



PAINTING: KALI'S FEET / OIL AND CHARCOAL ON CANVAS BY REIKO SHIMIZU

## EDITORIAL

### ***The Phalaharini Kali***

**T**HIS IS A DISCUSSION ABOUT KALI and her relevance in our lives and also the significance of the Phalaharini Kali puja day, which is observed on a new moon day and has gained popularity because it was on this day that Sri Ramakrishna offered all the merits of his spiritual practice at the feet of his consort, Sri Sarada Devi. The word *phalaharini* means 'the female, who takes away the fruits of our actions.' *Phala* means fruit, the fruits of actions. Whenever we do something, it creates a fruit in the form of tendencies in the mind and that fruit leads us to do another action. Suppose one listens to something

good, it leaves a good tendency in the mind and it makes one listen to more good things. This cycle makes you come back over and again to this world, because one has to exhaust one's mental tendencies. *Phalaharini* removes all these tendencies by taking away the fruits of one's actions. *Harini* means a female who takes away. One continues to get the results of one's actions because of the thought: 'I am the doer and I am the enjoyer'. The goal of spiritual life is to remove this thought. This process is hastened by Phalaharini Kali.

All of us are here in this world because each one of our actions produces an impression on our



minds and that impression propels us to do more actions. If I do a good action it leaves a good impression on my mind, which is called *samskara*—it is also called *karma* or *karma-phala*—and that would make me do another good action and this goes on and on till I understand that I am not the doer. Till I have the sense of doer-ship this *samskara* or *karma-phala* is generated. Kali is called—particularly in the context of Phalarini Kali puja—*phalabharini*, because she has the power to destroy all the *karmas* or *samskaras* of our lives. She has the power to give you and I liberation from the cycle of repeated births and deaths, repeated coming and going. So it is quite significant that Sri Ramakrishna surrendered all the fruits of his spiritual austerities on the Phalarini Kali puja day, at the feet of his wife.

This is not only significant but it is unprecedented and unparalleled in spiritual history. Never has any spiritual personality, a prophet, or an avatara given so much importance to his wife, to the extent that he has surrendered all the spiritual austerities to her. This was not a wife with whom he had some kind of supernatural or miraculous connection, but she was a wife very much in flesh and body, whom he was married to; and to this person he surrendered all his spiritual austerities.

In the life of Sri Ramakrishna, we see a strong connection with the Goddess Kali. Later on we see the same connection in the life of Swami Vivekananda, and for many reasons it was very important for Sri Ramakrishna that Swamiji accept the divinity of Kali and that is why when Sri Ramakrishna saw that Swamiji had accepted the divinity of Kali, he was extremely overjoyed: he started clapping his hands and singing songs.

### **The Form of Kali**

What is the general form of Kali? Kali is a goddess whose complexion is completely black. There are songs which say that she is blacker than the colour black itself. She is pitch-black. In Sanskrit the word for divinity, *deva* or *devi* comes from the root *div*, which means light. And that is the reason why most of the gods and goddesses are very beautiful. But here is one goddess, who is very black. However good granite or marble you may use to make the image of Kali, it has to be black. The form of women or the form of a deity, particularly a female deity, is conventionally supposed to have what is called the feminine grace. If you take the forms of Lakshmi or Sarasvati, their forms are very graceful, full of femininity and feminine grace. And one thing which is a very important aspect of feminine grace is the dress. That is why we see that in the past, queens gave—and even today, social queens give—much importance to their dress. However, Kali does not wear

anything. She is absolutely in the nude. She is stark naked. First, she strikes at the conventional sense of beauty by being pitch-black and second, she strikes at the conventional idea of feminine grace or femininity by being completely nude.

According to the conventional norms of womanly grace, it is expected that a woman talks softly. Society associates a woman with a soft sound, a soft gesture, and a gracious gait. But in Kali is a woman who has her tongue put out of her mouth. When do you do that kind of thing? When you want to insult somebody or when you are in a frivolous mood, and you are trying to make fun of someone. Both of these actions are not considered good in society. There are numerous interpretations of why Kali puts out her tongue, but the image of a feminine divine form, which is nude and black, and with the tongue put out, is quite shocking.

