

# DAŚA MAHĀ-VIDYĀS

## The Ten Great Wisdom Goddesses

### KĀLĪ

Of all the Hindu icons, Kali is the most confronting for most westerners! It must also be mentioned in all fairness that many Indians also find her iconography disconcerting. Mother Kali is usually depicted dancing on the prostrate figure of Lord Shiva. She is black in colour with four arms. Her



hair is disheveled and her tongue lolls out of her mouth. She has four hands — holding a decapitated head, a sword, a bowl of blood which she drinks and the lower right hand displays the gesture of fearlessness. She wears a garland of human heads and her skirt is comprised of severed arms.

Bearing in mind that Kali is the embodiment of Time and that impermanence and change are the 2 underpinning realities of the universe and our existence in it — the image of the Goddess attempts to portray the force of disintegration and confronts us with the reality of our own mortality.

#### Accoutrements

The **kapāla** — head she holds represents our **ahaṅkāra** *concept-of-self* — the ego. It is the concept of ourselves as separate and unique individuals which is the foundation upon which the edifice of ignorance and delusion is built. It is the pivot of our assumptive personal

universes.

The **khadga** — sword represents discrimination and wisdom. Through discriminating between the real and the unreal, the truth and the untruth we gradually progress towards insight and wisdom which culminates in the elimination of the ego. Our spiritual practice does not consist of achieving anything but rather removing those conditioning factors which obscure the vision of the Divine which is our essential, natural state.

The **muṇḍa-mālā** — garland of human heads represents all the false personalities that we embody and the masks that we wear — all of which hinder and obscure insight into our true natures.

The severed hands represent the countless actions **Karma** that we engage in to support our assumed identities and to fulfil our cravings and repulsions — all in search of the actualisation of "happiness projects" which never really bring the ultimate happiness expected.

The demon who was Kālī's nemesis on the field of battle was Rakta-bīja — the blood-seed demon, whose every drop of spilt blood generated another demon like him — representing our desires. Each and every desire that is fulfilled begets another desire just as strong. The only way to terminate this cycle is to decapitate the demon and to drink his blood. The drinking of the blood

symbolises the quaffing of all desires, cravings and attachments which are the basis for our existential suffering. The hand bestowing fearlessness indicates the need to overcome the greatest of all fears which is the fear of personal annihilation. By facing our fears and confronting the ultimate time-bound experience — death, we can achieve liberation from our spacio-temporal limitations and the cycle of rebirth and achieve Nirvana — the Supreme Bliss of "non-existence".

*Mahā-Kālī* is the personification of the universal power of transformation, the transcendent power of Time, the Great Goddess who rules unchallenged over the universe and all that is in it.

All processes in the universe are seen to be cyclic and can be divided in 10 phases connected with the symbolism attached to the mystical number 5 — the five aspects of Śiva and the five aspects of Śakti operate as day and night — the markers of Time.

*Mahā-Kālī* sub-divides herself into the 10 goddesses known as the *Mahā-vidyas* (ten objects of transcendent wisdom) which are the 10 aspects of the cycle of time — they're representative of the entire processes of projection and withdrawal of the universe. They are the underlying subtle energies of which the gross universe is the outer expression. *Impermanence* and *change* are the 2 underpinning realities of the universe and our existence in it, hence the Goddesses of Transcendental Wisdom are ultimately the powers of disintegration, but it is through the disintegration of all of our assumptive universes and everything that "appears" desirable and by facing what appears to us most fearful, (*mahā-bhaya*) the ultimate time-bound experience — death, that we can be liberated from bondage to the cycle of becoming and attain the ultimate goal of life, the limitless supreme bliss (*parama-ānanda*) of "non-existence" (*existence* is being conditioned by time and space.)

## The 1st Mahā-vidya

### Mahā-Kālī the Power of Time. The Night-of-Eternity (Mahā-rātrī)

Śiva, as *Mahā-kāla* is eternal time, he's the substratum from which arise all the secondary cycles of time and the energies which rule them — beginning with the cycles of evolution and involution of the cosmos and including all the cycles which govern everything from the sub-atomic particles to the galaxies, including the cycles which rule the existence of every single species of life, and it's each and every moment. The most representative division of the cycle of time is the alternation of day and night which are constant reminders of the rhythmic universal patterns of projection and dissolution of all that exists.

### The Eternal Night

The original Absolute state of the universe is an Eternal Night. The planetary movements of the Sun and the Moon which give rise to day and light by night, to our experience of divisible time, are only temporary phenomena implying a coming into being, existence in a location and some form of relativity. The psychological state of deep dreamless sleep (*turiya*) resembles to a degree the absolute quiescence of the Universe after dissolution (*pralaya*) when all existences return to the state of the Great Night (*Mahā-rātrī*). In this state of perfect integration nothing remains but the transcendent power of Time, Mahā-Kālī.



The term Śiva can be derived from the root *Sin*, which means “to sleep.” Hence Śiva is described as he in whom “all goes to sleep,” “he who puts all things to sleep,” etc. His power is represented by the eternal night in which all goes to sleep.

As absolute eternal time, Śiva is transcendent. He is the “Beyond the beyond” (*parat parah*) of the Upanishads. The absolute, indivisible night (*Mahā-rātrī*) is the abode of the Transcendent-power-of-Time (*Mahā-Kālī*).

From the ‘Hymn to the Night’ (Rātri Sukta of

the Rig Veda 10.127) we can understand that there are two divinities of night, the one experienced by mortal beings, the other by the divine Being; the one experienced by all the spheres and in relation to which all activities come daily to rest, the other in which the activity of divinity also comes to rest. This absolute night is the night of involution, inversion, and is the nature of the Power-of-Time (*Kālī*). Nothing then remains except the transcendent Immensity chequered with its power of illusion. This stage is the stage of Unmanifest-Nature (*avyakta*).

