power is embodied in strong goddesses like Durga, Parvati, and Kali. All of these deities have their own mythology, their own temples, and their own cults.

To complicate matters, Vishnu has a habit of sending avatars—incarnations of himself—into the world. The most important of these are the man-gods Rama—a warrior king and model of rectitude—and Krishna, cosmic lover and canny master of cunning and statecraft. As Rama, Vishnu is the beloved of Sita, who embodies faithful, wifely devotion. As Krishna, he has dozens of consorts, but most notably Radha, his youthful lover and the partner of his most erotic games.

The Goddess, Shakti, also appears in a multiplicity of forms. As an independent goddess, she is often given the generic name of Devi (Goddess), but she is also worshipped on her own as Durga, the demon-slayer and mother of warriors, and as Kali, the Black One, who matches Shiva in her power to dissolve forms into formlessness. The best way to explain in modern terms what a deity is, is to understand deity as a unique vortex of energy. Sometimes that energy vortex takes recognizable anthropomorphic form (for instance, in meditation visions). Sometimes that energy is felt through the sound vibrations called *mantra*, or through the geometric pictures, called *yantras*, that map the way that energy looks in “blueprint” form. To learn to experience these distinct energies, with their distinct powers and qualities, is the invitation of *Awakening Shakti*. Recognizing and decoding the various “tastes” of the goddesses is a way of deepening your capacity for living with passion and depth. It’s a practice for mining your soul’s connection to the cosmos. It offers a powerful means of understanding the capacities of your own psyche. And it can reveal spheres of consciousness that are ordinarily beyond the range of human understanding.

LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Our relationships to the sacred change as we develop. The form of the divine we conceive as five-year-olds will be different than the way we conceive of the divine in our twenties. The religious fundamentalist’s view of God will not be the same as the vision of a scientist nor that of a mystic.

The same goddess may be worshipped by uneducated villagers in rural India as the focus of superstition and fear, and by educated middle-class urbanites as the focal point of conventional religious worship. A mystically minded devotee might invoke that same goddess as the mediatrix of her spiritual unfolding or as a source of inner blissfulness. A meditator might experience the Goddess as his kundalini, expanding his awareness through meditation, appearing in visions, ultimately dissolving all forms into light.

So, when we invoke the Goddess, our view of her always depends on our own level of consciousness at a given moment. That said, there is a level at

which gods and goddesses have an independent existence, apart from the way we conceive them.

Gods and goddesses are “real.” They are actual beings who exist in eternal forms in the subtlest realms of consciousness. But within the human psyche, these cosmic beings also exist as psychological archetypes in the Jungian sense of the word. Jung and his followers looked at the Greek gods—Zeus, Aphrodite, and the others—as archetypes of universal psychological energies. An archetype is a subtle blueprint that both transcends individual personality and lives in it, connecting our personal minds to the cosmic or collective mind. The Hindu deities are just as much a part of our psychic structure. When we work with Kali as a symbol, she represents—and in my experience actually can *uncover*—dynamic psychological forces. She personifies energies that we feel but may never have thought to name or invoke, both in ourselves and in the world.

This was what I began to discover as I studied and contemplated the personalities of the specific goddesses in the Indian pantheon. I had always thought of them as purely symbolic, even metaphoric. But now I began to see them less as symbols than as actual entities in the psyche and the universe—elemental and very real beings who could be reached through visualization, through mantra, and through the powerful structures of their myths. Because they recognize the transformative potential of contemplating deity energies, both Hindu and Buddhist Tantrikas (practitioners of Tantra) have performed deity meditations since at least the eighth century CE.

Getting to know these different energies through deity meditation changed my relationship to my own energy sources. On the most immediate level, practicing with the goddesses showed me that there are sacred powers within me, aspects of my unique self that connect me to the elemental forces of the cosmos, that I can call on for insight and help.

This book serves as a user’s manual for connecting to the sacred feminine through the great goddess Kali. The book’s intention is to help you open the layers of your soul that are related to her particular energies and the practices that invoke them. That way, you can better receive her gifts. You can recognize and own her shadowy aspects. You can access her power to awaken and transform you. Above all, you can dance with her energies.

SACRED FEMINISM

I like to think of goddess practice as a form of sacred feminism—not political feminism, but feminism of the soul. To my generation, feminism was not only a

movement for women's economic and political equality. It also involved a deep and fearless self-exploration, a commitment to looking beyond our conditioned assumptions about masculine and feminine. That exploration got lost in a kind of backlash in the 1980s and 1990s, but young women are again exploring those questions, even as neuroscience is coming to understand the differences between a male and female brain. One of the great questions that sacred feminism looks at is: what is true feminine power?

Sacred feminism aims to answer this question. It also takes us beyond the association of femininity with gender, and it shows us that the very life-force of the universe is the feminine face of spirit. To be a sacred feminist is to be a lover of the feminine face of God as she appears in the world, in culture, and also in our own psyche and soul—while also recognizing that the feminine can never be separated from her masculine other half.

The Tantric traditions of India and Tibet, especially, understood the divine feminine as the force within life that can act creatively or destructively with equal facility. The sacred feminine can be nurturing but also appropriately ruthless and chaotic, as is the case with Kali. Goddess powers endlessly weave the strands of our personal and planetary destiny through space and time, and into the timeless and spaceless. Sacred feminism sees and loves the world as a sacred dance. Sacred feminism wants to embrace everything that is beautiful in the feminine, as well as everything that is terrifying. It wants you, whether you're a man or a woman, to learn to see and embody all these qualities in yourself.

The most immediate and powerful way to unlock the energies of the sacred feminine is through the technologies of deity practice. In deity practice, we contemplate the forms and qualities of subtle beings. Advanced practitioners in the Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions have developed deity meditation into a living science for transforming consciousness. In these traditions, a teacher suggests that a student meditate on a particular deity in order to activate qualities in his or her own psyche. The deity becomes the focus of your meditation and acts as an inner guide, protector, and as the one addressed in petitionary prayer. At more advanced levels, you meditate on the subtle and secret energies within the deity. Gradually, through your meditation and through your inner conversation with the deity, you start to feel the subtle energy of Shiva or Kali or Lakshmi inside your own energy field.

Deity meditation has powerful psychological benefits. It unsnarls psychological knots—for instance, issues with power or love. As a spiritual

practice, it opens up transpersonal forces within your mind and heart. It can become a powerful focus for devotional feelings, put you in touch with protective energies, and subtly clear your inner vision so that you see the world in a softer, more loving way.

Moreover, your inner relationship with the deity becomes a source of refuge, like an intimate friendship that gives you comfort and a sense of home. When you invoke deities through meditation, visualization, inner dialogues, and mantras, you bring their light and energy into your own body and mind. Deity practice helps us embody the subtlest powers of the universe. It affects us psychologically, spiritually, and even physically. It can protect us, empower us, teach us unconditional love, and even enlighten us.

THE FEMININE AS POWER

The Hindu goddess tradition offers a uniquely insightful window on the dynamic aspect of the divine feminine. To recognize power as feminine is game-changing. In the West, we are used to regarding the feminine as essentially receptive, even passive. The Tantric sages took the opposite view. Looking deeply into the energies at play in the world, they intuited the feminine as pure creative Eros, the life-force behind all evolution and all change, whether physical or psychological. In fact—and this is a big insight—the Tantric traditions tell us that all power comes from an essentially feminine inner source. The masculine in its purest, most essential form is the source of *consciousness*, of *awareness*. So when the masculine wants power, it must draw it from the feminine, just as when the feminine wants to be conscious, to reflect, she must draw that capacity from her inner masculine source.

From the Tantric perspective, all our biological activity is inherently feminine. The power behind breath is the expression of the feminine, not to mention our heartbeat, the energy that fires our muscles, and the impulse behind thoughts. Even more important, the Hindu view of the Goddess identifies her with the kundalini energy, the hidden power of spiritual awakening. So practicing with these goddesses gives us a direct connection to the inner force that can transform consciousness itself.

THE LIVING GODDESS

Deities come alive when they are invoked and worshipped. For example, if you want to know Kali, you need to treat her not only as a figure out of myth but as a

living being, an energy that is palpable, powerful, and *real*. Kali, whether we see her as an internal archetype or as a personality or as an aspect of a universal power, is truly present in millions of people's inner lives. She give boons. She manifests insights. She dances inside meditators as the kundalini energy, the subtle power that transforms consciousness. Because human consciousness and human imagination are so powerfully creative, our attention to her forms has a powerful effect on our own life experience, and also affects collective consciousness. In other words, when a lot of people are invoking a particular cosmic energy, they create a channel that makes it easier for that energy to show up in the human world.

Neil Gaiman, in his mordant novel *American Gods*, depicts the ancient Western deities Wotan, Zeus, and Freya as disreputable hobos, forced to live on the highways and truck stops of the American Midwest because no one gives them offerings anymore. Among the gods who appear in the novel, only one deity is doing well: Kali, whom Gaiman names Mama Ji, and who appears plump and sleek, supported by the love of her millions of devotees.⁵

Gaiman, in his irreverent way, was onto something important: the Hindu deities are now very much a part of our globally influenced collective consciousness. Kali, Lakshmi, Durga, and Saraswati appear on T-shirts, wall hangings, coffee mugs, and even lunchboxes, brought to the modern globalized West not only through the Indian diaspora and the international yoga movement, but also through Western popular culture. Their images and mantras are constantly downloaded from the Internet. From one perspective this is a clear example of how consumer culture commodifies sacred imagery. From another perspective it's a sign of the Goddess's reach. There are reasons for this that go beyond our fascination with exotic cultures and mythic symbols, and even beyond the obvious connection with the political and social empowerment of women. The goddesses of the Hindu pantheon cover a much wider and more radical spectrum of feminine possibility than many of us are normally willing to own. There are Hindu goddesses of exquisite beauty and gentleness. There are also goddesses with sharp teeth, fangs, and arms bristling with weapons. The very wildness of their diversity is part of what makes them so powerfully relevant for contemporary women and men. The Indian goddesses represent aspects of our fundamental life-energy that we need to get to know. In other words, they aren't just related to their native culture or to the images of women in Indian society. Their energies are at play in every one of us, men as well as women, and also in cultures, in politics, and in the natural world. When we

engage with the personal aspects of these energies—with their mythic, symbolic forms—we activate hidden powers in our own psyche. Then, these powers transform us.

TRANSFORMATIVE SYMBOLS

We've known since Jung's time that myths and symbols have a lock-and-key relationship to energies in our personal consciousness, as well as in the collective. The ancient spiritual traditions understood very well the power of the imaginal realm. They knew how contemplating an enlightened quality (like compassion) or a divine archetype (like the Sacred Heart, the Tree of Life, or Krishna with his flute) will eventually bring what you're contemplating alive in you. Ancient seers, or *rishis*, "saw" these deity energies both as light bodies and as geometric patterns called yantras. They "heard" them as inner sounds, which they then articulated as mantras. Out of their experience came practices that let us touch these energies emotionally, mentally, and even physically.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DEITY MEDITATION

On a personal, psychological level, deity meditation gives us access to a power that works on a deeper level than is available through conventional psychology. The transformative power of the goddess energies can untangle psychic knots, calling forth specific transformative forces within the mind and heart. It can cleanse our mental and emotional bodies, put us in touch with the protective powers within us, and deeply change the way we see the world. More than that, it can shift the way we see ourselves, giving us the power to see the divine qualities we already hold. For women especially, tuning in to the goddesses is a way of homing in on aspects of our own life-energy that we may never have understood or owned. Celebrating the goddesses has the potential not only to tune us to our own sacred capacities, but also to help us work with the hidden and secret forces at play in our lives. When we can do that, we can literally harness these forces for our own transformation.

