

## Shakti - the Power of Feminine

Hindus understand the Divine to be both masculine and feminine, as well as neither. Divine energy, Shakti, manifests and is worshiped as the Goddess(es) and is seen to be complementary and not in competition with divine masculine powers which manifest as God(s). These magnificent, awe-inspiring feminine manifestations — at once fierce and compassionate, scary and loving, and powerful and gentle — work hand in hand with their equally awe-inspiring male consorts towards upholding dharma (cosmic order), demonstrating for us mere mortals the ideal and strength of symbiotic existence.

In the material realm, the individual soul is eternal and genderless, but when manifested in human form, it takes on in varying degrees both feminine and masculine characteristics. One oft recited prayer reminds us of where the Divine can be honored in our daily lives in our mother and our father:

“Matru devo bhava pitru devo bhava”

Whether mundane or ethereal, internal or societal, when both the feminine and masculine principles are in balance, we all share in the potential of functioning as a blissful whole.

Shakti, one of the most important goddesses in the Hindu pantheon, is really a divine cosmic energy that represents feminine energy and the dynamic forces that move through the universe. Shakti, who is responsible for creation and can also be an agent of change, is often manifested to destroy demonic forces and restore balance.

As a vital cosmic force, Shakti takes many forms and names, including mother goddess, fierce warrior, and the dark goddess of destruction. In Hinduism, every god has a Shakti, or energy force. It's one of the reasons she is worshipped by millions of people throughout India.

Shakti is also known as Parvati, Durga, and Kali, She's an archetype who you might call upon for strength, fertility, and power. You might identify with her as a powerful female figure or you might look to her as you try to repair or sustain your marriage.

As Parvati, she is the wife and energy behind the Hindu god of destruction and rejuvenation Shiva. With Shiva, she produced two sons: Kumara, who conquered the demon Taraka; and Ganesha, who became the elephant-headed god of wisdom and good fortune. Parvati symbolizes fertility, marital happiness, devotion, power, and asceticism.

She is honored as the mother goddess, a universal source of energy, power, and creativity.

Shakti is a Mahadevi, or Great goddess—which is essentially a sum of all other goddesses. In the guise of Durga, Shakti is a fierce warrior who kills the demon Mahisasur as well many other evil creatures. Kali is another form of Shakti who's worshipped throughout India. Kali, whose name is commonly translated as “the black one,” is the dark goddess of destruction. In Hindu tradition, she symbolizes the destructive and temporary nature of life. However, her devoted adherents also believe that she protects them both on Earth and in the afterlife.

## The Story of Shakti

Shakti's many names and forms have resulted in numerous origin and adventure stories. A favorite story is as Kali, famous for fighting Raktavija, the head of an army of demons.

According to legend, she couldn't wound him with her weapons, so she killed him by drinking all of his blood. Because of this story, Kali is commonly portrayed as having a bright red tongue that protrudes down her chin. She is usually depicted as having four arms: In her two left hands she holds a sword and swings Raktavija's head by his hair, while her two right hands are outstretched in blessing. She also wears a necklace of human skulls.

## The *Vahana* of Shakti

Deities, including the many forms of Shakti, are associated with an animal or bird that acts as a *vahana*, or vehicle. This animal is not only a means of transport and a way to identify the god or goddess; it also is an extension of his or her powers.

The lion is the *vahana* for both Durga and Parvati. Durga, who encompasses the power of all of the gods and takes on the role of warrior goddess, uses her lion as a weapon and for transportation.

## Inspiration from Shakti

Remember that Shakti is a universal energy force. And as such, she can be called upon for numerous purposes, such as:

1. To fight your own personal demons or when seeking protection, call upon Durga.
2. For fertility or if you identify with the mother goddess archetype, turn to Parvati.
3. To destroy evil and restore balance, look to Kali.