“Night has for its substance the power of illusion of the Immensity (*brahma-maya- atmika*); the nature of night is dissolution into supreme divinity (*paramesa-laya- atmika*). The principle presiding over this absolute night is celebrated as the goddess-of- the-spheres (*Bhuvaneshi*).” (Devi Purana.)

“May the divinity of night (*Rātrī*), the transcendent power of consciousness (*cit-śakti*), be pleased, so that we may nestle in happiness like birds in their nests at night. Dwellers in the villages, their cows and horses, the birds of the air, men who travel on many a business, and jackals and wild beasts, all welcome the night and joyfully nestle in her; for to all beings misguided by the journey of the day she brings calm and happiness. Then all comes to rest. Even those beings who have never heard the name of the lady-of- the-spheres (*Bhuvaneshvari*) come to her lap, where they sleep as happily as unconscious children. O merciful! O power of consciousness! O enfolding darkness! O divinity of Night! Overlook our deeds; take us away from the killers who harm us, the wolf that is sin, and the she-wolf that is never-ending desire. Remove us from lust and the other passions which rob us of wisdom and wealth, and be for us the ship of gladness that brings us to the other shore and leads us to beatitude.” (Karapatri, Sri Bhagavati tattva.)

The word *rātrī* (night) is symbolically derived from the root *rā* “to give,” and is taken to mean “the giver” of bliss, of peace, of happiness.

## The Iconography of Kālī

“Most fearful, her laughter shows her dreadful teeth. She stands upon a corpse. She has four arms. Her hands hold a sword and a head and show the gestures of removing fear and granting boons. She is the auspicious divinity of sleep, the consort of Śiva.

“Naked, clad only in space, the goddess is resplendent. Her tongue hangs out. She wears a garland of heads. Such is the form worthy of meditation of the Power of Time, ‘Kālī, who dwells near the funeral pyres.- (Kālī Tantra. [496])

### The corpse

Kālī is represented as the supreme night, which devours all that exists. She therefore stands upon “non-existence,” — upon the corpse of the destroyed universe. The corpse is that of Śiva. So long as the power that gives life to the universe remains predominant it is favourable (*Śiva*), but when it is without strength it becomes as a corpse (*śava*). The lifeless body is indeed the symbol of whatever is left of the manifested universe when it reverts to the natural state of eternal time. At the time of universal dissolution (*pralaya*), the Power of Time, the power of destruction, is all that remains.

### **The fearful appearance**

At the end of the battle, when the warrior stands among the corpses of the vanquished enemy and remains alone on the field of battle, her appearance inspires fear and horror — exhausted covered in blood and gore. Who could dare to look her in the face? So terrible is Kālī. Her dread appearance is the symbol of her boundless power of annihilation.

### **The nakedness**

The universe which is projected from the Brahman and pervaded by the eternal power of time is also Its garb. “Having projected it [from himself], he entered into it.” (Taittiriya Upanisad 2.6.) When the universe is dissolved, the Power of Time remains without a veil, naked. Hence the Goddess is “clad in space” (*digambara*), having the vast emptiness of space as her only vesture.

### **The four arms**

The four arms of Kālī represent the four directions of space identified with the complete cycle of time — four being the number of perfection. Completeness is usually represented by the four corners. With her four arms, she stands as the symbol of the fulfillment of all and of the absoluteness of her dominion over all that exists. In the strict language of symbolism four arms always represent the idea of absolute dominion. This is also the meaning of the Christian cross.

### **The laughter**

The conqueror laughs in her triumph. That laughter is the expression of absolute dominion over all that exists. It mocks at those who, in the folly of their vanity, hope to escape dissolution. It ridicules all those who cling to material existence and clutch their paltry possessions craving to continue their feeble existence in a cosmos in the grip of change and transformation.

### **The sword**

The sword represents the power of destruction. The power of knowledge which cuts asunder the veil of ignorance and severs the bonds which bind us to our conditioned existence.

### **The severed head**

The head represents the ego (*ahamkara*) — the notion of individuality. The severed head in the hand of the Goddess reminds all living beings that there is no escape from the Omnipotence of Time (Kālī). All the ego personalities that we assume and take with such seriousness are all trifling and unsubstantial. The ultimate state requires their decapitation.

### **The gesture of fearlessness**

So long as there is existence, there is fear of destruction. Fear is inherent in all forms of existence; fear is the law of all that exists. “Out of fear of him fire burns; out of fear the sun shines.” (Katha Upanisad 2.3.3. [4971])

Every sentient being that is conditioned fears that which is beyond its limits of understanding. Only absolute time (*mahā-kala*) which pervades all things and has no limit knows no fear. The Upanishads say that he alone who exists “beyond the beyond” “exists without fear.” Kālī, the power of time that destroys all, is the embodiment of all fear, while she herself is beyond fear; she alone who is beyond fear can protect from fear those who invoke her. This is the meaning of the hand removing fear.

### **The gesture of generosity**

All the pleasures of the world are transient; all human joy is but a momentary and feeble reflection of our true nature, which is unbounded joy. But such perception cannot last and is soon veiled by pain. True happiness can only exist in that which is permanent. Only the Power of Time is permanent; it alone can grant happiness. Thus Kālī is the giver of bliss. This is represented by her

giving hand.

