

Durga Saptashati

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The Devisukta of the Rig Veda
Explanations based upon the writings of
Shree Devadatta Kali

Devisukta is a hymn of eight verses found in the most ancient
Hindu sacred text, the Rig Veda (in the 10th mandala).

The Devisukta (RV 10.125) declares that the Goddess is the power expressed through all the gods, that they are united in her who shines with consciousness, that her presence is all-pervading, that she supports all of creation, that she is the source of righteousness and the revealer of truth, that she is the source of all worlds, yet that she shines transcendent beyond them. Among Shaktas this Vedic hymn is held in high esteem and is considered to be the source from which the entire Chandi sprang. Later, the Chandi itself was elaborated upon in the Puranas and Tantras.

The Chandi goes by two other names. The most common and widely recognized is Devimahatmya [The Glory of the Goddess]. The other is Sri Durga Saptashati [Seven Hundred Verses to Sri Durga].

Durga Saptashati Katha

Explanations from other sources

Abridged and paraphrased in a few places

This Katha can be divided into three sections:

1. The demons Madhu and Kaitabha destroyed by Lord Vishnu
2. Demon Mahishasur destroyed by Mahamaya (Mother Durga– the united light or combined power of the gods.)
3. The destructions of demons Shumbha and Nishumbha.

The demons Madhu and Kaitabha destroyed by Lord Vishnu

Section one

Chapter 1 The Slaying of Madhu and Kaitabha

Markandeya said (to his disciple Krasustuki Bhaguri):

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There was a king by the name of Suratha who ruled the kingdom of Kola. He was a good king who protected his people and treated them as his sons. Some ministers of Kola plotted against king Suratha and deposed him. Deprived of his kingdom, king Suratha rode alone on horseback into a dense forest. There he came to the hermitage of sage Medhas, where the sage's disciples enhanced the atmosphere of the place and the wild animals looked mild as if influenced by the tranquil vibrations that emanated from the hermitage.

The sage received king Suratha with due hospitality. While on a walkabout near the hermitage, king Suratha reflected in his own mind. Overcome with attachment, he thought:

'I do not know whether the capital (which was) well-guarded by my ancestors and recently deserted by me is being guarded righteously or not by my servants of evil conduct. I do not know what enjoyments (care) my chief elephant, heroic and always elated, and now fallen into the hands of my foes, will get. Those who were my constant followers and received favour, riches and food from me, now certainly pay homage to other kings. The treasures which I gathered with great care will be squandered by those constant spendthrifts, who are addicted to improper expenditures.'

The king was continually thinking of these and other things.

Near the hermitage of the sage the king saw a merchant, and asked him:

'Who are you? What is the reason for your coming here? Wherefore do you appear as if afflicted with grief and depressed in mind?'

Hearing this speech of the king, uttered in a friendly spirit, the merchant bowed respectfully and replied to the king.

The merchant said: 'I am a merchant named Samadhi, born in a wealthy family. I have been cast out by my sons and wife, who are wicked through greed of wealth. My wife and sons have misappropriated my riches and made me devoid of wealth. Cast out by my trusted kinsmen, I have come to the forest grief-stricken. Dwelling here, I do not know anything about the welfare of my sons, kinsmen and wife. How are they? Are my sons living good or evil lives?'

The king said: 'Why is your mind affectionately attached to those covetous folks, your sons, wife and others, who have deprived you of your wealth?'

The merchant said: 'This very thought has occurred to me, just as you have uttered it. What can I do? My mind does not leave attachment; it bears deep affection to those very persons who have driven me out in their greed for wealth, abandoning love for a father and attachment to one's master and kinsmen. I do not comprehend although, I know it. O noble hearted king, how is it that the mind is prone to love even towards worthless kinsmen? On

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account of them I heave heavy sighs and feel dejected. What can I do since my mind does not become hard towards those unloving ones?’

Markandeya said: Then the merchant Samadhi and the noble king Suratha together approached the sage (Medhas); and after observing the etiquette worthy of him and as was proper, they sat down and conversed (with him).

The king said: 'Sir, I wish to ask you one thing. Be pleased to reply to it. Without the control of my intellect, my mind is afflicted with sorrow. Though I have lost the kingdom, like an ignorant man- though I know it- I have an attachment to all the paraphernalia of my kingdom. How is this, O best of sages? And this merchant has been disowned by his children, wife and servants, and forsaken by his own people; still he is inordinately affectionate towards them. Thus, both he and I, drawn by attachment towards objects whose defects we do know, are exceedingly unhappy. How does this happen, then, sir, that though we are aware of it, this delusion persists? This delusion besets me as well as him, blinded as we are in respect of discrimination?’

The Rishi said: ‘Sir, every being has the knowledge of objects perceivable by the senses. And object of sense reaches it in various ways. Some beings are blind by day, and others are blind by night; some beings have equal sight both by day and night. Human beings are certainly endowed with knowledge, but they are not the only beings (to be so endowed), for cattle, birds, animals and other creatures also cognise (objects of senses).

The knowledge that men have, birds and beasts too have; and what they have men also possess; and the rest (like eating and sleeping) is common to both of them. Look at these birds, which though they possess knowledge, and are themselves distressed by hunger are yet, because of the delusion, engaged in feeding grains into the beaks of their young ones. See with what devotion they put the food grains into the beaks of their young ones? Men, O king, are full of desires. Human beings are, O tiger among men, attached to their children because of greed, expecting rewards in return.

Do you not see this? Even so men are hurled into the whirlpool of attachment, the pit of delusion, through the power of Mahamaya (the Great deusion), who makes the existence of the world possible. Marvel not at this. This Mahamaya is the Yoganidra, of Vishnu, the Lord of the world. It is by her the world is deluded. Verily she, the Bhagavati, the Mahamaya forcibly drawing the minds of even the wise, entangles them into delusion. She creates this entire universe, both moving and unmoving. It is she who, when propitious, becomes a boon-giver to human beings for their final liberation. She is the supreme knowledge, the cause of final liberation, and eternal; she is the cause of the bondage of transmigration and the sovereign over all lords.’

The king said: 'Venerable sir, who is that Devi whom you call Mahamaya? How did she come into being, and what is her sphere of action, O sage? What constitutes her nature? What is

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her form? Wherefrom did she originate? All that I wish to hear from you, O you supreme among the knowers of Brahman.'

The Rishi said:

She is eternal, embodied as the universe. By her all this is pervaded. Nevertheless, she incarnates in manifold ways; hear it from me. When she manifests herself in order to accomplish the purposes of the devas, she is said to be born in the world, though she is eternal. At the end of a kalpa when the universe was one ocean (with the waters of the deluge) and the adorable Lord Vishnu stretched out on Sesa and took the mystic slumber, the terrible asuras (demons) the well-known Madhu and Kaitabha, sprung into being from the dirt of Vishnu's ears, and sought to slay Brahma.

Brahma, the father of beings, was sitting in the lotus (that came out) from Vishnu's navel. Seeing these two fierce asuras and Janardhana (Vishnu) asleep, and with a view to awakening Hari (Vishnu), Brahma with concentrated mind extolled Yoganidra, dwelling in Hari's eyes (appeared as Sleep in the eyes of Vishnu). The resplendent Lord Brahma extolled the incomparable Goddess of Vishnu, Yoganidra, the queen of cosmos, the supporter of the worlds, the cause of the sustenance and dissolution alike (of the universe).

Brahma said: 'O great Mother! 'You are Svaha (the energy of Devas). You are Svadha (the energy of Pitris). You are verily the Vasat (the emblem of sacrifice). You are the embodiment of Svara (Vedic accent). You are Sudha (the nectar). O eternal and imperishable One, you are the embodiment of the threefold mantra. You are Savitri and the supreme Mother of the devas. You are the goddess of good fortune, the ruler, modesty, intelligence characterized by knowledge, bashfulness, nourishment, contentment, tranquillity and forbearance. Armed with sword, spear, club, discus, conch, bow, arrows, slings and iron mace, you are terrible (and at the same time) you are pleasing, yea more pleasing than all the pleasing things and exceedingly beautiful. You are indeed the supreme Isvari, beyond the high and low. O Devi, bewitch these two unassailable asuras Madhu and Kaitabha with your superior powers. Let Vishnu, the Master of the world, be quickly awakened from sleep and rouse up his nature to slay these two great asuras.'

The Rishi said: There, the Devi of delusion extolled thus by Brahma, the creator, in order to awaken Vishnu for the destruction of Madhu and Kaitabha, drew herself out from every part of Vishnu's body, and appeared before Brahma. Janardana (Vishnu), Lord of the universe, rose up from His couch on the universal ocean, and saw those two evil (asuras), Madhu and Kaitabha, of exceeding heroism and power, with eyes red in anger, endeavouring to devour Brahma. Thereupon the all-pervading Lord Vishnu got up and fought with the asuras for five thousand years, using his own arms as weapons. And they, frenzied with their exceeding power, and deluded by Mahamaya, exclaimed to Vishnu, ' Ask a boon from us.'

Lord Vishnu said: 'If you are satisfied with me, you must both be slain by me now. What need is there of any other boon here? My choice is this much indeed.'

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The Rishi said: Those two (asuras), thus bewitched (by Mahamaya), gazing then at the entire world turned into water, told Lord Vishnu the lotus eyed One, 'Slay us at the spot where the earth is not flooded with water.' The Rishi said: Saying 'Be it so', Lord Vishnu, the great wielder of conch, discus and mace, took them on His loins and there severed their heads with His discus. Thus she (Mahamaya) herself appeared when praised by Brahma. Now listen again the glory of this Devi that I will tell you. Here ends the first chapter called 'The slaying of Madhu and Kaitabha' of Devi Mahatmya Sri Durga Saptashati in Markandeya Purana, during the period of Savarni, the Manu.

Section Two

Demon Mahishasur destroyed by Mahamaya

(Mother Durga– the united light or combined power of the gods.)

Chapter 2

Slaughter of the Armies of Mahishasura

Of yore when Mahishasura was the lord of asuras and Indra the lord of devas, there was a war between the devas and asuras for a full hundred years. In that the army of the devas was vanquished by the valorous asuras. After conquering all the devas, Mahishasura became the lord of heaven (Indra).

