

STEPPING INTO OURSELVES

An Anthology of Writings on Priestesses

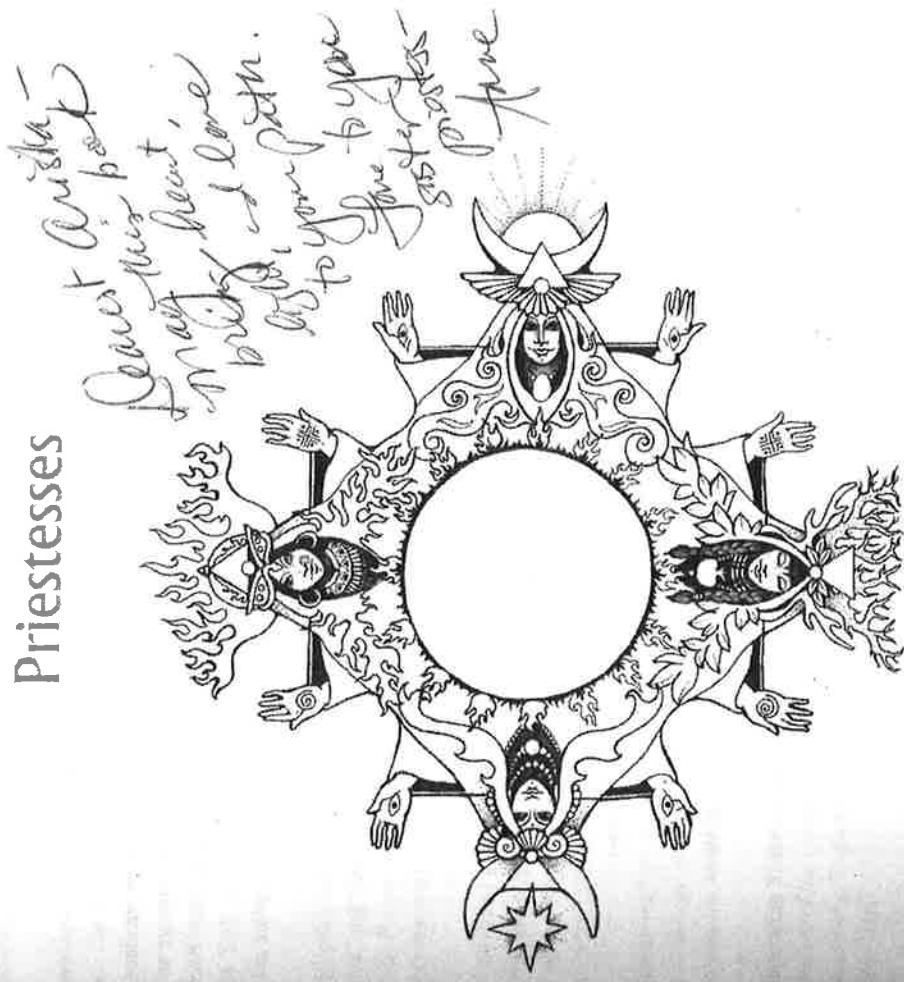


Edited by
Anne Key and Candace Kant

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Priestess of Kali

By Chandra Alexandre



I am a Priestess of Kali. With these few words, a whole cacophony of syllables arises in me. These are not the seed sounds of mantras turning on my tongue. Rather, they are the tones of language rushing to respond—some attempt to elucidate, to help the uninitiated understand what it means to occupy this space as a radical feminist and Western-born Hindu convert. The words come with memories of having endured the incredulous gazes of educated atheists in Indian households and meeting rooms, women and men who believe religion to be the downfall of humankind for all the injustice wrought in its name, particularly against females.

Some of the sounds move to simplify and articulate a position that is as straightforward as my breath, powerful and careful steps upon the planet. The words come with awareness that my footfalls are keeping time with the whispers and drumbeats of the witches, healers, sages and wise ones across traditions and history. They are in alignment with the teachings of my maternal grandmother, who had ready access to the unseen realm and taught me to believe in magic. Others seek to distance me from those who find the archetype of the terrible, devouring mother a convenient way to explain their theories and phobias. The words come to argue a larger vision, one spoken by great Hindu-Tantric mystics, those who see Kali clearly as both a birther of worlds and a devourer of them.

Finally, voices inside me move toward the challenges of what it means to be authentic, a lineage carrier and a female priest. The words come to claim space as I stand counter to the orthodoxy that recognizes only Brahmin men as her clergy and sees women's blood as impure.

They come to claim territory, as Kali worship has evolved to fit both new limitations (animal sacrifice, for example, is not welcomed in the Western world) and new freedoms afforded on American soil. They come because I have freely chosen an arduous path; on this path, I have received so many gifts, and I would love to share with others what I have learned on my journey.