### **The garland skulls**

Life and death are inseparable aspects of our being. There is no life without death, no death without life. Hence there must be a common support for both life and death — Kālī is the supreme bliss which supports both and is the only refuge. She is the basis of all existence and non-existence. The garland of skulls represents impermanence and the traces which are left behind by the dead as reminders of our own mortality and impermanence. They also represent all the assumptive identities which we use to validate ourselves.

### **The funeral pyre**

Her dwelling place is the charnel ground illumined with the burning pyres of the world in destruction. A further reminder to us of the inevitability of our own physical dissolution and termination in the funeral pyre.

### **The black colour**

Black is not actually a “colour” but the absence of all light. All colours of the spectrum merge in the colour black. In the Power of Time all colours and light dissolve into darkness. As the embodiment of the tendency toward dispersion or obscuration (*tamas*), Kālī is depicted as black. All shapes return to shapelessness in the all-pervading darkness of the eternal night.

### **The lolling tongue**

Kālī’s gaping mouth and lolling tongue, her appearance and habits generally, are unquestionably repulsive to our ordinary sensibilities. In Tantra, this is probably precisely the point. What we experience as disgusting, polluted, forbidden, and gruesome is grounded in and conditioned by limited human (or cultural) consciousness. Our cultural and social conditioning has ordered and divided reality into categories that serve limited, ego-centred, selfish conceptions of how the world should be. Kālī in her crass way, de-constructs these categories, inviting us as her students to relax and open ourselves up to life in all its aspects — positive and negative, attractive and repulsive. She invites us to dare to taste the world in its most disgusting and forbidding manifestations in order to discover for ourselves its underlying unity and divinity, which is the Great Goddess herself.

### **The disheveled hair: pollution and dissolution**

Another striking feature of Kālī as with all the Mahā-vidyas is her long, loose, dishevelled hair. Hindu women always wear their hair well kept, braided or bound (as do brahmin men with long hair) — Loose hair is very uncommon — the only occasions being during the ritual impurity of menstruation in which it is forbidden to bind the hair and during mourning. The loose hair thus represents her as either menstruating — pre-creation; or mourning — post creation

Kālī is the ultimate suffragette openly and proudly displaying her disdain for social convention. She is totally liberated from all social convention, wild and uncontrolled in nature, and not bound to or limited by a male consort. She also displays other unconventional features — her nudity, her standing atop her husband or consort, her dwelling in cremation grounds, and her rude, lolling tongue, messy, loose, tangled hair emphasises her socially liberated character,

The Sacred texts describe eight principle manifestations of Kālī corresponding to the eight aspects of Śiva.

## The 2nd Mahā-vidya

### Tāra — the Star, the Power of Hunger. The Night-of-Anger (Krodha-rātrī)

“I meditate upon the Divine Mother of the three worlds, who is sitting on a white lotus situated in the centre of the waters enveloping the universe. In her left hands she holds a knife and a skull and, in her right hands, a sword and a blue lotus. Her complexion is blue, and she is decked with ornaments.... She is decorated with three beautiful serpents and has three red eyes. Her hair is bunched into a single plait of tawny colour. Her tongue is always moving, and her teeth and mouth appear terrible. She is wearing a tiger skin around her waist, and her forehead is decorated with ornaments of white bone. Sage Aksobhya, in the form of a serpent, is situated on her head. She is seated on the heart of a corpse and her breasts are hard. Thus should one meditate on Bhagavati Tārā who is the mistress of all three worlds.” (*Mantra Mahodadhi*)



The Star (Tārā) is the first force that arises in the *Bindu* [Golden-Embryo — Hiranya-garbha], the cosmic location from which the universe evolves. As soon as the germ of life is planted, hunger arises — the embryo wants food. Only through the process of combustion of some fuel, some nutrients, can the universe survive and develop. This perpetual cosmic need to consume is the basis of the cosmic sacrifice, as well as of all the forms of existence and life. The nature of the Golden Embryo can well be said to be hunger and its power lies in the ability to devour. The name given to this pure and absolute, hunger is — “the Star” (Tārā).

“In the night of time, which is the state of universal dissolution, light [the first combustion, the first satisfied hunger] appears as a star. This light is the nature, the source, of all thought [for thought is also an energy, a combustion] and is the instrument of knowledge illuminating its object.” (Karapatrī, Bhagavati tattva.)

Although the word *tāra* means a star, the Tantras take its etymology to mean “that which leads to the other shore.” “She who brings us to the other shore (*Tārāti*) is Tārā.” — *Tārāyanaya sā tārā*. (Quoted in the *Devi-sahasra-nama*.)

Just as the nature of hunger is twofold - ravenous, all-consuming, driving, forcing before consumption, and the other pacified, peaceful and contented after consumption — Tārā also is depicted in a dual aspect, the one fierce, fearful, all-devouring, the other pacified and luminous. This duality is also the nature of the sun and of all beings.

“Hunger” [kṣudha] is defined as a desire to consume — food as well as knowledge, power, resources etc. Hunger [Tārā] and Time [Kālī] are inseparable since consumption is regulated by Time and Time consumes all things.

“In the Great Void, the sphere of the Egg-of-Immensity that is the universe (Brahmanda), there exist fifty forms of void. Five of these are the kingdom of the power-of-hunger (Tārā); the rest belong to the power-of-time (Mahā-Kālī).” (Quoted in Karapatrī, Bhagavati tattva “)

In the cycle of day and night, Tārā represents early dawn, the hunger, the desire, that first appears after the calm of sleep, after the rule of Kālī. Hence *Tārā* rules from midnight to dawn. This is the Night-of-Anger (*Krodha-rātrī*) when every living thing prepares to destroy and devour other lives, other beings.

### Tārā as the Void

In its peaceful aspect, the power of hunger is merely spoken of as a void.

