

AWAKENING KUNDALINI

the path to radical freedom

Lawrence Edwards, PhD

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Kundalini and the Great Goddess

Kundalini Shakti is one of the feminine faces of the Divine. In other words, Kundalini is an archetypal form of the Goddess. The Goddess, also known as the Great Mother, has been worshipped for over thirty thousand years, and symbolic representations of Kundalini go back thousands of years. Kundalini is seen as feminine, but not simply female in the sense of gender; She's seen as the archetypal form of the Divine Feminine because of the functions, powers, and processes associated with Kundalini. Kundalini Shakti is that which gives birth to everything, sustains and nurtures all creation, and welcomes it all back into herself as these ephemeral forms dissolve into Her once again. This Power of Consciousness known as the great goddess Shakti Kundalini, also known as Mahakali, Maha Kundalini, and many other names, is that which gives birth to all forms out of herself. She also gives birth to the forms of consciousness, forms of limited being, in order to know what it is to inhabit those bound forms. She has the unlimited Consciousness to transcend and embrace them, to know limitations *and* to know Infinite Being. These words attempt to point to an unimaginable state, a state that the ordinary mind, as one of those bound forms, will never know.

Shiva, the “auspicious one,” is the transcendent, Infinite Consciousness that is inseparable from Shakti. In the system of Shaivism, He is the male counterpart

to Shakti, God inseparable from Goddess. Shiva is the eternal, formless, transcendent, and ever-blissful One. His power to create, sustain, dissolve, conceal, and reveal is Shakti, the eternal power of Consciousness, always united with the transcendent formless One, Shiva. He is Shakti's formless dimension. She is his all-knowing creative power. The great sage of Advaita Vedanta, Shankaracharya, begins his hymn of praise to Shakti Kundalini, the Saundaryalahari, by proclaiming that the Auspicious One, Shiva, is incapable of creating or even moving without Shakti.¹ Shiva and Shakti are the universe of formlessness and form. There is nothing outside of them, separate from them. They allow only themselves into their transcendent domain. Thus to know the highest, one must completely dissolve back into the Source.

Shakti will take on any number of forms to usher seekers through her gate from the finite to the Infinite. She can become the masculine form of gods, feminine forms of goddesses, forms of mantras, yantras, guardians, paths, traditions, and more. All forms issue from Her. Some people wonder why, with their Kundalini awakening, they primarily have visions of Shiva or Krishna, Hanuman or Ram, Buddha or Jesus, or other male forms of the Divine, or why they don't perceive forms at all, but rather clouds of Light suffused with Loving Consciousness. The list of Shakti's possible creations is endless! She will appear in ways that will help the seeker move forward. It's important to let go of any preconceptions of how the Goddess should appear, let go of how we would like Her to appear, and receive Her as She chooses to appear, even if in the moment that is simply as a thought. Everything arising in the mind, including the mind itself, is Shakti.

FORMS OF THE GODDESS

The Goddess comes to seekers in many forms. As Kundalini, She is the power that brings the highest attainment—and She appears in the Hindu tradition as Shakti. But She goes by many other names. In the Buddhist tradition, we also see the Goddess revered as the source of all Buddhas. The Heart Sutra, one of the foundational scriptures of the Buddhist tradition, is called the Bhagavati Prajnaparamita Hridaya—*Bhagavati* means “the Great Goddess.” It is the Great Goddess's highest wisdom, the heart-essence of wisdom that is referred to in the Heart Sutra. It's seen as the great mother who produces all *tathagatas*, “all those that go beyond,” in other words all Buddhas and all their wisdom. Seeing emptiness in form and form in emptiness, Buddha's wisdom and attainments

are born from Bhagavati, from the Great Mother. Thus, in the Buddhist tradition too, there's the recognition that the Divine Feminine is the one who gives birth to this wakefulness of Buddha mind, whether that awake one is in the transcendent domain or in the earthly domain as a walking Buddha.

In the West, one of the Goddess's forms is that of Wisdom. She is the Goddess Sophia and is revered for her great gifts of learning and spiritual insight. Philosophers—from the Greek *phileo Sophia*, which means “lovers of wisdom”—worship Her by pouring ablutions of attention on Her through contemplation and study.

The strong patriarchal religious traditions from the Middle East essentially banished the Goddess. The Divine Feminine appears in a reduced form as Mother Mary and through her icons of the black Madonnas—a fitting image for the Goddess having been pushed into the deep shadows.