Then the vanquished devas headed by Brahma, the lord of beings, went to the place where Siva and Vishnu were. The devas described to them in detail, as it had happened, the story of their defeat wrought by Mahishasura.

'He (Mahishasura) himself has assumed the jurisdictions of Surya, Indra, Agni, Vayu, Chandra, Yama and Varuna and other (devas). Thrown out from heaven by that evil-natured Mahisha, the hosts of devas wander on the earth like mortals. All that has been done by the enemy of the devas, has been related to you both, and we have sought shelter under you both. May both of you be pleased to think out the means of his destruction.'

Having thus heard the words of the devas, Vishnu was angry and also Siva, and their faces became fierce with frowns. There issued forth a great light from the face of Vishnu who was full of intense anger, and from that of Brahma and Siva too. From the bodies of Indra and other devas also sprang forth a very great light. And (all) this light united together. The devas saw there a concentration of light like a mountain blazing excessively, pervading all the quarters with its flames. Then that unique light, produced from the bodies of all the devas, pervading the three worlds with its lustre, combined into one and became a female form; the manifestation of the lights of other devas too (contributed to the being of the) auspicious Devi. Then looking at her, who had come into being from the assembled lights of all the devas, the immortals who were oppressed by Mahishasura experienced joy.

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The bearer of Pinaka (Siva) drawing forth a trident from his own trident presented it to her; and Vishnu bringing forth a discus out of his own discus gave her. Varuna gave her a conch, Agni a spear; and Maruta gave a bow as well as two quivers full of arrows.

Indra, lord of devas, bringing forth a thunderbolt out of (his own) thunderbolt and a bell from that of his elephant Airavata, gave her. Yama gave a staff from his own staff of Death and Varuna, the lord of waters, a noose; and Brahma, the lord of beings, gave a string of beads and a water-pot.

The earth quaked and all the mountains rocked. 'Victory to you,' exclaimed the devas in joy to her, the lion-rider. The sages, who bowed their bodies in devotion, extolled her. Seeing the three worlds agitated the foes of devas, mobilized all their armies and rose up together with uplifted weapons. Mahishasura, exclaiming in wrath, 'Ha! What is this?' rushed towards that roar, surrounded by innumerable asuras. Then he saw the Devi pervading the three worlds with her lustre. Making the earth bend with her footstep, scraping the sky with her diadem, shaking the nether worlds with the twang of the bowstring, and standing there pervading all the quarters around with her thousand arms. Then began a battle between that Devi and the enemies of the devas, in which the quarters of the sky were illumined by the weapons and arms hurled diversely. The profuse blood from the asuras, elephants and horses flowed immediately like large rivers amidst that army of the asuras. As fire consumes a huge heap of straw and wood, so did Ambika destroy that vast army of asuras in no time.

Here ends the second chapter called 'Slaughter of the armies of Mahisasura' of Devi-Mahatmya in Markandeya-Purana, during the period of Savarni, the Manu.

Chapter 3

The Slaying of Mahishasura

Seeing the great asura swollen with rage and advancing towards her, Chandika displayed her wrath in order to slay him.

She flung her noose over him and bound the great asura. Thus, bound in the great battle, he quitted his buffalo form. Then suddenly he became a lion. While Ambika cut off the head (of his lion form), he took the appearance of a man with sword in hand. Immediately then the Devi with her arrows chopped off the man together with his sword and shield. Then he became a big elephant. (The elephant) tugged at her great lion with his trunk and roared loudly, but as he was dragging, the Devi cut off his trunk with her sword. The great asura then resumed his buffalo shape and shook the three worlds with their movable and immovable objects.

And she with showers of arrows pulverized (those mountains) hurled at her, and spoke to him in flurried words, the colour of her face accentuated with the intoxication of the divine drink. The Devi said: 'Roar, roar, O fool, for a moment while I drink this wine. When you will be slain by me, the devas will soon roar in this very place.'

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The Rishi said: Having exclaimed thus, she jumped and landed herself on that great asura, pressed him on the neck with her foot and struck him with her spear and thereupon, caught him under her foot. Mahishasura half issued forth (in his real form) from his own (buffalo) mouth, being completely overcome by the valour of the Devi. Fighting thus with his half-revealed form, the great asura was overpowered by the Devi who struck off his head with her great sword. Then, crying in consternation, the whole asura army perished; and all the hosts of deva were in exultation. With the great sages of heaven, the devas praised the Devi. The Gandharva chiefs sang and the beavies of apsaras danced. Here ends the third chapter called 'The Slaying of Mahishasura' of Devi-Mahatmya in Markandeya Purana during the period of Savarni, the Manu.

Chapter 4 The Devi Stuti

The Rishi said: When that most valiant but evil-natured Mahishasura and the army of that foe of the devas were destroyed by the Devi, Indra and the hosts of devas uttered their words of praise, their necks and shoulders reverently bent, and bodies rendered beautiful with horripilation and exultation.

'To that Ambika who is worthy of worship by all devas and sages and pervades this world by her power and who is the embodiment of the entire powers of all the hosts of devas, we bow in devotion. May she grant us auspicious things!

'May Chandika, whose incomparable greatness and power Bhagavan Vishnu, Brahma and Hara are unable to describe, bestow her mind on protecting the entire world and on destroying the fear of evil.

'O Devi, we bow before you, who are yourself good fortune in the dwellings of the virtuous, and ill-fortune in those of the vicious, intelligence in the hearts of the learned, faith in the hearts of the good, and modesty in the hearts of the high-born. May you protect the universe!

'You who are always bounteous, with whom you are well pleased, those (fortunate ones) are indeed the object of esteem in the country, theirs are riches, theirs are glories, and their acts of righteousness perish not; they are indeed blessed and possessed of devoted children, servants and wives.

'By your grace, O Devi, the blessed individual does daily all righteous deeds with utmost care and thereby attains to heaven. Are you not, therefore O Devi, the bestower of reward in all the three worlds?

'When called to mind in a difficult pass, you remove fear from every person. When called to mind by those in happiness, you bestow a mind still further pious. Which goddess but you, O dispeller of poverty, pain and fear, has an ever-sympathetic heart for helping everyone?'

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Thus, the supporter of the worlds was praised by the devas, worshipped with celestial flowers that blossomed in Nandana and with perfumes and unguents; and with devotion all of them offered her - heavenly incense. Benignly serene in countenance she spoke to all obeisant devas.

The Devi said: 'Choose all of you, O devas, whatever you desire of me. (Gratified immensely with these hymns, I grant it with great pleasure)' The devas said: 'Since our enemy, this Mahishasura, has been slain by Bhagavati (i.e you) everything has been accomplished, and nothing remains to be done. And if a boon is to be granted to us by you, O Maheshvari, whenever we think of you again, destroy our direct calamities. O Mother of spotless countenance, and whatever mortal (human) shall praise you with these hymns, may you, who have become gracious towards us, also be gracious for him and increase his wealth, and other fortunes together with riches, prosperity and life, and good wife, O Ambika!'

The Rishi said: O King, being thus propitiated by the devas for the sake of the world and for their own sake, Bhadrakali said, 'Be it so' and vanished from their sight. Thus, have I narrated, O King, how the Devi who desires the good of all the three worlds made her appearance of yore out of the bodies of the devas.

And again how, as a benefactress of the devas, she appeared in the form of Gauri for the slaying of wicked asuras as well as Shumbha and Nishumbha, and for the protection of worlds, listen as I relate it. I shall tell it to you as it happened. Here ends the fourth chapter called 'The Devi Stuti' of the Devi-Mahatmya in Markandeya-Purana during the period of Savarni, the Manu.

Section Three

The destruction of demons Shumbha and Nishumbha.

Chapter 5

Shumbha and Nishumbha

The Rishi said: Of yore Indra's (sovereignty) over the three worlds and his portions of the sacrifices were taken away by the asuras, Shumbha and Nishumbha, by force of their pride and strength. The two, themselves, took over likewise, the offices of the sun, the moon, Kubera, Yama, and Varuna.

They themselves exercised Vayu's authority and Agni's duty. Deprived of their lordships and sovereignties, the devas were defeated. Deprived of their functions and expelled by these two great asuras, all the devas thought of the invincible Devi. She had granted us the boon, "Whenever in calamities you think of me, that very moment I will put an end to all your worst calamities."

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Resolving thus, the devas went to Himavat, lord of the mountains, and there extolled the Devi, who is the illusive power of Vishnu. The devas said: 'Salutations to the Devi, to the Mahadevi. Salutations always to her who is ever auspicious. Salutation to her who is the primordial cause and the sustaining power. With attention, we have made obeisance to her. We bow to her who is welfare; we make salutations to her who is prosperity and success. Salutation to the consort of Shiva who is herself the good fortune as well as misfortune of kings. Salutations always to Durga who takes one across in difficulties, who is essence, who is the authority of everything; who is the knowledge of discrimination.'

O Prince, while the devas were thus engaged in praises and (other acts of adoration), Parvati came there to bathe in the waters of the Ganga. She, the lovely-browed, said to those devas, 'Who is praised by you here?' An auspicious goddess, sprung forth from her physical sheath, gave the reply: 'This hymn is addressed to me by the assembled devas set at naught by the asura Shumbha and routed in battle by Nishumbha.'

Because that Ambika came out of Parvati's physical sheath (Kosa), she is glorified as Kaushiki in all the worlds. After she had issued forth, Parvati became dark and was called Kalika and stationed on mount Himalaya.

Then, Chanda, and Munda, two servants of Shumbha and Nishumbha, saw that Ambika (Kausiki) bearing a surpassingly charming form. They both told Shumbha: 'O King, a certain woman, most surpassingly beautiful, dwells there shedding lustre on mount Himalaya. Such supreme beauty was never seen by any one anywhere. Ascertain who that Goddess is and take possession of her, O Lord of the asuras! Nishumbha has every kind of gem produced in the sea. Fire also gave you two garments, which are purified by fire. Thus, O Lord of asuras, all gems have been brought by you. Why this beautiful lady-jewel is not seized by you?'

