

Celebrating Navarathri: *What it means...*

The Vedic tradition has given us Ayurveda, or the science of health; Jyotish, the science of prediction, or guiding light; as well as many other branches of yogic knowledge, all aimed at supporting the balance and bliss of life on earth – and beyond. But it has also given us an ancient practice that is tied to the shift of the seasons in the year, and the subtle vibrational energies at play in the universe.



This ancient practice revolves around acknowledging the feminine energy, or Shakti, that is a constitutive part of Nature and our lives. The experience of remembering Shakti during the Fall, and Spring seasons, is accompanied by a story, a very very old story. It is told that the Shakti or dynamic energy in Nature had to manifest in order to combat negative or a-sura (dis-harmonious) entities that were trying to destroy creative life. The story goes like this.

The Devata-s (creative life-sustaining impulses of Nature) were distraught by the rise of Asura-s (non-creative destructive impulses of Nature) and were losing ground to them. The Asuras were threatening to destroy all, and reduce everything to inert matter. The Devata-s waged innumerable battles and consistently lost, incapable of overcoming the rise of Asura impulses in Nature. Their final resort was to plead with Shakti. Commemorating her dynamic victorious exploits is a ritual practice of chants called Navarathri, celebrated for nine days



and nine nights, culminating in Victory day, this is the story of Mother Divine, as old as time itself...

The recitation of 700 verses narrating the exploits of Goddess Durga and her victory over the demon Mahishasura constitutes an annual festival in India, and now, in many cities of the US. Navarathri is a celebration of the Goddess Durga, the manifestation of cosmic creational impulses in the form of Shakti [dynamic energy or power. Navarathri is also known as a 'ten days festival' with Vijayadashami, the 10th day of Victory, being its culmination.

On each day of Navarathri, a specific form or aspect of Mother Divine is invoked and celebrated. This invocation culminates in the form of Mahisasura-mardini, or Durga, who comes to remove obstacles and ends the hardships of the Devatas. Each year, the dates of the Navarathri festival are determined according to the lunar calendar. This year it falls on October 12, and culminates in Victory Day celebrated on October 23rd.

How old is this tradition of celebrating Mother Divine as Shakti?



Scholars agree that the beginnings of Shaktism are shrouded in the mists of prehistory. The earliest Mother Goddess figurines unearthed in India have been carbon-dated to approximately 20,000 BCE. Thousands of female statuettes dated as early as c. 5500 BCE have been recovered at Neolithic sites across the world.

Male vs. Female, vs. the “Neuter”

Shaktism does not mean favoring the feminine at the expense of the masculine. In fact, both male and female are said to be inert in the absence of Shakti. In the Devi- Bhagavata Purana, a central Shakta scripture, the Devi declares:

*"I am Manifest
Divinity, Unmanifest
Divinity, and
Transcendent
Divinity. I am
Brahma, Vishnu and
Shiva, as well as
Saraswati, Laxmi, and
Parvati. I am the Sun
and I am the Stars,
and I am also the
Moon. I am all
animals and birds,
and I am the outcaste
as well, and the thief. I
am the low person of
dreadful deeds, and
the great person of excellent deeds. I am Female, I am Male, and I am
Neuter."*



Shakti is the creative energy at play without which Shiva or the power of silence cannot express itself. Adi Shankara, South Indian Vedic visionary, poet, and philosopher, says it best in his famous hymn, the Saundaryalahari (c. 800 CE): "If Shiva is united with Shakti, he is able to

create. If he is not, he is incapable even of stirring.” In this sense they are co-dependent, or in the words of the nineteenth-century saint Ramakrishna, one of the most influential figures of modern Bengali Shaktism, they are actually one:

"Kali is none other than Brahman. That which is called Brahman is really



Kali. She is the Primal Energy. When that Energy remains inactive, I call It Brahman, and when it creates, preserves, or destroys, I call It Shakti or Kali. What you call Brahman I call Kali. Brahman and Kali are not different. They are like fire and its power to burn: if one thinks of fire one must think of its power to burn. If one recognizes Kali one must also recognize Brahman; again, if one recognizes Brahman one must recognize Kali. Brahman and Its Power are identical. It is Brahman whom I address as Shakti or Kali."

