



Who is this terrible Woman,  
 dark as the sky at midnight?  
 Who is this Woman  
 dancing over the field of battle,  
 Like a blue lotus that floats  
 on a crimson sea of blood?  
 Who is She,  
 clad alone in the Infinite for a garment,  
 Rolling Her three great eyes  
 in frenzy and savage fury?  
 Under the weight of Her tread  
 the earth itself is trembling!  
 Siva, Her mighty Husband,  
 who wields the fearful trident,  
 Lies like a lifeless corpse  
 beneath Her conquering feet.<sup>1</sup>

**W**HO IS THIS STRANGE GODDESS,  
 and why, of all the gods and goddesses  
 in Hinduism, would Sri Ramakrishna

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Pravrajika Shuddhatmaprana is a nun at Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely, New York.

## Why Mother Kali?

### Pravrajika Shuddhatmaprana

choose to worship and invoke her as his personal *Ishta*, his chosen deity? Some of you, perhaps, have asked this very question. Many of you have seen various pictures of Kali. And you have probably also seen photos of the very image of Kali that was worshipped by Sri Ramakrishna. Perhaps some of you have even personally seen her in a visit to the Dakshineswar temple, so you know what she looks like.

Perhaps you also know some of the symbolism behind this image: Her dark colour represents the infinite; her three eyes represent knowledge of the past, present, and future. Her red tongue sticking out represents *rajas*, the quality of activity; while her white teeth, pressed on her tongue, represent *sattva*, the quality of calmness. Both then represent the quality of activity being controlled by calmness. The garland of fifty skulls represents the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, which also means speech. The sword in her upper left hand cuts our ignorance, or bondage; while the severed head in the lower left hand is said to bestow wisdom. As Kali stands on Shiva, who represents the Absolute aspect of God, so Kali represents the cosmic power, or *Shakti*, that brings creation into being.

### Why Kali?

So this is, in short, what it all means. But still we have to ask: Why Kali?

Every year at the Vedanta centre in Southern California someone makes a large image of Kali that will be worshipped at the annual Kali Puja festival in Hollywood. A new image is made

every year because each year the one that has been worshipped is immersed in water, according to the traditional custom. One year when one of the nuns in Santa Barbara was making the image, she went to a store that sells Hindu puja items to buy some decorations. The owner of the store was pleased that a Western woman was buying Hindu puja items and asked what image these decorations were for. When the nun told her it was for an image of Kali, the woman's face fell. 'Why Kali?' she asked. 'Why not Lakshmi? Why not Sarasvati? Why Kali?' I don't know what reply the nun gave.

So, why did Sri Ramakrishna choose Kali?

It may seem, from a general reading of Sri Ramakrishna's biography, that he did not have any interest in the worship of the Divine Mother—and especially in the form of Kali—until after his brother Ramkumar came to the Dakshineswar temple to take up the job of priest there. But we learn from the biography of Swami Subodhananda that even before Sri Ramakrishna came to Dakshineswar—that is, when he was living in the Jhamapukur area of Calcutta—he began spending much time at the Siddheshvari Kali temple of Thanthania. Sri Ramakrishna was just a teenager then and was helping his eldest brother, Ramkumar, run a Sanskrit school. The Siddheshvari Kali temple, which was very close to the school, was owned by Swami Subodhananda's family, and Sri Ramakrishna knew the family very well.

M., the recorder of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, also lived very close to that temple. Once he showed some devotees the place where Ramkumar's Sanskrit school used to be. Later a small Shyamsundar temple

was established there, which is still there. M. told the devotees: 'At that time he [Sri Ramakrishna] performed worship in the house of Raja Digambar Mitra. He would carry the offered rice, fruits, and sweets that he had received from that house and sit in front of the [Siddheshvari] Kali temple. ... People knew that the handsome young man had a good voice, so they would ask him to sing. He would sing to the Mother, then return to his apartment distributing the prasad to the people.'<sup>2</sup>

In another version of the story it is said that the young men of the neighbourhood knew that Sri Ramakrishna was something of a soft touch. They would ask him to sit in front of the temple and sing; meanwhile, they would ransack his offerings, which were tied up in a towel. After singing, Sri Ramakrishna would leave, laughing and shaking out his towel.<sup>3</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna was brought up in a family that had worshipped Raghuvir—that is, Sri Ramachandra—for generations, but his father also worshipped the goddess Sitala in a consecrated pot in Kamarpukur, as also Shiva. After Sri Ramakrishna's sacred thread ceremony was performed, he was then eligible to worship all