But the shock does not stop here. She wears a garland of heads. Another thing which is commonly associated with a woman are ornaments. We find that Sri Sarada Devi was supposed to be given some ornaments at the time of her marriage, but after the marriage these ornaments were removed. And Sri Ramakrishna funnily remarked that now the bride's family could do nothing; the marriage was already over. In the present times that incident would probably not have passed off so simply but that was a remark made in those long gone times. However, later, Sri Ramakrishna got some ornaments made for Sri Sarada Devi because he said that a women love ornaments. Even today women love ornaments, may be the form of the ornaments have changed. Women today may not have that same love for golden ornaments but there are new kinds of ornaments like nail extensions or nail overlays. Nonetheless women always love ornaments. Even men love bodily accessories, only they are not conventionally seen as ornaments by society.



This is the conventional idea of a feminine form and that is why we find goddesses Lakshmi or Sarasvati decked with ornaments like nose rings and earrings. In the temple of the virgin Goddess in Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu, however far away one stands from the main deity, you will see a lamp glowing on the nose of the image of the Goddess. That is not a lamp but a nose ring with a gem so powerful that it emits such a strong light as if it were a great lamp. Legend has it that in the past, when the temple was not covered and the image was in the open, ships used to navigate by seeing the light of the nose ring of the Goddess, which acted as a lighthouse.

So, every female form is associated with some ornaments. And here we have the form of Kali who is wearing a garland of heads as an ornament; not just a garland of heads, but also a garland of fingers. Whatever she is wearing as an ornament cannot be considered one even by the wildest stretch of the imagination. This is a stark contrast to our sense of decorum and aesthetics. Most



people, who are grounded in traditional ideas of feminine beauty and grace—like the Greek or European notions of a goddess or someone coming from parts of the world not familiar with the image of Kali—are greatly shocked when they first see the form of Kali. They are totally shocked because they have never ever imagined a deity like this: a black woman in the nude, protruding her tongue, and having a garland of skulls. Of course, it still does not stop there. To top it all, the icing on the cake is that she is standing on the chest of Shiva. Here you have a feminine form which is standing on a masculine form. It is the greatest shock possible to all conventional ideas of beauty and femininity. All these aspects of Kali have a great ramification and significance. We do not generally see the image of Kali in that light. Most

of us just go in front of her image and say: ‘Please protect me.’ We just pray in fear.

The iconography and symbology of Kali’s image has a great importance. The positioning of the female form over the male form is of particular importance. In the case of Lord Narasimha, we see that Goddess Lakshmi is sitting in his lap. In the case of Lord Vishnu, we see that Goddess Lakshmi is sitting at his feet. We do not see a feminine form other than Kali standing on top of a male deity. And who is that male deity? Shiva, a mendicant. He is a sadhu. Shiva is the deity of all sannyasins. His marriage too is the highest demonstration of renunciation in the world. Because he does not bother about where he stays, he does not bother about what he wears, he does not bother about what he eats, and he is ever-blissful. That is why he is the Lord of the sannyasins. In Sanatana Dharma, everything is deified. Sanatana Dharma does not have any dichotomy of divinity. What is dichotomy of divinity or duality of divinity? It is the belief that there is something divine and that there is something that is not divine. That there is a God and that there is a Devil. Sanatana Dharma does not believe in that. All the traditions of Sanatana Dharma profess that everything that we see is the manifestation of the One divine principle and so there is no problem worshipping Kali, because Sanatana Dharma has deified destruction and death. In some regions of India, Kali worship is prohibited for the householders. However, in some other places in India, Kali is worshipped daily in several homes. Same is the case with the worship of Chinnamasta. Kali is the deification of the terrible. Even the word ‘Kali’ could denote the terrible. Kali is the terrible or terror incarnate.

### ***Kali and Tantra***

How did this form of Kali evolve? Most likely, this form evolved just after the early Vedic times.

It was not there in the early Vedic times. It came after the early Vedic times and this form, for all we know, is not so pronouncedly found in the Vedas. Though a couple, or may be a little more, references to Kali can be found in the Vedas, none of them are from the early Vedic times and even these references are not really clear. However, we do know that Mother Worship or worship of the female divine principle was quite prominent in the Vedas. It is found throughout the Vedas. But, the form of Kali is not so distinct in the Vedas. The form of Kali originated in India and has spread through different parts of the world. This form was also adapted into Buddhism. Kali went into Buddhism and came back in a different form to India, as a Buddhist goddess like the Vajra Devi.