## **Some more background literature.....**

Goddess worship is one of the longest standing religious traditions in Hinduism. Arthur Basham, a well-known historian of India wrote:

The theme of Shakti perhaps grew out of a conflict and eventual compromise between a powerful matriarchal culture that existed in India before the Aryan migrations (2500, B.C. [B.C.E.]) and the male-dominated society of the Aryans. The Mother Goddess of the Indus Valley people never really gave place to a dominant male. The Earth Mother continues to be worshipped in India as the power that nurtures the seed and brings it to fruition. This basic reverence of an agricultural people affirms that man is really dependent on woman for she gives life, food and strength.

Mother Goddesses were worshipped at all times in India, but between the days of the Harappa Culture (2500-1500 B.C. [B.C.E.]) and the Gupta period (ca. 300-500) the cults of goddesses attracted little attention from the learned and influential, and only emerged from obscurity to a position of real importance in the Middle Ages, when feminine divinities, theoretically connected with the gods as their spouses, were once more worshipped by the upper classes...by the Gupta Period the wives of the gods, whose existence had always been recognized, but who had been shadowy figures in earlier theology, began to be worshipped in special temples (Arthur L. Basham, *Wonder That Was India* Revised Edition [London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1967], 313).

Another scholar describes Shakti in the following manner:

Sakti [Shakti] means “power”; in Hindu philosophy and theology Sakti is understood to be the active dimension of the godhead, the divine power that underlies the godhead’s ability to create the world and to display itself. Within the totality of the godhead, Sakti is the complementary pole of the divine tendency toward quiescence and stillness. It is quite common, furthermore, to identify Sakti with a female being, a goddess, and to identify the other pole with her male consort. The two poles are usually understood to be interdependent and to have relatively equal status in terms of the divine economy (David R. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986], 133).

The term Shakti refers to multiple ideas. Its general definition is dynamic energy that is responsible for creation, maintenance, and destruction of the universe. It is identified as female energy because Shakti is responsible for creation, as mothers are responsible for birth. Without Shakti, nothing in this universe would happen; she stimulates siva, which is passive energy in the form of consciousness, to create. Ardhanarishvara, a Hindu deity who is half male and half female, is an iconic representation of this idea. The deity is equally male and female, illustrating that the creation, maintenance, and destruction of the universe is dependent on both forces.

Shakti also refers to the manifestations of this energy, namely goddesses. Some goddesses embody the destructive aspects of Shakti, such as death, degeneration, and illness, while other goddesses embody the creative and auspicious powers of Shakti, such as nature, the elements, music, art, dance, and prosperity. Shakti may be personified as the gentle and benevolent Uma, consort of Shiva, or Kali, the terrifying force destroying evil, or Durga, the warrior who conquers forces that threaten the stability of the universe. Goddess worshippers often view their deity as the all-powerful Supreme Being, second not even to a male god. There are enduring goddess traditions all over India, especially in West Bengal and south India. Goddesses symbolizing various aspects of power very often predominate in village culture. Village men, women, and children, when they pray for immediate needs, address a female, not a male. David Kinsley writes:

Texts or contexts exalting the Mahadevi [Great Goddess], however, usually affirm Sakti to be a power, or the power, underlying ultimate reality, or to be ultimate reality itself. Instead of being understood as one of two poles or as one dimension of a bipolar conception of the divine, Sakti as it applies to the Mahadevi is often identified with the essence of reality (Ibid., 135). The Hindu tradition also considers women the vessels of Shakti.

This identification with Shakti acknowledges women as the vessels of both creative and destructive power. Like many modern cultures, Hindu culture has a hard time reconciling the biological compulsion of these two powerful forces. Some feminists and scholars criticize this identification because they believe it has led society to label women either as saints or sinners, with little room in between. They argue that women, like benevolent goddesses, are expected to exhibit forgiveness, compassion, and tolerance of others' transgressions. If they conform to this role, patriarchal society accepts them; if they do not, and attempt to exhibit independence and assertiveness, they are considered destructive, disrupting community and family social structures. However, others argue that the idea of Shakti can be used to empower Indian women to resist patriarchy.