*Ramkumar's Sanskrit School at Jhamapukur*



these deities in the family shrine. According to Swami Saradananda, while performing the worship of these deities, Sri Ramakrishna ‘became so absorbed in worship that he experienced *bhava samadhi* or *savikalpa samadhi* and sometimes had various spiritual visions.’<sup>4</sup>

It is also said that Sri Ramakrishna’s eldest brother Ramkumar was very devoted to the Divine Mother. According to Swami Saradananda:

As a result of studying the scriptures, he [Ramkumar] had become very drawn to the worship of the Divine Mother; and now [when he was still living in Kamarpukur] he was initiated into a *Shakti* mantra by an adept guru. One day while worshipping the Goddess, his Chosen Deity, Ramkumar had a wonderful vision. With Her finger, the Goddess wrote on his tongue a mantra for the attainment of perfection in astrology. After that, whenever he saw someone who was ill, he could tell whether that person would be cured. Because of that power, whatever he predicted came true and he became a well-known soothsayer (96).

Later, when Ramkumar and Sri Ramakrishna were living at the Dakshineswar temple, Ramkumar asked Sri Ramakrishna to be initiated in a *Shakti* mantra so that he too could worship the Divine Mother Kali. Sri Ramakrishna decided to take initiation from Kenaram Bhattacharya, who often came to the Dakshineswar temple and was highly regarded as ‘a devout spiritual aspirant’. Swami Saradananda writes: ‘We have heard that as soon as the Master was initiated he went into ecstasy and that Kenaram was amazed by his extraordinary devotion’ (205).

### **Who Chose Whom?**

So we see that Sri Ramakrishna had a deep connection with the goddess Kali even before he started formally worshipping her. But, here we could ask, did Sri Ramakrishna actually choose Mother Kali, or did Mother Kali choose Sri

Ramakrishna? Moreover, why was there this connection between them?

Like our first question, ‘Why Kali?’, these questions also cannot be answered so easily. This is because Sri Ramakrishna was not an ordinary spiritual aspirant. It is obvious, looking at his life, that he was here on a divinely ordained mission. But, again, was it his mission or hers? Sri Ramakrishna himself would not easily refer to it as ‘his’ mission. Generally, when he was on a normal plane of consciousness, he considered himself to be a child of the Mother. He often said that he was simply an instrument in the hands of the Mother, and that it was she who blessed the devotees through him, and it was she who laid out the plan for his life such as practising *sadhanas* of various religious paths. As Swami Saradananda writes: ‘The Mother had made him understand clearly that it was She who had put that desire into his mind [to see her in various forms and by different spiritual paths] on many occasions’ (647).

But there are other instances when Sri Ramakrishna directly told devotees that they should meditate on him,<sup>5</sup> or give him ‘the power of attorney’<sup>6</sup>—that is, surrender to him. Again, he told many of the devotees, ‘He who came as Rama and as Krishna has come now in this body (*pointing to himself*)’ (238). All these indicate that he was very much aware of himself as a divine incarnation with a mission.

This contradiction can be resolved when we understand that Sri Ramakrishna regarded himself and Mother Kali as one. One day at the Cossipore garden house, when Sri Ramakrishna was dying of throat cancer, he said (*placing his hand on his heart*): ‘There are two persons in this. One, the Divine Mother ... Yes, one is She. And the other is Her devotee. It is the devotee who broke his arm, and it is the devotee who is now ill. Do you understand?’<sup>7</sup> Again, speaking to M. one



day, he made it very plain when he said: ‘Know for certain that I and She (Kali of Dakshineswar) are one, and there is no difference. If you think of Her day and night, that will be thinking of me.’<sup>8</sup>

Thus, there is actually no such question of one choosing the other. Sri Ramakrishna and the Divine Mother Kali were one and the same Divine Being. But sometimes that Divine Being manifested more as the Divine Mother, sometimes more as Sri Ramakrishna, and sometimes as both of them together. So when Sri Ramakrishna talks about Mother Kali instructing him, or that something he did was the Mother’s will, we have to think of it in this sense.

Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna was told on at least three occasions by God, or the Divine Mother, ‘to remain in *bhavamukha*’—that is, to remain in a state in which his mind was on the border between the Absolute and the relative states of consciousness. We can probably consider this to be the key to his state of consciousness. He did not have a limited ‘I’-sense, as ordinary people have. Rather, his ‘I’-sense was united with the universal or cosmic ‘I’ of the Divine Mother. So his mission *was* the Divine Mother’s mission.

We could go on and on discussing what this mission was. But I think the whole thing can be very well summed up in something that Swami Vivekananda said: ‘In this age the *Brahma-kundalini*—the Mother who is responsible for the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe—has been awakened by the fervent prayers of Sri Ramakrishna.’ Here Swamiji is referring to the cosmic aspect of the kundalini. Regarding Swamiji’s statement, Swami Shivananda commented: ‘No wonder the individual *kundalini* will be awakened now! That is why we see symptoms of a great spiritual upsurge everywhere.’<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the universal spiritual consciousness has been awakened, so no one,

anywhere, can remain unaffected. Again, the more we make an effort to connect with this consciousness, the more we will gain from it. And this was the mission of the Divine Mother and of Sri Ramakrishna.

### **The Significance of Kali Worship**

But what did this worship of Kali actually mean to Sri Ramakrishna? Sri Ramakrishna had various terms that he used to describe the philosophy behind the worship of the Divine Mother, and these are the same terms that Vedanta uses: ‘Prakriti’, ‘Shakti’, and sometimes ‘maya’ or ‘*mahamaya*’. The term Shakti is especially used in the sense of power or energy, and in this sense it is also used to refer to the kundalini, the coiled up serpent power that normally lies asleep within each individual. As Sri Ramakrishna said: ‘The Primordial Energy [Adya Shakti] resides in

*Ramprasad Praying to Kali*



all bodies as the Kundalini. She is like a sleeping snake coiled up.<sup>10</sup> But, as we just saw, she not only resides in individuals; she has a cosmic aspect as well.

The term ‘Prakriti’ was originally used in the dualistic Sankhya philosophy. Swami Saradananda writes of Sri Ramakrishna’s explanation to the devotees of the two cosmic principles in the Sankhya philosophy—Purusha and Prakriti:

[O]ne day we were discussing Sankhya philosophy. Describing the origin of the universe from Purusha and Prakriti, the Master told us: ‘According to Sankhya, Purusha is not the doer: It is static. Prakriti does everything; Purusha is a witness to those actions. But Prakriti cannot do anything by herself—she needs the help of Purusha.’ The Master’s audience included office clerks, accountants, doctors, lawyers, deputy magistrates, and schoolboys and college students—none of them were scholars. When they heard the Master say this, they stared at one another. The Master understood their confusion and said: ‘Hello, haven’t you seen what happens in the house during a wedding ceremony? After issuing orders, the master sits and smokes tobacco from a hubble-bubble. The mistress runs around the house and supervises all the activities. Her sari is stained with turmeric and she welcomes the ladies. With hand gestures and animated face she reports to her husband from time to time: “This has been done this way, and that, that way. This is to be done, and the other not to be done.” While smoking, the master listens and nodding his head, he assents to everything, saying, “Yes, yes.” It is just like that.’ All laughed after listening to the Master’s explanation of the Sankhya philosophy, but they understood it.<sup>11</sup>

So here, in Sri Ramakrishna’s illustration, we can understand that in the Sankhya philosophy there is a dualism between Purusha and Prakriti. They are two separate principles, though Prakriti is dependent on Purusha.

Yet later this same term ‘Prakriti’ evolved in the non-dualistic philosophy of Advaita Vedanta to mean Shakti. And Sri Ramakrishna sometimes used the word in this sense also. Once he said: ‘According to Vedanta, Brahman and Its power—Purusha and Prakriti—are identical, that is, they are not two different entities. The same substance appears sometimes as Purusha and sometimes as Prakriti’ (ibid.).

As Swami Saradananda related: ‘When he saw that we did not understand this, the Master said: “Do you know how it is? It’s like a snake—sometimes it moves, and sometimes it remains motionless. When it’s still, it represents the nature of Purusha. Prakriti is then united with Purusha and they have become one. When the snake moves, Prakriti is then working, as it were, separating herself from Purusha”’ (ibid.).

So in this last example, Sri Ramakrishna used the words ‘Purusha’ and ‘Prakriti’ in the same way that he often used the terms ‘Brahman’ and ‘Shakti’. But besides the example of the snake moving and still, he also would give other examples to define these terms—such as, milk and its whiteness, or fire and its power to burn. That is to say, just as you cannot separate milk from its whiteness, or fire from its power to burn, you cannot separate Brahman and Shakti. They are one and the same.