The Rishi said: On hearing these words of Chanda and Munda, Shumbha sent the great asura Sugriva as messenger to the Devi.

He said: Go and tell her thus in my words and do the thing in such a manner that she may quickly come to me in love. He went there where the Devi was staying in a very beautiful spot on the mountain and spoke to her in fine and sweet words.

The messenger said: O Devi, Shumbha, lord of asuras, is the supreme sovereign of three worlds. Sent by him as messenger, I have come here to your presence. Harken to what has been said by him whose command is never resisted among the devas and who has vanquished all the foes of the asuras: (He says), "All the three worlds are mine and the devas are obedient to me. We look upon you, O Devi, as the jewel of womankind in the world. You who are such, come to me, since we are the enjoyers of the best objects. Take to me or to my younger brother Nishumbha of great prowess, O unsteady-eyed lady, for you are in truth a jewel. Wealth, great and beyond compare, you will get by marrying me. Think over this in your mind and become my wife."

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The Rishi said: Thus told, Durga the adorable and auspicious, by whom this universe is supported, then became serene.

The Devi said: You have spoken truth; nothing false has been uttered by you in this matter. Shumbha is indeed the sovereign of the three worlds and likewise is also Nishumbha. But in this matter, how can that which has been promised be made false? Hear what promise I had made already out of foolishness. "He who conquers me in battle, removes my pride and is my match in strength in the world shall be my husband." So, let Shumbha come here then, or Nishumbha the great asura. Vanquishing me here let him soon take my hand in marriage. Why delay?

The messenger said: O Devi, you are haughty. Talk not so before me. Which man in the three worlds will stand before Shumbha and Nishumbha? All the devas verily cannot stand face to face with even the other asuras in battle. Why mention you, O Devi, a single woman?

Indra and all other devas could not stand in battle against Shumbha and other demons, how will you, a woman, face them? On my word itself, you go to Shumbha and Nishumbha. Let it not be that you go to them with your dignity lost by being dragged by your hair.

The Devi said: Yes, it is; Shumbha is strong and so is Nishumbha exceedingly heroic! What can I do since there stands my ill-considered vow taken long ago? Go back and tell the lord of asuras carefully all this that I have said; let him do whatever he considers proper.

Here ends the fifth chapter called 'Devi's conversation with the messenger' of the Devi-Mahatmya in Markandeya-Purana during the period of Savarni, the Manu.

Chapter 6

The Slaying of Dhumralochana

The Rishi said: The messenger, filled with indignation on hearing the words of the Devi, returned and related them in detail to the king of the daityas. Then the asura monarch, enraged on hearing that report from his messenger, told Dhumralochana, a chieftain of the daityas: 'O Dhumralochana, hasten together with your army and fetch here by force that shrew, distressed when dragged by her hair. Or if anyone else stands up as her saviour, let him be slain, be he a god, a yaksa or a gandharva.'

The Rishi said: Then the asura Dhumralochana, commanded thus by Shumbha, went forth quickly, accompanied by sixty thousand asuras. On seeing the Devi stationed on the snowy mountain, he asked her aloud, 'Come to the presence of Shumbha and Nishumbha.' When Sheba, the lord of asuras, heard that asura Dhumralochana was slain by the Devi and all his army was destroyed by the lion of the Devi, he was infuriated, his lip quivered, and he commanded the two mighty asuras Chanda and Munda: 'O Chanda, O Munda, go there with large forces, and bring her here speedily, dragging her by her hair or binding her. But if you have any doubt about doing that, then let the asuras strike (her) in the fight with all their

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weapons. When that shrew is wounded, and her lion stricken down, seize that Ambika, bind and bring her quickly.' Here ends the sixth chapter called 'The Slaying of Dhumralochana' of Devi-Mahatmya in Markandeya Purana during the period of Savarni, the Manu.

Chapter 7 The Slaying of Chanda and Munda

The Rishi said:

Then at his command the asuras, fully armed, and with Chanda and Munda at their head, marched in fourfold array. They saw the Devi, smiling gently, seated upon the lion on a huge golden peak of the great mountain.

On seeing her, some of them excited themselves and made an effort to capture her, and others approached her, with their bows bent and swords drawn.

Thereupon Ambika became terribly angry with those foes, and in her anger her countenance then became dark as ink. Out from the surface of her forehead, fierce with frown, suddenly issued Kali of terrible countenance, armed with a sword and noose. Bearing the strange skull-topped staff, decorated with a garland of skulls, clad in a tiger's skin, very appalling owing to her emaciated flesh, with gaping mouth, fearful with her tongue lolling out, having deep-sunk reddish eyes and filling the regions of the sky with her roars, and falling upon impetuously and slaughtering the great asuras in that army, she devoured those hosts of the foes of the devas.

Then the Devi, mounting upon her great lion, rushed at Chanda, and seizing him by his hair, severed his head with her sword. Seeing Chanda being slain, Munda also rushed at her. She felled him also to the ground, striking him with her sword in her fury.

Seeing the most valiant Chanda and Munda laid low, the remaining army there became panicky and fled in all directions. And Kali, holding the heads of Chanda and Munda in her hands, approached Chandika and said, 'Here have I brought you the heads of Chanda and Munda as two great animal offerings in this sacrifice of battle; Shumbha and Nishumbha, you shall yourself slay.'

The Rishi said: Thereupon seeing those asuras, Chanda and Munda brought to her, the auspicious Chandika said to Kali these playful words: 'Because you have brought me both Chanda and Munda, you O Devi, shall be famed in the world by the name Chamunda. Here ends the seventh chapter called 'The slaying of Chanda and Munda' of Devi-Mahatmya in Markandeya Purana, during the period of Savarni, the Manu.

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Chapter 8

The Slaying of Raktabija

Seeing the asuras harassed by the band of Matrs and fleeing, the great asura Raktabija strode forward to fight in wrath. Whenever from his body there fell to the ground a drop of blood, at that moment rose up from the earth asura of his stature.

The great asura fought with Indra's shakti with club in his hand; then Aindri also struck Ranktabija with her thunderbolt. Blood flowed quickly and profusely from him who was wounded by the thunderbolt. From the blood rose up (fresh) combatants of his form and valour. As many drops of blood fell from his body, so many persons came into being, with his courage, strength and valour. And those persons also, sprung up from his blood, fought there with the Matrs in a more dreadful manner hurling the very formidable weapons. And again, when his head was wounded by the fall of her thunderbolt, his blood flowed and therefrom were born persons in thousands. Vaisnavi struck him with her discus in the battle; Aindri beat that lord of asuras with her club. The world was pervaded by thousands of great asuras who were of his stature and who rose up from the blood that flowed from him when cloven by the discus of Vaisnavi. Kaumari struck the great asura Raktabija with her spear, Varahi with her sword, and Maheshvari with her trident. And Raktabija, that great asura also, filled with wrath, struck everyone of the Matrs severally with his club.

From the stream of blood that fell on earth from him when he received multiple wounds by the spears, darts and other weapons, hundreds of asuras came into being. And those asuras that were born from the blood of Raktabija pervaded the whole world; the devas got intensely alarmed at this. Seeing the devas dejected, Chandika laughed and said to Kali, 'O Chamunda, open out your mouth wide; with this mouth quickly take in the drops of blood generated by the blow of my weapon and (also) the great asuras born of the drops of blood of Raktabija. Roam about in the battlefield, devouring the great asuras that spring from him. So, shall this daitya, with his blood emptied, perish. As you go on devouring these, other fierce (asuras) will not be born.'

Having enjoined her thus, the Devi next smote him (Raktabija) with her dart. Then Kali drank Raktabija's blood with her mouth. Then and there he struck Chandika with his club. The blow of his club caused her not even the slightest pain. And from his stricken body wherever blood flowed copiously, there Chamunda swallowed it with her mouth. Then Chamunda devoured those great asuras who sprang up from the flow of blood in her mouth and drank his (Raktabija's) blood. The Devi (Kausiki) smote Raktabija with her dart, thunderbolt, arrows, swords, and spears, when Chamunda went on drinking his blood. Stricken with a multitude of weapons and bloodless, the great asura (Raktabija) fell on the ground, O King. Thereupon the devas attained great joy, O King. The band of Matrs who sprang from them danced, being intoxicated with blood.

Here ends the eighth chapter called 'The Slaying of Raktabija' of Devi-Mahatmya in Markandeya-Purana, during the period of Savarni, the Manu.

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Chapter 9

The Slaying of Nishumbha

The king (Suratha) said: 'Wonderful is this that you, adorable sir, have related to me about the greatness of the Devi's act in slaying Raktabija. I wish to hear further what the very irate Shumbha and Nishumbha did after Raktabija was killed.' The Rishi said: After Raktabija was slain and other asuras were killed in the fight, the asura Shumbha and Nishumbha gave way to unbounded wrath. Enraged on seeing his great army slaughtered, Nishumbha then rushed forward with the chief forces of the asuras. In front of him behind him and on both sides of him, great asuras, enraged and biting their lips, advanced to slay the Devi. Shumbha also, mighty in valour, went forward, surrounded, with his own troops to slay Chandika in this rage, after fighting with the Mats. Then commenced severe combat between the Devi on one side and on the other, Shumbha and Nishumbha who, like two thunderclouds, rained a most tempestuous shower of arrows on her. Chandika with numerous arrows quickly split the arrows shot by the two asuras and smote the two lords of asuras on their limbs with her mass of weapons.

As Nishumbha, the afflicter of the devas, was advancing with the dart in hand, Chandika pierced him in the heart with a swiftly hurled dart. From his (Nishumbha's) heart that was pierced by the dart, issued forth another person of great strength and valour, exclaiming (at the Devi) 'Stop.' Then the Devi, laughing aloud, severed the head of him, who issued forth, with her sword. Thereupon he fell to the ground. The lion then devoured those asuras whose necks he had crushed with his fierce teeth, and Kali and Sivaduti devoured others.

Here ends the ninth chapter called 'the Slaying of Nishumbha' of Devi Mahatmya in Markandeya-Purana during the period of Savarni, the Manu.