The non-dual yogic traditions and Kashmir Shaivism recognize that all attainments come through the grace of Shakti Kundalini. All forms are her form because She is the Universal Creative Power, the one who creates all forms from herself; there is no “other.” Thus all mystical traditions as forms of knowledge are her traditions; all wisdom is her wisdom and that universalist understanding is part of what unfolds with the awakening of Kundalini—these are her sublime gifts. That doesn't mean all wisdom is the same or that all traditions lead to the same attainment. Not every wellspring is pure, not every stream makes it to the sea. When you walk into a jewelry store, you see many forms of gold, but they are not all the same even if they are all gold. Looking closer you see some things are made of pure gold, some are alloys of lesser value. Through Kundalini's grace, She empowers one with the discrimination to see through the finite to the Infinite, to see through forms to the formless. More than that, She is calling you, begging you, to join Her in this sublime, ecstatic state of wakefulness!

THE GREAT GODDESS ACROSS TIME

Evidence that the Great Goddess has been known and revered goes back over thirty thousand years. For all but the last five to seven thousand years, She reigned supreme. Most of human history is in fact “Herstory.” In her book, *The Chalice and the Blade*, Riane Eisler traces what has happened in the evolution of spirituality across thousands of years. She begins by going back to the time

when the worship and the understanding of the Great Goddess dominated the human psyche and human tradition, more than five thousand years ago. It's from that time that you see all the iconic forms and statues, often thought of as primitive statues, of the Goddess. They're found throughout civilization—from ancient India to ancient Europe. Goddess-centered consciousness demonstrated the archetypal Divine Feminine consciousness that generates and knows the rhythms and mysteries of life, death, and rebirth.

The Goddess knows what it is to create forms and life within herself, holding and nurturing, actualizing the potential in the seed, in new life, and bringing it forth, nurturing it with the milk from her own body. The ways of the Goddess were reflected everywhere in nature, and humanity lived with reverence for Her and attempted to live in harmony with the wisdom She revealed. For thousands of years, society was based on cooperation, being neither matriarchal nor patriarchal. For thousands of years, there were no fortifications or evidence of war. However, over time, a new form of consciousness began to develop in what Eisler calls the *dominator mode*.

The dominator mode was associated with patriarchal forms of religion and approaches to the Divine, which continue to persist to this day. The dominator mode also coincides with a shift in human culture where fortifications, battles, and wars between groups developed. That's what Eisler is referring to in the title of her book. She writes about the difference between the chalice and the blade. The chalice is a symbol of the Divine Feminine, the consciousness that holds and contains, that nurtures, that actualizes, versus the blade that cuts and severs, that differentiates, penetrates, and dominates. From my perspective, both are part of the full expression of Consciousness and forms that Shakti creates to express the complete spectrum of Consciousness. The pendulum has swung to an extreme and now is moving back to a center that integrates both modes of consciousness.

Eisler explains that as the dominator mode developed, there was a shift in understanding that was expressed in changes in religious traditions as well as other cultural and political structures. It radically changed the approach to the Divine Feminine. As the patriarchal dominator mode of consciousness began to flower, the Divine Feminine became more and more suppressed, so much so that in time, in some Middle Eastern cultures, the Goddess became known as the “abomination.”

Furthermore, priestesses of the Goddess traditions went from being the high priestesses, revered and loved for their wisdom (such as Goddess Sophia), to being suppressed and distrusted for their power. They were thought of as witches. Some were hunted down because they had powers that weren't under the control of whatever the dominant patriarchal religious tradition came to be.

There are some Eastern cultures where the denigration of the Divine Feminine didn't happen. To this day the Goddess, the Devi, in many forms, continues to be worshipped and honored in India and other Eastern nations. Her power, her glory, her role as the one that draws us into Unity Consciousness continues to be recognized.

The patriarchal dominator mode or perspective changed the interpretation of some of the ancient symbols of the Divine Feminine, for instance, the snake. The snake was an ancient symbol of the traditions that honored the Divine Feminine and the Goddess. You'll see Her in ancient forms of the uroboros, a symbol of a snake looking like it's chasing its tail or eating its tail. It is a symbol of the Divine Feminine's ability to give birth and to be reborn like the snake shedding its skin. She is forever recreating herself. The circular form of the symbol of the uroboros implies the never-ending nature of many cycles. This was part of the wisdom of the Divine Feminine, knowing the cycles of life, being informed by them, and living in harmony with them. Some of the mysteries of the Divine Feminine were understood to be impenetrable, and it was only by the grace of the Goddess that one could enter the mysteries, that darkness, and gain direct knowledge that the ordinary mind and ordinary words would never illuminate or touch. The Goddess gave the fruit from the tree of knowledge, and the dominator form of a male god didn't like that!

