

awakening  
**Shakti**

The  
Transformative  
Power of  
the Goddesses  
of Yoga

**sally**kempton



**sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

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## CHAPTER 1

# 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 of the romance of the Goddess Sati.

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, disdainful 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 minor elemental deity, 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

It also made me start looking deeper into the myths of the Hindu goddesses and into the practices of sacred feminism. As others have before me, I intuited that we are in a time when Sati will definitively take her place in the world once more.

#### 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 like Sati—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.<sup>3</sup> The great evolutionary mystic Aurobindo concurred. He wrote, “If there is to be a future, it will wear a crown of feminine design.”<sup>4</sup> 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 GODDESS AS EVERYTHING

The yogic sages—especially in the branch of yoga called Tantra, which we'll discuss more in chapter 2—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' 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, warrior 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. All these names and attributes can be confusing to the linear mind, especially when you first discover the same goddess being described under different names. Yet that multiplicity is also what allows us to choose our own gateways into the luscious field of goddess energies. For this, we need to give ourselves permission to explore the different faces and energy signatures of these deities. That's what we will do in this book.

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 this book. 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.

## OF GODS AND HUMANS

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 them as symbols, the Hindu deities represent—and in my experience actually can *uncover*—dynamic psychological forces. They personify 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 came out of these contemplations, and I offer it as a user's manual for connecting to the sacred feminine through the great goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. The book's intention is to help you open the layers of your soul that are related to these particular energies and the practices that invoke them. That way, you can better receive their gifts. You can recognize and own their shadowy aspects. You can access their power to awaken and transform you. Above all, you can dance with their energies.

There are dozens of goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. We'll work with eleven:

**Durga** ("Hard to Conquer"): the warrior, cosmic protector, and empowering mother.

**Lakshmi** ("Auspicious"): the goddess of good fortune, wealth, and inner and outer abundance.

**Kali** ("The Black One"): the mysterious, terrifying, fiercely loving goddess who brings radical change into your life and ultimately dissolves all forms into the void. Among her forms are Tara and Bhairavi.

**Parvati** ("Mountain Lady"): the goddess of the sacred marriage; the divine yogini, who embodies the power of creative will.

**Saraswati** ("The Flowing One"): the goddess of language, creative intuition, music, eloquence, and speech.

**Sita** ("Furrow"): the faithful wife, guardian of the womb, goddess of the earth and its mysteries.

**Radha** ("Golden Girl"): the goddess of erotic devotional love who carries the gift of divine longing and mystical surrender.

**Dhumavati** ("Lady of Smoke"): the crone goddess who teaches us how to turn disappointment into spiritual growth.

**Chinnamasta** ("The Severed-Headed One"): the goddess who presides over the sacrifice of the false self.

**Lalita Tripura Sundari** ("The Playful Beauty of the Three Worlds"): the queenly goddess of sacred sexuality as well as the highest form of mystical experience, whose blessing unites the energy of the body with the energy of spirit.

**Bhuvaneshwari** ("Lady of Space"): the goddess of sacred space who creates reality out of the infinite space and dissolves all limitations into herself.

Some of these goddesses are warriors. Others are lovers. Some have maternal energy, others are dedicated to opening you to mystical realms. Each one



of them can be a guide into the deepest realms of the soul and a teacher of the skills of living as an empowered feminine lover of life.

## 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 woman’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, chaotic, and orderly. 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. If you want to know them, you need to treat them not only as figures out of myth but as living beings, energies that are palpable, powerful, and *real*. The Hindu deities, whether we see them as internal archetypes or as personalities or as aspects of a universal power, are truly present in millions of people's inner lives. These goddesses give boons. They manifest insights. They dance 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 these 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.<sup>5</sup>

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. A few years ago, I saw a *New Yorker* cartoon featuring Durga, complete with her crown and her eight arms, as a multitasking road warrior. She is driving a car. Two of her hands hold a latte and a cigarette. Another hand holds her cell phone, while yet another is giving the finger to a passing motorist. What made this funny, of course, was the fact that so many middle-class contemporary women live that way—juggling roles, doing five things at once—quick-tempered power goddesses in their own spheres. For many women I know, Kali, Durga, and Lakshmi have become icons, each embodying a particular flavor of feminine strength.

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 into 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.