Chapter 10

The Slaying of Shumba

The Rishi said: Seeing his brother Nishumbha slain, who was dear to him as his life, and his army being slaughtered, Shumbha angrily said. 'O Durga who are puffed up with pride of strength, don't show your pride (here). Though you are exceedingly haughty, you, resorting to the strength of others, fight.' The Devi said: 'I am all alone in the world here. Who else is there besides me? See, O vile one, these Goddesses, who are but my own powers, entering into my own self!' Then all those, Brahmani and the rest, were absorbed in the body of the Devi. Ambika alone then remained. The Devi said: 'The numerous forms, which I projected by my power here - those have been withdrawn by me, and (now) I stand alone. Be steadfast in combat.' The Rishi said: Then began a dreadful battle between them both, the Devi and Shumbha, while all the devas and asuras looked on. With showers of arrows, with sharp weapons and frightful missiles, both engaged again in a combat that frightened all the worlds.

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The daitya-king, wounded by the blow of her palm fell on the earth, but immediately he rose up again. Seizing the Devi, he sprang up and mounted on high into the sky. There also Chandika, without any support, fought with him. Then the daitya (Shumbha) and Chandika fought as never before, with each other in the sky in a close contact, which wrought surprise to the Siddhas and sages. Ambika then, after carrying on a close fight for a very long time with him, lifted him up, whirled him around and flung him down to earth. Flung thus, the evil-natured (Shumbha) reaching the earth and raising his fist, hastily rushed forward desiring to kill Chandika. Seeing that lord of all the daitya-folk approaching, the Devi, piercing him on the chest with a dart, threw him down to earth. Pierced by the pointed dart of the Devi, he fell lifeless on the ground, shaking the entire earth with its seas, islands and mountains.

When that evil-natured (asura) was slain, the universe became happy and regained perfect peace, and the sky grew clear. Flaming portent-clouds that were in evidence before became tranquil, and the rivers kept within their courses when (Shumbha) was stricken down there. When he had been slain, the minds of all the bands of devas became overjoyed, and the Gandharvas sang sweetly. Others sounded (their instruments), and the bands of nymphs danced; likewise, favourable winds blew; the sun became very brilliant; the sacred fires blazed peacefully and tranquil became the strange sounds that had risen in different quarters.

Here ends the tenth chapter called 'The Slaying of Shumbha' of Devi- Mahatmya in Markandeya-Purana, during the period of Savarni, the Manu.

Chapter 11

Hymn to Narayani

The Rishi said: When the great lord of asuras was slain there by the Devi, Indra and other devas led by Agni, with their object fulfilled and their cheerful faces illumining the quarters, praised her, (Katyayani). The devas said: 'O Devi, you who remove the sufferings of your suppliants, be gracious. Be propitious, O Mother of the whole world. Be gracious, O Mother of the universe. Protect the universe. You are, O Devi, the ruler of all that is moving and unmoving. You are the sole substratum of the world, because you subsist in the form of the earth. By you, who exist in the shape of water, all this (universe) is gratified, O Devi of inviolable valour! You are the power of Vishnu and have endless valour. You are the primeval maya, which is the source of the universe; by you all this (universe) has been thrown into an illusion. O Devi. If you become gracious, you become the cause of final emancipation in this world.

Salutation be to you, O Devi Narayani, O you who abide as intelligence in the hearts of all creatures and bestow enjoyment and liberation. Salutation be to you, O Narayani, O you who, in the form of minutes, moments and other divisions of time, bring about change in things, and have (thus) the power to destroy the universe. Salutation be to you O Narayani, O you who are the good of all good, O auspicious Devi, who accomplish every object, the

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giver of refuge, O three eyed Gauri! Salutation be to you, O Narayani, you who have the power of creation, sustenance and destruction and are eternal. You are the substratum and embodiment of the three gunas. Salutation be to you, O Narayani, O you who are intent on saving the dejected and distressed that take refuge under you O you, Devi, who removes the sufferings of all!

Salutation be to you, O Narayani, O you who are good fortune, modesty, great wisdom, faith, nourishment and Svadha, O you who are immovable O you, great Night and great Illusion. Salutation be to you, O Narayani, O you who are intelligence and Sarasvati, O best one, prosperity, consort of Vishnu, dark one, the great nature, be propitious. O Queen of all, you who exist in the form of all, and possess every might, save us from error, O Devi. Salutation be to you, Devi Durga! May this benign countenance of yours adorned with three eyes, protect us from all fears.

When satisfied, you destroy all illness but when wrathful you (frustrate) all the longed-for desires. No calamity befalls men who have sought you. Those who have sought you become verily a refuge of others. Who is there except you in the sciences, in the scriptures, and in the Vedic sayings to light the lamp of discrimination? (Still) you cause this universe to whirl about again and again within the dense darkness of the depths of attachment. Where raksasas and snakes of virulent poison (are), where foes and hosts of robbers (exist), where forest conflagrations (occur), there and in the mid-sea, you stand and save the world. O Queen of the universe, you protect the universe. As the self of the universe, you support the universe. You are the (goddess) worthy to be adored by the Lord of the universe. Those who bow in devotion to you themselves become the refuge of the universe. O Devi, be pleased and protect us always from fear of foes, as you have done just now by the slaughter of asuras. And destroy quickly the sins of all worlds and the great calamities, which have sprung from the maturing of evil portents. O Devi you who remove the afflictions of the universe, be gracious to us who have bowed to you. O you worthy of adoration by the dwellers of the three worlds, be boon-giver to the worlds.

The Devi said: O Devas, I am prepared to bestow a boon. Choose whatever boon you desire in your mind, for the welfare of the world. I shall grant it. The devas said: ' O Queen of all, in this same manner, you must destroy all our enemies and all the afflictions of three worlds.' The Devi said: 'When the twenty-eighth age has arrived during the period of Avaisvata Manu, two other great asuras, Shumbha and Nishumbha will be born. Then born from the womb of Yashoda, in the home of cowherd Nanda, and dwelling on the Vindhya mountains, I will destroy them both. Thus, whenever trouble arises due to the advent of the danavas, I shall incarnate and destroy the foes.'

Here ends the eleventh chapter called 'Hymn to Narayani' of Devi-Mahatmyam in Markandeya Purana, during the period of Savarni, the Manu.

Chapter 12 Eulogy of the Merits

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The Devi said: 'And whoever with a concentrated mind shall pray to me constantly with these hymns, I shall without doubt put down every trouble of his. 'And those who shall laud (the story of) the destruction of Madhu and Kaitabha, the slaughter of Nishumbha likewise and those also who shall listen with devotion to this sublime poem on my greatness on the eighth, the fourteenth and on the ninth days of the fortnight with concentrated mind, to them nothing wrong shall happen, nor calamities that arise from wrong doings nor poverty and never separation from beloved ones. He shall not experience fear from enemies, or from robbers and kings, or from weapons, fire and floods. Hence this poem of my greatness must be chanted by men of concentrated minds and listened to always with devotion; for it is the supreme course of well-being.

May this poem of my glories quell all epidemics, as also the threefold natural calamities. The place of my sanctuary where this poem is duly chanted every day, I will never forsake and there my presence is certain. When sacrifice is offered, during worship, in the fire-ceremony, and at a great festival, this entire poem on my acts must be chanted and heard. I will accept with love the sacrifice and worship that are made and the fire-offering that is offered likewise, whether they are done with due knowledge (of sacrifice) or not. During autumnal season, when the great annual worship is performed, the man hearing this glorification of mine with devotion shall certainly through my grace, be delivered without doubt from all troubles and be blessed with riches, grains and children. Hearing this glorification and auspicious appearances of mine, and my feats of prowess in battles, a man becomes fearless. Enemies perish, welfare accrues and the family rejoices for those who listen to this glorification of mine. Let one listen to this glorification of mine everywhere, at a propitiatory ceremony, on seeing a bad dream, and when there is the great evil influence of planets. (By that means) evil portents subside, as also the unfavourable influence of planets, and the bad dream seen by men turns into a good dream.

It creates peacefulness in children possessed by the seizures of children (i.e., evil spirits), and it is the best promoter of friendship among men when split occurs in their union. It diminishes most effectively the power of all men of evil ways. Verily demons, goblins, and ogres are destroyed by its mere chanting. This entire glorification of mine draws (a devotee) very near to me. And by means of finest flowers, arghya and incenses, and by perfumes and lamps, by feeding Brahmanas, by oblations, by sprinkling (consecrated) water, and by various other offerings and gifts (if one worships) day and night, in a year-the gratification, which is done to me, is attained by listening but once to this holy story (katha) of mine.

The chanting and hearing of the story of my manifestations remove sins, and grant perfect health and protects one from evil spirits; and when my martial exploit in the form of the slaughter of the wicked daityas is listened to, men will have no fear from enemies. And the hymns uttered by you, and those by the divine sages, and those by Brahmanas bestow a pious mind. He who is (lost) on a lonesome spot in a forest, or is surrounded by forest fire, or who is surrounded by robbers in a desolate spot, or who is captured by enemies, or who is pursued by a lion, or tiger, or by wild elephants in a forest, or who, under the orders of a wrathful king, is sentenced to death, or has been imprisoned, or who is tossed about in his

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boat by a tempest in the vast sea, or who is in the most terrible battle under shower of weapons, or who is amidst all kinds of dreadful troubles, or who is afflicted with pain - such a man on remembering this story of mine is saved from his predicament. Through my power, lions etc., robbers and enemies, flee from a distance from him who remembers this story of mine.

The Rishi said: Having spoken thus the adorable Chandika, fierce in prowess, vanished on that very spot even as the Devas were gazing upon her. Thus, O King, the adorable Devi, although eternal, incarnating again and again, protects the world. By her this universe is deluded, and it is she who creates this universe. And when entreated, she bestows supreme knowledge, and when propitiated, she bestows prosperity. By her, the Mahakali, who takes the form of the great destroyer at the end of time, all this cosmic sphere is pervaded.