Goddess Kundalini, as a quintessential form of the Divine Feminine power of consciousness, has been touched by those dominator modes that influenced the development of yogic traditions. There have been approaches in the yogic traditions that try to dominate Kundalini, to forcefully push Kundalini to do this or do that by prescribing endless exercises of forced breathing and body postures that are meant to bind and force Kundalini to go in a direction that the yogi wants Her to go. Not surprisingly, these are also traditions that often say Kundalini is dangerous and must be controlled. These were also the kinds of descriptions that have been applied to the Divine Feminine by patriarchal

dominator approaches. But this power of Consciousness is indomitable, it isn't going to be suppressed; it always has its ways of coming out.

The wise seek to approach Her through reverence, love, and devotion, and then they gain the good graces of this power. Devotees that approach Kundalini as the Great Goddess with their loving devotion have an entirely different experience. They gain her boons, her gifts of enlightenment, without having to fear what may be provoked by some forceful, domineering practice. That attitude is key to understanding how we receive the gifts that this extraordinary innate power of Consciousness has to offer. It doesn't mean that our experiences of our karmas going up in flames may not be intense. But there's no need to exacerbate things with a willful egotistical attitude.

We're living at a time of the return of the Goddess. We need her wisdom to inform and inspire humanity to live cooperatively again if life on this earth is going to survive. We need her clarity of vision, her deep compassion, and her unwavering patience to live in harmony with each other and the environment. We need the awakened state of selflessness that Kundalini Shakti bestows, empowering people to recreate society, social structures, businesses, and economic systems on a cooperative model instead of the dominator mode that breeds destruction and war. The more She awakens people, the more individuals there will be transforming the collective consciousness of families, groups, towns, businesses, and countries. We are her organs of perception and action. Empowered by Her, we can see clearly and act wisely.

KALI: THE DARK GODDESS, MOTHER OF THE UNIVERSE

Kundalini is one of the great archetypal forms of the magnificent Goddess Kali. Kali, the Great Mother Goddess of the Hindu tradition, is the Source, the One that gives birth to all. Known as a slayer of demons, She destroys the army of mind-born delusions symbolized by demons that separate us from the Divine as our own true Self. Into our bound, limited, and contracted ego identities, She may strike terror, at times appearing as a coal-black, sword-wielding, blood-smeared dancer of death and destruction. To our Divine Self, Shiva, She is our supremely beautiful Beloved, our dear spouse, performing a ballet of incomparable grace, overwhelming us with love.

Kali is Shakti, spouse of Shiva. Ma Kali's story is profoundly meaningful. (Referring to Her as Ma is a devotional expression that recognizes Her as the

Great Mother, She who gives birth to all and protects all.) Shakti took the form of Kali when a horrific demon named Raktabija (“blood seed”) was threatening to destroy the world. The demon won a boon from Lord Brahma that made him invincible by turning every drop of blood he spilled into ten thousand Raktabijas as soon as the drop of blood hit the ground. Wounding him only produced countless more demons. The gods went to Shiva for help, but he was immersed in his transcendent state and unavailable! His inseparable consort Shakti, ultimate power of the universe, answered their pleas for help and took the form of Kali. Kali went after Raktabija and all his clones, cut off their heads, and drank their blood before it could touch the ground. She vanquished them all, but then continued dancing her mad dance of destruction, destroying the bound forms of many non-demons. The gods went to Shiva to get him to stop her dance. He lay down beneath her feet, absorbing the power of her pounding steps as though they were mere love taps. She dropped her Kali form and revealed her exquisite nature as Shakti, adored by Shiva.

The demon is the archetype of the shadow side of the mind. What it reveals is that just like the thoughts of the mind, Raktabija’s lifeblood has the power to give birth to thousands more Raktabijas. In the same way, the mind’s thoughts appear to sprout more and more thoughts as soon as they seem to land. Even if one cuts them off in meditation, more sprout. Quelling the mind, dispatching the demon, requires the power of Shakti Kundalini. In this great mythic tale, Kali comes in and cuts off the demon’s head. She drank all its blood before it could hit the fertile ground of existence. In other words, Kali Kundalini takes the life energy out of all the thoughts, desires, and delusions that plague the seeker and prevent the seeker from knowing pure union. Kali, as She’s cutting off the heads, is symbolically cutting through the mind, cutting all the thoughts that are going to give birth again and again to bondage and delusion. She absorbs them into herself; in other words, She frees the life-force, the Shakti, from those bound forms. All forms are her creation. She alone has the power to dissolve all forms, releasing the energy, her energy, from them.