GODDESS ENERGIES IN THE PERSONALITY

Most of us have more than one goddess energy flowing through our personalities. Some we are clearly born with, but others seem to arise through the different conditions of our lives. The goddesses we channel when we are young have different faces than the goddesses of maturity and old age. Often we

experience these different expressions of the feminine as contradictory: How can you enjoy submitting to a lover yet adore the power you feel when you throw yourself wholeheartedly into a task? What does it mean to be a seductress, yet stand up like a warrior to defend a truth you believe in? How do you integrate your love for beauty and comfort with your instinct to overthrow the conventional structures that restrict your freedom?

One way to overcome these contradictions is to learn how to befriend the deities you sense in yourself, the ones you're drawn to, and also the ones who scare you. As you learn to recognize these energies, they start to act through you in a more flowing way. Energies that have been co-opted by the ego shed their neurotic, self-aggrandizing qualities and start to reveal an essential core. Deity practice can help us enlist these energies for guidance or help. Even more important, meditating with a deity can help you integrate and work with some of your elemental qualities—the problematic as well as the constructive.

Perhaps you come to realize that the emotional intensity that surfaces as anger or a strong drive to change something in the environment is actually an expression of a transpersonal Kali-like energy. Then you can be more fluid when Kali-like intensity bubbles to the surface, instead of letting it overwhelm you and come out as a sharp word or an impulsive action.

THE GODDESS AS THE POWER OF SPIRIT

The goddesses embody transformative power, especially the power to kindle the spiritual energy in each of us, the soul-making energy that lets us awaken to our true Self. On a spiritual level, each of these goddess energies can awaken you in multiple ways. In India, men have traditionally related to the Goddess as a giver of worldly and spiritual boons, and worshipped her so that she would lend them her power. Women do the same, of course. But women have also tended to *identify* themselves with the goddesses, especially with the more recognizably auspicious ones. As we become more able to recognize that men and women contain both masculine and feminine qualities, it changes the way we honor the Goddess. We can start to see her qualities as less gender specific, and more as qualities of consciousness itself.

Recognizing your Shakti as it expands and empowers your inner gifts lets you flow at your growing edge and can also give you profound confidence that you are supported from within, and even from the universe itself. When we engage these Shaktis, we touch into the deep structures of the cosmos and of ourselves. We touch the source code, the hard drive of consciousness itself.

PERSPECTIVES ON KALI

In this book we'll look at the Goddess Kali from several perspectives.

First, we'll approach her as a unique transpersonal energy with a signature energy frequency. We'll examine the core myths and stories and look at the classical depictions of the goddess Kali. We'll consider the goddess as a divine personality, a unique being who lives in a body of light and can show up in meditation or even out of it. We'll look at the iconography and its symbolism. And we'll see the different ways we can experience the personal energy of a deity in nature and culture.

For example, the icon of Goddess Kali shows her holding a severed head and a bloody sword, signifying her power to create revolutionary change, dissolve ego, and overthrow hierarchies and structures. In the physical world, she shows up as sudden earthquakes and hurricanes, but also the revolutionary life-changes that shake up cultures and disrupt societies. You'll find her in intense experiences of all kinds, especially the experiences that destroy what is outworn and prepare you for new creative growth. You find her energy in endings that presage new beginnings, and in the powerful impetus to create change and transformation in your life and in your world.

Second, we'll consider how the goddess shows up in our psychological and spiritual lives, in both her light and shadow aspects. We'll look at how Kali operates through our minds and hearts. One of the important insights of the Tantric sages was that each goddess can appear in ways that are liberating and expansive, but she can also manifest in ways that are binding, entrapping, and confusing.

For instance, as a liberating energy, Kali's Shakti might appear as a moment of breakthrough, as intense love and ecstasy, an inner push to change your life, or a need to speak truth in a difficult situation. She brings powerful energy to your spiritual practice, allowing you to literally pierce the veils of ordinary awareness and see the truth that lies behind the mind. Her shadow side might manifest in uncontrollable anger or an addiction to intensity, or as an impulse to make radical changes on the spur of the moment. As we said earlier, once you are in dialogue with the Goddess in yourself, you can work with her psychological manifestations in a way that will radically shift how these energies play in your psyche. Even her shadow sides can teach you (as we'll see in the next chapter). Goddess energies are innately transformative. When we interact with them on any level, they change us.

Third, we'll look at the goddess as an aspect of our awakened spiritual

energy—the kundalini Shakti, or coiled power. To awaken the Goddess as kundalini is to awaken the transformative intelligence of our innate divine power. It literally brings cosmic energy—the energy of the Goddess—alive within us. The resting, or sleeping, kundalini operates as our basic life force. It operates the breath, powers the heartbeat and the brain, constantly impelling our attention toward external experience. When kundalini is asleep, you experience a split between subject and object, between yourself and the world. According to the tantras, the awakening of kundalini is the awakening of the Goddess’s power to reveal fundamental unity and transcendent love. In order to do this, her energy will subtly or dramatically transform your nervous system and the architecture of your brain so that you begin to be able to see with what some traditions call the “eye of the spirit” or the “eye of the heart.” Kundalini has been called the evolutionary energy in the human body, and the force of evolutionary eros. In mythic terms, kundalini is the liberating face of the Goddess. So, as we examine and practice with Kali, we’ll look at how she reveals herself in us as the aspect of kundalini that purifies and transforms our consciousness, and awakens unconditional love as a result.

Finally, we’ll explore practices for connecting to the Goddess. We’ll find out how to approach her as a personal deity, as a helper, a guide and teacher, as a giver of boons, and as a fierce transpersonal force that dissolves old paradigms and reveals new aspects of the self. We’ll learn many methods for invoking the Goddess, and for consciously bringing her presence into our field. We’ll discover how to recognize her presence and guidance in our lives.

The book includes contemplations, mantras, personal exercises, and meditations to help you access the goddesses in different ways. Some of these exercises are psychological. However, many of them draw on traditional Tantric methods, like visualization and invocation, that aim to help us recognize the subtle in ourselves and the world. Practices like these have been the mainstay of mystical traditions—not just Hinduism, but also Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity (with meditation on Jesus and the saints standing in for the deities).

IMAGINATION AND DEITY PRACTICE

Though traditional deity practice often uses external ritual, Goddess practice is primarily an activity of intention and imagination. Mystics, like artists, discover truth through imagination. In our ordinary understanding of things, the imagination is considered unreal, made up. “You imagined it,” we say—meaning, “It doesn’t hold up empirically, so it isn’t real.” To the mystic,

imagination is the faculty through which we perceive the numinous, the supra-real. The forms and qualities of our divine nature are hidden in consciousness: we bring them forth through the faculty of imagination. The Greek word *phantasia*, from which we derive the word *fantasy*, comes from a verb that means “to make visible.” We make subtle energies visible by creating images in the mind. What we don’t always understand is how these images can transform our inner landscape, and then our life.

The courage, compassion, wisdom, and beauty of the inner self are mostly invisible to us. Our conditioning, our relentless dependence on the egoic perception of our separateness, even our neural wiring predispose us to view ourselves only as the physical and personality self. As egoic beings, we often feel inherently disconnected from the world around us and from our true sources of power. At times, we assume that we are in charge of our lives and capable of building, creating, or manifesting anything we want. Alternatively, we may feel incompetent, incapable, lost. Most of us alternate between the two points of view, both of which are aspects of egoic consciousness.

One way to discover both the richness of our deeper self and the availability of invisible help is through active imagination. Visionary practices, working with archetypes, creating intentions for our future life are all methodologies that challenge our limiting assumptions about ourselves and ask us to open to what we are beyond the ordinary. All are based on a fundamental insight about the mind—a realization that what we think about profoundly affects not only our psyches, but also our physical lives. When we tell ourselves angry stories, we fill ourselves with angry energy. For that moment at least, we become angry people. When we use active imagination to envision positive outcomes for ourselves and others, we can create realities that will eventually manifest in our personhood and in our culture. Through imagination, we tap into our highest human potential and encounter that which is more than human in us: that which is divine.

What we can imagine, we will ultimately be asked to bring forth—whether it is positive or negative. As poet William Blake wrote, “Imagination is not a state: it is the human existence itself.” That recognition has become a major force in the Western new thought movements. But this way of thinking actually has deep roots in the Tantric traditions of India. Tantric technologies teach us to divinize—yes, literally, make divine—our bodies and minds by entering deeply into imaginative communion with deity forms. As you read this book and do the practices here, you’ll learn how to make visible certain numinous qualities in yourself, qualities that are embodied in these forms and the principles associated

with them.

We need to do this not only for ourselves, but for each other and for the world itself. It's a truism that scientific materialism has tended to reduce all natural phenomena to mechanical processes, as postmodernism has tended to reduce metaphysics to an outworn cultural artifact. Unless we live in rural India or Bali, there are no roadside shrines to remind us to look beyond the surface of the land, to see the energies at play within the soil or the soulful presences that live in plants and weather patterns. So we move through the world with tunnel vision, using our technological skills to control the weather, to engineer crops and their DNA, and to force productivity from desert soil. For most people, it's only when earthquakes, hurricanes, and tsunamis disrupt our human infrastructures that we recognize the awesome natural powers that create our world.

It's not just the powers of wind and water that we fail to understand. We also ignore the subtle presences within human culture and pay the consequences without even realizing it. When you don't realize, for example, that language arises from an inner divine power, and that every sound is filled with creative Shakti, you'll tend to use words thoughtlessly and wonder why they so often appear empty or uninspired, or why they turn out to be hurtful. When we don't recognize the numinous presences in ourselves and our world, we attempt to control them by human means and—when we can't control them—feel helpless or hopeless.

As we learn to recognize divine forces in the world, when we *invoke* them, then we are able to interact with the natural world as well as with the powers within ourselves. I have an acquaintance who is a weather worker. I've seen him lift the fog on the California coast. His ability to relate to elemental weather systems has been recognized by an oil company, which once hired him to talk a storm system into bypassing a particularly vulnerable piece of the coast. He does it, he says, by simply tuning in to the energies in the elements and relating to them as he would to another person. From a Tantric perspective, he is dialoguing with goddesses as they manifest in wind and water.

You may not have that particular gift, or even any interest in it. What you do have, however—because we all have it—is the power to communicate with the energies of the goddesses in your inner world. As you do so, as you sense a goddess's presence inside and around you, you may recognize her qualities of strength, of beauty, of flexibility. You'll begin to tune in to that subtle energy that in Sanskrit is called *shri*—best translated as “auspiciousness”—which is one

of the gifts of the divine feminine. And that energy will come forth in your speech and actions.