Sourcebooks of the Navarathri Festival

The Devi Mahatmyam or Devi Mahatmya (Sanskrit: devīmāhātmyam, or "Glory of the Goddess") constitutes the crystallization of thousands of years of Goddess worship into a unified narrative describing the victory of the Goddess Durga over the demon Mahishasura. As part of the Markandeya Purana, it is one of the Puranas or secondary Hindu scriptures, and was composed in Sanskrit around c. 400-500 CE, with authorship attributed to the sage (Rishi) Markandeya.

Devi Mahatmyam is also known as the Durgā Saptashatī or simply Saptashatī, Caṇḍī or Caṇḍī Pāṭha - where pāṭha – "reading" – refers to the act of ritual reading. The text contains 700 (saptashata - "seven hundred") verses, arranged into 13 chapters.

This goddess Shakti, the Goddess of power is the complete



incarnation of AdiShakti, has three chief manifestations, as Durga, Goddess of strength and valour, as Mahakali, goddess of destruction of evil and as Goddess Gauri, the goddess of benevolence.

The Devī Māhātmya consists of chapters 81-93 of the Mārkandeya Purana, one of the early Sanskrit Puranas, which is a set of stories being related by the sage Markandeya to Jaimini and his students (who are in the form of birds). The thirteen chapters of Devi Māhātmya are divided into three charitas or episodes. At the beginning of each episode a different presiding goddess is invoked.

The framing narrative of Devi Mahatmya presents a dispossessed king, a merchant betrayed by his family, and a sage whose teachings lead them both beyond existential suffering. The sage instructs by recounting three different epic battles between the Devi and various demonic adversaries (the three tales being governed by, respectively, Mahakali (Chapter 1), Mahalakshmi (Chapters 2-4) and Mahasaraswati (Chapters 5-13). Most famous is the story of Mahishasura Mardini – Devi as "Slayer of the Buffalo Demon" – one of the most ubiquitous images in Hindu art and sculpture, and a tale known almost universally in India. Among the important goddess forms the Devi Mahatmyam introduced into the Sanskritic mainstream are Kali and the Sapta-Matrika ("Seven Mothers").



"When the mind is brought to the level of Being, the body is also brought to that level. Thus, by our thought, word and action - and even by our very presence - we vibrate a good influence of life and peace, harmony and joyfulness, around us."

Why do we ritually Recite the Verses Annually?

A ritual reading of this text is part of the Navarathri. The sage's three tales can be read as allegories of outer and inner experience, symbolized by the fierce battles the all- powerful Devi wages against demonic foes. Her adversaries could be said to represent the all-too-human impulses arising from the pursuit of power, possessions and pleasure, and from illusions of self-importance. Akin to the battlefield of the Bhagavad Gita,

the Devi Mahatmya's killing grounds could said to represent the field of human consciousness. The Devi, personified as one supreme Goddess and many goddesses, confronts the demons of ego and dispels our mistaken idea of who we are. Paradoxically, it is she who creates the shrouding of truth in the first place, and she alone who awakens us to our true being. Reciting the verses is a way to remember and to re-immense ourselves in the story of who we are...

Vedic Scholar and sage, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi has also commented on this ritual awakening that can occur through the recitation, saying: "[...]All devotees can awaken the nine qualities explained by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, The Lord has defined these qualities as earth, water, fire, air, sky, mind, intellect, and ego. The ninth quality is Transcendental Consciousness. In fact, the devotees awaken the eighth qualities until Ashtami (the eighth day), and all these qualities merge with the Transcendental Consciousness on the ninth day. And finally, the Transcendental Consciousness awakens the total knowledge and infinite dynamism on the tenth day of Vijaya Dashami [...]. It is a scientific concept of awakening the Shivatatva, or the domain of total silence, which then transforms into total dynamism. By reciting the Nava Durga hymns (glorification of Goddess Durga) and performing Anusthanas, the devotees can awaken all the Devis and Devatas (supreme creative impulses) defined in Veda and Vedic Literature in their physiology."