Kali is one of the principal forms or goddesses associated with tantra. There is a lot of confusion regarding tantra. Today tantra is considered a license to indulge in the sensual but tantra is anything but that. Tantra is the channelling of human weaknesses by directing them towards God. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that if you want to cry, cry for God; if you want to desire something, desire God; and if you want to love, love God. Channelise or direct your impulses and instincts towards God. That is tantra. Tantra has various streams, but the goal of all the streams is to channelise all desires towards God. The basic philosophy of tantra is the divinisation of desire—albeit in a different way—not by acceding to desires but by superseding them, by divinising them.

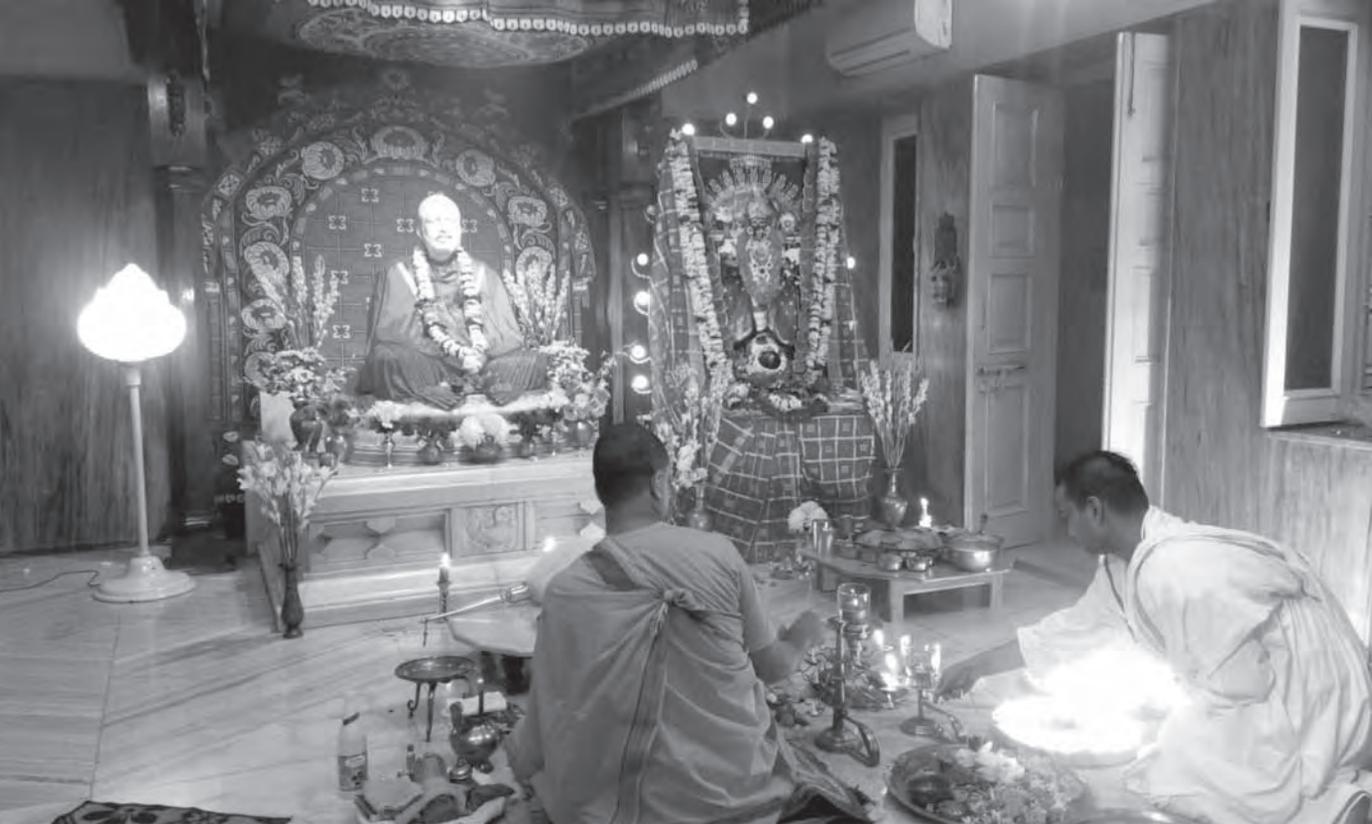
Desire creates problems. You take this desire away and channelise it towards something divine, something godly, something ennobling, and something that will elevate you. That is tantra. But what are people doing now? They are holding on to desire and bringing oneself down to the level of desire, to the level of the body. That is not tantra. Kali has been one of the main



*Image of Goddess Kali at Telo Bhelo*

deities in tantric practices. Kali has also been the deity of thugs. There is much literature on thugs in India, particularly from the colonial or the British period. Many British historians have written books on Indian thugs. They were considered to be a different class of people, mainly dacoits, who lived in India, and worshipped Kali. Sri Sarada Devi came across a group of dacoits and saw them worshipping Kali.