She indeed takes the form of the great destroyer at the (proper) time. She, the unborn, indeed becomes this creation. She herself, the eternal Being, sustains the beings. In times of prosperity, she indeed is Lakshmi, who bestows prosperity in the homes of men; and in times of misfortune, she herself becomes the goddess of misfortune, and brings about ruin. When praised and worshipped with flowers, incense, perfumes, etc., she bestows wealth and sons, and a mind bent on righteousness and prosperous life.

Here ends the twelfth chapter called 'Eulogy of the Merits' of Devi-Mahatmya in the period of Markandeya-Purana, during the period of Savarni, the Manu.

Chapter 13

The Bestowing of Boons to Suratha and Vaisya

The Rishi said: I have now narrated to you, O King, this sublime poem on the glory of the Devi. The Devi is endowed with such majestic power. By her this world is upheld. Knowledge is similarly conferred by her, the illusive power of Bhagavan Vishnu. By her, you, this merchant and other men of discrimination, are being deluded; and others were deluded (in the past) and will be deluded (in the future). O great King, take refuge in her, the supreme Isvari. She indeed when worshipped bestows on men enjoyment, heaven and final release (from transmigration).

Markandeya said (to his disciple Bhaguri): O great sage, King Suratha who had become despondent consequent on his excessive attachment and the deprivation of his kingdom, and the merchant, having heard this story prostrated before the illustrious Rishi of sever penances and immediately repaired to perform austerities. Both the king and the merchant, in order to obtain a vision of Amba, stationed themselves on the sand-bank of a river and practised penances, chanting the supreme Devi-sukta (hymn to the Devi).

Having made an earthen image of the Devi on the sands of the river, they both worshipped her with flowers, incense, sacred fire and libation of water. Now abstaining from food, and

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now restraining in their food, with their minds on her and with concentration, they both offered sacrifices sprinkled with blood drawn from their own bodies. When they, with controlled minds propitiated her thus for three years, Chandika, the upholder of the world, was well pleased and spoke to them in visible form.

The Devi said: What you solicit, O King, and you, the delight of your family, receive all that from me. Well-pleased I bestow those boons to you both. Markandeya said: Then the King chose a kingdom, imperishable even in another life, and in this life itself, restoration of his own kingdom wherein the power of his enemies is destroyed by force. Then the wise merchant also, whose mind was full of dispassion for the world, chose the knowledge, which removes the attachment (in the form of) 'mine' and 'I'. The Devi said: O King, after slaying your foes in a few days, you shall obtain your own kingdom and it shall last with you there. 'And, when you are dead, you shall gain another birth from the Deva Vivasvat (Sun) and shall be a Manu on earth by name Savarni. And, O the best of merchants, I grant you the boon, which you have desired of me. (Supreme) knowledge shall be yours, for your self-realization. Markandeya said: Having thus granted them both the boon that they desired, the Devi disappeared forthwith, as they were extolling her with devotion. Having thus gained the boon from the Devi, Suratha, the foremost of Kshatriyas, shall obtain a new birth through Surya and shall be the eighth Manu named Savarni.

Here ends the thirteenth chapter called 'The bestowing of boons to Suratha and Vaisya' of Devi-Mahatmya in Markandeya-Purana, during the period of Savarni, the Manu. Here ends the Devi-Mahatmya of 700 Mantras.

Om Tat Sat

The Message Of The Chandi

By Devadatta Kali

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This month's reading is from a lecture given at the Vedanta temple in Hollywood, on November 10th, 2002. Devadatta Kali has been closely associated with the Vedanta Society since 1966. A regular contributor to Vedanta journals throughout the world, the author's book *Chandi, In Praise of the Goddess: The Devimahatmya and Its Meaning*, is due to be published by Nicholas-Hays in December 2003.

In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, [Mahendranath Gupta] records a Sunday afternoon with some visitors to Dakshineswar in the winter of 1883. One of the visitors was well versed in the shastras [the sacred Hindu scriptures], and the conversation caused M. to fall into a

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pensive mood. Having some knowledge of Vedanta, he later asked Sri Ramakrishna, “Is the world unreal?”

Why should it be unreal?” Sri Ramakrishna responded. “What you are asking is a matter for philosophical discussion.” Later that evening Ramakrishna returned to M.’s question and asked him again, “Why should the universe be unreal?” He continued, “The Divine Mother revealed to me in the Kali temple that it was She who had become everything. She showed me that everything was full of Consciousness. The image ..., the altar ..., the water-vessels ..., the door-sill ..., the marble floor ...—all was Consciousness.

“I found everything inside the room soaked, as it were, in Bliss—the Bliss of Satchidananda. I saw a wicked man in front of the Kali temple, but in him I also saw the Power of the Divine Mother vibrating. “That is why I fed a cat with the food that was to be offered to the Divine Mother. I clearly perceived that the Divine Mother Herself had become everything (M., 345-346).”

On many other occasions, M. recorded similar teachings, and on one point Sri Ramakrishna was particularly emphatic. “... Brahman and Shakti are identical. If you accept one, you must accept the other. ... You cannot conceive of the sun’s rays without the sun, nor can you conceive of the sun without its rays. ... One cannot think of the Absolute without the Relative, or of the Relative without the Absolute (M., 134).”

Another time Sri Ramakrishna said: “That which is Brahman is also Kali, the Mother, the Primal Energy. When inactive It is called Brahman. Again, when creating, preserving and destroying, It is called Shakti. Still water is an illustration of Brahman. The same water, moving in waves, may be compared to Shakti, Kali (M., 634-635).” “Water is water, whether it moves or is still (M., 835).”

These are consistent teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, spoken from his own experience, but they are not the teachings of Sankara’s Vedanta. Without question, Ramakrishna was well versed in Vedantic teaching. We know that toward the end of 1865, he took initiation from an austere monk named Tota Puri, practiced the disciplines of Sankara’s Advaita Vedanta and in a short while attained nirvikalpa samadhi, the realization of nondual consciousness. But four years earlier Ramakrishna had undergone an intensive course of Tantric sadhana, taught to him by an itinerant holy woman known as the Bhairavi. She was a Shakta, a worshiper of the Divine Mother.

Nor was this Sri Ramakrishna’s first exposure to Shakta teachings. Earlier still, at the age of 19, when the young Ramakrishna agreed to be employed as a priest at the Dakshineswar Kali temple, he was trained by his older brother Ramkumar in the Mother’s worship and in the recitation of the Chandi, the great scripture on the Divine Mother (Saradananda, 133-134).

The Chandi declares that the Mother is the supreme reality and that she herself has become this universe. We do not know who composed the Chandi, only that its author or authors

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created the most widely known and most sacred of all Shakta texts about sixteen hundred years ago. Some of the traditions preserved in the Chandi are inconceivably older. We know from the evidence of archeology that some of the Chandi's ideas on the Motherhood of God go back six thousand years or more. Votive statues that survive from neolithic India and Pakistan portray a goddess in two different aspects: either as a nurturing mother with hand held to breast, or as a hooded, deathlike figure.

This dual distinction of the Divine Mother in auspicious and terrible forms is an enduring feature throughout the history of Indian religion and survives to this very day. Throughout the ages the tribal cultures and high civilizations that rose and fell on Indian soil left their mark on the 13 chapters of the Chandi. Prominent among the many and diverse influences is the Devisukta, a hymn of eight verses found in the most ancient Hindu sacred text, the Rig Veda.

The Devisukta (RV 10.125) declares that the Goddess is the power expressed through all the gods, that they are united in her who shines with consciousness, that her presence is all-pervading, that she supports all of creation, that she is the source of righteousness and the revealer of truth, that she is the source of all worlds, yet that she shines transcendent beyond them. Among Shaktas this Vedic hymn is held in high esteem and is considered to be the source from which the entire Chandi sprang. Later, the Chandi itself was elaborated upon in the Puranas and Tantras. Still later its imagery inspired the Bengali mystics, Ramprasad and Kamalakanta, whose devotional songs so often evoked ecstatic moods in Sri Ramakrishna.

The Chandi goes by two other names. The most common and widely recognized is Devimahatmya [The Glory of the Goddess]. The other is Sri Durga Saptashati [Seven Hundred Verses to Sri Durga]. In reality the Chandi contains fewer than 700 verses, and the number 700 is arrived at only through creative means, such as counting a half verse as full or a full verse as three. There must be a good reason for this, and indeed there is.

The author or authors of the Chandi were Shaktas, devotees of the Mother, and they wanted their work to be recognized as comparable to the Vaishnavas' great scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, which consists of 700 verses. They wanted to show that their view of God as Mother was as valid as the Vaishnava view of Krishna as the supreme God. Of course, both texts represent ancient traditions, and even the oldest Hindu scripture, the Rig Veda, proclaims: *ekam sat vipra bahuda vadanti* —“Truth is One, the wise call it by various names.” Many centuries later, Sri Ramakrishna taught the same when he said: “Krishna is none other than Satchidananda, the Indivisible Brahman. ... That which is Brahman is also Kali. ... He who is Krishna is the same as Kali (M., 1012).”

In drawing comparison to the Bhagavad Gita, the authors of the Chandi wanted specifically to emphasize the Divine Mother's role, like Krishna's, in upholding the moral order of the universe and in leading humankind to liberation through the highest knowledge of the Self. The Chandi and the Gita have much else in common. Each is an independent text embedded

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in a larger work. The Gita belongs to the Mahabharata; the Chandi is an interpolation in the Markandeya Purana. Each is a synthesis of spiritual and philosophical knowledge drawn from diverse sources. Each begins with the story of one or more human beings in crisis, who will learn from a teacher in human form the way beyond all suffering. And each involves the battlefield as a metaphor for the field of human consciousness.

The Bhagavad Gita begins on the battlefield, with Arjuna surveying the armies of his kinsmen on both sides, arrayed for battle. Plunged into despair at the thought of killing his friends and relatives, he turns to his charioteer, Krishna, who is none other than God in human form. Krishna then delivers one of the world's great spiritual messages. The Chandi begins with King Suratha, likewise plunged into an existential crisis after losing his kingdom in battle.