Vaidya Mishra: My experience of Navarathri and Vijayadashmi

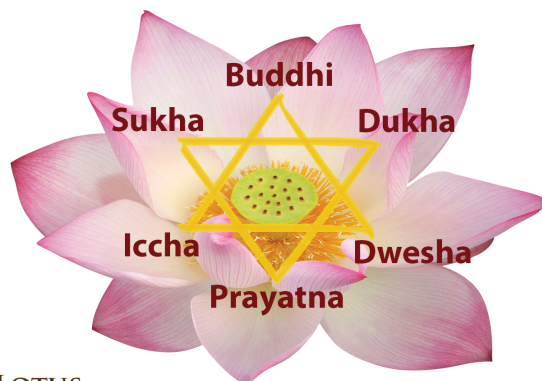
In 1965, I was initiated by my maternal grandfather, Digambar Mishra, into the ritual of 9 days of Mother Divine. He gave me a very elaborate description of Kali, the primary deity of the 9 days. Then, my highschool principle, Pundit Vishwanath Jah, taught

me about Mahakali, Mahalaxmi and Mahasaraswati. Since that day, I have celebrated the ritual almost every year without exception. After my initiation and first Navarathri, I was transformed inside out. These ancient mantras and chants had a very profound impact on my physiology, my mind and my heart. If I were to put it in one sentence, I would say that the vibrational effect of the mantras woke up my brain centers and transformed me from a buffalo-riding kid who ran away from school every day into an A+ student who finally became a successful ayurvedic physician! In Ayurvedic terms, my “dhi, dritti, and smriti” (or the learning, retaining and recalling functions of my intellect) were stimulated and awakened through these mantras, so that my intellect was able to directly connect with the light of my soul, or my consciousness, and guided me to embrace my dharma, or the duty of the healer I was born to perform in this life.

You know by now that there are many ways of approaching and interpreting this 9 days’ ritual. In the entire Chandi Paath text there are a total of 13 chapters, which are then divided into 3 sections or charitras. Each section is then dedicated to 1 of the 3 cosmic nurturing motherly energies: the cleansing, the bestowing, and the sustaining. But there is another important layer to this story.

The universe we live in is made up of primarily 2 kinds of vibrational energies: Sura energy and Asura energy. Sura energy is that which is in balance, it is the vibrational flow that nurtures us, connects our minds to our souls, and our individual souls to the universal soul, supporting humanity and all of creation. Asura energy is that energy which is devoid of

anything sura, it
is a-sura,
without sura, or
without
creational
rhythm and
support. It is
thus disruptive
and destructive,
it does not
support life, and



HEART LOTUS

accelerates devolution.

But both energies - one bright and one dark – are found everywhere, and in every human physiology, every individual mind, in the light of every soul. Both exist in seed form in everything under the sun! The Carak Samhita talks about this and refers to it as Satwa Guna, or the properties of consciousness (light of the soul). This knowledge was particularly prized in my Shaka Vansiya tradition, and used to explain many aspects of health and disease.

There are, in total, 6 Satwa Gunas or properties. Of the 6, buddhi, prayatna, iccha, and sukha make-up the Sura or life-supportive gunas; then the remaining 2 gunas, dukha and dwesha, carry Asura properties, and they can sprout and disturb the remaining 4 positive gunas and turn them into negative gunas. Thus, sukkha, or joy, can be taken over and turned into dukha or sorrow.

Sura and Asura vibrational seeds are there, dormant in the light of the soul. But how does this relate to the recitations of 9 days of Mother Divine?

First Section: Chapter 1 of the Chandi Paath is all about Mahakali. Mahakali is the mother of time. She is the one who owns time. Rules time. The first story of the Devi Mahatmya depicts Devi in her universal form as Shakti. Here Devi is central and key to the creation myth; she is the power that induces Vishnu's deep slumber on the waters of the cosmic ocean prior to the manifestation of the Universe, which is a continuous cycle of manifestation, destruction and re-manifestation. Vishnu reclines on the nāga shesha during yoganidra.



Two demons arise as thought-forms from Vishnu's sleeping body and attempt to vanquish Brahma who is preparing to create the next cycle of the Universe. The 2 demons that appear out of the earwax of Vishnu are asura. Their names are Madhu and Kaitabh. To put it simply as my grandfather did, Madhu means: too much! And Kaitabh means: too little! Brahma is disconcerted and tries to awaken Vishnu in vain, he then invokes the Great Goddess, asking her to withdraw from Vishnu so he may awaken and slay the demons. Devi agrees and Vishnu awakens and vanquishes the demons. Devi serves as the agent who allows the cosmic order to be restored.