HOW TO WORK WITH THIS BOOK

I suggest that you read *Awakening to Kali* with an exploratory attitude. Notice what comes up for you as you read, and also notice how your view of the goddess expands when you do the exercises that are layered into her chapter.

The exercises are doorways into deeper resonance with the goddess. So I recommend reading this book slowly, pausing to practice at least one or two of the contemplations and meditations in her chapter. Let your reading be an opportunity to open yourself to the energies that are playing through these pages.

The goddess highlighted in this book is embedded in a rich cosmology and a profound philosophical tradition. To understand the individual expressions of the Goddess, it helps to be somewhat familiar with the basic world view of the Hindu tradition. It's also useful to have at least a rudimentary understanding of the core Tantric cosmological narrative and of how that undergirds the relationships between the human and divine. [Chapter 2](#) of *Awakening Shakti* provides that. It is meant to give you the mythic and conceptual framework for the rest of your exploration.

Each of the subsequent chapters explores the Goddess Kali in depth. It includes exercises to allow you to contact her through meditation, or dialogue with her through meditation. You should find that when you meditate on the Goddess, using the practices described in these chapters, they will unlock important facets of your consciousness, aspects of the psyche that are unique to them and to you.

One way to use the book is as a practice manual. You could keep it by your bed or your meditation cushion and work with one goddess every week. As you read each chapter, practice the contemplations and meditations, and repeat the mantras. You might write or journal about what arises. Then notice how the Goddess unveils herself through your dreams and meditations, and how she shows up in your life.

You may feel a natural affinity with Goddess Kali. This might be because you hold her archetype strongly in your personality. It could also mean that she carries qualities that you need to develop. Different Shaktis become important at different times in our lives. You might have been born with a tendency to express a particular goddess energy, and manifest it naturally. On the other hand, your culture or upbringing, the style of your family, or your social context could

have made you uncomfortable with some aspect of the feminine. You might have hidden her energies in yourself, or simply left them unrecognized or undeveloped until some event in your life calls forth a goddess you didn't realize was within you. If you're a man, you may have projected those energies onto women in your life. Now might be the time to recognize that the feminine energies you are drawn to or repelled by are also within you. It's my hope that reading about the Goddess in her different manifestations will show you qualities in yourself that are familiar to you and also qualities that you have wished or suspected were present and never knew how to name.

Mythic doesn't mean unreal. The mythic realm interfaces with our psyche on several different levels. What that means is that the energies of the Goddess will show up through the human beings and animals in your life. They will reveal themselves in the natural world. You'll begin to see their footprints in culture. You'll recognize them in your friends and coworkers, in your lovers and family members. There's always the possibility that as you practice these contemplations, they will lead you into the dimension of reality in which deities actually reveal themselves as distinct presences. The forms of the goddesses are discerned with the eye of spirit rather than the physical gaze. But they are no less real for being invisible to the naked eye.

In the teachings of the Tantras, the goddesses are said to have three forms through which they can be engaged: the image we see in paintings and statues, the mantra, and the geometric form, or yantra. Each of these forms, the Tantric sages say, fully contains the energy of the deity. As we tune into that unique energy signature, it will start to come alive within us. (For an in-depth discussion on mantra, see Appendix II: Calling Out the Power in Mantra.)

Then there are the stories. For most of us, it's the tales that carry the Goddess. There are layers of meaning in the Goddess stories. Some are beautiful, others totally bizarre, some seem to teach ethics, others are so startling that they stop your mind. If you pay attention, you'll find that each time you read or hear one of these stories, you can find something new in it. There's a good reason why mythic stories are told and retold. They are a path into the heart of sacred reality. They open us to grace. They reveal, for each of us, a unique pathway into the divine feminine. So when you read these tales, let each of them resonate inside you. Maybe the interpretive frame I've given will help crack the façade of the story and get into its heart. Maybe you'll need to let the truth of it emerge from within yourself.

As you invoke and work with Kali, she will show up for you in new ways,

unveiling herself within you and outside you, surprising you, loving you up, giving you unexpected gifts, disturbing you, and showing you how the manifestation of her Shakti can awaken you to your own heart.

Kali

Goddess of Radical Transformation

Isaac spent all his time reading in a dark house, refusing to go out into the sunshine. His next-door neighbor was a hidden spiritual master, who periodically dropped by to say to Isaac, “Don’t spend your whole life hunched over your desk in this dark room. Get out and look at the sky!” Isaac would nod and keep on reading. Then one day his house caught fire. Grabbing what possessions he could, he ran outside. There, he saw the master, pointing upwards. “Look,” said the master, “Sky!”

In this story, there are three elements that represent the process of awakening: the fire, the master, and the sky. Kali is all of them.

• • •

O Kali, my mother full of Bliss! Enchantress of the almighty Shiva!
In your delirious joy you dance, clapping your hands together!
You are the mover of all that moves, and we are your helpless toys!

RAM PRASAD

JUST BEFORE I BEGAN WORK on this book, a friend loaned me a painting of Kali. It’s done in the richly detailed style of traditional Nepali religious art, filled with complex and significant detail. The goddess is shown as a beautiful young woman, with dark blue skin, naked except for what looks like a hula skirt made of severed arms. Her round breasts are full and firm enough to burst off the canvas. Wild black locks flow down her back and over her shoulders. Her wide, lustrous eyes are set in a dark face so luminously beautiful that it is impossible not to be drawn to it. Her tongue sticks out just a bit, delicately touching her upper lip. There’s the slightest suggestion of fangs, or perhaps that’s an illusion. The sword in one of her four hands is not an illusion: it drips with blood. Nor is the severed head she holds in her other hand. Around her neck is a necklace

made of skulls. She squats over the pale, prone body of Shiva, holding in her open vagina Shiva's erect phallus, which gleams white and foaming between her red-tinged labia. He lies on a lotus-shaped bed supported by four skulls.

Flames, blown by an invisible wind, flow from Kali's head and shoulders, and from Shiva's feet. One of her hands is raised in the gesture that signals "Fear not." Another points downward, bestowing boons. She is, to say the least, formidable.

People who came into my house when I had the painting would often sneak side glances at it or stand in front of it for a few minutes, staring. There were moments when I understood their reaction. Even though the image was so familiar, even though I could rattle off the esoteric meaning of all those skulls and severed arms, the painting often startled me. Every time I looked at it, I remembered that Kali, the fiercest aspect of the feminine, is not a goddess to take lightly.

THE BLOOD DRINKER

In Indian mythology, Kali first appears as a frenzied, battle-maddened demon-slayer, who comes into the world at moments when dark forces—demons—threaten civilization and especially the feminine. In the core myth of Kali's emergence, she appears out of Durga's third eye at one of the key moments in the *Devi Mahatmya*, when the Devi is threatened by two demons called Chanda and Munda. Durga's face darkens, and Kali emerges with a roar, her sword swinging, cutting down demons and crunching them in her teeth. At last, she slashes off the heads of Chanda and Munda, and presents them to Durga. Later in the battle, Kali confronts the demon chief Raktabija. Raktabija has a magical power: when drops of his blood spill, they turn into warriors. Kali, with her long tongue, licks up his blood before it can touch the ground.

Many images of Kali show her with a long tongue, caught in the act of licking the blood of warriors. In these images, she often appears as a hag, emaciated, ugly, with fangs, and with blood dripping from her tongue. But as human consciousness evolved over the centuries, so, it seems, did the image of Kali. Her body became beautiful, as it is in most modern representations. Instead of seeing her as an almost demonic presence, devotees meditating on Kali began to find esoteric resonance in her gestures and implements. Raktabija's blood became a symbol of the uncontrollable desires that agitate our minds, and Kali's tongue became the power of yogic will to eat up desires and thoughts so that the luminosity of our essential awareness can reveal itself.

TWO FACES OF KALI

Kali appears differently depending on the level of consciousness with which you approach her. Anthropologists note that there are two basic versions of Kali in popular Indian religion. There is the village or forest Kali, where she and her alter-ego forms—such as Bhadrakali, Chamunda, and Bhairavi—are often seen as goddesses of the margins: scary, half-demonic forest deities. They are invoked for protection and magical purposes by mostly uneducated rural people, often in nighttime rituals and seasonal dances in which goddess-possessed worshippers enact the myths with lots of shouting and roaring, fueled by home-distilled local liquor. Black magicians worship this same aspect of Kali with mantras, for the sake of acquiring magical powers and killing enemies. In Nepal, as in many parts of Bengal, Kali worship is accompanied by animal sacrifice, and her temples often smell of the blood of goats.

In more modern, urban Hindu religious practice, Kali is Kali Ma—Mother Kali—a benign and loving source of every kind of boon and blessing. This is how Kali appears in American Kali temples and on the website for Kali Mandir in Laguna Beach, California.

At this level, her wildness is interpreted symbolically. The skulls around her neck are not dead victims, but the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, through which she manifests both liberating mantras and deluding ideas. (Remember the goddess's dual nature as both the force that binds us and the force that sets us free.)

The hands on her apron represent the karmic tendencies she removes from her devotees, as well as her own manifold capabilities. The skull in her hands, which her sword has just lopped off, is the ego that separates us from her. Kali's nakedness shows that she has cast away illusion; in her, the entire truth about life and death is revealed. Even her color is esoteric; Kali's dark colors stand for the ultimate void state, where all differences dissolve into the absolute beyond all form. Her sword is the force that slices through delusion, ignorance, false hope, and lies. Her position on top of Shiva reveals that she is the dynamic force in the universe, the power that churns the stillness of the void, so worlds can be created inside that transcendent nothingness.

In fact, Kali holds both these energies—the spiritually liberating and the fearsome—which is why she always remains wildly, dynamically paradoxical. She is multifaceted and multilayered, both as an inner force—a spiritual and psychological power—and as a force in the universe. The nineteenth-century Bengali poet Ram Prasad, in his songs to Kali, caught her paradox. He sang of a

goddess who embodies love and destruction, who is both the Shakti at the heart of this confusing world and the power who dissolves our pain:

O Mother! Thou art present in every form.
Thou art in the entire universe and in its tiniest and most trifling things,
Wherever I go, and wherever I look
I see Thee, Mother, present in thy cosmic form.
The whole world—earth, water, fire, and air—
All are thy forms, O Mother, the whole world of birth and death.

O mother, who can understand thy Maya?
Thou art a mad Goddess; Thou hast made all mad with attachment.
Such is the agony caused by the mad Goddess
That none can know her aright.
Rama Prasad says, “All sufferings vanish if she grants her grace.”¹

In the meditation that follows, we invoke her paradox, and the mysterious quality of her love—the love that this devotional poet saw in her.

MEDITATION

KALI

Sit or lie down comfortably for this exercise.

Close your eyes and focus on your breath for a few minutes, until you feel calm and centered.

Imagine yourself lying on a beach on a beautiful summer night. You're completely comfortable, very close to the earth, and the earth is warm. As you look up into the moonless sky, you sense a sacred feminine presence in the darkness, a presence filled with pulsing energy. As she comes closer, you recognize the form and the energy of the goddess Kali. You may envision her body as luminous blue-black, full-breasted, shining. Or, you may sense her kinesthetically. As she comes closer, you find yourself gazing into her eyes, which are shining with love. You sense within her an absolute love and an invitation to freedom.