A wise and just ruler, Suratha discovers that even his trusted ministers have turned against him, and on the pretext of going hunting, he mounts his horse and flees for his life. After riding for some time into a dense forest, he comes to the ashram of a holy man named Medhas. This forest retreat is a place of great calm and natural beauty, where even the ordinarily ferocious tiger abides peacefully with the gentle deer. Yet Suratha knows no peace. His mind churns in agony at the thought of everything he has lost: his kingdom with its riches and privilege, the loyalty of his subjects, the glory of power. These thoughts torment him ceaselessly.

One day another visitor arrives. His name is Samadhi, and he is every bit as despondent as the king. Once a prosperous merchant, he has been cast out by his wife and sons, who seized his wealth out of greed. He is deeply hurt by their betrayal and cannot understand it, being himself a man of good character. Most of all, he cannot understand why he still feels love for those who caused his deep humiliation and pain. And so, the king and the merchant approach Medhas the seer and ask why they are so miserable. Surely, as men of knowledge they ought to know better, but they are deeply perplexed.

"You say you are men of knowledge," Medhas remarks. "Do you know what knowledge is?" He explains that what the king means by knowledge is only the experience of the objective world. Through the senses, men, birds and beasts alike share such a knowledge, each species according to its own capacity. Such knowledge is relative. In every way, the knowledge gained through the senses is conditioned by time and space, and we are constantly deceived. Medhas explains further that animals act out of instinct; but humans have the added capacity to reason and make choices, although such choices are most often driven by self-interest and the expectation of results.

If even our simple sense perceptions are so misleading, how much more confounded are we by the added factors of reason, will, memory, emotion and expectation? The operative principle here is that nothing in this world is as it seems to be. Not only are the king and the merchant perplexed, Medhas explains, everyone is, because even the wise are thrown into

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the whirlpool of delusion by the blessed goddess Mahamaya. “Who is this Mahamaya?” the king asks. “Whatever there is to know about her, all that I wish to learn.”

And so, we arrive at the heart of the Chandi. The story of the king, the merchant and the seer acts as a frame that encloses three additional stories which Medhas relates to instruct his two disciples. Each story is a mythical account of the Divine Mother’s fierce, bloody battles with demons. Now, we must not dismiss a myth as a piece of fiction merely because it does not describe a historical event or the world as we know it. Instead, a myth takes us beyond the realm of fact and into the realm of meaning. Through symbols, it plumbs our deeper levels of understanding and brings to light elusive truths that are difficult to convey by ordinary means.

The Platonic philosopher Synesius of Cyrene summed it up in a single sentence: “Myths are things that never happened, but always are (Greer, 45).” The Chandi is an allegory. Its battlegrounds represent our own human consciousness, and its events symbolize our own experiences. The demons represent all the evils in the world and all that is wrong within our minds and hearts. The Divine Mother is our own true being, and her clashes with the demons symbolize the outward and inward struggles we face daily.

Because there are three myths, the Chandi naturally falls into three parts, and they can be related to the three gunas, the basic universal energies or qualities of sattva, rajas and tamas. The first part tells about the Divine Mother in her dark, deluding aspect that ensnares humankind in the bonds of ignorance and attachment. It teaches us about the nature of reality and asks us to question: what are divinity, the universe and humankind?

The second part presents the Mother as the fiery and active power that vanquishes evil and upholds the moral order of the universe. It teaches us how to live in this world, where we are torn between good and evil, right and wrong, enjoyment and suffering.

The third part reveals the luminous, benevolent form through which the Mother grants enlightenment and liberation. It shows us how to transcend the world through the higher knowledge of the spirit. Side by side with grisly narratives of bloodshed and slaughter, the Chandi integrates four hymns that are rich in philosophical and theological content. Of surpassing beauty, these hymns are sublime outpourings of devotion. The variety of material in the Chandi is a convenient reminder that overall this text can be approached in more than one way. Its stories can be taken as allegories relating to our own behavior and circumstances. Its hymns inspire us to devotion for the personal forms of God as Mother; and its deeper, philosophical and esoteric interpretation leads us to the realization of God as the impersonal supreme reality.

Medhas’s first myth is short and to the point. During a period of cosmic dissolution, Vishnu lies sleeping on the thousand-headed serpent Shesha, who drifts on the waters of the undifferentiated ocean. Sitting on a lotus that grows from Vishnu’s navel, Brahma, the Lord of Creation, surveys the four directions. Suddenly two demons, named Madhu and Kaitabha,

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spring forth from the wax in Vishnu's ears and attempt to kill Brahma. Frantically he tries to awaken Vishnu, but the god is held in the power of Mahamaya, who is settled over his eyes as his blessed sleep.

And so, Brahma praises Mahamaya with a hymn. She allows Vishnu to awaken, and he battles with the demons for 5000 years, but without victory. At this point Mahamaya intervenes again. She confounds Madhu and Kaitabha with delusions of their own might and grandeur. Look at us, the demons think. Not even Vishnu, the Supreme Lord, can conquer us. Because he has fought so well, let us offer him a boon. These big, lumbering demons are comical in their stupidity, and at this point we can almost hear them gasp, "Oops! Did we make a mistake?"

Of course, they did, because Vishnu replies, "There is only one boon to ask: that I destroy the two of you here and now." In a last-ditch effort to save themselves, Madhu and Kaitabha look around and see only the endless cosmic ocean. "Very well," they say, "but on one condition: slay us where water does not cover the earth." The outcome of this story hinges on a pun, because the Sanskrit words for "earth" and "thigh" are almost the same. And so, Vishnu lifts the two demons to his thighs and cuts off their heads. It is said that a pun is the lowest form of humour, and this is fitting, because Madhu and Kaitabha represent the lowest form of human awareness, densely shrouded in ignorance. Their unprovoked attack on Brahma reminds us of the senseless violence in our own world, where members of one religious or political or ethnic group attack people of other groups only because they are different.

Madhu and Kaitabha, in their near-bestial state, recognize no higher reality; they are violent, ugly creatures intent on gratifying their base instincts, often expressed through the thrill of intimidation or brute force. In their physical strength they grow exceedingly vainglorious. But of course, pride goes before a fall, and their own arrogance becomes their undoing. Through the hymn that Brahma addresses to Mahamaya, the universal deluder, we learn much about the universe we inhabit. This hymn, the Brahmastuti, is composed in highly symbolic language that is often difficult to interpret, but it reveals profound insight into the nature of the cosmos. Although the ideas are expressed in devotional terms, the concepts are scientific even by today's standards.

The Brahmastuti tells us that creation is a process of manifestation that flows from the One to the many. The Divine Mother is the infinite, nondual consciousness as well as its dynamic creative power; and she is ever present throughout all of creation. Before manifestation, she is the bindu, the dimensionless, nonlocalized point of concentrated shakti that contains within itself all possibilities. This sounds very much like the Big Bang theory and especially like a recent refinement of it, known as the Cosmic Inflation theory. This proposes that the entire universe popped out of a dimensionless, contentless point and immediately expanded to cosmic size in a miraculous way, suggesting the agency of a higher power.

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Let us not forget that the Sanskrit word for “power” is shakti. According to Brahma’s hymn, the Divine Mother gives birth to the universe, supports it and draws it back into herself in an ever-repeating cycle, because creation is without an absolute beginning or an absolute end. In this process, she who is nondual consciousness veils her radiant boundlessness with the limitations of time and space, name and form, cause and effect. Through these limitations she projects the finite world of our experience—a world that is both dark and dazzling, terrifying and enchanting.

The Divine Mother is the all-encompassing source of good and evil alike, who expresses herself in every form. Yet beyond this apparent multiplicity, everything—be it spirit, mind or matter—is ultimately one. Philosophically, the Chandi agrees with Sri Ramakrishna’s answer to M.’s question, “Is the world unreal?” But when Ramakrishna first replied that it was a matter for philosophical discussion, he recognized that among themselves Hindus hold more than a single opinion. A follower of Sankara’s Advaita Vedanta would answer, “The world seems real as long as we experience it, but once we attain knowledge of Brahman, the phenomenal world vanishes. We think we see a snake in the semi-darkness, but when the light reveals it to be a rope, the perception of the snake vanishes.”

According to the Vedantin, the world is no more real than the misperceived snake. This position is called vivartavada, the doctrine of appearance, because the phenomenal world is thought to be a mere appearance superimposed upon the transcendental unity of Brahman. The Shakta philosophy takes a different position. When thread is woven into cloth, it undergoes a change of form but not of substance. In becoming cloth, thread takes on the additional qualities of cloth, but in substance it is still thread. In the same way, the Divine Mother, who is pure energy and consciousness, assumes all the names and forms and characteristics of the creation, even while remaining the pure energy and consciousness that is her true nature. This view is called parinamavada, the doctrine of transformation.

We find it in the Chandi, where Medhas says of the Divine Mother: “She is eternal, having the world as her form (DM 1.64).” And also, in Sri Ramakrishna’s reply to M.: “The Divine Mother revealed to me in the Kali temple that it was She who had become everything (M., 345).” There is one more point: whichever way we choose to view the world, we still have to live in it. And that is what the second part of the Chandi is all about.

Medhas’s second story is intended especially for the king. Suratha, like Arjuna in the Gita, belongs to the ruling and warrior caste, whose duty is to uphold the moral order of the world. In the story that Medhas relates, an ill-tempered buffalo demon, named Mahishasura, wages war against heaven, casts out the gods, and usurps Indra’s throne. When the dispossessed gods seek Vishnu’s and Shiva’s help, the Divine Mother herself comes to the rescue.

First from Vishnu’s brow, then from the bodies of all the other gods, a great radiance shines forth and coalesces into the beautiful form of Durga. The gods bow to her, recognizing that their own individual powers are only aspects of her supreme power. After Durga has slain

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Mahishasura's forces, she stands on the blood-soaked battleground facing the buffalo demon himself. Mahishasura, bellowing in confrontation, represents wilfulness and monumental rage. Under his frenzied wheeling, the trampled earth breaks apart, his blasting breath tosses mountains into the air, his lashing tail causes the oceans to overflow, and overhead his mighty horns tear the gently floating clouds to shreds.