Kali is seen as the non-Brahminical goddess. She is the goddess of the common person just like Lord Jagannath of Puri is seen as the god of the masses. In most places in India—except some places, particularly the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka—anybody can go into a Shiva temple and even embrace the Shiva linga. That is not the case with the other gods and goddesses. Kali has evolved



*Kali Puja at Ramakrishna Math, Vrindaban*

as a goddess for the common people, for people who are supposed to be of lower classes and were deprived entry into temples. Even today, in many parts of India, they are deprived access to the worship of gods and goddesses. For them Kali is there, she can be worshipped by anyone.

The form of Kali has also been adapted into different forms. In many parts of India, the form of Kali does not go well with the psyche of the local populace. They are unable to accept a female goddess, a feminine divine form in the nude and so they have covered her up with dress and changed her name. Hence, we find female goddesses similar to Kali in various parts of India, but they are all well dressed up and there are some such other changes in an effort to tame and domesticate the divine feminine!

### ***Sri Ramakrishna and Kali***

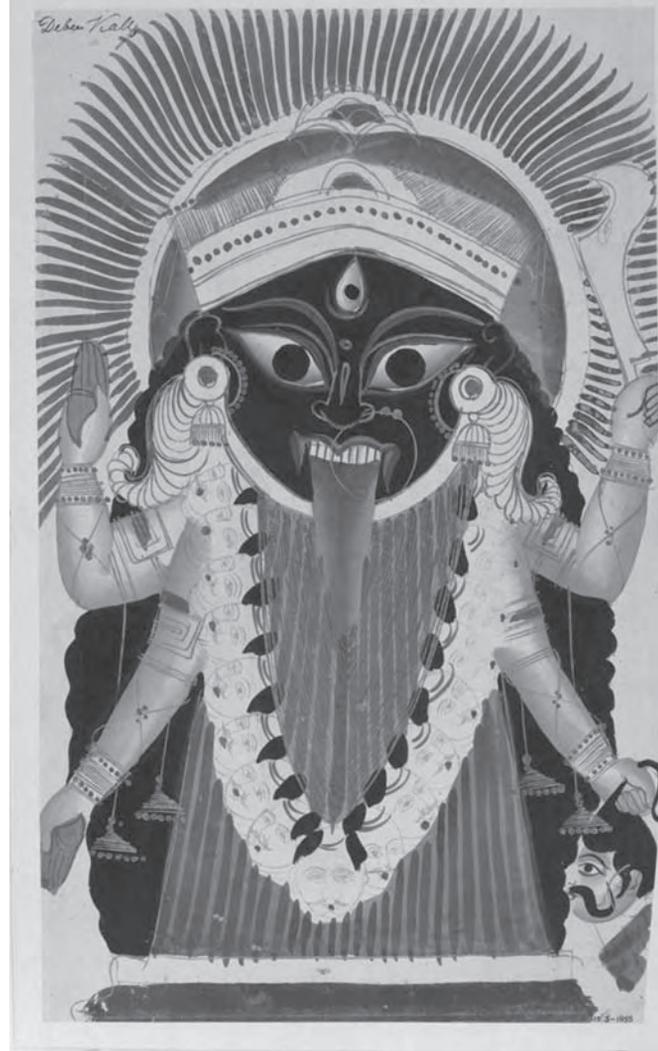
Kali also has pronounced feminist underpinnings of her form and advent. That Sri Ramakrishna chose Kali as his principal deity and that

he chose the temple at Dakshineswar as his place of sadhana in this Kali Yuga also have deep import and implications. The Bhavatarini temple at Dakshineswar was built by Rani Rasmani, who was of the caste of fishers, who could not worship the Goddess in the temple. A woman of the fisher caste brought a Brahmin of the highest order, the very incarnation of God, as the pujari of her temple. This was one of the various actions by which Sri Ramakrishna established this age as the age of Mother Worship. Rani Rasmani was a great woman and a great administrator. Even today in Kolkata there are huge properties that belong to the Rani Rasmani Estate. That is a great testimony to the power and skill of Rani Rasmani.