As you tune in to the cosmic energy of Kali, let yourself recognize that this sacred feminine presence sees you completely. She sees your beauty, your woundedness, your doubts, your fears, your karmic blocks, the ways you've hurt others. She sees your mistakes, your longings, and your innate goodness. She

sees everything that's apparent and everything hidden. . . . She sees you; she adores you; she holds you. She is fierce wisdom incarnate, the liberating force of grace. She is freedom itself.

Let your breath connect you to her glowing sacred heart, to her pulsing, utterly free energetic core, which is also your own heart.

With each inhalation, you draw in the liberating grace of her presence, letting it flow through your body, your being. And with each exhalation, you allow the sense of whatever within you needs to be released to be let go, in order that she can dissolve it.

Your inhalation and your exhalation are almost like a prayer. "I accept freedom. I allow whatever can be released in this moment to be released."

KALI AS THE MIRROR OF OUR INNER STATE

Ram Prasad, like all great lovers of Kali, was able to hold her light and dark sides together, finding within her a path that transcends duality. She invites us to do the same, which may be why Kali so fascinates modern practitioners. Kali challenges us by daring us to look her in the face and find the love behind the pain of life.

The way we see Kali at any given moment has everything to do with where we are in our own journey. Whether Kali seems terrifying, fascinating, or loving depends on our state of consciousness and our level of both emotional and spiritual development. But she always invites us to a radical form of ego-transcendence.

Swami Vivekananda, one of the most important Hindu teachers to come to the West in the early twentieth century, deeply understood this truth. In one of his songs, he says:

I am not one of those . . .
Who put the garland of skulls round thy neck,
And then look back in terror
And call Thee "The Merciful."
The heart must become a burial ground.
Pride, selfishness, and desire all broken into dust,
Then and then alone will the Mother dance there!²

I discovered this ego-destroying quality of the Kali Shakti the first time I taught a class on Kali at a retreat center in the 1980s. Preparing for the class, my

contemplation of Kali literally intoxicated me. The idea that divine grace can take the form of fierce, destructive blood lust; of wild freedom; of bared teeth and naked breasts seemed both deeply exciting and deeply mysterious. I soon found myself identifying with Kali's strength and wildness, invoking her with poems to the volcano and the hurricane, feeling myself expanding in a kind of participation mystique as I considered the ways in which Kali manifests in nature and in human life. Contemplating her, I felt strong enough to step beyond any rules or conventional forms—I felt like a Kaliesque Tantric hero.

Two days before the course was to take place, during a meeting with the other speakers, the program director began shouting at me. She was normally a volatile person, but this display went beyond mere volatility. As the others in the room sat open-mouthed in shock, she railed for five minutes about how my conception of Kali was nothing like what she had in mind. Her rant was so far out of proportion to the circumstances that it finally struck me: this woman was enacting a manifestation of Kali's wrathful face. As I listened to her, I sensed the goddess saying, "You think you know me? You think you can identify with me? Before imagining that you are ready to embody me, you might want to learn to bow to me!"

Afterward, as I tried to make sense of the event, I suddenly remembered Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the great nineteenth century devotee of Goddess Kali. Ramakrishna always identified himself not as a tantric hero, but as the goddess's child. He practiced as a devotee, allowing his ego to get out of the way of his adoration of the goddess.

I went to my room and threw myself on the floor in the classic position of spiritual surrender. "I'm not strong," I said to the goddess. "I'm not a heroine. I'm your child! Please show me what to do!"

In the days to come, I was informed that I should not stand at the podium to give the talk on Kali, but to speak from the back of the hall, in the dark, as if I were narrating a slideshow. There was no question that this was a move meant to lop off one of the heads of my ego: specifically my pride in myself as a teacher.

As I sat there in the dark, something powerful and free began to move through me. The words began to speak themselves. Simultaneously, a tidal wave of love poured through the room. The ecstasy that swelled up from inside my chest felt almost unbearable. The man sitting next to me gasped "Wow!"—clearly the same thing was happening to him. Some powerful alchemy had arisen in that moment, and Kali was manifesting not in her fierceness, but in her melting sweetness. I heard from many of the people in the room that afternoon

that they had had a similar experience. Kali had, at least temporarily, cleared my egoic persona out of the way and then come through herself.

KALI AND THE EGO

That experience—which I am grateful to have had in the safety of a meditation retreat—showed me something about Kali that I’ve never forgotten. She is a massive love-force that is literally death to the ego. When she erupts in your life, Kali will cut away whatever is extraneous, whatever is indulgent. She is especially hard on arrogance, including the arrogance that makes us believe prematurely that we are outside the rules, before our earned wisdom has legitimately given us the right to set aside rules in the service of higher values. Though Kali embodies transformative anger, she also, paradoxically, destroys anger—especially the anger that comes from thwarted egoic desires.

KALI’S FIERCE FORMS

In the Tantric tradition, Kali’s role in the transformation of consciousness is embodied in ten different flavors, or sacred roles, called the Mahavidyas, or Great Wisdoms. (I look deeply at several of these goddesses in *Awakening Shakti*.) Her fiercest form, Bhairavi, erupts with the boundary-busting force of a volcano or a massive forest fire. Then there is Bagalamukhi, the Crane-Headed One, who has a beak like a crane and is also known as the Impaler. She is the force that stops you in your tracks—impeding forward movement and forcing you to internalize your energy. Chinnamasta, the most resonant and mysterious of all, holds her own head in her hands, and has two streams of life-force running from her neck into the open mouths of two attendants. Dhumavati is the crone-goddess who compels renunciation of everything worldly. Tara dissolves boundaries and protects. Kali manifests in all these forms, both as an external force and as an internal energy.

In nearly all of them, she compels you to bow down.

One of the myths of Kali’s origin has Kali emerge out of the body of Shiva’s consort Sati during a critical moment in Sati’s marriage to Shiva. If you’ll remember, the story of Shiva and Sati turns on the debacle of Daksha’s fire ritual. In this version, however, Daksha, who believes Shiva is not an appropriate husband for Sati, invites her to the celebration, but not him. Not wanting to miss the event, Sati asks Shiva for permission to go without him. Shiva refuses. Furious, Sati takes on her fearsome form as Kali. Shiva is terrified of her and

tries to flee. But Kali fills all of space with innumerable forms of herself until Shiva finally surrenders, sits down before her, and asks, “Where is my beautiful Sati?” She answers that this is her real form, and that she has taken on the sweet body of Sati to reward Shiva for his austerities. It is in her fearsome form, she tells Shiva, that she carries out the divine functions of creation and destruction.

Violence is part of the creative process. (The big bang, after all, was an explosion.) The energy that pushes a baby out of the womb, in a process that is bloody and full of the threat of death, is full of creative violence. Like anything to do with Kali, once the birth process begins, it is inexorable. Of course, in our time we employ drugs and surgical knives to “civilize” the process, to make it more convenient and often save the lives of mothers and children. But in the essential truth of the body, the process of birthing belongs to Kali, and for many women it offers the first great recognition that here is a place where the human ego has to get out of the way.

Another of Kali’s teachings is that in order for something new to be born, old structures must be destroyed—whether in nature or in society or in your personal life. Her name, Kali, is the feminine form of Kala, or Time, the great destroyer of even those things that seem permanent. As I wrote this chapter in the summer of 2011, tornados were sweeping through the American South, and every other day brought news of the huge swathes of wind that flattened every structure in their path. In Santa Cruz, California—a town near my own home—they were rebuilding the port that was smashed by a relatively small swell from the great tsunami that rolled over coastal Japan in 2010, destroying cities and creating a meltdown in the Fukushima nuclear power plant.

It’s not hard to see these earth upheavals as Kali’s work, as nature’s great “No!” to the poisons human beings have dumped into her air and soil and oceans. Ancient people saw earthquakes and hurricanes this way, as the anger of gods like Kali and her male counterpart Rudra-Shiva. Nowadays, we understand their physical causes. Yet for a Tantrika, who looks at the world and the psyche as a play of Shaktis, or divine feminine energies, the physical forces that create upheaval are also Kali’s manifestations in the world of tide and wind, no less filled with her mystery for being scientifically explainable.

Aurobindo wrote, “There is in her an overwhelming intensity, a mighty passion of force to achieve, a divine violence rushing to shatter every limit and obstacle. All her divinity leaps out in a splendour of tempestuous action; she is there for swiftness, for the immediately effective process, the rapid and direct stroke, the frontal assault that carries everything before it. . . . But for her, what

is done in a day might have taken centuries.”³

KALI AS THE “NO” OF REVOLUTION

Witness the sudden upheavals of the Arab Spring of 2011, when Kali ripped through the Middle East as the force of popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Durga gives the strength to begin and support the process of change, but Kali has the force to sweep away old structures. Her energy, moving through a group or a nation, can topple a dictator, bring down the Berlin Wall, and melt down the stock market so quickly that it leaves us dazed. Yet it is only from the open freedom—left after old structures are dissolved—that the inspiration to create anew can arise.

Moreover, when Kali is at work, you can trust her to show you what is truly indestructible, both in you and in your world. She does this by dissolving everything in you except that which cannot be destroyed. That’s why we need her. You don’t know what love is until you’ve felt the depth and fierceness of Kali’s love, which, in my experience, is the strongest force of love and ecstasy in the universe. That’s the secret that her lovers know—and Kali has many lovers, including awakened practitioners like the nineteenth-century *siddha* Ramakrishna and contemporary saints like Ma Amritananda. It’s a secret that you only come to when you let her dissolve your defensive boundaries. To know her boons, you must, in some way, surrender to her intensity. The biggest experience of Kali’s love always accompanies those moments when we have allowed ourselves to let go of our egoic agendas. As she sweeps away a layer of ego, the depth of her care is revealed.

KALI AND SPIRITUAL LIBERATION

Without her ruthless insistence on melting us to the bone, we’ll never get down to our essence, down to the apparent nothingness that alone can reveal our true vastness, and out of which real creativity arises. It isn’t enough to pay lip service to the beautiful idea that in our essence we are God living as a human being. To actually realize that, to *be* it, demands that we step forward audaciously into our largeness and love, and that we be willing to look into and surrender our own darkness, our shadowy motives, our built-in contraction, and our tendency to identify with the false self.

For this, Kali is the teacher. Her energy can get behind the classic self-inquiry question, “Who am I?” and give it so much passion that the very inquiry

becomes a sword to cut away conditional beliefs, false ideas, and everything that keeps you from recognizing your unconditioned self. If you let her, Kali will clean out your dark pockets, bring your shadows to light, and reduce all your excuses to ashes even as she licks up the ragged edges of your karmas.

If that sounds dramatic, it is. (Kali is nothing if not dramatic!) Craig, a California businessman, discovered Kali when the housing crash of 2008 wiped out his real estate development business, and his debts depleted the seventeen million dollars he had acquired over ten years of work. In the aftermath, he lost his house and his girlfriend and was left to live in his car. During that time, he experienced paralyzing fear, rage, and humiliation.