“She is the transcendent form of the Void, the divider (kala), the Supreme Beauty (Mahā-sundari).

Beautiful, she commands the king of kings. Boundless, she is the ruler of the vast universe.

“She is the Great Void, the Star from which all was gradually evolved and which leads all toward liberation from the endless [cycle of life].” (Mahāsundari Tantra. [5021])

“All deities are aspects of the Void. The universe arose from the Void and dissolves into the Void. Seeing the Void as the goal of the universe, the sages, leaving a world of delusion (moha), dissolve into the Void, into the changeless shape of the Immensity.” (Hirananda Sastri Gaud, “Tārā-rahasya,” P. 225.)

So long as food is provided, so long as offerings are poured into the fearful solar fire, the cosmic sun is at peace, but if food is lacking the sun becomes the Fearful-Star (Ugra-Tārā) and devours the worlds.

## Buddhist Tārā

Jains and Buddhists also worship the goddess Tārā. For the Buddhists as for the Hindus hunger is eternal. In the Buddhist Scripture Tārā is represented as the power of *Avalokītesvara*. In the Tantras she is the consort of the Never-decaying (*Aksobhya*) which is an aspect of Śiva.

“O great goddess, without decaying, Śiva the lord of sleep, drank the *halāhala* poison, hence he is known as the Never-decaying (*Aksobhya*). The transcendent power of illusion, ever in lustful dalliance with him, is the Star, Tārā.” (Tārā Tantra.1 )

## Iconography of Tārā

The Hindu Tārā is always depicted in her fearful form with four arms entwined with poisonous snakes and serpents in her matted hair. She holds a head and a chalice, for in her fearsome mood she drinks blood, the sap of the world.

“Standing firmly with her left foot forward resting on a corpse, she laughs loudly -transcendent. Her hands hold a sword, a blue lotus, a dagger, and a begging bowl. She raises her war cry, hum! Her matted tawny hair is bound with poisonous blue snakes. Thus the terrifying Tārā destroys the unconsciousness of the three worlds and carries them on her head [to the other shore].”

“She shines upon a white lotus arisen from the water, pervading the world. She holds in her hands scissors, a sword, a skull, and a blue lotus. Her ornaments are snakes, which form a girdle, earrings, a garland, armlets, bracelets, anklets. She has three red eyes, fearful tawny tresses, a wagging tongue, fearful teeth. Round the hips she wears the skin of a panther. She wears a diadem made of bleached bones. One should meditate on Tārā, the mother of the three worlds, who is seated on the heart of a corpse, her face resplendent with the power of the Never-decaying (*Akshobhya*).” (Tārā Tantra)

## The Worship of Tārā

The Hindu Tantras specify that the goddess is to be worshiped according to the Buddhist ritual. Otherwise her worship remains fruitless.

“The proper way to worship me is the Buddhist way. O Tormentor of Men! That way one people alone know; none other knows its inner significance.” (*Lalita-upakhyana*.)

## The 3rd Mahā-vidya

**Tripura-sundari — the beauty-of-the three-realms, Perfection. The Divine-Night (Divya-rātrī)**

“I salute the auspicious goddess who shines like the orb of an infant sun, has four arms and three eyes, and holds a noose, an elephant hook, an arrow, and a bow.” (Sodasi Tantra)

The number used to represent the totality of perfection is 16. In human beings sixteen years represent the age of accomplished perfection, after which decline sets in — it is the age of the fullness of vigour and libido. There are fifteen days (tithis) in the complete lunar cycle from the new moon to the full moon. The 15 day is either the full moon or the new moon. 16 therefore represents that which is full within time and yet beyond time. The Girl-of-Sixteen (Shodashi) rules over all that is perfect, complete, beautiful.

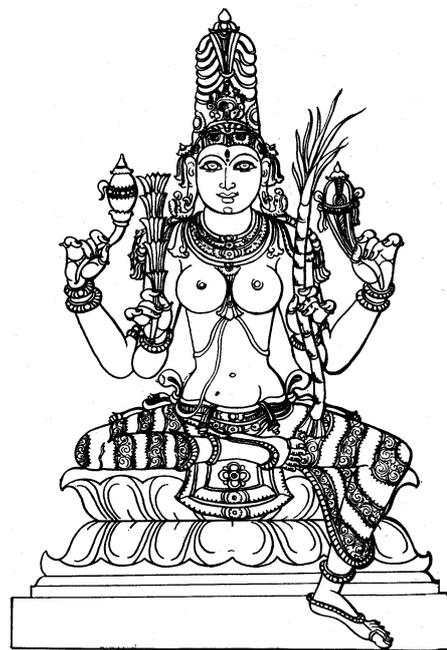
After dawn, after the hour of the Star (*Tārā*), comes the hour of perfection. The young sun has risen in its fullness; the sun is the source of all life on this planet and is numerologically connected with the number 5 and with the five elements and is represented by the five-faced Śiva. Just after dawn its fierceness has not yet appeared. It seems gentle, bright, auspicious (*Śiva*). In the morning sun men worship the Progenitor, the principle that gives life to the three worlds and to all the mortals and immortals.

The Girl-of-Sixteen, the power of Śiva as the ruler of the three worlds, is, according to the Sodashi Tantra, identified with the Beauty-of-the-Three-Cities (*Tripura-sundari*), said to be the light radiating from the three eyes of Śiva to illumine the worlds. Hence she is “the Girl-of-Sixteen in whom the three forms of light unite.”

