

KALI

One of the most iconic goddesses of Hindu mythology, Kali is the goddess of time, destruction, and protection. Kali is the changing flow of time, the deity that grants an individual liberation from the cycle of rebirth, and the destroyer of all evil. Physically, she is often depicted as blue-skinned and with four arms. She has wild hair, a necklace of human heads, and vestments made of human arms. She carries a cup made from a skull that collects blood. Her nakedness is symbolic; she is unconcealed Reality, as opposed to the shifting form of Maya, the dancing illusion that appears to the senses. Despite her fearsome appearance, she is often described as kind and loving, and is regarded by those that follow her as the Mother of the universe. Kali also has the aspect of Mahakali, the Great Kali, depicted with ten arms, ten heads, and ten legs. Each of Mahakali's ten hands carries an item representative of the power of the celestial Devas or the gods. As she carries items belonging to the Devas, Mahakali bears their power and so worshippers of Kali claim that she is identical with Brahman, the Supreme God of All.

One account of how Kali came into being takes place when the goddess Durga, another ten-armed deity, confronted the buffalo demon Mahishasura. The intense fight led Durga to become so filled with rage that the rage burst forth from her forehead in the form of Kali. Despite her depiction of blue-skin, Kali is often written of as having black-skin, and the black-skinned goddess devoured every single asura, or demon, that crossed her path. One after the other, they fell before her attacks, and Kali strung their heads into the necklace that she is famous for. Stunned by her bloodthirst, both the people of the land as well as the gods did not know how to quell her rage.

Shiva, the god symbolizing the Self or soul in Hinduism, heard of this predicament. He journeyed to Kali's location and, upon finding the rampaging goddess, laid down his body in front of Kali. Kali, unaware of anything except her rage, trod upon Shiva. When she realized just who it was she stood upon, her anger subsided. Kali is often depicted as standing atop Shiva. Shiva, in these depictions, does not suffer under his wife's foot. Rather, the god often wears a countenance of peace and bliss.

Another story involves a similar origin account with the goddess Durga, except the opponents are the demons Chanda and Munda. Kali defeated them after bursting out of Durga's head, and later must face the self-replicating demon Raktabija.

The fight between Kali and Raktabija is perhaps the goddess of time's most famous story. The goddess Ambika fought against Raktabija, delivering upon him one wound after another. She used a variety of weapons, none of which seemed to avail against the demon's magic. The demon Raktabija was undefeatable because whenever his blood touched the ground, another version of himself sprang forth from the spilled drops. Clone after clone of Raktabija erupted out of the shed blood, threatening to overwhelm the battlefield. Kali, both vicious and cunning, decided to switch tactics. As she pierced and slashed the demon's skin, she began to catch the

droplets of blood with her outstretched tongue before they could touch the ground. In doing so, she devoured Raktabija's clones and thereby defeated the powerful asura. She danced upon the corpses of the slain in celebration.

Kali has many other stories of her birth, which are also important. Several of these stories feature Parvati, the wife of Shiva. She is the goddess of fertility, love, beauty and harmony. Parvati shed her dark skin in one of these stories. The skin came to life, becoming the goddess Kali, while Parvati assumed a lighter form, contrasting with the form of Kali. In another story featuring Parvati, the demon Daruka rampaged across the land, terrorizing god and mortal alike. The gods enlisted the aid of Parvati, as only a woman was said to be able to slay the demon Daruka. Parvati jumped down her husband Shiva's throat, in order to retrieve the halahala that he had swallowed long ago. The halahala was a poison that had arisen from the roil of the ocean during the creation of the universe, which threatened to corrupt the whole world. As Parvati merged with the poison, she became the fierce goddess Kali. Leaping from Shiva's throat, Kali struck down Daruka and restored peace to the troubled realm.

Kali's role as protector is also highlighted in the story of the thieves. A band of thieves wanted to make a sacrifice to her, but they unwisely chose a Brahmin monk as their sacrificial victim. The thieves took the monk hostage and forced him to a nearby temple. As they made their preparations in front of a statue of Kali, the statue animated and stepped forward. The statue of Kali was disgusted that the thieves would make a sacrifice of such a holy man and drew her weapons. She beheaded the whole lot of them, reveling in the massacre and throwing the heads around for pleasure. During the chaos, the Brahmin monk escaped, continuing his life of contemplation.

While Kali is a goddess of destruction, it is important to note exactly what it is that she destroys. Kali does not perpetuate evil. Instead, she destroys the veil of Maya, the illusion that keeps beings bound in the meaningless cycle of suffering. Beyond Maya exists Brahma, unfettered Supreme Reality. By destroying the veil of illusion, Kali grants liberation from suffering and allows beings to ascend to moksha, realization of the formless divine. Kali is in fact a deity of the greatest compassion, as moksha means to transcend beyond all limits to that which is wholly unbounded and formless. Kali does this by being the most powerful form of Shakti, that is, the dynamic cosmic energy that moves through the entire universe. While Shiva is the destroyer of the universe, Kali as the Shakti is the action by which her husband Shiva does this. It is important not to confuse the goddess Kali with the demon/asura Kali, who presides over the Kali Yuga, the age of moral turpitude in which we currently find ourselves.

Kali is also the goddess of sexuality. There are many depictions of Kali displaying her yoni, suckling a newborn child, and as a warrior. Tying together all three implies a fierce femininity, full of sexual desire, mothering instinct, and violent potential.

The worship of Kali is as varied as the stories of the goddess herself. Indeed, her significance appears to shift based on how the devotee approaches the goddess. One way to worship Kali is

through the use of mantra. Many mantras involve chanting and honoring the goddess's divine energy. Some of the mantras bring rapid growth to the chanter's spirituality, while others invoke Kali to save the chanter from ignorance and the fear of death.

Other means of honoring Kali are through Tantric yoga. Tantra is an esoteric (or hidden) branch of Hinduism and some branches of Buddhism, that involve rituals, iconography, and texts. Kali rituals can involve the transgression of social taboos to evoke the goddesses' imitate powers. It's even been hypothesized that Kali worship traveled to the West via the traveling Romani and ceremonies that honor Saint Sarah, or Sara-la-Kali "Sarah the Black". The goddess Kali's reach, it would seem, extends far and wide, even during the era of rapid Christianization in the West.

Kali is the fierce mother of the universe. Her destruction is conducive to protection of those who cannot protect themselves from demonic forces, and her ultimate boon is to grant salvation to those who seek her blessings. Kali breaks in order to renew, and her dark energies are as wild and untamed as her naked appearance. Her darkness is symbolic of the darkness out of which all things came into being from, and as such she can be said to be the mother of everything. She is a goddess of freedom from civilization, the currents of change and time. In many mythologies, the dark is often (though not always) associated with the feminine and chaos. Kali may be a manifestation of the Great Mother, a mythic archetype that has faded with the rise of patriarchal monotheistic religions, yet nevertheless lives on in the collective imaginations of humans everywhere. Kali is an embodiment of this archetype par excellence, as she is opposite of civilization, rules, and stasis. She is dynamic, in motion, and always destroying so as to regenerate and allow for renewed creation. Even though Kali can be said to destroy an individual, she really destroys the ego, the small sense of self that stands in the way of realization of the greater I AM. Beyond the illusion of material form, Kali waits to embrace us all, as a mother might embrace her children who have returned home after a very long journey.