Becoming Kali's priestess has meant that I have consciously invited the process of birthing my soul. And whether in Kolkata or San Francisco, this Goddess has both represented and simultaneously been more than personification, metaphor or archetype of my transformation. In 1992, Kali came to me in a dream. Larger than life, black and bloody, she invaded my New York apartment and asked me one pointed question: "Do you want to live or die?" With every cell of my body, I knew the answer and realized I was making some very bad choices if life was what I truly wanted.

Taking formal initiation in India six years later, I agreed to accept challenges both seen and unknown. The first of these involved rectifying my relationship with my body. Once addicted to perfection and suffering from anorexia nervosa, it was Kali's form as an emaciated goddess that brought me to my senses and helped me heal. When she is depicted as skeletal, her imagery offers us a glimpse at the paradox of Spirit incarnate. She is shown in this way because her life-generating aspect is so powerful that she is in a constant state of insatiable hunger and must be fed, but she can only be fed on her creation. She exists in the liminal at the same time that she is of this world, creating and decomposing the stuff of life to make life once again.

From the sufferings of my self-inflicted starvation to moments of spiritual awakening, Kali has inspired the work required in this body that I might experience some of the depths and heights of the human condition. Much like my original coming to Kali (or her coming to me), another dream recently offered me additional insight. In the dream, I held my young daughter in my arms. She had been taken and beaten by a group of people unknown to me, and had only just been returned to me. She lay quiet and comfortable in my embrace. As I held her, I knew

she would heal and that what she needed most at that moment was my care and love. I reached over to take off her sneakers and socks. Pulling off the first sock, I saw the horror of her torment: her captors had broken every toe and twisted each around. When I awoke, I was shaking.

After the anguish of wrestling with that dream for days, I finally understood its truth: I am my daughter and the dream presented her dramatically in order to instruct me. She is unconditional love, such as that of a mother for her child, and she is the pain of living through the traumas of family- and culture-inflicted injuries. I realized, in holding this awareness, that I had been loving myself as broken all this time. Quiet and eventually comfortable with my brokenness after years of psycho-spiritual self-reflection, I had learned to kiss my wounds and go on, but I had not come to accept the whole of my being.

Just as I know my daughter is pure and perfect, regardless of all else, the same must be true of me. The dream's teaching was revealed: I need to own the beauty and essence of who I am, right in the imperfections of this physical birthing. The toes in the dream were a special message from my soles in touch with my soul. This, I have learned, is what it means to accept Kali's embrace: the birthing of the soul is the blossoming that happens when we are able to love ourselves completely.

To be aligned with the Goddess, Kali, for me, is to feel something within that could be mistaken for the will to live. I can only describe it as that philosophical sentiment the ancients refer to as a reflection of the Great Mystery—that which burns at the heart of one's being in profound resonance with the Divine as she exists beyond boundaries of time and space. But my lack of articulation here does not cloud what I know. She is not an agenda. She is not driven by imagination, theory or ego.

In one sense, she is merely the name I give to my awe at the wonder of the world through the lens of this incarnation. In another, birthed as I am from a particular marriage of energy and consciousness, she is the whole of biological evolution, at the same time that she is also the dancing of the stars at the limits of black holes. She is the innermost recesses of thought and the certain fabric of my existence. She is time and essence, space and reverberation. She is an unveiling of the folds and

layers of breath that have gone and continue to go into life itself.

For over six months in 1998, I felt at home in the north and northeast of Bharat Mata (Mother India) as I did fieldwork of more than one kind, exploring my own assumptions, limitations and fears. I felt internal barriers crumble as I experienced the joy of being received without reservation by devotees of the Divine who cared not for my place of birth, only my sincerity. I felt other protections get stronger as I navigated alleyways and temples alike filled with decomposing fruit and flesh. My experiences hint at the beauty of Kali's teachings on non-duality, in which the elegance and horror of creation both become real.

This is reflected in much of Kali's iconography. She may appear with unbraided hair, for example, to denote sex or menstruation. To signify the bliss of egoless detachment, her snake-entwined arms may hold a severed human head in one hand and, in the other hand, at the level of her heart, a *kapala* (skull cap). My first visit to Tarapith, in West Bengal, provided a concrete example. There, I was welcomed after a grueling trip with abundant red flowers strung into fragrant garlands. Despite a glorious *darsshan* (seeing of the Goddess, Tara) at the temple, the day ended disappointingly when the door to my pilgrim's guest house room opened to reveal a fresh pile of excrement on the bed. In India, the possibility for escaping the realities of life were, I was learning, greatly (and importantly for the spiritual seeker) diminished.

From the cosmic perspective, Kali is the sacrifice of spirit arising in the world. Following the whim of the Divine, she—the all-pervading and powerful force of conscious spirit—yearns, and then answers that yearning, becoming the yearning itself, as the limitless condenses into the world of matter and is created. In our bodies, we know pains of the flesh and the sufferings of the heart, yet we have only hints of the torment endured by the Divine. For the sake of knowing the taste of freedom and the scent of love, she is born. Many women's unadulterated experience of natural childbirth (my own included) offers one microcosmic expression of this reality; to say it another way, the rendering asunder is also a portal to unfathomable bliss.