She is also known as Lalita. The wise say, “The word *Lalita* has eight meanings, namely brilliance, manifestation, sweetness, depth, fixity, energy, grace and generosity; are the eight human qualities.” The Kama-Shastra says:— *Lalita* means erotic actions and also tenderness; as she has all the above- mentioned qualities she is called *Lalita*. It is said also, “Thou art rightly called Lalita for thou hast nine divine attendants [in the Sri cakra,] and your bow is made of sugarcane, your arrows are flowers, and everything connected with you is lovely (commentary on *Lalita sahasranama*).

Indra, the wielder of the thunderbolt, is a solar aspect of Śiva, hence he is sometimes identified with the Girl-of-Sixteen. “Indra is Sodasi” (Satapatha Brahmana 4.2.5.14. )

As a form of the eternal night, *Sodasi* is the Divine-Night (*Divya-rātrī*), the night of perfection.



## The 4th Mahā-vidya

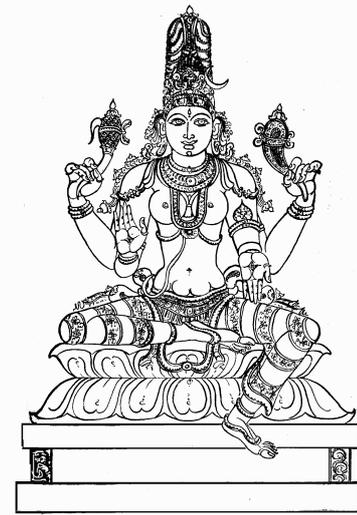
**Bhuvaneśvari — the Lady of the Spheres, Knowledge. The Night- of- Realisation (*Siddha-rātrī*)**

“With the moon as her diadem, with large breasts and three eyes, smiling, she shines like the risen sun. Her hands grant boons, allay fears, and hold an elephant hook and a noose. I bow to the fear-inspiring lady of the spheres.” (*Bhuvanesvari Tantra*.)

After the rising of the Sun after the gentle dawn period of the day and of projection of the universe, the Girl-of-Sixteen (Shodashi) makes way for the resplendent Lady-of-the-spheres (*Bhuvaneshvari*), consort of the Three-eyed Śiva (*Tryambaka*). Creation now becomes a powerful flow, a constant evolving, over which rules the Sovereign Goddess. As the ruler of the universe she is also known as the Queen-of-Queens (*Raja-rajeshvari*).

*Bhuvaneśvari* is also associated and identified with the earth and the universe in general, and the underlying energy that brings it into being and pervades it. She embodies the characteristic dynamics and constituents that make up the world and that lend creation its distinctive character. In this sense she is identified with the *mahā-bhūtas* (the basic physical elements) and *prakṛti* (primordial nature).

The lady of the spheres is represented with various attributes. In the lower of her right hands she holds a vessel, in the upper right hand a mace, in the upper left hand a shield, in the lower left hand the bilva fruit, called the fruit-of-Fortune (*Sri-phala*). On her head are a serpent, a linga, and a yoni. Preciously coloured like molten gold, the all-powerful goddess wears a divine garland and gold ornaments.



The fruit in her hand shows her as the giver of the fruit of actions.

Her club is the 'power to act' or 'power of dispersion' (*viksepa śakti*). The 'power of knowing' (*Jñāna śakti*) is her shield; the 'tendency toward liberation, toward the Fourth stage' (*turiya vr̥tti*), is the vessel which contains the sap (*rasa*) of existence, that is, delight in the Self. The linga is the male principle (*purusa tattva*), the yoni represents Nature (*prakṛti tattva*). The serpent is 'Time' (*kala tattva*). (Karapatṛi, Sri Bhagavati tattva.)

As a form of the eternal night Bhuvanesvari is the Night-of-Realisation (*Siddha-rātrī*), the veil made of knowledge which surrounds the universe.

## The 5th Mahā-vidya

### Chinnamasta — the Beheaded, the Power of the Sacrifice. The Night-of-Courage (*Vira-rātrī*)

“Her left foot forward in battle, she holds her severed head and a knife. Naked, she drinks voluptuously the stream of the blood-nectar flowing from her beheaded body. The jewel on her forehead is tied with a serpent. She has three eyes. Her breasts are adorned with lotuses. Inclined toward lust, she sits erect above the god of love, who shows signs of lustfulness. She looks like the red China rose. Her eyes are blue.” (Chinnamasta Tantra). [Lord Śiva said] - “I shall describe *Chinnamasta*. During the Kṛta Yuga on the best of mountains — Kailasa, I and *Mahāmaya* were engaged in *Mahāvṛata* (sexual intercourse). When I ejaculated, she appeared as *Candika*, of fearsome visage, and from her body two Śaktis emerged who became her attendants — they were known as *Dakini* and *Varnini*. One day Candika with two attendants went to the bank of the Puspabhadra River. At midday her hungry attendants said to Candika, “Please give us food.” smiling and auspicious Candika heard their request, looked in all directions [finding no feed] she severed her own head. With the left bloodstream, she gratified *Dakini*, with the right one, she gratified *Varnini* and from the center one, she drank own blood. After exhibiting her pastime in this way, she replaced her head on her torso and assumed her original form. At dusk, they returned home. When I saw her anaemic appearance, I suspected that she had been abused by someone. This infuriated me. From this anger a portion of me arose and became known *Krodha Bhairava*. (Pranatoshini Tantra)

Once the progress of the day or the process of world unfoldment has reached a state of stability, it continues to exist, depending for its sustenance on destruction, on burning, on consuming. The cosmic sacrifice (*yajna*) expresses this process of universal metabolism, and the ritual sacrifices (*yajnas*) are performed with the intention of harmonising and co-operating with the cosmic process. *Yajna* is the exchanging of energies between differing levels.