But the destruction raging through his life turned Craig into a seeker. In the painful, fearful months after the crash, he gradually faced into his own heart. He saw how armored his body had become by his relentless focus on pursuing success and how much he had cut himself off from other people and his own center. Craig decided to look at his crisis as a teacher and see if he could discover a motivation for living that was deeper than worldly success. He embarked on a yoga practice, and on the even deeper practice of learning how to follow the intuitive guidance that began to emerge through his long periods of solitude.

In a less dramatic way, one of my major spiritual breakthroughs arrived in the wake of being “fired” by my fiery guru. I was working on a project for him. In the course of it, I shared something he had said to me with someone else. In Tantric spiritual disciplines, the ability to keep the teacher’s instructions secret is considered a crucial quality. When my teacher heard that I had shared his words, he called me to his conference room and shouted that he didn’t want me to work for him anymore. I was devastated.

I made my way to my room and sat down on the bed, expecting to burst into tears. Instead, I was thrust into a state of open-eyed meditation. In that moment, “I” woke up to the presence of a self beyond ego. That presence “saw” that who I really was had nothing to do with my ordinary personality, my aims, and my neuroses. Lifted out of ordinary body-identified consciousness into a state of radical freedom and joy, it was obvious—beyond obvious—that who I am is consciousness itself. My teacher’s Kaliesque gesture, his fiery words, had temporarily cut the string that tethered me to the personality-self.

For three days, “I” lived in that experience of simple, joyful, absolute freedom. At the end of the third day, my guru summoned me back to my job on his staff. In the press of ordinary life, the expanded awareness was gradually

covered by daily worries and ideas, but a part of my consciousness had been permanently liberated from identification with my false self.

CONTEMPLATION

THE FELT SENSE OF KALI IN YOUR LIFE

Find a comfortable position, and have your journal or a notebook and pen handy. This contemplation involves some writing.

Kali comes into our lives in many different ways, including in those moments that seem part of the “normal” violence of life. Think back to a time when someone you loved or admired berated or broke up with you. Consider the moment when you lost a job, or when something of value was taken from you. Think of a time when you were unjustly accused.

Now, sense your way into the feelings that came up at such a time. What would the experience have been like if you had been able to see the divine face of creative destruction in these events? How did the experience change you?

Now, ask yourself, “Were there unexpected gifts that arose from those losses or changes? What were they?”

If you like, take a few moments to write about what comes up for you in this contemplation.

Write an invocation, a poem, or a poetic paragraph about or to Kali beginning with the line, “Kali, the wild dark goddess . . .” Let your writing come forth as spontaneously as possible, without censorship and without worrying about literary elegance. See if you can let the Kali Shakti write through you.

Next, read through what you’ve written. Then sit for a few moments and meditate.

THE TANTRIC KALI: DEITY OF HEROES

To look Kali in the face and receive her gifts is not easy. To actually court her ego-destroying boons is the work of a hero. In the Tantric traditions, Kali is the central deity of the left-handed path, where transgressive activities are practiced in ritual settings for the sake of discovering the blissful state where dualities like pleasure/pain, pure/impure and even life/death dissolve. To follow that path—in which the forbidden becomes sanctified and poison becomes nectar—is possible only for practitioners at an advanced level of consciousness. It demands discipline, a mind made strong and still by rigorous practice, and a relentlessly nondual vision. In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the hero feeds his daughter small

amounts of poison, which make her immune to any attempt to kill her through poison. Similarly, the Tantric hero subjects himself to experiences that make him familiar with the dark side, particularly with death, so that he cannot be moved by them.

Practicing in cremation grounds, sitting on corpses, even drinking blood—these were part of certain Tantric rites, which might be undertaken for the sake of radical self-purification through renunciation, or, at a lower level of consciousness, for the sake of acquiring magical powers.

The left-handed path is notoriously tricky—even dangerous for those who are not ready, because more often than not, the “poison” is simply poisonous. However, it’s more than possible to practice worshipping Kali like a Tantric hero without engaging in transgressive rituals. It can occur in the context of life itself. Vivekananda wrote thrillingly of seeing Kali in a storm:

The stars are blotted out,
Clouds are covering clouds,
It is darkness, vibrant, sonant
In the roaring, whirling wind
Are the souls of a million lunatics,
Just loose from the prison house, wrenching trees by the roots,
Sweeping all from the path. . . .

The flash of lurid light
Reveals on every side
A thousand, thousand shades
Of death begrimed and black

Scattering plagues and sorrows,
Dancing with joy,
Come, Mother, Come!
For Terror is thy name,
Death is in thy breath,
And every shaking step
Destroys a world for e’er,
Thou “time,” the All-Destroyer!
Come, Mother, Come!
Who dares misery love,
And hugs the form of Death

Dance in destruction's dance,
To him the mother comes.⁴

A young woman journalist told me of a transfiguring vision—profoundly Kaliesque—that came to her as she witnessed a horrific scene in wartime Bosnia:

“I was standing in a village square. Every building had been burned out, and the stench of burning bodies was everywhere. I can't even describe the horror of the human destruction I saw there. Then, it was as if I went into an open-eyed trance. Suddenly, with my naked eyes, I saw the horrible scene suffused with light. Light streamed through it, dissolving every charred house, every broken body. I could see—so clearly, the way I see you now—that it was all one light, one substance. My heart was breaking with love.

“Who could understand with the mind how light and, yes, love could be present in such a moment?” the young woman said to me. It was only years later, hearing the mythology of Kali, that she was finally able to make sense of her vision.⁵

THE KALI WOMAN: ARCHETYPE OF FEMININE POWER, SEXUALITY, AND RAGE

When a world-transforming energy gets modulated through an individual's unconscious, it becomes a personal archetype. For many contemporary Western women, Kali represents not the inhuman power in nature or culture, but the possibility of an audacious fierceness that has historically been denied both to the divine feminine and to individual women. Almost always, when a woman says “I need to find my Kali side,” or “I need some Kali energy,” she's looking for a way to stand up for herself, to discover her inner fierceness, or to express the outrageous side of her sexuality.

One of my students, whom I'll call Annie, is a graduate of a Catholic girls' school, and a really nice person. Her yoga and Buddhist practice had centered on developing peaceful qualities: nonviolence, surrender, contentment, and detachment. But as sometimes happens, her spiritual aspirations had gotten somewhat mixed up with the values of her middle-class upbringing. As a “nice girl,” the product of twenty-five or so years of acculturation, Annie had disowned her own anger, her jealousy, and her sadness. When she became a yoga student, these qualities began to seem particularly unacceptable.

Then she found herself in the midst of a knotty sibling battle over the care of

her bedridden mother and the disposition of the family property. As she attempted to make herself heard by her strong-willed sisters, Annie realized that her carefully cultivated tendency to seek peace at any price was making her impotent. She understood that being nice was not always the most enlightened response. She needed something else, some kind of cut-to-the-chase aggressiveness—some fierceness. Without it, she was in danger of giving in to her siblings’ unabashedly self-seeking agendas, which she knew both she and her own children would regret.

For Annie, invoking Kali offered a doorway into her own strength. It sharpened her discernment and woke her up to the recognition that her niceness was actually a mask: it was based on socially conditioned roles and responses, and on old family dynamics. As she inquired deeper, she saw into the fear that lay behind her politeness.

Annie began working with her Kali energy by doing a yoga pose that was half a squat: raised arms, tongue stuck out, vocalizing “Ahhhh” as loud as she could. She would imagine herself shouting “NO!” to her siblings and also to her own passivity. Her passivity, she realized, was based on fear, the core refuge of her egoic false self, and the more she questioned and liberated it, the freer she became to speak out. She was able to insist that she and her siblings put her mother’s money in a trust, in care of a lawyer who was answering to all three of them. For the first time, Annie’s sisters began to listen to her views and treat her as an equal.

KALI ASANA

Place your feet wide apart, so that you can comfortably bend your knees. With bent elbows, raise your arms. Begin standing straight, then swiftly bend into a squat, pulling your arms down, elbows first, and sticking out your tongue. As you do, shout “AHHHHH.” Try to do this from the belly rather than the throat. Inhale up to standing, and take a deep breath, filling your lower chest, middle chest, and upper chest. Then repeat the movement. Do this five times. Notice what you feel.

THE POSTMODERN KALI

Until recently, it hasn’t been easy to find role models for incarnate Kali, since most Kaliesque characters in fiction are depicted as demonic or crazy. (Think of the grungy serial killer played by Charlize Theron in *Monster*, or the murderous

lover played by Jessica Walter in the early Clint Eastwood film, *Play Misty for Me.*) Martial arts films sometimes have Kali-style heroines. Uma Thurman in the film *Kill Bill* and Ziyi Zhang in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* are Kali-touched warriors, both deadly and beautiful. Rock singer Patti Smith in her heyday channeled Kali's wildness. So did other punk rock bands like The Clash. (It's no coincidence that soldiers in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 went into battle with earphones blaring heavy metal music—Kali music!)

Despite her problematic aspects, or perhaps because of them, Kali fascinates contemporary women. As feminist-oriented anthropology, goddess-centered spirituality, and yoga have spread through the Western world, the image of Kali has surfaced in Western culture more visibly than any other Indian goddess.

As a postmodern goddess, Kali irradiates popular culture as the incarnation of the fiercely in-your-face side of feminine power. A twenty-year-old friend pointed me to a Lykke Li music video called "The Only," which she told me expressed her own experience of Kali. The singer, wearing a jeweled goddess-girdle, dances in and out of flames, grinding her hips against a board full of throwing knives.

Kali is the force many young women call on in those moments when they courageously face and move beyond their own trauma, or when they want to break through sexual shyness, politesse, insecurity, and discomfort. Kali's image offers an entrance into a wild audacity that has historically been denied both to the divine feminine and to individual women. Lady Gaga exemplifies this edgy, Kali-like quality in songs like "Edge of Glory" and "Marry the Night."

CONTEMPLATION

KALI'S AUDACITY

Sit in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and contemplate the Kali energy in your life.

How has Kali energy empowered your audacious or unconventional behavior?

How has she inspired you to push the edge—in both positive and negative ways?

SHADOW KALI

If Kali symbolizes feminine audacity and youthful intensity, she also symbolizes more shadowy and problematic forms of power, especially the angry and

aggressive energies that are hard for many women to own and for men to handle. (Even in India, to call a woman “a regular Kali” is not a compliment—instead, it’s shorthand for foul-tempered or rageful). Kali, like all divine forces, is much bigger than our human ego. So when she shows up in the feminine psyche, it can feel as if we’ve been possessed, literally taken over by something that has nothing to do with our normal, “daytime” personality.

Kali’s power, suppressed, will often turn in on us, fester in the form of rage, attack our bodies in the form of illness and accidents, and surface in ways that can destroy our love and the love others have for us. (It seems telling that one of Lady Gaga’s music videos takes place in a hospital, in the aftermath of what seems to have been a suicide attempt.) It was not until the 1980s that clinicians realized that many women suffering from depression and eating disorders had been the victims of rape or sexual abuse of different kinds. Their rage and pain had been “stuffed inside,” and needed to be expressed as well as cleared in order for the women’s bodies and psyches to heal.