While there could be various theories, guesses, and conjectures as to why Sri Ramakrishna chose the Dakshineswar Kali temple for his sadhanas, we get the answer in a letter written by Swamiji in reply to a complaint that was sent to him by one of his brother-disciples. When Sri Ramakrishna's birth anniversary was celebrated in the Dakshineswar

Kali temple garden, many people of supposedly lower classes, many public women and many other people of questionable character or morals attended the celebrations. Many 'gentlemen' took offence to the presence of these people and complained to the brother-disciples of Swamiji, who was away in Switzerland. The complaint was that such people who are not the 'gentry' should not be allowed to attend the celebrations. When Swamiji heard of this complaint, he strongly objected through a letter that Sri Ramakrishna did not come for the 'gentry' and that if no members of the 'gentry' attend such celebrations, so be it! Swamiji said that let more and more thieves, robbers, prostitutes, and other such people who are denounced by society attend the celebrations because it is for them that Sri Ramakrishna made his advent. Swamiji said that Sri Ramakrishna came for the downtrodden, the ignorant, and the wicked and if anyone had any problems with such people attending the celebrations, let them not come. In this letter of Swamiji lies the answer as to why Sri Ramakrishna chose Dakshineswar to be the main seat of his spiritual practices.

The great advantage with Sri Ramakrishna is that we have historical documentation of everything, unlike other avatars like Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, about whom we do not have such documentation. Sri Ramakrishna practised tantra, Vaishnavism, Vedanta, Islam, and Christianity and realised the ultimate goals of all these disciplines. However, he also practised all the disciplines of tantra. He did that to authenticate the path for Kali Yuga. He said that in the Kali Yuga, our bodies are dependent on food. We are dependent on material comforts, we are dependent on our desires, and it is our desires that propel us in our daily lives. So if we know how to control desires or to channelise them, then and only then, can we go towards our goal in life: God-realisation. Sri Ramakrishna showed us a path



Goddess Kali

where you can actually channelise desires and that path is tantra. There are numerous in-depth studies in tantra and there is still much yet to be understood. The acknowledgement of human desire and its transformation by various spiritual practices including Kali worship is tantra.

### **Deification of the Terrible**

Kali is the worship of the terrible. There is a very significant difference between the Eastern and Western psyche regarding the divine principle. In the West, generally, anything terrible is considered unholy, devilish, or ungodly. Generally, a snake is not considered holy in Western faith-traditions, where anything having a terrible form



is considered unholy. Generally in the West, we do not find the deification of death. In the Judeo-Abrahamic and Islamic traditions, usually death signifies something dark and devilish. Kali worship has a deep socio-cultural influence on the regions where such worship is prevalent. In India, Kali worship is prevalent mainly in eastern India and parts of Kerala. And in these places, we see the matriarchal system of society: although in most other places today, the system has changed to the patriarchal. The worship of Kali influenced the position of women in society or it could also be that the supremacy of the feminine brought about a prevalence of Kali worship.

### ***The Fulfilment of Sri Ramakrishna's Kali Worship***

Sri Ramakrishna actually fulfilled the worship of

Kali by surrendering the fruits of all his spiritual practices to Sri Sarada Devi and establishing her divinity. He also told her that he had done not much in the name of spiritual ministry and that she would have to do much more. That is what happened Sri Sarada Devi gave spiritual wisdom to countless people. Sri Ramakrishna's disciples were only a handful but we do not have even a rough estimate of the number of Sri Sarada Devi's disciples. Sri Ramakrishna thus brought about a revolution in religious history by according a superior spiritual position to his consort.

Swamiji says that many of the abominable practices going under the name of tantra in Hinduism are essentially corrupt forms of Buddhist practices. Sri Ramakrishna says that just like there are different doors to a house, some from the front and some from the back, similarly there

are different paths to God, and some paths, like some tantric sects, are the backdoor entries to God. He calls them backdoor entries because they give much importance to the body and engage in sensual bodily enjoyments. There are many goddesses in Buddhism, many of them very similar to the goddesses of Hinduism; some of them like Vajrayogini are similar to Kali.