Sri Ramakrishna actually made some very interesting comments to M. about the worship of Shakti that we do not find in the *Gospel*. One day he said to M.:

He who is Brahman, He is Shakti and also the Divine Mother. Without acknowledging Shakti, no one can understand what Brahman is. Brahman can become manifest only through Shakti. What is fire? It is something that has the power to burn. Fire would become useless if it could not burn. As fire and its power to burn are no different, so Brahman and Shakti are the

same. When we describe them, they seem to be two different things, but in reality they are one. The One has become many; that is the manifestation of His power.<sup>12</sup>

Then Sri Ramakrishna said to M.—and this point should especially be noted, as we shall come back to it later: ‘How is it possible to realize Brahman without taking refuge in Shakti? The words that are used to call on Him, the sound that is used to worship Him—those are all functions of Shakti. You [*speaking to M.*] have originated from Shakti, and you move and walk by means of Her power’ (98).

As the song says: ‘Thou art the Moving Force, and I the mere machine; ... I am the chariot, and Thou the Charioteer; I move alone as Thou, O Mother, movest me.’<sup>13</sup> So, if we move, walk, and speak by means of her power, then why are we in this delusion? Why do we not know this? Because she—this Shakti—is also *mahamaya*, the great enchantress. She deludes everyone. As the poet says, ‘When such delusion veils this world through Mahamaya’s spell; That Brahma is bereft of sense; And Vishnu loses consciousness; What hope is left for men?’ (155).

In the Advaita philosophy, this delusion is produced in two ways. There is the *avarana-shakti*, the power that veils, or hides, the Reality from us, just as a screen hides whatever is behind it. And then there is the *vikshepa-shakti*, the power of projection, which projects this world of name and form and duality. Under this aspect we become enchanted with this world of duality, and we do not seek the Reality that underlies it.

So what hope is left for us if this Shakti, this power that controls the universe, is the very same power that deludes us?

According to Sri Ramakrishna, *mahamaya*, or Shakti, deludes us, yes; but she can also reveal the Truth and grant liberation. Grace also is there. As he says, if we take refuge in her it is

possible to become free from this delusion—to realise Brahman and attain supreme Bliss. Why? Because she is also the Mother—the Divine Mother of the universe.

### **The Motherhood of God**

It’s not possible to know exactly when the universal Goddess became worshipped as mother. Probably the recognition of power associated with motherhood came in very ancient times, so this worship of the universal Goddess as an expression of the power of motherhood also is very ancient—even prehistoric. But this is not quite the same as the worship of the Goddess as a mother in a devotional sense, as we see in Ramprasad or Kamalakanta, or in Sri Ramakrishna’s life. In the *Devi Mahatmyam*, or *Sri Sri Chandī*, which was probably written around the fifth or sixth century CE, the Goddess has both benign and terrible aspects, but she is always the powerful Goddess who destroys evil and protects the gods. And though there are a group of these goddesses called Matrikas, or Mothers, who near the end are absorbed into the body of the great Goddess, she herself is only once addressed in the *Chandī* as Mother.<sup>14</sup> Rather, she is invariably addressed as Devi,

Kali at Thanthania







Heinrich Zimmer (1890–1943)

Goddess, or by one of her many names, such as Ambika or Narayani. Her aspect there is too formidable to think of her as a mother.

The portrayal of the Goddess as a mother in a devotional sense seems to have come later. In South India, the Goddess Sri, or

Lakshmi, was regarded very early as the consort of Vishnu and as the giver of all that is *sri*, auspicious. But gradually she also became the mediator between the devotee and the Lord. And as this last point became stressed more, she became thought of more as a mother. In Parashara Bhattar's *Sri Guna Ratnakosha*, he says: 'Having caused Him [the Lord] to forget our sins, you make us your very own children. So you are our mother!'<sup>15</sup>

Of course, Sri always has a beautiful form and has a totally benign aspect, unlike the Goddess Kali. So it is very easy to regard her as a mother.