Women, as we know, have suppressed their power for thousands of years, becoming masters of passive aggression and vicarious backstage manipulation. So the process of finding and harnessing that energy in ourselves is fraught with missteps. We don’t always know how to separate the transformative anger that can stand against injustice from the rage of the wounded feminine, which all of us, whether we know it or not, hold in our cells. The boldness and audacity that is as much a part of the divine feminine as her softness can be channeled into powerful and effective protest. It was witnessed by the Mothers of the Disappeared—who demonstrated silently and publically during the days of the Argentinean junta and helped bring public attention to the regime’s atrocities—and it fuels the efforts of former sex workers and others who now toil to end sexual trafficking around the globe. Divine feminine anger can also erupt in ways that destroy the structures of our lives.

KALI AS THE INNER VOICE OF DESTRUCTIVE RAGE

When Kali appears in the dreams and poetry of contemporary Western women, she often serves as a hook for everything in us that feels uncontrollable in our psyches. Witness the invocation of Kali on yOni.com, a neofeminist website:

I am the Bitch from Hell
I think you know me well
I am the dark goddess

Kali, Hecate, Lilith, Morrigan, Ereshigal.

From an article on this same website: “The dark goddess lives in us all. Often suppressed and denied, she will eventually leak out in hostility and sarcasm, with sly cutting digs, nagging gossip, and putdowns . . .”⁷ For many women, especially third-wave feminists in their twenties and thirties, owning their Kali side is a metaphor for learning to love their own rage and sexuality. Kali storms through us as the repressed power that women hide as they try to live up to the image of the loving, nurturing feminine archetype that every society idealizes. It’s no wonder that “Kali” and “Kaliesque” are more often than not used as shorthand terms for feminine rage. On the other hand, some women use the Kali image to justify shadow behaviors: uncontrolled outbursts, PMS symptoms, and acts of vengeful anger against family members and former partners who have abused or betrayed them.

The following version of the Kali myth carries the scent of this uncontrollable quality as it appears in the personal psyche.

A demon has appeared who can only be killed by a woman. So, at Shiva’s request, Parvati enters his body and transforms herself by drinking the poison that Shiva holds in his throat. In this way, she takes in all the negativity of the collective consciousness, which she turns into wrath. She emerges as the naked, bloodthirsty Kali with matted hair and a blazing, red third eye in the middle of her forehead.

Kali quickly dispatches the demon, but afterward she’s so intoxicated by battle lust that she refuses to return to her beautiful form as a devoted wife. Instead, she wanders into the forest, where she dances so wildly and with such force that she threatens to bring down the worlds. (Revolution, once started, can tend to get out of control.)

The local sages petition Shiva for help, but even he is unable to get Kali’s attention. Finally, he challenges her to a dance contest. He begins his own dance, which is so intense that it creates craters in the earth and shakes the planets from their orbits, causing so much destruction that it arouses Kali’s compunction, and she comes to her senses and returns to her “normal” form.

This story comes from the Shiva Purana, a text in which Shiva is the dominant partner and the goddess merely a consort. From one point of view, it expresses both male terror of the uncontrollable side of feminine power and the masculine instinct to show his strength in order to control the feminine. In this instance, Shiva tames Kali by acting so wild that she has to calm down in order

to soothe *him*. (In another version the story, Shiva transforms himself into a baby, which arouses Kali's mother instinct.) From a neuropsychological point of view, we could look at Kali in this story as emotion and Shiva as reason; Kali as the amygdala and Shiva as the neocortex; Kali as passion while Shiva is insight.

This story also expresses our collective terror at the rage of the feminine. After several thousand years of patriarchy, we're used to masculine anger and rage, even when we fear it. But the rage of the feminine—the terrible face of the mother—seems to threaten the very ground of existence. It reminds us that the earth itself could turn on us, could refuse to play its supportive role, and could erupt as a volcano or a tornado.

From the point of view of conventional society or of modernist rationalism, the Kali appearing in the personal psyche carries the blood scent of chaos—the all-bets-are-off chaos that arises when the abused and betrayed feminine rises up in vengeance or simply with a cry of “Enough.” When women are seized by the rage of shadow Kali, it can wreak massive personal destruction.

The most dramatic story of this shadowy side of Kali comes not from Hindu but from Greek mythology. It's the tale of Medea, the princess of Colchis, who uses her magical powers to help her lover, Jason, shear the golden fleece from two indomitable rams. For the love of him, she abandons her family and her home and goes with him to the city of Athens. Then, several years later, Jason is offered the hand of a younger princess who happens to be the daughter of the ruler of Athens. Medea begs Jason not to abandon her, but when he refuses, she fashions a magical cloak that incinerates his bride—and then she kills her own children.

In modern times, there's a Kaliesque quality in the shocking story of Lorena Bobbitt, who put up with her husband's infidelity until one night her suppressed rage overtook her and she cut off her husband's penis. (Fortunately for him, he made it to the hospital in time to get it reattached.) In the 1980s and 1990s, as women began for the first time to speak about their experiences of sexual abuse in their families and date rape in their peer relationships, I witnessed confrontations between daughters and their fathers, confrontations that sometimes came close to tearing the families apart. Women who get “possessed” by Kali sometimes seem to me to be carrying the pain and rage of millennia, as if they had opened themselves to the accumulated anger of millions of wounded women, layered into the collective unconscious, demanding some form of release.

DISTORTION AND ESSENCE

Like all shadow behaviors, the expressions of negative Kali energy are distortions of the positive qualities of Kali Shakti. They twist and mask a quality that is essential and sublimely transpersonal: the force of liberation through radical change. Kali can manifest sublimely through the intense activism of the women who fight to expose human sexual trafficking, factory farming, and the exploitation of workers in electronics factories. But she also acts through the rages of people like Jane, a gifted and loving therapist, who holds power in her family and tribe through her destructive eruptions of anger, which cause the people around her to walk on eggshells. Most of the people close to her yield ground immediately rather than stand up to Jane's emotional tsunami.

Tellingly, Jane's uncontrolled anger is the shadow side of her most profound gift. She's a master facilitator of transformation who can cut through the masks of politeness that keep a group from coming together authentically. Her positive Kali energy has all the force of the goddess's power to destroy the outworn and make room for the new. This doesn't make Jane any easier to be around when she's in a rage, any more than understanding what Kali is about will necessarily make your experience of a life upheaval more comfortable. But if you pay attention, Kali can teach you how to channel power so that you recognize, integrate, and deeply honor the forces of change, including the change that comes about through your encounter with the dark energies of the world.

CONTEMPLATION

THE SHADOW KALI

You will need a journal and a pen for this exercise. Find a comfortable seated position and contemplate the following questions.

How do you see the shadow forms of Kali in your own life?

Does Kali come out in your tone of voice, in the way you talk to your family members, in inner feelings of rage and resentment?

Is your inner shadow Kali rebellious? Angry? Hurt? How does she manifest?

The beginning of any process of integrating the shadow Kali is to learn how to recognize her, and as I said earlier, this often doesn't happen except under some kind of inner or outer duress. Sometimes it takes a breakdown to get us to look into our shadow Kali.

For me, it happened during a health crisis. At the time I was living a

classically yogic lifestyle, actively “working on” my anger and personal ambition through the time-honored practice of total denial. Like many people involved in spiritual self-cultivation, I believed that any form of personal willfulness was selfish (i.e., bad) and took for granted that being spiritual meant witnessing, and hopefully transcending, my shadow qualities. Since I have a lot of rebellious and eccentric qualities, this was not easy or natural for me. As so often happens when we disown our shadow, my creative energies went underground. I was tired all the time. My unadmitted anger tended to pop out in sarcasm or in sudden outbursts that created problems for me with other people. Finally, my digestion started to go south.

One night I had a scary dream. In the dream, an animal was trapped inside my body, eating his way out. I happened to be reading Robert Johnson’s book, *Inner Work*, which describes a classical Jungian process of active imagination that is a powerful way to get in touch with your own shadow energies. I decided to start a process of dialogue with what I recognized as suppressed Kali energy. It often happens this way: we seek Kali at the moment we realize that we are living in dissonance with the parts of ourselves we may not fully understand or know.

Sometimes people do this kind of shadow work aloud; I did it as a written dialogue. I began by writing with my right, dominant hand, “I’d like to speak to Kali.” Then I took the pen in my left hand. As I did so, I felt a leaping in my heart and saw these words flowing through my pen: “I am anger, I am power, I’m the girl in the corner, I’m the wild dancer, I’m you, I’m you, I’m you!”

“What do you want?” I wrote.

“I want out,” wrote my other hand. “To be free! To be wild! To be in control!”

The process went on for several hours, and ended only when I got a cramp in my hand that finally made it too uncomfortable to write. In the process of writing, I had felt myself swinging from wild exhilaration to resentment and back again, but always with a feeling of mounting energy and excitement.

After a few weeks of this process—which I’ve often come back to over the years, with Kali and other goddesses—I began to notice the near miracle that occurs when we begin to tune into any divine archetype, and especially to allow it to consciously speak through us. I began to find that positive Kali qualities—a natural kind of assertiveness and freedom—were coming back into my life. My health improved, but more to the point, I began to be able to speak my truth in the moment in ways I hadn’t in years. Talking to Kali had actually allowed me to

integrate these energies.

DIALOGUING WITH KALI

Find a time when you can be alone to complete this exercise. Light a candle, and keep your journal and pen handy.

Using the illustration in [figure 1](#) below, saturate your vision with the image of Kali.

Close your eyes and imagine her standing before you. Imagine her with three eyes, wild hair, and a beautiful dark blue or black face. See her long tongue and her fangs. Feel the energy emanating from her.

Breathing in, feel Kali's energy flow from her third eye into your heart. Exhaling, allow that energy to flow through your body.

Now, begin to speak to her. Ask Kali to tell you about the ways she manifests or would like to manifest within you. Ask:

“Who are you for me, goddess Kali?”

“What do you have to teach me?”

“How do you express yourself in my life?”

“How are you suppressed?”

“How and when can you help me?”

“How would you like to be recognized by me or expressed through me?”

Ask these questions with complete openness, without anticipating how the answers will come. Write down the answers. Alternatively, you can write your questions with your dominant hand, then immediately write Kali's answers with your nondominant hand. Write without censorship, letting both the questions and the answers come out as they will.

Read over what you have written.

Finish by sitting with the energy of Kali, breathing in and out, sensing her Shakti flowing from her third eye into your heart and enlivening your body.

Afterward, journal about this contemplation. Notice how the energy of your personal Kali feels emotionally and in your body. Is there a difference between the empowering, enlivening form of Kali and the shadowy Kali qualities that you experience?



FIGURE 1. DANCING KALI

THE ANIMAL SACRIFICE

Kali and her alter-ego goddesses—Bhadrakali, Tara, and others—are said to like animal sacrifices, and in certain parts of India goats are still offered to her during festivals. On the subtle level, however, the “goat” to be sacrificed is egoic selfishness, and one of Kali’s boons is her power to help you clean your heart of negative energies—desire, fear, anger, and jealousy. More than that, she gives a kind of radical freedom from attachment, especially the attachment to the structures of the persona and the personality-identified ego. This is one reason for the tradition of worshipping Kali in cremation grounds, where the presence of death reminds you that all the things you desire and fear will pass away.