Devotees of Kali like Ramprasad and Kamalakanta had an intimate relationship with the Goddess. The songs they have composed reveal the closeness these devotees had with their chosen ideal. The lyrics of these songs could be considered heresy by many who are believers of God, but are new to the form of Kali. The devotion and the expression of the devotee transcend the boundaries between the serene and the obscene. Graphical descriptions of the Goddess and an intimate interchange through insinuations, allegations, abuse, quarrel, and calling of names, much of which qualify as crass slangs—all of these show that even the worship of Kali defies all norms and questions the mainstream by encompassing the marginalised. Most of these songs, which are called 'Kali Kirtan', are set to tune in the Dhrupad system of Hindustani classical music, which system Swamiji was very fond of, and which allows every vowel, note, and beat to grow into you and take you into the same ethos and the fervour that the devotee might have had when the song was originally sung. Even Shiva is taken to task in these songs. This kind of intimacy is a difficult thing to practice. Thus, Kali worship has two important aspects: One worships the terrible knowing her to be the all-in-all of the universe and at the same time has a very intimate relationship with her. She is the Mother of the universe, she is the only Goddess—one may know all these and yet you can scold her, call her mad, drunk, and whatever else one can think of. One can keep on scolding her

and also her husband! That is the privilege the worshipper of Kali has.

### ***Transcending Abhorrence***

There are certain pertinent aspects of the spiritual practices of Sri Ramakrishna that we talk of, but fail to understand their import and therefore fail to emulate them. As part of his spiritual practices, Sri Ramakrishna once went to the toilet of a person and cleaned the toilet with his hair. We need to remember that the toilet in question was not like the modern toilets, spick and span, where one could actually sleep; there is no visible filth anywhere. The toilets during those days, particularly in India, were tremendously filthy places with big containers to hold the filth that were emptied periodically. One could not go anywhere near these places without suffering a terrible stench. Till recently, such toilets were in use in some parts of rural India. It was to such a place that Sri Ramakrishna went and cleaned it with his hair. Many people cannot even clean the blocked sinks of their kitchens and so, many of us cannot understand what Sri Ramakrishna did. When we read of this incident in the life of Sri Ramakrishna, we do not understand its total significance and impact. One had to transcend abhorrence to do what Sri Ramakrishna did. For most people, a lizard is the threshold of their tolerance of abhorrence. Sri Ramakrishna did not just transcend abhorrence; he accepted it and cleaned the toilet.

Kali worship and tantra require us to accept the abhorrent. Sri Ramakrishna had to touch with his lips rotten human flesh, while doing tantric practices. He had to do many such things to remove abhorrence. This is integral to tantric practice because there is no dichotomy in divinity and there is nothing that is not divine. The One divine principle exists in the pleasant as well as in filth. It has no limits in space, time,

or causation. Even filth and the abhorrent is a wrong reading of Brahman. In its essence, it is non-different from Brahman. From this standpoint the worship of Kali is the worship of the One immanent divine principle.

But how do we worship Kali? We offer her incense sticks, adorn her with flowers, decorate her to our heart's content and bring her down to our straitjacketed norms of beauty and femininity. That is not the way to worship Kali. Kali is the embodiment of the terrible. To worship her, we should worship the terrible. She should be worshipped in the forest. She should be worshipped in the cremation grounds. She should be worshipped in the mortuaries. She should be worshipped in the hospitals. These are the places of Kali worship; she is the embodiment of destruction and death. However, we do not remember this when we worship her. Most of us are terribly afraid of death. Even if one were to refer to one's impending death in the passing, in a conversation, people around that person get perturbed

and start denouncing any reference to death. We are inundated with statements about this transitory universe and how death is the only thing certain in our lives. Yet, we seldom act accordingly. Yudhishthira said that the greatest wonder in this world was that while all see people die around them every day, they are quite convinced of their life as though they were immune to death. The very concept, talk, or even a slight mention of death frightens us. With this mindset, can we worship death, can we celebrate death?

Death could be seen as a form of Kali. Death is perceived differently by different societies. Some sections of the so-called lower classes of society make a big celebration of the death of a person and have dances, music, drums, and drinks when someone dies. They have a huge procession of people dancing to drums and drinking around the dead. This is the celebration of death. Some Buddhist monastic sects practice meditation on the cremation of a person. They meditate on various stages of the destruction of the dead



body—its burning, the cracking up of the skull, and so on. In this manner, they strengthen their knowledge of the impermanence of the body. In tantra, there is a practice of doing spiritual practices sitting on a corpse, *shava*. It is called *shava-sadhana*. This is practised by some tantrics, even today.