But most likely the devotional movement that was started in the sixteenth century by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Bengal—which later spread throughout North India—could not help but affect the Shaktas, the worshippers of the Divine Mother in North India. This movement, with its emphasis on a personal relationship with God, was ready-made for the worship of the Goddess as a mother—including the Goddess Kali. Before this, the Goddess was worshipped by the Shaktas more for power. But after this time we see the rise of poet-saints among the Shaktas, such as Ramprasad, Kamalakanta, and Premik, all of whom worshipped Kali as a mother—albeit a powerful

mother. We should also keep in mind, from what we have just seen, that this evolution of the Goddess as a mother was, as Sri Ramakrishna would say, done by her—at her will.

But how do *we* conceive of a fierce-looking Goddess like Kali—and one who treads on her consort as well? How do we think of her as a mother? Perhaps these saints could do it, but what about us?

Swami Swahananda had an answer for this. Whenever anyone would voice any doubt about the worship of Mother Kali, he would say: 'Would you rather have a namby-pamby mother? Or do you want someone who will *fight* for you?' Yes, Kali is certainly not namby-pamby. But then we could argue, Durga and Jagaddhatri also carry weapons, yet they do not have such a terrifying aspect.

### **The Symbolism of Kali**

So why Kali? I think what Heinrich Zimmer says in reference to the symbols and mythology of India can also be applied to the images of the deities in India. They are just not something that we can intellectualise. The mythologies, he says, 'are effective primarily on a subconscious level, touching intuition, feeling, and imagination. Their details impress themselves on the memory, soak down, and shape the deeper stratifications of the psyche. ... The myths and symbols of India resist intellectualization and reduction to fixed significations. Such treatment would only sterilize them of their magic.' Again, he says, the mythology of India 'stirs and feeds the unconscious'.<sup>16</sup>

So most likely this is true with regard to the deities as well. Deities like Durga, Kali, Shiva, Sri Ramachandra, and others affect us at another level—an unconscious level. We don't know why we are drawn to them. We just are. Too much intellectualisation does not solve anything. Yet

that does not mean we cannot ask ourselves: ‘What is this image of Kali saying to me?’

We gave some of the symbolism of this image at the beginning. But there are a few more points we could add that may have a deeper impact on our understanding of her. First of all, the name Kali refers to her colour, which is black, and represents the infinite. But it also refers to time. That itself gives us a clue to her function, because time, space, and causation are all processes of *maya*, the great illusion. Time, as we all know, truly is the all-destroyer. Nothing in this world can escape from destruction due to time.

As we have seen, Kali has four arms, representing the dualities of this world. Her two right arms represent the benign aspect. She bestows fearlessness and boons with those. While her two left arms, holding a sword and a severed head, and most of the rest of her, represent the terrible aspect. Here we have her function of causation—creating and destroying, as well as of the dual experience in this world. Everything comes from her and everything dissolves back into her. Again, she is standing on—subduing, you might say—Shiva, the transcendent Absolute aspect of God, the ultimate Reality beyond name and form and all dualities. This, we could say, is her function of the finite—which is within space—veiling the infinite. Thus Kali is herself the *maya* that we must recognise and worship in order to realise the infinite. *Yet*—she is also the infinite. Kali and Shiva are two aspects of the same reality—like fire and its power to burn, as Sri Ramakrishna says.

### ***Kali: The Symbol of Death***

So what do we have here with Kali? In spite of the fact that one part of her is offering us fearlessness and boons, the major part of her is terrifying. She is *mahamaya*, the great illusion herself. And she looks like the embodiment of



destruction—like the symbol of death.

Death, as we all know, is terrifying. Yet death is a natural process of life. Why should something that is so perfectly natural terrify us? It terrifies us because we are in complete ignorance of it. *Mahamaya*—made up of time, space, and causation—has deluded us so much that we cannot even be sure of our own existence after the death of our body.

So Kali, as Swami Vivekananda himself says, is the symbol of death. As he says in his poem ‘Kali the Mother’:

For Terror is Thy name,  
Death is in Thy breath,  
And every shaking step  
Destroys a world for e’er.  
Thou ‘Time’, the All-destroyer!  
Come, O Mother, come!<sup>17</sup>



So Swamiji is asking us to welcome death and let her destroy everything.

Then Swamiji says: ‘Who dares misery love; And hug the form of Death; Dance in Destruction’s dance; To him the Mother comes’ (ibid.). So we have to love misery *and* hug the form of death *and* dance in destruction’s dance. All of these are prerequisites—not just one or another. They all have to be there. Who will hug death when they are happy? And who wants to be miserable? Everyone wants to be happy and happy alone.