Kali wears a garland of fifty skulls around her neck. Those fifty skulls actually represent the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet—the sounds and forms that make up thought, that are the basis of all creation. She’s the one who takes the life-force out of them so that we can be free of them, as well as the one who gave birth to them to begin with. Taking refuge in Kali is taking refuge

in that innate power to cut off the heads of the very thought forms, attitudes, beliefs, and all the limiting structures of the mind that catch us in delusion. Once cleared, She brings us to union again with the Infinite—as Kali does with her spouse Shiva. Even a myth like this, which may seem so bizarre and gruesome to the ignorant, has profound meaning for our sadhana, revealing what is involved with our spiritual practice moment by moment.

When you are doing *japa*, the practice of mantra repetition, of Om Kali Ma, her mantra, you are bringing your awareness back to Kali over and over again. You can do this practice right now or the next time you sit for meditation. Close your eyes and dissolve every thought into Om Kali Ma, Om Kali Ma, Om Kali Ma. (We'll go further into mantra practices in chapters 9 and 11.)

Kali's story shows that this magnificent dynamic is going on with every repetition of Om Kali Ma. As the throb of mantra, She cuts off all the thoughts, all the deluded thinking, all the bound attitudes and feelings that may have occupied the mind. Holding the mind in the refuge of mantra means holding the mind in a sacred place that is free of all the thought forms that the mind might have created its own bondage with. Every repetition of mantra is a movement of Kali's sword clearing and opening that spaciousness of awareness, freeing our energy and consciousness so that we can experience the fullness of who and what we are in each moment.

The great goddess Kali can never be understood by the intellect. Her essential nature is beyond the mind. Don't be surprised if your rational mind rebels and wants to go no further! Poets and mystics advise us that in order to know Her we must plunge into her luscious, radiant blackness and dive through our fear of the unknown into her overwhelming mystery, allowing ourselves to dissolve in her velvety midnight embrace. By her grace, we may know the unutterable truth of her love, even as we are annihilated by her infinitude.

JAI KALI MA

What mind can possibly approach you,
 Much less grasp you, my beloved Kali!
 This ordinary mind longs for you to be simple,
 predictable, easily appreciated, a sweet divinity,
 a demure goddess, lovely to look at, engendering kindness.
 Instead you parade forth in gruesome reality,

unabashed, you unleash your limitless creative power,
 thrilling the mind and body with overwhelming sensual delights,
 propelling the spirit into awe-inspiring transcendent domains and
 crushing us all in your jaws of time, decay and suffering.

You gave birth to ignorance and her offspring,
 “lacking this” and “wanting that,” populate the universe.
 Is there nothing you don’t delight in creating?
 How is this poor mind ever going to truly worship you?
 I set out to circumambulate your divine form,
 to do puja to you,
 But lifetimes of effort have left me gasping,
 seeing your infinitude spread out in all directions,
 my mind and heart quiver with fear and adoration,
 longing for annihilation in you, my beloved.

You demand full and total sacrifice,
 not flower garlands and coins tossed at a statue,
 not merely lighting candles and prostrating piously,
 not sitting still as a corpse lost in the illusion
 of inside and outside.
 No, you delight in swallowing all sense of separation,
 Offer me your individuality you say,
 Offer up your ego mind,
 Offer up the waking, dream and deep sleep states!

This yoga is only for the insane
 drunk on the nectar of Divine Love.
 If you drink from the Holy Grail
 you will drown in the end.

KALIDAS²

To this day Kali is worshipped around the world. She continues to be a living archetypal form of the Great Goddess who initiates seekers into the highest wisdom. A woman who was a dedicated Zen practitioner asked me about what she thought was a bizarre recurrent experience: It would happen after sitting

for hours, when finally her mind and sense of self would begin to dissolve. She would always see what she described as a luscious, irresistible, black portal, glistening, and inviting. To her, it looked almost like a Georgia O’Keeffe black iris painting. She would be drawn into the blackness of that portal and disappear, and her ordinary mind and ego sense would be completely erased. That too is Ma Kali, Kundalini Shakti, dissolving the mind in the Infinite. She doesn’t care what path brings you to her portal. She delights in taking whatever form will draw the seeker into union.