### **Beauty in the Terrible**

Tantra is about seeing goodness or divinity in the terrible. A person becomes bad because of particular circumstances. Swamiji says that everyone is potentially divine. Good or bad qualities are just coverings on one's true nature. One does not become good simply because one has the money to buy a good dress. One may have the karma to be born in a respected family and get a good education. However, that person will become good only by her or his actions. Swamiji says that if one keeps doing good things, good things alone will come to that person. If a person keeps on doing bad things, bad things alone will attract that person. One person becomes good and better, and the other person becomes bad and then worse.

Kali worship is the worship of the terrible. Why should this worship be done only in the temple? True worship of death and the terrible should be the worship of the immanent. If one sees a drunkard, a rogue, or a criminal, should not one worship them? Are they different from the immanent conscious divine principle? But, we do not worship them. Instead we abhor them. People expect others to wear dresses according to their preferences. We have structured notions of beauty and gentleness. In most parts of the world, to be considered beautiful, one has to be fair-complexioned. This insistence on fairness is completely unfair. The worship of Kali should enable us to see beauty everywhere, even in things that are conventionally considered to be fierce, ugly, and repulsive.

We usually associate conventional ideas of ugliness with evil. If a person is not good looking, people question that person's character. If a person is not well-dressed, people are not comfortable approaching that person. The external is always considered a vital key to the internal. But is it true? Even if there is any truth in that belief, an unpleasant exterior cannot be different from God. Also, logic or empirical evidence does not support the belief that a pleasant exterior points to an integral interior. And if the dress of a person, particularly that of a woman, does not conform to conventional norms, that woman is ridiculed and her character is questioned. This is the mental make-up of most people. And that is where the form and worship of Kali becomes all the more significant. The form of Kali robs the physical body of its sensuality and establishes its divinity. That is why Kali is in the nude. She diminishes the importance of clothing. The female physical body, which is commonly associated with the snare of *maya*, has been robbed of its seductive power by the form of Kali. She transforms the wife in the female body to the mother. Seeing the Divine Mother in every woman is one of the important spiritual practices for a man. Thus, it does not matter if the person is clothed or not. The worshipper of Kali does not see the sensual in the feminine but sees only the divine in all forms.

The worship of Kali is done in images that are made according to the conventional standards of beauty with 'perfect' looks. Instead Kali should be worshipped in the most 'jarring' of images: fat, ugly, and disproportionate. Because, it is the worship of the terrible. Also, there are a lot of gender stereotypes and misogyny around the places of the annual Kali worship where the puja pandals thrive on anti-women consumeristic practices. The female form is insulted, ridiculed, and made a source of consumerism. And



we conveniently ignore the aspect of Kali that stands on Shiva—the supremacy of the feminine over the masculine. Places in India associated with Kali worship are mostly places where

women are held in high regard in society. The worship of Kali is not widespread. This form of Kali is the form which we need to worship. She is the epitome of women empowerment and that

is why Sri Ramakrishna offered the fruits of his spiritual austerities at the feet of Sri Sarada Devi on the day of Phalabarini Kali puja. He wanted this women empowerment to be implemented in present-day society with Sri Sarada Devi in the centre. It is in her name that the Sarada Math and the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission has been founded, arguably the first monastic organisation in the world to be completely owned, controlled, and managed by women, by sannyasinis.

Generally, around the world, and across major world religions, monastics are considered to be the highest section of society—even the king has to go and bow down before a monk. Usually, it is the woman who manages a household, gives birth to children, and gives them a good upbringing. Nobody else can do that. That is why the Divine Mother controls the universe and that is why she stands on the chest of Shiva. And whenever we think of Kali, we should think of the terrible, we should think of all such people who have been deprived of proper circumstances, food, clothing, shelter, education, and a decent livelihood. The worship of these people will be the true worship of Kali.

Sri Ramakrishna brought the wonderful concept of serving God in living beings with the knowledge that they are God. It could also mean that one should serve living beings, knowing them to be Kali. Then, one would not run away from the terrible and the unpleasant and would serve the suffering. I recount an incident that happened in a hospital of the Ramakrishna Mission located in a place of pilgrimage. People have a lot of faith in this hospital and whenever someone sees a homeless person suffering on the roads, they bring them and leave them in the caring hands of the hospital staff. Some times, they do not even wait for the hospital authorities to arrive. They simply put the patient in front of the hospital and go away. That is the faith of