Today, after annual pilgrimages to her homeland and over thirteen years of public *pujas* (rituals) offered in her name, I am much more

comfortable with my role and responsibilities relative to her teachings in the flesh. The learning continues, of course, as I plunge more deeply with community into the realms she inhabits and seek to know more intimately the gateways she guards. Her gifts, sometimes even the passwords that open the gateways, have been largely earned on the path of practice and service.

In India, the person out in front initiating ritual by creating the container in which spirit can dance is called *purohit*. My Sanskrit teacher in America remarked once that I must claim that title and, in time, I have. I lead ritual and live an engaged spirituality, in part through the work of service in community. Every month, we gather, and Kali is loved through symbol and form, smile and sacrifice. Kali *puja* welcomes old and young, newcomers and initiates alike. We are family for that time of worship, no matter what our backgrounds or heritage, political preferences or beliefs. We each take responsibility for our worship, with my role being largely that of facilitator, and come to know her through our shared and unique experiences.

The worship is laden with verses from the *Rig Veda* and *Chandi*, ancient books of the gods and goddesses. We follow Hindu protocol in the temple and honor Kali in a traditional manner that includes incense, water, food, fan and fire. We honor her in a non-traditional manner as well, with sacred substances reflective of non-dualistic Tantric rites. These are intended to open us to the potentials for coming to the original soul that lies beneath the rubbish of our unquestioned assumptions, acculturated norms and internalized oppressions.

My own *sadhana* (spiritual discipline) has been a key to coming closer to original soul through the throwing off of various encumbrances. It is also what enables me to maintain the promise I made long ago to spread Mother-worship. From the lips of my first guru, Shyam Sundar Dash, to my ears and then to the shores of San Francisco, bringing Maa (Divine Mother) here was something with which I was charged. Certainly, I was not the first, and I did not have to accept responsibility for another iteration of Kali devotionalism in California (let alone America); however, at the time, it was the most meaningful thing I could imagine doing.

Since then, the promise has transformed, and the nature of spreading Mother-worship, and its meaning to me, has changed along with it. I have found myself speaking no longer of a promise but rather of a permeating vow. In 2003, I received another initiation in India by an Aghori Baba, this one at Kamakhya where the *yoni* of the Goddess resides in Assam. While the details of this are really another story, the point is that, with this particular initiation, I began to have embodied experiences of connection to Kali on a regular basis. The power of Shakti (the female force) became palpable, something I could feel and source in order to change outcomes. These arisings of energy necessitated my adherence to a regular set of spiritual disciplines, much in the way one's yearning to run a marathon or aspiration to pass a difficult exam requires strengthening through exercise and repetition in order to achieve the goal.

From there, the sense in me of priestessing Kali—of being both charged with and dedicated to being clergy—began to emerge. My commitment to her opened from breath to bone. I began a new chapter, one of realizing that the path of spirit is my way of life. This is the heart of my permeating vow and what it means to me to be her priestess: to live in engaged spirituality; to cultivate discernment in thought, speech, action and presence; and to actively disentangle myself from emotional entrapments, thereby allowing greater possibilities for love and liberation to emerge.

For your own work and practice, I offer you this, Kali's prayer, to be recited as you feel called by crisis or by spirit to the work of blossoming your own original soul: "*Om Krim Kalyai Namah.*" I would translate it like this: "I bow to you, Kali, from your manifestations in the flesh to your revelation as the vibrations of the universe." With this, may Kali's gifts be yours to share.

Ammachi: In the Lap of the Mother*

By Linda Johnsen



Worldly love is not constant. Its rhythm fluctuates; it comes and goes. The beginning is always beautiful and enthusiastic, but slowly it gets less beautiful and less exciting. In most cases it ends up finally in upset, hatred and deep sorrow.

Spiritual love is different. The beginning is beautiful and peaceful. Then comes the agony of longing. This pain of love will prevail until it leads to unity with the beloved. This unity in love remains forever and ever, always alive, both within and without, and each moment you live in love. It will swallow you completely until there is no "you." There is only love.

The speaker knows what she's talking about. She is Amritanandamayi Ma, a diminutive, semi-literate South Indian from a small fishing village by the Arabian Sea. She grew up in abject poverty (even the sari she wore had been loaned to her), the victim of years of physical and psychological abuse. Sudhamani (Pure Jewel, her birth name) attended school through the fourth grade, when her mother's illness forced her to remain home to attend to the household. The work load was enormous for a nine-year-old, but Sudhamani's mind was absorbed in Lord Krishna. If she suddenly realized she had taken several steps without remembering Krishna, she would run back and walk those steps again, repeating the Lord's name. Sudhamani's unconventional ways were particularly

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