Consider the symbolism: the power of human anger and greed threatens to destroy everything it touches: the goodness of the nurturing earth, the stability of the mountains, the expansive beauty of the oceans, the innocence of the gentle clouds. Under Durga's attacks Mahisha changes form—from buffalo to lion to man to elephant, every time eluding her deathblows. But she resolves to slay him, and when Mahisha returns to his mighty buffalo form, she pins him beneath her foot and thrusts her spear into his side. Instantly Mahisha reveals his true demon form, and Durga beheads him with her great sword.

Like Mahisha, we go through life dissatisfied, often agitated, sometimes full of rage; and the causes of our misery change over time. One day it's this, the next day it's something else, and so it goes. Until we can pin down the root cause, our discontent cannot be overcome, and like Mahishasura that cause is loath to reveal itself. Mahisha represents more than monumental rage. His anger is one of six passions that afflict our human awareness. The others are lust, greed, pride, jealousy and delusion. Let's analyse them. Lust, or desire in general, is a longing for gratification. We want something. Why? Because we feel something is lacking. We feel deficient, limited or separated in some way. When we fail to satisfy a desire, a common response is anger. Or when a desire is satisfied, a common response is greed: we want more. And so, we're caught in an ongoing cycle. To make matters worse, we can add pride and jealousy to the mix.

Let's define pride as a false sense of superiority designed to convince us we're not deficient after all, but in fact better than anyone else. And so, we think—until someone else comes along whom we see as richer, more powerful, more attractive or happier than we are. Then we fall prey to jealousy—an apprehensive resentment of someone else's better condition in life. All this adds up to delusion: we are caught up in a misreading of who and what we really are. The Sanskrit word for delusion, moha, comes from a root meaning "to lose consciousness," and herein lies the key to understanding.

The Divine Mother is infinite consciousness. When she projects herself as the universe of name and form, that consciousness appears divided among all beings. This apparent fragmentation creates the sense of individuality. Each individual self-experiences its existence in terms of "I, me and mine," as well as "not-I, not-me and not-mine." And so, the trouble begins. The root cause of our inner existential discontent and our outward conflicts is the feeling deep down inside that we are limited, separated and incomplete. We mistakenly identify with the limited ego, when in fact we are the limitless atman. That atman, abiding in every person, is the true Self—the one, undivided reality whose essence is pure being-consciousness-bliss.

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Just as Mahishasura is about to be beheaded by Durga's sword of knowledge, his glance meets hers, and he gets a fleeting glimpse of that truth—that his true identity lies dispassionate and blissful beyond the raging whirlpool of his passions. After he is slain, the gods celebrate Durga's triumph over Mahishasura in the longest and most eloquent of the Chandi's four hymns. Known as the Shakradistuti [Praise by Indra and the host of gods], it invites us to reflect on the themes of good and evil, fate and free will, karma and divine grace.

The hymn praises Durga as “good fortune in the dwellings of the virtuous and misfortune in the abodes of the wicked (DM 4.5).” On the surface, this verse implies reward and punishment by a personal deity. The deeper, philosophical meaning points to an impersonal balancing principle at work in the universe, the law of karma. Either way the message is the same: our deeds have consequences. A central theme of the hymn is the question of good and evil. A working definition might go like this: good is that which takes us toward the Divine—toward harmony, love and unity; evil is that which distances us from the Divine and creates hatred, injury and disunity in our lives.

Additionally, referring to the fierce battle that has just taken place, the hymn asks how Mahisha, even though enraged, could be moved to strike the Mother's gently smiling face. From this we can add another dimension to our definition of evil: that it is intentionally profaning. In the world around us we witness continual assaults on all we hold sacred. War, terrorism, genocide, the corruption of the innocent, the logging of irreplaceable forests, and the remorseless pollution of the air, water and earth that support our very existence—what evil moves humans to commit such terrible acts?

Whether we are talking about destructive actions, hate-filled speech, malevolent thoughts or even uncaring passivity, let these be a sobering reminder that our collective and individual evil is the human face of Mahishasura's rage. Yet the hymn proclaims that even toward evildoers the Mother's intentions are most gracious. Her nature is to subdue the misconduct of the wicked. Through her inconceivable grace, even wrongdoers who have committed enough evil to keep them long in torment are purified in battle by the touch of her weapons and are brought to beatitude.

We are reminded once again of the Bhagavadgita. Sri Krishna declares that whenever righteousness declines and evil spreads, he is born into the world to protect the good, to destroy wickedness, and to re-establish virtue (BG 4.6-8). On the theme of unconditional grace, he says: “I am alike to all beings; to me none are hateful or dear. ... If even an evildoer worships me with utter devotion, he should be regarded as good, for he is rightly resolved. Quickly he becomes righteous and attains eternal peace (BG 9.29-31).”

The story of Madhu and Kaitabha was concerned with the power of *tamas*: how in our ordinary state of being, we all walk around dazed and confused. In the story of Durga and Mahishasura, the power of *rajas* predominates. Mahishasura's rajasic energy controls him and impels him to destructive acts, but Durga controls her own fiery splendor. Her *rajas* is

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protective of her devotees and intent on destroying evil. Through this story Medhas teaches that through active struggle, we can overcome enslavement to our passions and live virtuously, in harmony with the world.

According to Hindu teaching, life has four legitimate aims. These are dharma, artha, kama and moksha—virtuous conduct, material comfort, enjoyment and liberation. The first three form a category called bhukti, concerned with life in the world. Bhukti is the king's immediate concern. Having fled to the forest after his defeat, he has failed to fulfill his moral responsibility, and he still feels attraction for the privileges of kingship. In other words, he has unfinished business in the world.

How different is the merchant Samadhi? World-weary and ready to renounce the pursuits of dharma, artha and kama, he is ready for moksha, spiritual liberation. For his sake, Medhas tells his third and final story, one that points toward realizing our inner perfection beyond the world. The story has a familiar beginning. Two demons, named Shumbha and Nishumbha, have dispossessed the gods, stripped them of their powers and appropriated their wealth and privilege. This time the cast of characters is much larger, and the demons seem more like us than the ones we've met previously.

The complex scenario passes through three phases as we move progressively inward. The Mother's successive victories over a colorful cast of demons symbolize our own efforts at purifying our consciousness of every imperfection and misconceived notion. First the myth turns the mirror on our behavior and motivations. Next, we are drawn in deeper to observe the mind and its workings, and finally we face the fundamental question of who or what we are.

We first meet Shumbha sitting in his palace amid his glittering hoard of stolen treasure. The sickening excess of it all reminds us of our own materialism run amok. Soon the two fawning servants, Chanda and Munda, enter with news that they've seen a young woman of captivating beauty dwelling in the Himalayas. Playing upon Shumbha's vanity, they suggest that he who is all-wealthy and all-powerful surely must also possess this jewel among women. Little do they know that she is the Devi, the Divine Mother herself, in her sattvic aspect. In the same way, we are drawn to the world's enchantments but forget that they are expressions of the Divine. Shumbha, his lust aroused, wants to claim her as his own, just as we want to possess all that we find attractive and desirable. And just like us, if one way fails, Shumbha will try another, and another, with growing frustration.

When his smooth-talking messenger, Sugriva, delivers a marriage proposal, we recognize in him our own lack of complete truthfulness. At first the Devi plays along with delicious irony, but after she refuses the marriage proposal, Sugriva's honeyed words turn threatening. If cajoling and deceit don't work, how about force? Next, Shumbha sends a dim-witted thug named Dhumralochana to fetch the Devi, kicking and screaming if need be. In other words, when we set our mind to something, how it affects others is not necessarily our concern.

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When Dhumralochana's brute force fails, Shumbha loses all reason and sends Chanda and Munda with a huge army to bring back "that vile woman" in any way or in any condition whatever. Notice how in Shumbha's agitated mind "the jewel among women" is now "that vile woman." What was once so desirable is now the cause of his misery, and his desire now is only for the triumph of his own will. Don't we also overreact irrationally when circumstances frustrate our intentions? The struggle escalates, and the gently smiling Devi Durga calls forth the terrifying, emaciated form of Kali and eight other fierce goddesses to combat the demon hordes. Each one of these shaktis is an aspect of her own immense power. Each represents a higher function of our own consciousness.

When Chanda and Munda lie dead, a demon named Raktabija strides onto the battlefield. He possesses a unique power. Whenever a drop of his blood falls to earth, another demon of identical size and strength springs up. In the fighting, demons proliferate from his spilled blood, and utter terror seizes the gods, until Durga merely smiles and tells Kali to roam the battlefield and lap up the drops of blood as they fall. The demons arising from it soon perish between her gnashing teeth; and Raktabija, drained of blood, falls dead.

This scene bridges two levels of reality. On one level the glistening red drops of Raktabija's blood represent the overwhelming power of desire. Like a seed, every desire that falls on the fertile soil of our mind grows to maturity and bursts with seeds for the next planting. Every desire produces the seeds of many more, and we find we are never satisfied. The ghastly image of Kali, in her red-eyed, emaciated form known as Chamunda, avidly licking up the drops of blood, tells us that desires are best conquered when nipped in the bud.

Another interpretation of the Raktabija episode takes us deeper into the mind. Patanjali, whose Yoga Sutra systematized the science of meditation more than two thousand years ago, wrote, "Yoga is the control of the thought-waves in the mind." Anyone who has ever sat to meditate knows how difficult this is. No matter how hard we try to concentrate, the mind wanders from here to there. One thought gives rise to another. Raktabija symbolizes this normal, unruly state of human consciousness, where mental energy is scattered and unfocused. Chamunda Kali is the power of concentrated awareness that subdues the thought-waves and takes us to a calmer, purer state of consciousness.

Finally, only two demons remain, the brothers Shumbha and Nishumbha. They are almost inseparable, and the Chandi calls Nishumbha the younger brother who is dearer to Shumbha than life itself. Shumbha represents the ego, and Nishumbha is the sense of attachment, the tag-along sibling that accompanies him everywhere. Earlier we spoke about the ego as a sense of separate selfhood. What we call ego is a limiting function of consciousness that in Sanskrit is called *ahamkara*, literally the "I- maker." It is both a process of consciousness and the product of that process. Along with the sense of its own individuality, this I-making principle has the power of self- appropriation that claims things as its own.