The aspect of Śiva which presides over the cosmic sacrifice is the Headless (*Kabandha*). The Vedic ritual of sacrifice consists in beheading the victim — “The sacrifice is indeed beheaded.” (Satapatha Brahmana). Hence the Shakti of the sacrifice is depicted as the “Beheaded-one

(*Chinnamasta*). At the end of the ritual sacrifice there is a ceremony called the “joining of the head” (*siro-sandhana*), in which the head is symbolically reattached to the body of the victim. This represents the consummation of the cycle, the ultimate resurrection of all forms, without which the meaning of the sacrifice would remain incomplete.

The beginning of life is the sex act in which an offering of semen is made into the uterus. The womb is symbolic of the fire-pit and the offering of ghee is the semen. In the animal sacrifice the full offering is the blood and the animal is consumed. When seen as a participation in a perpetual cosmic process, the feeding upon life can become a means of great realisation, instead of being merely an unconscious act of self-nourishment. The Tantras warn that the *sādhaka* should only partake of meat from animals that have been duly consecrated and sacrificed, and the first fruits of all produce should be offered to the deity.

*Chinnamasta* rules over the five Great-Sacrifices (*pancha-mahā-yajnas*). Every human born is liable to 5 debts (*runas*) and our duty as conscious humans is to discharge these 5 debts at every occasion for the entirety of our lives on the planet. The five Great Sacrifices are nothing but the continual expressing of gratitude to all those who facilitate our existence. They are:—

*pitr yajna* — to Ancestors - parental responsibilities  
*deva yajna* — to gods, the cosmic forces which maintain the harmony of the universe.  
*brahma yajna* — to Supreme through the study of the teachings of the sages.  
*manusya yajna* — to fellow human beings - societal responsibilities.  
*bhuta yajna* — to the animals and elements - environmental responsibilities.

The myth of beheading is also found associated with Vishnu in the Shatapatha Brahmana. Vishnu’s head is cut off and it ascends into the sky to become the sun. The solar radiation (*pravargya*) is also a constant offering to the earth. The very life-essence of the sun, poured into the earth so that it and all beings upon it may live. The solar energy is the essence of all food (*anna*). This

outpouring of solar radiation is compared to a perpetual beheading of the sun and as such the Beheaded represents the life-giving and life-destroying power of the Sun.

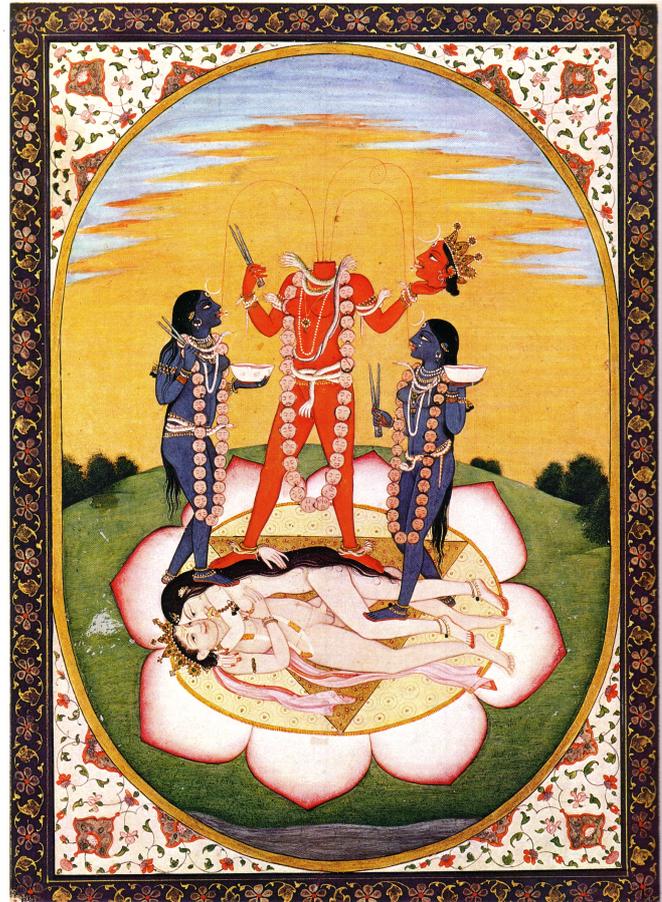
In Buddhism *Chinnamasta* is called the Power-of-the-Thunderbolt (*Vajra-yogini*). Her philosophical form is *Prajna-paramita*.

As a form of the eternal night *Chinnamasta* is the Night-of-Courage (*Vira-rātrī*) when the victim is brought to the altar of sacrifice.

## The 6th Mahā-vidya

***Bhairavi*, the Fearful Goddess, the Power of Death. The Night-of-Death (*Kala-rātrī*)**

“Softly smiling, you shine with a crimson glow that may be compared to a thousand newly risen suns. You wear a silken veil and a garland of skulls. Blood smears your breast. Three voluptuous eyes adorn



your lotus face; the moon is your diadem. Your lotus hands show the gestures of victory, of wisdom, the granting of boons, and the allaying of fear.” (Tripura-Bhairavi Tantra.)

*Chinnamasta* represents the end of things, the spectacular moment when the victim is sacrificed, beheaded; life, existence, comes to an abrupt end.

But this sudden end is only the culmination of a process that began long before. Destruction begins from the very first moment of existence. Death is the ever present reality operating in everything. This aspect of death is called the “perpetual-destruction” (*nitya-pralaya*).