In this chapter then, the whole first section in itself is all about the Goddess of time, Kali and the 2 demons of extreme, “too much” and “too little”! But how does this relate to our every day life? My grandfather explained to me that the shastras remind us to always honor and surrender to the power of time. If you honor and surrender to time, and metaphorically, to the Mother of Time, then she will always be with you, instead of running against you. You will have wisdom to handle success without getting entrapped by ego, the sense of “I did it”. When you



surrender to the Mother of Time, she turns your bad times into good times, or even if bad times must come, you come out unscathed having learnt invaluable lessons. That's how my grandfather put it.

But, as I grew older I began to wonder: what do these ideas of honor and surrender have to do with Madhu and Kaitabh? To give you a practical example, whenever I see clients who come to me

complaining of auto-immune problems, I read their pulse and see that they are fighting time! So I ask them: “what do you when you are stuck in traffic?” Some tell me: “I get frustrated to the point of wanting to bang my head on the steering wheel” or “I get so stressed out and angry that I feel suffocated, stuck, and energy rushes through me even more making me more impatient” etc. We all mean well, we get stressed out about time because we want to be on time everywhere but we do not seem to

know how to surrender to the Goddess or Mother of time. Madhu or the idea of “too much” gives you the overconfidence of “don’t worry about time!” so that you don’t start your things on the scheduled time, and then you don’t finish your job on time either. The stress of being late produces cortisol in your body and we know how that is related to a long list of diseases. If you honor time and start your day, your journey, your project, on time and you happen to be stuck in “bad traffic” or unexpected delays, then you know that it is beyond you, that it’s really not something you can do anything about, and you learn to surrender. But then the other demon, Kaitabh or “too little” pops up, and he tells you that you should not surrender because you already have so very little time to do everything in your life and you have so many things you want to do...

In this chapter of the Chandi Paath we see even Lord Brahma, the creative impulse of nature, surrendering to and honoring the Mother of Time or Kali, and praying to her, invoking her, so she wakes up the Supreme Consciousness out of his Mayanidra or deluded sleep, and slays Madhu and Kaitabh. Time will do away with “too much” and “too little” time when we acknowledge it.

Middle Section The second set of chapters is all about Mahalaxmi. My grandfather further explained to me that when you honor and surrender to the Mother of Time, Kali, then you receive abundance, and it feels like whatever you endeavor to do, you get full support of Mother Nature with unexpected events guiding you towards sure success every step of the way. Everything falls into place.

Durga, the great Warrior Goddess, represents the divine cosmic anger turned against evil. This section explains that the world was under attack by Mahishasura, the most evil Asura yet to be, who took many different forms, including that of a buffalo. The male



gods, fearing total annihilation gathered and endowed Shakti each with their special powers, and forth came Durga, Shakti shielded and further empowered by all their divine powers. Riding a lion into battle, Durga slew the buffalo by cutting off its head and then she destroyed the spirit of the demon as it emerged from the buffalo's severed neck. It is through this act that order was re-established in the cosmos. Mahishasur, stands in for the wicked ego, and the deluded sense of detachment from our environment, from the universe we live in, the thought that we are an entity unto ourselves, and we make things happen on our own. When Mahishasur inhabits our hearts and mind, we begin to take credit for our accomplishments, for the success in our lives, and we become critical of others who have failed where we have succeeded, belittling them for their lack of talent, or perseverance, or intelligence, and the list is endless! This is the time to surrender, and practice compassion through establishing a good relationship between the divine individual energy of our intellects and our senses. This can come through surrender. In chapters 2-4, all the deva-s are surrendering to Mother Nature asking her the favor to slay these egotistic thoughts. Sometimes, all it takes is awareness: awareness that we have slipped into egotistic thoughts. We can then re- mind ourselves and surrender, surrender to the intelligence that makes the universe flow in time and holds us safely in it.