But hugging the form of death does not mean suicide. We must, at the same time, be able to dance with the Mother in her dance of destruction. And what is being destroyed? What is this death? It is, in reality, the death of the ego. Like our bodies, we identify so much with our ego that it seems to us that there is no existence for us without it. Little do we realise that when the ego dies, there is no more death for us.

As it is said, nature abhors a vacuum. So also, as soon as the ego departs, the Lord, the real Self, comes in. Sri Ramakrishna says again and again: ‘All troubles come to an end when the ego dies.’<sup>18</sup> This is because, along with the ego, all our desires, likes and dislikes, attachments and aversions—all our anger, fear, pride, jealousy, and other passions—all these also die. They are all rooted in the ego.

But how is it that Swamiji, of all people, could revel in this terrible aspect of God? This is Swamiji we are speaking of—the ever-free soul who had the heart of a Buddha.

The answer that Swamiji seems to give in his poem is that Kali is worshipped solely for

liberation; and for Swamiji, liberation was everything. Durga is often worshipped in households for beauty, fame, progeny, and the like. Lakshmi is worshipped for wealth and everything that is auspicious. Sarasvati is worshipped—especially by children—for knowledge. And, yes, you can say that they are all aspects of the same Divine Mother. It is true.

But Kali herself is not generally worshipped for anything but liberation—at least nowadays, after Sri Ramakrishna. If you want liberation, you must give up everything, even the ego. In fact, liberation is what she represents. Except for her right arms, everything else about Kali is terrifying. Her form makes us think: Must we go through suffering to attain our goal? Yet her right arms give us assurance that grace is also there. Moreover, her face and her form—what seemingly we must pass through to get beyond form, to the ultimate Reality—are actually beautiful. This gives us assurance that the ultimate Reality does lie beyond her form—and that it truly is our desired goal.

But, still, who among us would want to hug the form of death? Who wants to love misery, even for the sake of liberation? Isn’t there supposed to be a Personal God—God with all the auspicious qualities—in all this? We expect the Lord to be compassionate, to remove our difficulties and rescue us from sufferings. To us, that is his job, his reason for being. And, on top of it, we can get liberation from him too.

So, alright, if Swamiji loves suffering, fine. We’ll go to Sri Ramakrishna about this. But what does Sri Ramakrishna have to say about it? Well, surprisingly, almost nothing. If we go through *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, we never find the Master telling us to pray to the



Abhaya Mudra

Lord to be free from suffering. For him, talking about suffering was almost beside the point. Rather, he encouraged the devotees to pray only for pure, motiveless love for God, and for knowledge and discrimination.

What Sri Ramakrishna put stress on was: We are God's very own. This is how we should think of God, and this is how we should relate to her or him in all our actions. Pain and suffering are part of this world of duality. And this is what Kali shows us. We have to accept them, for they are part of her and part of this world. Yet they come and go. They are transitory. But God is our own forever. She or he alone is real.

When it is said that Kali is *mahamaya*, the great illusion, the great enchantress, this does not mean that she is the obstacle to our liberation or anything. She is not the obstacle at all. We are—or rather, our ego, with all its baggage, is. Kali only shows us what we have to face—what the purification process is, and how we must 'dance in destruction's dance' to shed our own obstructions.

Do we really understand what it means to have the Lord come in our lives? Do we understand what it takes for that to happen? It's no small thing. Everything must go. And Kali takes us there. This is where she reveals her grace. She holds up her hand showing the *abhaya* mudra, the gesture of fearlessness, saying: 'Don't be afraid. It may seem difficult, but hold on to me and I shall help you.' Then another hand displays the *varada* mudra, the gesture of bestowing boons, which says: 'I shall give you everything you need to accomplish this.' And where does she take us? To that realm of absolute Love.

Then we understand: it was all along the ego that was separating us from this love. Once that ego—with all its desires and attachments—has been destroyed, then we realise ourselves as the Mother's own child. Then we are liberated and attain supreme bliss.

But, after all this, have we really answered the question: Why Kali? Perhaps the question cannot be answered. For me, however, an answer comes from both Swamiji and Sri Ramakrishna. First, Swamiji once told Sister Nivedita: '*You see, I cannot but believe that there is somewhere a great Power that thinks of Herself as feminine, and called Kali and Mother.*'<sup>19</sup> Again, he said: 'These gods are not merely symbols! They are the forms that the Bhaktas have seen!' (ibid.).