The southern direction is dedicated to Yama, the God of death the southern fire (*dakshina agni*) is the fire of destruction. The north is dedicated to Soma, the “essence of life,” of love (*sneha tattva*), the nourishing ambrosia of immortality. In Saiva theology the Southern-Image (*Daksina-murti*) or the Time-of-the-Fearful (*Kala-Bhairava*) is associated with the South.

The *shakti* of death and destruction is the Fearful-Goddess, *Bhairavi*, also called the Fearful- Goddess-of-the-Three-Cities (*Tripura-Bhairavi*). All that the lady-of- the-spheres (*Bhuvanesvari*) preserves and nurtures, the Fearful Goddess relentlessly destroys. She is the Tangible-Demoness (*Apara-Dakini*), always our constant companion lurking nearby.

Bhairavi’s presence is found in self-destructive habits that we possess — eating tamasic food, alcohol, smoking, drugs etc. She is further strengthened by the destructive emotions like anger, jealousy, hatred, resentment etc.

## The 7th Mahā-vidya

### Dhūmavati — the Smoky One, the Power of Poverty. The Night- of-Frustration (Daruna-rātrī)

“She appears as a woman of unhealthy complexion, restless, wicked, tall, with a dirty robe and dishevelled hair. With gaps in her teeth, she looks like a widow, and holds in her hand a winnowing basket. Her eyes seem cruel, her hands tremble, her nose is long. She behaves deceitfully and is sly in her looks. Insatiably hungry and thirsty, she inspires fear and is the instigator of quarrels.” (Dhumavati Tantra.)



After death the body is consigned to the funeral pyre, our entire subjective, assumptive universe ends in smoke; hence the power of ultimate destruction is called the Smoky-One (*Dhumavati*). She is the *shakti* that destroys the structure of all things, (structure is ruled over by the male principle whereas process is the feminine energy), hence she is called a widow (*vidhava*). Nothing is left for her to own, hence she is utterly destitute. She is the goddess-of-poverty (*Daridra*), of frustration, of despair, identified with Mis-fortune (*A-laksmi*) and with the goddess-of-disease- and misery (*Nirrti*).

Her presence can be seen in the destitute, the beggars, the lepers, the diseased. She dwells in the wounds-of-the-earth (*ksata-viksata-prthivi*), in deserts, ruined houses, tatters, hunger, thirst, widowhood, quarrels, the mourning of children, the battle

field etc..

*Dhumavati* rules over the rainy season which lasts for four months, during which the life-giving solar light is hidden by the evil water-spirit (*asura- apya-prana*). This corresponds in the cosmic cycle to the night of the gods when the spirits of darkness rule. The night of *Dhumavati* is the Night-of- Death (*Kala-rātrī*) — during the 4 months of the monsoon no public ritual can be performed, there are no pilgrimages, no festivals, no marriages, no initiation. At the end of the rainy period the rule of light returns and the festival of lights (*dipavali*) takes place.

## The 8th Mahā-vidya

### *Bagala mukhi* — The Deceitful, Crane-headed, the Power of Cruelty. The Second Night-of-Courage (*Vira- rātrī*)

In the middle of the ocean is a pavilion of jewels with an altar inside it. On the altar is a lion throne on which the goddess *Bagala-mukhi* is seated. Her complexion is completely yellow, perfectly yellow, and she wears a yellow dress, yellow ornaments, and a yellow garland. I call to mind she who holds the tongue of the enemy in her left hand and a raised club in her right hand.

She has assumed a serious mood and is maddened with intoxication. Her brilliance reflects the golden hue of her body. She has four arms and three eyes and is seated on a lotus. On her forehead is the crescent moon, which is yellow in colour. She wears yellow clothes, has high, firm breasts, and wears golden earrings. (Brhat Tantrasara)



An aspect of our human psychology that we very quickly learn to repress is a subtle desire to kill other living beings – a desire to destroy all others but ourselves; the forbidden pleasure that we feel when hurting another — something we don't like to admit to. This desire to kill, to torture, is present to some degree in the psyche of everyone. This repressed destructive desire unconsciously motivates many of our actions in day to day life. In the iconography of Tantra this aspect of mind-force is represented as a woman with the head of a crane, the placid, graceful crane being considered the most deceitful of all creatures.

*Bagalamukhi* is also known as *Pitambara-devi* (The goddess garbed in yellow) she presides over all the subtle forms of killing. She is more than any of the other *Mahā-vidyas* the presiding goddess of the supernatural yogic powers known as “siddhis” which can either be used for universal good (“white-magic”) or subjective self-agrandisement (“black-magic”). She is the cosmic force which incites men to kill and to torture one another.

A demon named Madan undertook austerities won the boon of *vak siddhi*, according to which anything he said about. He abused this *siddhi* by killing people. Enraged by his mischief the gods worshiped *Bagalamukhi*. She stopped the demon's rampage by taking hold of his tongue and stilling his speech. Before she could kill him, however, he asked to be worshiped with her, and she relented. That is why he is depicted with her.

“I bow to the two-armed goddess who with the right hand grasps the tongue of her enemy and with her left hand tortures him. She holds a mace and is clad in yellow.” (Bagalamukhi Tantra.)

*Bagala-mukhi* is also strongly associated with sexual desire and pleasure — particularly that of the sado-masochistic type. Several of her epithets in her thousand-name hymn associate her directly

with *kama*, “sexual desire,” or the god of sexual desire, Kama-deva. She is called, for example: She Who Dwells Where There Is Sexual Desire, Who Likes Sexual Desire, Whose Form Is Sexual Desire, Whose Eyes Are Full of Desire, Who Promotes Sexual Desire, and Who Takes Pleasure in Sexual Play.”