Here is where Nishumbha comes in. The attachment he represents is called *mamatva*, literally, "my-ness." In a sense it is the glue that holds our identity together. We consciously

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attach our sense of self to things that are not the Self. We identify with our bodily characteristics, such as sex, size, shape, color. We define ourselves by our likes and dislikes, by the people in our lives and our relationships to them, by our professions, leisure activities, religious or political affiliations and countless other factors that combine in ways to make each one of us unique. We use our life's experiences—what we do and what happens to us—to shape and reshape our identity. And so, our sense of self is constantly shifting.

Sri Ramakrishna noted how a fine new garment, or a new pair of boots can change an ordinary man into a swaggering fool, or how money can make a humble man arrogant (M., 169). Is our sense of self so fragile that a slight change of circumstance can cause us to reformulate ourselves? Every factor we identify with is known in Sanskrit as an upadhi, a defining attribute. But upadhi also means a limiting adjunct. We go through life acquiring upadhis, thinking they will make our identity bigger and better, but in reality, we are merely adding to our limitations. Attachments to fame, influence, wealth and possessions only make our burden of personal identity heavier. The more we are reined in by our defining attributes, the more we lose sight of our larger sense of self.

When we allow our happiness and misery to be dictated by things outside of and foreign to our true nature, we lose our autonomy. Let's consider the third meaning of upadhi: a substitute, anything that may be taken for something else, an appearance mistaken for reality. Our defining upadhis are components of a false sense of our own identity. In the end, they are no more than worthless tokens of our separation from the infinite Self. But how we hold on to them! When the Divine Mother finally slays Nishumbha, we get a graphic image of the ferocity of the struggle. Just when she has the demon cornered, he sprouts ten thousand arms with ten thousand grasping hands. This picture of ugly desperation illustrates just how desperate we are not to let go.

Even with Nishumbha out of the way, there remains the ego-sense itself, denuded of all borrowed attributes. Now Shumbha, alone, stands face to face with the Mother. He points to her companion goddesses and chides her for relying on the strength of others in the fight. She answers, "I am alone here in the world. ... These are but projections of my own power... (DM 10.5)." To prove her point, the Shaktis vanish into her, and she then slays Shumbha. This final victory represents the realization of the true Self.

There is no way to describe this immediate, unmediated knowledge of the atman; but that has not stopped mystics of every religious tradition throughout history from trying to express the inexpressible experience of the Divine. In the Svetasvatara Upanishad, a text certainly known to whoever composed the Chandi, the enlightened seer proclaims, "I have known the unchanging, primeval One, the indwelling Self of all, everywhere present and all-pervading, whom the wise declare to be free from birth and eternal (SU 3.21)."

Medhas then relates how the gods again praised the Divine Mother in a fourth and final hymn. Three of its verses (DM 11.10-12) are well known in Vedanta circles. They are sung every evening around the world in temples of the Ramakrishna Order as the arati hymn "Om

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Sarva Mangala Mangalye.” Then, Medhas sends his two disciples to the bank of a river, where they meditate and worship the Mother devotedly. After three years she appears to them and offers each a boon. Suratha, who we remember has unfinished business, asks for the return of his earthly kingdom, followed by an imperishable kingdom in the next life. The merchant Samadhi, on the other hand, has grown wise and dispassionate. He asks for the knowledge that will dissolve the bondage of worldly existence.

Through the Mother’s grace, each boon is granted, in keeping with the Chandi’s teaching that the Divine Mother is bhuktimuktipradayini, “the bestower of worldly enjoyment and liberation (DM11.7).” How conversant Sri Ramakrishna was with the teachings of the Chandi is made clear in a conversation he had with members of the Brahma Samaj in the autumn of 1882. In a single paragraph that summarizes the essential message of the Chandi, Ramakrishna said, “Bondage and liberation are both of Her making. By her maya worldly people become entangled in ‘woman and gold,’ and again, through her grace they attain liberation. She is called the Savior, and the Remover of the bondage that binds one to the world (M., 136).”

A short while later he added, “I tell you the truth: there is nothing wrong in your being in the world. But you must direct your mind toward God; otherwise you will not succeed. Do your duty with one hand and with the other hold to God. After the duty is over, you will hold to God with both hands (M., 137-138).” On another occasion Sri Ramakrishna said, “Sometimes I find that the universe is saturated with the Consciousness of God, as the earth is soaked with water in the rainy season (M., 260).” This calls to mind the Chandi’s third hymn, known as the Aparajitastuti, [Hymn to the Invincible Goddess].

Unlike the three other hymns, which are intimately connected to the foregoing battle narratives, this one is an ecstatic celebration of the Divine Mother’s presence in the world. It reminds us simply to see divinity everywhere around us, because the Mother abides in all beings as intelligence, order, forgiveness, modesty, peace, beauty, good fortune, compassion, contentment, and in countless other ways. We need only to remember her presence; and as a sign of her grace, it is she herself who abides in us even in the form of memory.

We conclude with two verses from this hymn: “To her who presides over the elements and the senses and is ever present in all beings, to the all-pervading Devi, salutations again and again. To her who pervades this entire world and abides in the form of consciousness, salutation to her, salutation to her, salutation to her, again and again (DM 5.77-80).”

NOTES

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Madhu and Kaitabh

From the Mahabharata
Vana Parva, Section CCII
Translated by Sri Kisari Mohan Ganguli

Addressing Markandeya

Yudhishtira said: O holy one, O thou possessed of the wealth of asceticism, who was this Daitya (Dhundhu) of great energy? Whose son and whose grandson, was he? I desire to know all this.

Markandeya said: O monarch, know everything as it happened, O ruler of men, as I narrate the particulars truly, O thou of great wisdom!

When the world became one broad expanse of water and creatures mobile and immobile were destroyed, when, O bull of the Bharata race, the entire creation came to its end. He who is the Source and creator of the Universe, viz., the Eternal and unfading Vishnu, He who is called by Munis crowned with ascetic success as the Supreme Lord of the Universe, that Being of great holiness, then lay in Yoga sleep on the wide hood of the snake Sesha of immeasurable energy, and the Creator of the Universe, that highly blessed and holy Hari, knowing no deterioration, lay on the hood of that snake encircling the whole Earth and as the Deity lay asleep on that bed, a lotus endued with great beauty and effulgence equal unto that of the Sun, sprang from His navel.

And from that lotus possessed of effulgence like unto the Sun's sprang the Grandsire Brahma, that lord of the worlds who is the four Vedas, who has four arms and four faces, who is invincible in consequence of his own energy and who is endued with mighty strength and great prowess and as the Lord Hari of wondrous frame, possessed of great lustre and decked with a crown and the Kautubha gem and attired in purple silk, lay stretched for many a yojana on that excellent bed furnished by the hood of the snake itself extending far and wide, blazing, O king, in his beauty and the lustre of his own body like a thousand Suns concentrated in one mass.

He was beheld some time after by two Danavas of great prowess named Madhu and Kaitabha and beholding Hari (in that posture) and the Grandsire (Brahma) with eyes like

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lotus leaves seated on that lotus, both Madhu and Kaitabha wandered much and they began to terrify and alarm Brahma of immeasurable prowess, and the illustrious Brahma alarmed by their continuous exertions trembled on his seat, and at his trembling the stalk of the lotus on which he was seated began to tremble and when the lotus stalk trembled, Kesava (Vishnu) awoke.

And awakened from His slumber, Govinda (Vishnu) beheld those Danavas of mighty energy and beholding them the Deity said unto them: Welcome, ye mighty ones! I am gratified with you! Therefore, I will grant you excellent boons!

And thereupon both those proud and mighty Danavas, O king, laughingly replied unto Hrishikesa (Vishnu), saying: Ask boons of us, O divine one! O thou that art the Supreme Deity, we are disposed to grant thee a boon. Indeed, we will grant thee a boon! Therefore, ask thou of us anything that comes to thy mind.

Thus, addressed by them the holy one spoke: Ye brave ones, I will accept a boon from you. There is a boon that I desire. Both of you are possessed of mighty energy. There is no male person like unto any of you, O you of unbaffled prowess, submit ye to be slain by me. Even that is what I desire to accomplish for the good of the world.

Hearing these words of the Deity, both Madhu and Kaitabha said: We have never before spoken an untruth. No, not even in jest. What shall we say of other occasions! O thou foremost of male Beings, know that we have never been firm in truth and morality. In strength, in forms, in beauty, in virtue, in asceticism, in charity, in behaviour, in goodness, in self-control, there is no one equal unto either of us. A great danger, O Kesava, has approached us. Accomplish thou, therefore, what thou hast said. No one can prevail over Time. But, O Lord, there is one thing that we desire to be done by thee. O thou best and foremost of all Deities, thou must slay us at a spot that is absolutely uncovered. And, O thou of excellent eyes, we also desire to become thy sons. This is the boon that we desire, know then, O chief of the gods! Let not that O Deity, be false which thou had at first promised to us.

The Holy One then replied unto them saying: Yes, I will do as you desire. Everything will be as ye wish.

Markandeya continued: Then Govinda began to reflect but uncovered space found He none and when He could not discover any spot that was uncovered on earth or in the sky, that foremost Deity then beheld His thighs to be absolutely uncovered. And there, O king, the illustrious Deity cut off the heads of Madhu and Kaitabha with His keen-edged discus!

Markandeya said: The illustrious Dhundhu, O king, was the son of Madhu and Kaitabha, and possessed of great energy and prowess, he underwent ascetic penances of great austerity and he stood erect on one leg and reduced his body to a mass of only veins and arteries, and Brahma, gratified with him, gave him a boon. And the boon he had asked of the lord

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Prajapati (Grandsire Brahma) was in these words: Let no one among the gods, the Danvas, the Rakshasas, the Snakes, the Gandharvas and the Rakshasas be capable of slaying me. Even this is the boon that I ask of thee.

And the Grandsire replied unto him saying: Let it be as thy wishest. Go thy way.