KALI AS THE HUMAN TEACHER

In the Tantric traditions where Kali is most deeply understood, the ego-smashing side of the Shakti is often carried externally by the human guru, who in the traditions is held to embody the enlightened power to cut away those aspects of ego that no one seems to be willing to give up on his or her own. This function of the teacher is subtle and problematic, because it can sometimes degenerate into abuse. (For this reason, the *Kularnava Tantra*, one of the key surviving texts of the Kaula Tantra tradition, lists several pages of qualities that a trustworthy guru should possess and that a disciple is supposed to look for in his teacher. These include control of desires; absence of qualities like greed, anger, and pride; freedom from ego; unshakable contentment; constant engagement in deep practice; mastery of both the teachings and the inner pathways of enlightenment; and much more.⁸) For someone who genuinely wants to change, who has the right teacher, and who is able to stand the inevitable heat, practice with a Kaliesque guru can be one of the quickest paths to inner freedom. Susan, a longtime student of an Eastern teacher, described her experience to me in a letter:

“During the years I lived and worked with my teacher, I often saw her unleash Kaliesque verbal blasts, hurled with such precision and force that you sometimes felt that she had taken a sword to your deepest hidden wounds. She had a scorched-earth policy about any manifestations of ego. She pounced on both willfulness and weakness. If you manifested lack of confidence she would shoot down anything you said. But if you were arrogant, willful, or careless, she could be even more merciless. She once shouted at me in front of a roomful of

people, and one of her favorite ploys was to accuse you of someone else's mistake. It's said that the quickest way to recognize the ego is to notice the part of you that reacts when you're falsely accused. My teacher had a genius for raising that defensive inner voice, the voice that wants to shout 'I didn't do it!' One of her greatest gifts to me was the mirror she held up to that angry, self-justifying instinct, so that I came to recognize it as the reaction of my contracted self, and learned to be its witness.

"What made this bearable," Susan wrote, "was the undercurrent of deep love that permeated her environment. Often, even while I was reeling from one of my teacher's Kaliesque sword cuts, I'd be aware of an expansive opening through my heart, and a feeling of extraordinary joyfulness, a sort of self-generating bliss. It wasn't masochism as people who don't understand the guru path sometimes believe. It was a glimpse of my own essence, the deep love that arises when a piece of the ego lets go. That love kept me in place for years, despite the acute psychological discomfort I often experienced. Something in me knew that there was a greater prize at stake than simple comfort or short-term enjoyment.

"I've never regretted that decision. Over the years, Kali's sword, manifesting through my teacher's words, caused real attrition in my instinct to identify with my false self. At a certain point there was a shift. It's hard to say what happened, but it had something to do with letting go of my desire to have her like me, and at the same time recognizing that my own inner issues—resentment, fear, arrogance, and of course, childhood wounds—were calling forth her behavior toward me. As I took responsibility for my own shadowy qualities and began to be able to let them go, I not only stopped blaming her for "misunderstanding" me, I stopped being triggered by it. Gradually, the process had burned away enough of my fear and anger that there was less and less defensive ego to pop out. She would send a verbal arrow in my direction, and it would simply fly past me: the inner "hook" was gone. I even began to see the underlying playfulness behind many of her barbs—and as I lightened up, our relationship became much more open and playful."

Sometimes, the way through Kali's fire is utter surrender. Sometimes, as in Susan's case, it is pure endurance. And sometimes, it's quite simply our ability to love her even in her terrible form. One story goes that her consort Shiva adores her so completely that he asks that she dance on his prone body, and that she grants this as a boon to him. As many lovers of the fierce feminine can attest, once the "test" has been passed and the lover has shown his or her willingness to hang steady in the face of the terror, the goddess will reveal that behind all her

forms is love itself—love that reveals itself as the very substance of the universe.

SACRIFICING YOUR NEGATIVE TENDENCIES TO KALI'S FIRE

Find a comfortable seated posture in a quiet place to complete this exercise. Before you begin, consider the qualities in yourself that obstruct your happiness, your love, your wisdom, and your freedom. It might be anger or the kind of pride that makes you hold back from life. It might be resistance to practice and to the path. It might be fear—including the fear of letting go of your egoic contractions and opening to your capacity for clear, powerful action. Once you have several qualities in mind, begin the exercise.

Imagine that Kali stands before you. In front of her is a fire, its flames rising in jeweled colors. Imagine yourself bowing before her. Imagine the negative tendency you chose as a cloak that covers your body. Peel away the cloak, and drop it into the fire. Watch it dissolve in the flames.

Choose another quality of egoic consciousness. Peel it away like a cloak, and drop it into the flames.

Repeat this several times until you feel an inward shift.

Over the next few days, notice any shifts in your emotional state, in the way you are with others, and in your perceptions of situations. You may notice that your inner state becomes more intense for a while. This is the rumble of your tendencies leaving your system. In moments of intensity, imagine them being offered into Kali's fire and dissolving in the flames.

UNLOCKING THE HIDDEN KALI

Kali offers us the freedom that lies beyond death. You can enter her freedom through many doorways—looking into her force in nature, examining the hidden forces behind your shadow rage, or invoking her fire to help you dissolve emotional patterns and negative tendencies. Ultimately—and this is the secret that Kali reveals only to those who seek it—Kali's essence is the vast, empty, ultimately fertile void itself. Kali's blackness is the darkness of the ultimate mystery, the transcendent womb of black light out of which reality is always arising and into which it constantly subsides. She's the cloud of unknowing described by the Christian mystics; the presence behind all things. When you tune deeply into Kali's energy, letting the calm presence behind her eyes open you to the presence in your own, you discover that her death-dealing implements, her take-no-prisoners attitude toward ego, her revolutionary

forcefulness and her vast love are simply aspects of her ultimate power to draw the mind within. Kali does indeed dissolve our structures, but it's always in service of the heart. She reverses the process that brings form out of the formless and takes us back to the absolute. The yogi's Kali is that power that can turn the mind inward in deep meditation, dissolving our body sense, dissolving our thoughts, liberating emotions into energy, and drawing all our energies into their source in the inner heart. Her great dissolve carries us into the recognition that all things are one in the Self. In the heart of hearts, Kali lives as the magnetic draw of ultimate oneness, the call of the Self to let go of everything that would separate us from what we always already are.

MEDITATION

KALI AS THE VOID

Once again take a comfortable seated position somewhere quiet. Once you feel present, begin the meditation.

Imagine for a moment a vast, endless black sky. Let your entire attention focus on that blackness. Breathe it in, and breathe it through your body.

Now, with your exhalation, see if you can let go, just for this moment, of whatever stands in the way of opening to that fertile darkness.

KALI AS THE GREAT VOID

In the modern world, it is hard to come across absolute darkness. But camping in the California mountains on a moonless night, with the stars blotted out by the tent canvas, I meditated on blackness and found myself engulfed in it. For a moment, my body and mind disappeared, dropped away as in the old Zen tales, and there was nothing at all but a pure sense of aliveness. No me, no other, no here, no there. In that absolute darkness, pulsating with energy, Kali's love rose up as a fierce ecstasy, and for that brief time I understood in a pure wordless way what the poets mean when they say that Kali is the Absolute, the reality that remains when everything else dissolves. In that context, I saw that Kali's wild hair, her crazed bloody dance, her flailing limbs, and her hand raised in the gesture of "Fear not" really do represent the absolute freedom of release from karma and time. Absolute freedom is found in the pristine inner space between now and then—the inner sky that opens on its own—in the heart of any moment when thoughts drop away.

KALI

kah-lee—Black One

Other Names for Kali:

Shyama (*shyah-mah*)—Dark One

Chamunda (*chah-mun-dah*)—Destroyer of Ignorance and Duality, as represented by the demons Chanda and Munda

Bhavatarini (*bhuh-vuh-tah-ri-nee*)—She who saves from the ocean of worldly suffering

Bhadrakali (*bhuh-druh-kah-lee*)—Auspicious Black One

Chandika (*chuhn-dee-kah*)—Fierce One

Chandi (*chuhn-dee*)—Fierce One

MahaKali (*muh-hah-kah-lee*)—Great Black One; Kali as the source of all-that-is

Goddess of:

- the dissolution of outworn structures
- radical rebirth
- dynamic power of change
- the process of childbirth
- death
- the fury of battle
- release of constriction and stuckness
- radical purification and detoxification—both physical and internal
- righteous anger

- wildness and radical audacity
- liberation through “dying” to the egoic self
- absolute voidness beyond all forms
- fierce love and ecstasy

Recognize Kali in:

- lightning storms
- volcanic eruptions, tornados, and tsunamis
- battlefields
- wild outbursts of ecstasy
- the act of pushing the child out of the womb (literally and figuratively, as in a dramatic creative process)
- radical creative freedom
- purification experiences
- sudden changes in life, especially those that involve disruption
- sudden enlightenment experiences

Invoke Kali for:

- transformative strength
- burning limitations and karmic veils
- purifying the inner body and the chakras
- awakening the kundalini energy and inspiring her to rise
- discovering the truth in a confusing situation

- letting go of outmoded structures or egoic tendencies
- seeing into the mysteries of life and death
- all forms of enlightenment, especially the kind in which we move from the relative to recognition of the absolute reality
- purifying and strengthening the heart
- transcendent ecstasy in meditation, lovemaking, or in the midst of troubles

Bija Mantra

Krim (*kreem*)

or:

Krim hum hreem (*kreem hoom hreem*)

Krim activates energy.

Hum brings strength.

Hreem arouses sweetness.

Invocational Mantras

Om aim hrim klim chamundayai vicche svaha

ohm aim hreem kleem chah-mun-dah-yai vich-ey swah-hah

Om: the primordial sound

Aim: the seed of wisdom

Hrim: creative manifestation

Klim: transformative power

Chamundaye: a name for Kali as the destroyer of the “demons” of ignorance and duality

Vicche: cut (as in cutting the bonds of ignorance and ego)

Svaha: the mantra that signifies offering

Jayanti mangala kali

Bhadrakali kapalini

Durga kshama shiva dhatri

Svaha svadha namo'stute

juh-yuhn-tee muhn-guh-lah kah-lee

*bhuh-druh-kah-lee kuh-pah-li-nee
door-gah kshuh-mah shi-vah dah-tree
swah-hah swuh-dah nuh-mo-stoo-tey*

Auspicious and victorious Kali
Bhadrakali! Wearer of the skull garland! O mother, hard to know!
Compassionate and benevolent mother
You who embody the sacred syllable offered in all rituals,
I bow to you!

Gayatri Mantra

Om Mahakalyai cha vidmahe
Parameshwaryai dhimahi
Tannah Kali prachodayat

*ohm muh-hah-kahl-yai chuh vidmahe
puh-ruh-meysh-wuhr-yai dheemuh-hee
tan-nuh kah-lee pra-cho-duh-yah-tuh*

Om, may we come to know the Great Kali
May we meditate on the Supreme Goddess
May that goddess Kali impel us on our path.