A student of mine, Victoria, has spent years in a traditional marriage. It gave her, she told me, deep joy to support her husband's projects, bring up the children they had together, even pick up his socks from the bathroom floor. Yet her position of financial and emotional dependence worried her and came to annoy her husband. When she began contemplating goddess energies, she saw two things. First, she saw that she had a powerful and ecstatic inner pull toward the Shakti of Sita, the loving, self-sacrificing form of the goddess-as-wife. Recognizing this helped her see that her submission was not just dependence, but the expression of a particular quality of love. She also saw that, given the context of contemporary life, her submission placed a terrible burden on her husband. He, an ordinary man with his own needs and fears, felt required to play the role of masculine protector to her feminine supporter. She solved the problem by searching out the part of herself that embodied another consort goddess, Parvati, whose energy is independent and active, and who maintains a dynamic power balance in relationship to her husband, Shiva. Victoria, like Parvati, is a hard-core yoga practitioner. In yoga, she manifested a natural confidence and strength that was missing in her interactions with her husband. She began consciously identifying herself with the energy of Parvati, imagining the forceful presence of this goddess in her own body. Gradually, she became more challenging to her husband, and as she did, their relationship dynamic shifted radically.

Another woman, a doctor, got herself fired from two hospital positions because she repeatedly and explosively challenged the hospital authorities. When she recognized that something was off in the environment or discerned what she considered a lack of integrity among her colleagues, she would unleash self-righteous anger on the people in charge. At one point, I asked her to dialogue with the energy of Durga, the battle goddess, who comes into the world to right wrongs. She began to touch into the sinuous quality of Durga's strength, which knows exactly when to engage in battle and when to hold back. As she began to look past her embattled ego into the sacred warrior that lay underneath the egoic drive to be right, she was able to speak up in a much more balanced way and eventually got a place on a hospital regulatory commission, where her reformer's zeal led to some significant changes in local hospital protocols.

Danny, a rapper and musician, has learned that when he invokes the energy of Saraswati before he plays, it brings a precision to his music and makes it easier for him to improvise. More than that, contact with her seems to mitigate his self-consciousness, his egoic fear of failure, and his desire for approval. He has come to think of Saraswati as the real force behind his music—not only a muse, but also the one who makes his playing compelling.

## 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. Qualities like impatience and irritability, when irradiated by contact with the Goddess Durga, manifest as an ability to cut through obstructions. An addiction to comfort, purified by being immersed in the energy of Lakshmi, becomes an ability to create lines of beauty in any surroundings. 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. You can more readily recognize aspects of Sita in a moment when you feel impelled to sacrifice your own self-interest for others, or when you feel unheard or unseen by a lover or a boss. Or, seeing the connection between your moments of brilliance and Saraswati's

universal intelligence, you might simultaneously feel more confidence in your intuitions, and less egotistical about your intellectual gifts. By engaging Lalita Tripura Sundari, you could begin to see the divine purity that lives in your sexual desire, and by tuning into Parvati you can celebrate the qualities of sacred partnership in a marriage or a love affair.

## 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. (Lakshmi, for example, is often invoked as an example for wives to follow in their household affairs.) 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 THE GODDESS

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

First, we'll approach each goddess 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 goddesses. We'll consider the goddesses as divine personalities, unique beings who live in bodies 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 Lakshmi shows her with hands that drip gold coins, signifying her power to bestow abundance. In the physical world, she shows up as money and precious metals, but also as every form of fertility

and abundance. You might recognize her energy in a blossoming fruit tree, in a golden bracelet, a *Vogue* fashion spread, or in the glow of health on your own face. You might experience Lakshmi working through your outer life as the experience of prosperity and success.

Second, we'll consider how each goddess shows up in our psychological and spiritual lives, in both her light and shadow aspects. We'll look at how the goddesses operate 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, Lakshmi's Shakti might appear as a moment of wonder, an inner sense of abundance, or a feeling of love. Her shadow side might trap you through your addiction to shopping or sweets, your fear of failure, or your obsession with looking good.

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 later chapters). Goddess energies are innately transformative. When we interact with them on any level, they change us.

Third, we'll look at the goddesses as aspects 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. 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 the goddesses, we'll look at how each goddess reveals herself in us as the active force of kundalini.

Finally, throughout the book, 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.

Each chapter 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 into 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 Shakti* with an exploratory attitude. Notice what comes up for you as you read, and also notice how your view of each goddess expands when you do the exercises that are layered into each chapter.

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

The goddesses highlighted in this book are 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 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 one of the goddesses in depth. Some of the goddesses—notably Durga and Kali, Lakshmi, and Saraswati—are so archetypally significant, so prominent in mythology and in the psyche, that I couldn't resist writing about them at greater length. That's why the chapters