people on this hospital. In such manner, one day, someone brought a monk, who was lying by the roadside, to this hospital. This monk had many ailments, but the main one was that he had a gaping hole in his head and the hole had gone considerably deep. The monk had not got any medical attention for days and the hole in his head was infested with maggots. He had been lying in dirt for a long time and his entire body and clothes were emitting an unbearable stench and it was difficult for people to go near about twenty feet of this person. When this monk was brought to this hospital of the Ramakrishna Mission, a nurse took him into the open lawn and made him lie down on a big wooden bench. Herself sitting on a chair, this nurse took surgical instruments and started removing the maggots one by one, apparently oblivious to the terrible stench. She did this for many hours till all the maggots were removed, and then dressed the wound, took the patient inside the hospital, gave him a long and complete bath, put new clothes on him and took him to his hospital bed, as fresh as new. That is true worship of the terrible. If one can do such service, one does worship of Kali. The traditional worship of Kali where one distributes prasada after the puja is much easier to do. We need a different kind of Kali worship today; a worship that can make us assimilate the fact that there is nothing terrible in this world, everything is divine.

We need the abhorrent as much as the pleasant. Often we are put off by the terrible or abhorrent. But just as one watches humorous movies as also horror movies, we need to accept the terrible with the pleasant. It makes us strong. In this context, we need to remember Sister Nivedita's statement half in jest that what we need today is 'Kali and chutney'. Apparently, it is a harmless humorous comment but on reflection, one senses some deep meaning here.

Kali is the embodiment of all that is abhorrent and terrible and chutney is a spicy condiment. With a little chutney of proper deification and channelisation we can gulp and assimilate the Kali of the unpalatable.

The scriptures of the Sanatana Dharma are replete with references to the Divine Mother, worship of the feminine as divine. But in India, we see unspeakable atrocities being perpetrated on women. A woman who is 'beautiful' in the conventional sense of the term has a tough life to live and the life of a woman who is not so 'beautiful' is also full of pain. It is ironical that people want every woman to be 'beautiful' but a woman's life becomes miserable if she turns out to be 'beautiful'. Hence, our ideas of beauty and grace need to be completely changed. Everything in this universe is beautiful and divine. Even the very concept of obscenity has been engineered from the male perspective. It is the 'male gaze' that decides what is obscene. Only the 'inappropriate' portrayal of the female form is considered obscene, but not such a portrayal of the male form. That which disturbs the male psyche is obscene and that which disturbs the female sensibilities is ignored. Unless we transcend such narrow constructs, we will not be ready to worship Mother Kali.

Much hue and cry is raised about the clothes a woman can wear. If we are truly the worshippers of the Divine Mother, if we are truly the worshippers of Kali, it should not at all matter if a female form is clothed or unclothed. Because a devotee of Kali would see only Kali in all forms, masculine or feminine. It is the height of hypocrisy to worship the divine feminine on the one hand and to denigrate and oppress women on the other. There are no 'proper' or 'improper' clothes; the only cloth creating all misery is the cloth of ignorance and delusion.

As worshippers of Kali, we should worship

the terrible. We should accept the terrible. We should embrace the terrible. We should worship the female form and the female person. It would not do to restrict our worship only with the feminine divine in an image, but we should worship the female person too. We should worship women. Swamiji used to repeatedly tell that a country where women are not held in high regard comes to doom. Finally, we should not only worship women but accept their superiority over men. In society, men and women should go about like the two wheels of a chariot; complementing one another. However, that does not mean that men and women are equals; they are not. Women hold a much greater position and play an important function than men. That is why Kali stands on the chest of Shiva. No man ever gave birth to a child; that is biologically impossible. Nature has entrusted a woman with much more responsibility than a man. If we worship and accept women, as the superior among equals and if we embrace the terrible, we would be worshipping Kali.

Phalaharini Kali takes away all our karma, but we have to be alert and vigilant not to increase her work. We have to be conscious of not adding to the good and bad tendencies that we carry. It is easy to give up the evil but it is very difficult to give up the good. Sri Ramakrishna did that: he gave up all that was good and all that was bad with him. He just kept the Truth with him. He held on to the substratum and gave up all that is projected on it. So, as worshippers of Kali, we need to give up the good and bad results of our actions. Worship of Phalaharini Kali means to concentrate on accepting the terrible, the ugly, death, and destruction. Every time we see Kali, we should remember these things and not try to change the female Goddess Kali into a conventional female goddess conforming to the conventional sense of beauty and grace.