Kali's colors: red, black, midnight blue
Kali's flowers: red hibiscus, blue lotus
Kali's consort: Shiva

APPENDIX I

Which Goddesses Are You?

MOST OF US HOLD the energies of several different goddesses. But often, one or two of them predominate. Below, you'll find some revealing questions that might help you recognize your goddess affinities and which ones tend to predominate in your personality.

Please approach this questionnaire playfully! The more playful you are with it, the more you are likely to discover about your connection to each goddess. Certain goddesses will undoubtedly resonate with you more recognizably than others, but look for yourself in all of the goddesses. All of them are within you. And all of them can be read about in *Awakening Shakti*.

DURGA

- Do you have a strong desire to protect others?
- Do you feel acutely the wrongness of social injustice?
- Are you impatient and sometimes hot tempered?
- Do your friends and family sometimes call you bossy?
- Are you often the person others turn to to head the committee or lead the campaign?
- Are you a natural fighter?
- Do you like to be in charge?

- Do you believe that you're usually right?
- Are you capable of doing several things at once?
- Are you the head of a large family, company, or circle of friends?
- Are you a leader?

LAKSHMI

- Are you very physically attractive?
- Do people fall in love with you easily?
- Do you have a strong interest in fashion, decoration, and design?
- Are you good at spotting trends?
- Do you prefer the people in your life to be outstanding in some way?
- Does money tend to fall into your hands?
- Do you have an almost physical need to have beauty around you?
- Do you prefer to avoid anything unpleasant?
- Do you love a good time?
- Do you secretly believe that you can never be too rich?
- Do people around you feel more joyous because you are there?
- Are you supremely confident that you'll be taken care of because you deserve the abundance of life?
- Are you generous?
- Do you surround yourself with beautiful things?
- Do you feel negatively impacted by any form of disharmony?

- Are you a gifted business coach?
- Do you have a natural talent for making money?
- Do you have a green thumb?
- Have your friends and lovers noticed that their material lives improve when you're with them?
- Do you prefer being around good-looking, successful, and refined people?
- Are you kind?
- Do you pride yourself on your taste?

KALI

- Do you sometimes feel that there is a battle cry wanting to get out?
- Is your sexuality wild? Does it sometimes feel out of control?
- Do you sometimes frighten people (or yourself) with your intensity?
- Do you have so much raw power that you can accomplish anything you set your mind to?
- Have you ever felt so repressed that you turned your energy on yourself?
- Do you love fiercely?
- Do you have more energy than anyone you know?
- Do you sometimes wonder if you are a rage-aholic?
- Are you decisive?
- Do people ever tell you that since you've come into their lives they feel transformed?
- Do you often feel you have to hold back?

- Do you identify with outsiders and outlaws?

PARVATI

- Are you in a powerful yet combative relationship in which there is a strong drive for equality?
- Are you in a creative partnership of some kind in which your partner is in a leadership role and you handle the relationships?
- Are you an athlete or dancer?
- Do you practice intense yoga or meditation?
- Are you a loving but relaxed mother?
- Are you quirky, independent, and able to stand up to any sort of opposition?
- Are you a man's woman, who has had important male mentors?
- Have you ever set your sights on a lover or a career goal and stopped at nothing to attain it?

SARASWATI

- As a child, did you tend to fall in love with words?
- Do you forget about the outside world when you're reading or problem solving?
- Do you have a gift for eloquence, even if you're naturally introverted?
- Are you a gifted communicator?
- Are you a *compulsive* communicator?
- Do people tell you that you talk too much?
- Can you sway people with words?

- Are you picky about the words you use?
- Are you careful and detail-oriented in your work?
- Is clarity particularly important to you?
- Are you a nitpicker?
- Are you musically gifted?
- Do you naturally understand technology?
- Do ideas and inspirations come to you out of the blue?
- Do you have a beautiful voice?

SITA

- Do you tend to be loyal and self-sacrificing?
- Are you in grieving over a recent loss?
- Has your husband or lover left you?
- Do you feel that your role in life is to support others?
- Do you tend to be a caretaker?
- Are you pregnant?
- Are you a devoted wife or lover, or do you tend to become consumed by the people close to you?
- Are you able to endure a lot of physical pain or misfortune without complaint?
- Do you have quiet moral force?
- Are you the center of your family?
- Have you ever been raped or sexually abused?

DHUMAVATI

- Do you generally feel somewhat alienated from the social order?
- Are you reclusive?
- Do you have great empathy for the poor, the marginalized, and the aged?
- Are you elderly, frail, or sick?
- Do you have a chronic condition that keeps you from ordinary functioning?
- Are you lonely or depressed?
- Have you been out of work for a while?

RADHA

- Are you in love and passionate about your lover?
- Do you enjoy flirtation, playful lovemaking?
- If you are not in love, do you long for it?
- Are you a romantic?
- Do you still hold onto the thought of a lost high school lover?
- Are you the girlfriend of a man who is irresistible to other women—but loves you best?
- Are you passionately devoted to the divine?
- Are you a married person in love with someone who is not your husband?

CHINNAMASTA

- Do you tend to be radically experimental?
- Are you a cutting-edge teacher, therapist, or workshop leader?

- Are you deeply committed to truthfulness, even at the expense of keeping friends?
- Do you like to push the edge?
- Have you ever self-mutilated?
- Are you able to turn your own wounds into ways to help others?
- Are you easily able to let go of your egoic self?
- Do the people close to you tend to turn to you for support?
- Are people energized by being in your presence?
- Are you committed to democratic enlightenment and willing to give your own energy for the sake of a group?
- Do you regularly spend time in a thought-free meditative state?

LALITA TRIPURA SUNDARI

- Does every man who meets you fall in love with you?
- Are you beautiful?
- Do you love sex?
- Are you deeply happy with yourself? Are you confident in your own feminine power?
- Do you have an unusually good relationship with your husband or partner?
- Do you tend to be easily successful at most things you undertake?
- Do you gravitate toward circles of power?
- Are you comfortable with power?

BHUVANESHWARI

- Do you have a natural capacity to create welcoming energy or hold space for others?
- Do people want to congregate in your home?
- Do you have a green thumb?
- Are you the favorite hostess, mom, or teacher in your circle?
- Do you remain friends with everyone you ever knew, including ex-lovers and ex-spouses, because you don't let anyone out of your heart?
- Do people naturally gravitate toward you because everyone around you seems to flourish?
- Are you a therapist, yoga studio manager, or dedicated mentor or coach?
- Do you seem to have a natural healing energy?
- Is your love somewhat impersonal?

Notes

CHAPTER 1—A CROWN OF FEMININE DESIGN: THE GODDESS INCARNATES

1. I am indebted to Heinrich Zimmer for this version of the story, which comes originally from the *Kalika Purana*. His delicious retelling appears in the chapter called “The Romance of the Goddess,” in Joseph Campbell, ed. *The King and the Corpse: Tales of the Soul’s Conquest of Evil*, (Princeton: Princeton/Bollengen, 1973).
2. Told by poet and teacher David Whyte in his CD set, *What to Remember When Waking: The Disciplines of Everyday Life* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2010).
3. See Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987); Andrew Harvey, *The Return of the Mother* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2001); and Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, *The Divine Feminine and the World Soul* (Inverness, CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 2009).
4. Cited in Harvey, *The Return of the Mother*.
5. Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* (New York: William Morrow, 2001) is a dark adventure featuring gods of several traditions, including Norse deities Odin and Loki, as well as Hinduism’s Ganesha.

CHAPTER 2—KALI: GODDESS OF RADICAL TRANSFORMATION

1. *Rama Prasad’s Devotional Songs: The Cult of Shakti*, trans. Jadunath Sinha (Calcutta: Sinha Publishing House, 1966) no. 6, p. 3, as quoted in

David R. Kinsley *The Sword and the Flute: Kali and Krishna, Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000).

2. Sister Nivedita, *The Master as I Saw Him*, 9th edition (Calcutta: Udbodhan Office, 1963) p. 178, as quoted in Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*.
3. Aurobindo, *The Mother*.
4. Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*.
5. This story was told to me by a young woman journalist during a class I taught in 2000.
6. Lykke Li, “The Only” YouTube video, posted by “joshuRAWRRvideos,” February 22, 2011, [youtube.com/watch?v=rorfUVmTnGs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rorfUVmTnGs).
7. “All Things yOni,” accessed July 31, 2012, yoni.com/bitch.shtml.
8. Rachel Fell McDermott, “Kali’s New Frontiers,” in Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey Kripal eds., *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).
9. *Kularnava Tantra* rendered by M. P. Pandit from the Sanskrit (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1983).

About the Author

AS A POWERFUL TEACHER of meditation and applied spiritual wisdom, Sally Kempton is known for her capacity to kindle meditative states in others and to help students work with meditative experience as a framework for practical life change. She teaches teleclasses, retreats, and workshops, appearing at conference centers such as Esalen and Kripalu. Sally writes a regular column called “Wisdom” for *Yoga Journal*, as well as a column called “Meditation for Life” on the religious website patheos.com. She is the author of *Meditation for the Love of It*, which *Spirituality and Health* magazine called “the meditation book your heart wants you to read.”

In her twenties, Sally was a successful journalist, writing for the *Village Voice*, *Esquire*, *New York* magazine, the *New York Times Book Review*, and other publications. An early voice in the second-wave feminist movement, Sally entered a life of full-time study and spiritual practice in 1974. She lived, worked, and traveled with an Indian guru for many years and in 1982 was given initiation into *sannyasa*, the Indian order of Saraswati swamis, or monks. She spent twenty years teaching in her guru’s organization and received extensive training in the texts of yoga, Vedanta, and Kashmir Shaivism, which she also taught all over the world. In 2002, she put aside her monastic robes and began teaching independently. Sally’s teachings combine deep knowledge of the texts of yoga and tantra with practical wisdom from contemporary psychology and integral thought. Her website is sallykempton.com.

About the Illustrator

EKABHUMI CHARLES ELLIK is a poet, artist, husband, student, and teacher of classical Tantric Hatha Yoga. He holds a fine arts degree from California State University, Long Beach with an emphasis on figurative art, yet his creativity is expressed in many ways. He is the youth programs director for Yoga Mandala in Berkeley, where he also teaches adult yoga asana classes and displays paintings. A former options broker, he quit finance to produce poetry events full time in 1999, when his team of poets won the National Poetry Slam. Cofounder of the Berkeley Poetry Slam, poets he coached have won numerous national and regional titles. In 2007, he became the national Head 2 Head Haiku champion, and in 2009 he chaired the home city committee of the Individual World Poetry Slam.

With the encouragement of his guru, Dharma Bodhi, he retired from producing poetry events in 2010 to focus on sacred art and teaching. At that time, he also became a regular student of Nepalese master painter Dinesh Charan, who is teaching him the traditional Newar style of *tankha* and *paubha* painting. In 2011, he took a trip to India to study Yantra and the painting of Devas in the lineage of Harish Johari. In 2012, he was featured artist at the Wanderlust Festival in Tahoe and illustrated Christopher Wallis' seminal book *Tantra Illuminated*. When not writing, painting, or practicing yoga, he can be found in his garden learning directly from nature.

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