Final Section:

This is Mahasaraswati's section. It is all about connecting the mind to the Buddhi, the first Guna or property of the light of the soul, in order to have Vivek, or discrimination. To be able to discriminate between destructive pursuits or desires created by the horses and to stand one's satwic ground so as not to be betrayed by them. My grandfather explained this to me through an example. He said that when an individual has abundance of money and power, the asura



Dhumrelochan comes into the picture. Some translate this name as “sinful eye” or “greedy, jealous, eye.”

In the story, this demon sees the beautiful Mother Divine and is drawn to her and goes to his masters, Sumbh and Nishumbh, translated as “lust” and “anger” respectively inciting them to have her. The interpretation is that we covet beauty and wealth through errant eyes. In practical terms, we meet people in day-to-day life who have been blessed with abundance but who still covet the properties of others. When their desire is not fulfilled, when the lust for more is not satisfied, anger sets in. Lust and anger become their undoing through “dhumralochan.” With anger, destruction ensues, as the Bhagavad Gita reminds us: “Pondering on objects of the sense, a man develops attachment for them; from attachment springs up desire, and desire gives rise to anger. From anger arises delusion; from delusion unsteadiness of memory; from unsteadiness of memory destruction of

intellect; through the destruction of the intellect he perishes.”



In this section of the Chandipaath all the verses detail the different battles of Mother Divine, and how her Sura vibration can help us not stray in life, by maintaining the connection between Buddhi and Vivek.

In chapter 8 of the third Mahasaraswati section, Mahakali appears again to slay the asura named Raktabeeja. Raktabeeja translates into “too many devil destructive thoughts, which multiply into millions instantly.” Every drop of blood Raktabeeja sheds transforms into another demon as it touches the earth. A unique strategy has to be devised to vanquish him. A fiery burst of energy emerging from Devi's third eye takes the dark skeletal form of goddess Kali. With her huge mouth and enormous tongue she ferociously laps up Raktabeeja's blood, thus preventing the uprising of further demons.

The story continues in which Devi, Kali and a group of Matrikas destroy the demonic brothers Sumbha (chapter 10) and Nisumbha (chapter 9). In the final battle against Shumbha, Devi absorbs Kali and the matrikas and stands alone for the final battle. I remember my grandfather describing to me a person happy with name, fame, and all kinds of wealth from Mahalaxmi. If this person gets carried away and forgets to honor Mahakali, time, if they do not honor and surrender to her, then “dwesha” or aversion to good actions, one of the six Satwa Gunas, pops up. Then that person thinks that he or she can do whatever they want to do, including hurting or destroying innocent people to get to their desires. Just like Raktabeeja sacrifices his blood to create more demonic destructive entities and spread more destruction. People caught up in Raktabeeja’s game can even sacrifice their own kin or friends. To deal with him, Mahakali multiplies herself, to which the demon responds by spreading more of his blood, then Mahakali rolls out her tongue and swallows all the blood before a single drop of it falls to the ground sprouting into more demons. The demon loses all his blood, and gets destroyed.

My grandfather said: this is the message for all those who instead of thanking Mother Divine for the prosperity in their lives, use their wealth for self-destruction and the misery of others.

The demons can be conquered when we sit down in silence, and let the mind dive into silence through the help of Mother Divine’s seed mantras, so the intellect connects with the light of the soul, the mind is appeased, and discernment or vivek sets in. Then no a-sura vibration can disrupt the mind. And blessing flourish.

Before starting to recite the verses of Mother Divine’s victory over the asuras, we place a clay pot with soil in it and sprinkle barley seed sand water them daily with Ganges water. The blades of grass that sprout by the 10th day are called “jyanthi” or victory. On the 10th day, after



completing the chanting, the recitation of all the chapters, all the mantra-s - including curse removal mantras - on the 10th day, we celebrate the symbolic victory over all these demons, Madhu and Kaitabh, Mahishasur, Dhumralochan, and Sumbhanishumbh. Then we distribute the barley grass and tie red thread on our wrists taking the vow to allow Mother Divine to always be active in the world through us, and we remember to practice the honoring and surrendering to Mahakali, to the Mother of time, so that we may be victorious in our endeavors and encounter the fulfillment of all our wishes.