So perhaps we could say that Kali *wants* to be worshipped now, and worshipped as a mother. As we saw before, the evolution of the Goddess as a mother could only have come from her. And Kali is the form she has taken now. At least we might conclude that the time has come to worship Kali as the universal Mother. Remember, Swamiji said: 'In this age the *Brahma-kundalini*—the Mother who is responsible for the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe—has been awakened by the fervent prayers of Sri Ramakrishna.' So I believe that this is the age of motherhood, and of Divine Motherhood, God as Mother—all of it. Kali, with all her frightening features, wants us to accept her as our very own mother.

But why? For me, the key to the rest of the answer is what Sri Ramakrishna told M.: 'How is it possible to realize Brahman without taking refuge in Shakti? The words that are used to call on Him, the sound that is used to worship Him—those are all functions of Shakti. You have originated from Shakti, and you move and walk by means of Her power.'

As Sri Ramakrishna says, we have originated from Shakti, so we *are* her children. Will a child not acknowledge its own mother? Moreover, as Sri Ramakrishna says, we move and walk by means of her power—like the snake in motion. So we *must* acknowledge that power of our mother. That power is dwelling right within


us. Through this power we function. Again, we can remain in ignorance or we can acknowledge her, realise her, and become free. She is one with Brahman, so it is through her—through her grace—that we realise Brahman. Thus we must worship that mother and take refuge, like a child, in that mother. And that Mother Goddess whom Sri Ramakrishna himself acknowledged was Kali.

Moreover, we can understand from this that she is the Mother of us *all*—the whole universe, no matter what race, religion, nationality, or anything else we might be. We are all her children—all brothers and sisters in her. Nowadays a universal, global consciousness has been awakened—and it has been awakened by her—so likewise we need an awakening of harmony within us—of seeing the whole world as our own, as Sri Sarada Devi says. And for that we must accept all. We must accept everyone as her child.

It seems, in fact, that this is what she wants now. Accept everything—the good, the bad, all of it. *But* see everything as the manifestation of her. It is all her. Accept her and dance the play of this life with her. See her, the Mother, in all things and beings, in the good and in the bad, in everything. Then surrender to her. Take refuge in her.

And after that? Then we find that, hiding behind that terrible mask is a real mother Goddess of pure love. And we find that she has a mysterious kind of magnet—a magnet of pure love that she uses to draw us to her—a love we cannot explain. Ask Ramprasad. Ask Kamalakanta.

Nowadays the Dakshineswar temple is extremely crowded whatever time you go there. But about thirty or thirty-five years ago, if you went there early in the morning when the priests first opened the temple for the day, there were very few people. You could stand and have darshan to your heart's content. And, if you were lucky, you might see an old, thin, toothless man come and stand right in front of the shrine. He

always wore an old plain worn-out dhoti—no shirt. He would just stand there and sing his heart out. He had a crackly voice, but his bhava, mood, would melt a stone. There was no doubt in my mind: Kali really was his mother. 

## Notes and References

1. M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 240.
2. Swami Chetanananda, *Mahendra Nath Gupta (M.)* (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2011), 455.
3. See Swami Nityatmananda, *M., the Apostle and the Evangelist*, trans. D P Gupta and B Dey, 16 vols (Chandigarh: Sri Ma Trust, 1977), 3:59.
4. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2003), 128.
5. See Swami Chetanananda, *God Lived with Them* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 596.
6. *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 390.
7. *Gospel*, 943.
8. *Mahendra Nath Gupta*, 97.
9. *For Seekers of God*, trans. Swami Vividishananda and Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1993), 7.
10. *Gospel*, 363.
11. *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 633.
12. *Mahendra Nath Gupta*, 97.
13. *Gospel*, 818.
14. See *Devi Mahatmyam*, 11.3: 'Be propitious, O mother of the whole world.'
15. Parashara Bhattar, *Sri-Guna-Ratnakosha*, 52. Translation from Kuranarayana, *Praise-Poems to Visnu and Sri*, trans. Nancy Ann Nayar (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1994), 298. Parashara Bhattar was the son of Ramanuja's closest disciple, Kurattalvan.
16. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1972), 40–1.
17. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 4:384.
18. *Gospel*, 168–9.
19. Sister Nivedita, *The Master as I saw Him* (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 2007), 140–1.