Another string of epithets associates and identifies her with the female sexual organ: She Whose Form is the Yoni, Who dwells in the Yoni, Whose form is the Lingam and Yoni, Who Has a Garland of Yonis, Who is adorned with Yonis, Who Enjoys the Union of the Lingam and Yoni, Who Is Worshiped with the Lingam and Yoni, and Who is Absorbed with the Lingam and Yoni.

Her consort is the One-faced (Ekavaktra) Rudra.

The night of *Bagala-mukhi* is identical to that of Chinnamasta. It is the Night-of-Courage (*Vira-rātrī*), the time of suffering.

## The 9th Mahā-vidya

**Mātangi — the Elephant Power, the Power of Domination, the Outcaste Goddess.  
The Night-of-Delusion (Moha-rātrī)**



She is seated on a corpse. Her clothes and all her ornaments are red. She wears a garland of ganja seeds. She is sixteen years old and has full breasts. She holds a skull and a sword in her two hands. She should be offered leftovers [uccista].’

She is blue in colour and has the disc of the moon on her forehead. She has three eyes, is seated on a jewelled throne, and is adorned with jewelled ornaments. She has a very thin waist, and her breasts are round and firm. She has a smiling face and holds a noose, a sword, a goad, and a club in her four hands.’

One version of Mātangi’s origin is found in the *Pranatoshni-tantra*, Once upon a time, Parvati was seated on Śiva’s lap. She said to him that he always granted her wishes and that now she had a desire to return to her father’s home for a visit. Would he consent to her visiting her father, Himalaya, she asked? Śiva was not happy about granting her this wish but eventually complied, saying that if she did not come back in a few days, he would, go there himself to ask for her return. Parvati’s mother sent a crane to carry Parvati back

to her family home. When she did not return for some days, Śiva disguised himself as an ornament maker and went to Himalaya’s house. He sold shell ornaments to Parvati and then, seeking to test her faithfulness, asked that she have sex with him as his payment. Parvati was outraged at the merchant’s request and was ready to curse him, but then she discerned with her yogic intuition that the ornament vendor was really her husband, Śiva. Concealing her knowledge of his true identity, she replied: “Yes, fine, I agree. But not just now.”

Sometime later, Parvati disguised herself as a huntress and went to Śiva’s home, where he was preparing to do evening meditation. She danced there, near Manasa Lake. She wore red clothes, and her body was lean, her eyes wide, and her breasts large. Admiring her, Śiva asked: “Who are you?” She replied: “I am the daughter of a Caṇḍāla. I’ve come here to do penance.” Then Śiva said:— “I am the one who rewards those who do penance.” Saying this, he took her hand, kissed her, and

prepared to make love to her. While they made love, Śiva himself was changed into a Caṇḍāla. At this point he recognized the Caṇḍāla woman as his wife Parvati. After they had made love, Parvati asked Śiva for a boon, which he granted. Her request was this:— “As you [Śiva] made love to me in the form of a Caṇḍālinī [Caṇḍāla woman], this form will last forever and will be known as *Uccista-Caṇḍālinī*.”

The regal elephant is the mount of Indra, king of the gods as well as of temporal kings. It is the symbol of the power of domination. After the terror of the night appears the reassuring sunlight. The demons are defeated; *Mātaṅgī*, the Elephant power, establishes the rule of peace, of calm, of prosperity. The day is, however, a dream, a mirage that appears in the eternal night. As a form of night, *Mātaṅgī* is therefore the Night-of-Delusion (*Moha-rātrī*).

*Mātaṅgī* is associated with “left-overs” and indeed prefers pollution. Those who perform sādhanā of *Mātaṅgī* must offer her left-over food and worship her after eating without washing. Even the highly “polluting” menstrual state is said to please this goddess. *Uccista Mātaṅgī* as the embodiment of the ritually polluted is the goddess by means of whom one can directly come to terms with pollution. As such she is very empowering and liberating. She also has a strong association with forests and jungles.

## The 10th Mahā-vidya

### Kamalā — The Lotus-Goddess, the Power of Wealth. The Night-of-Splendour (Mahā-rātrī)

“With a golden complexion, bathed in the stream of ambrosia flowing from golden vessels held by the trunks of four white elephants, she looks like the abode of snow, the Himalaya. Her hands grant boons, allay fear, and hold two lotuses. She has a brilliant diadem. Her hips, like ripe fruits, are loosely draped in a silken garment. We bow to her who stands upon a lotus.” (Kamala Tantra)

When Everlasting-Siva (*Sada-siva*) takes over the function of Vishnu and sustains the world then *Kamala* becomes his consort. She is the embodiment of all that is materially and spiritually desirable, the exact counterpart of the Smoky-One (*Dhumavati*). The signs of the zodiac associated with these 2 goddesses are in opposition. *Kamala* rules over the auspicious nakshatra Rohini in Taurus, giver of wealth, while *Dhumavati* rules over the nakshatra Jyestha in the sign Scorpio which brings poverty.

Kamala is the power inherent in prosperity. As the energy of preservation she represents the potential for universal well-being that can only be accomplished through the correct utilisation of wealth. She is the only one of the goddesses who is totally benevolent and compassionate. In fact coming last in the list of Maha-vidyas she represents the “normative” state of what most people are comfortable;



with Kali is that which is least comforting. She represents material well-being, comfort, the familiar. As the preserving energy she bestows stability and security — she represents the very state of mind which contributes to further continuity in Samsara whereas Kali represents the Liberating force. Kamala consciousness is what one seeks to restrain, overcome and finally transcend.

The aspect of the eternal night corresponding to Kamala bears the same name, *Maha-ratri*, as the night of Kali but is interpreted to mean the Night of Splendour.