



ProVisions

One who is on the Quest needs provisions for the journey; such are these. We hope some are also visions-forward.

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Meditations on Mother

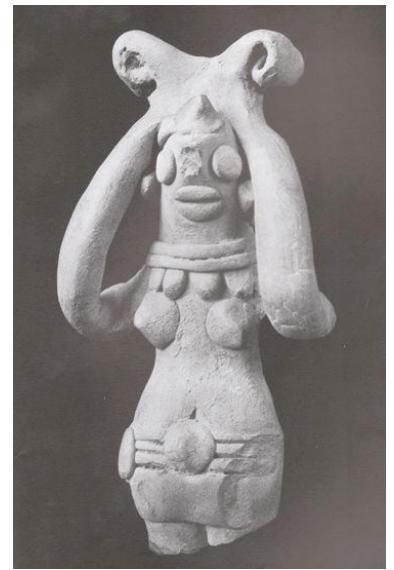
“Divine Mother” is the term used to refer to the Mother of the Universe. She manifests as various forms of the Divine Feminine, such as **Shakti** (the Mother of the Energy of the Universe), **Parvati** (Lord Shiva’s consort), **Saraswati** (Goddess of Knowledge and Speech), **Lakshmi** (Goddess of the Material Realm), and **Durga** (Goddess of our True Nature), and numerous others. And these are just the Indian versions of Mother! In this issue of **ProVisions**, we attempt a deeper understanding of Her through various meditations, writings, songs, and poems.

Shakti-worship

Shakti means power, force, the feminine energy, for she represents the primal creative principle underlying the cosmos. She is the energizing force of all divinity, of every being and every thing. The whole universe is the manifestation of *Shakti*. A *Sakta*, a follower of *Shakti*-worship, regards her as the Supreme Reality. The ritual side of the *Shakta* philosophy consists of the worship of the different forms of this Universal Energy personified as a goddess. *Shakti* is known by the general name *devi*, from the Sanskrit root *div* to shine. She is the Shining One, who is given different names in different places and in different appearances, as the symbol of the life-giving powers of the universe.

India is the only country where the goddess is still widely worshiped today, in a tradition that dates to the Harappan culture of c.3000 B.C. and earlier. Mother-goddess and fertility cults in which female divinities predominate appear to have constituted the indigenous religious beliefs of the prehistoric period. A prehistoric megalith is still worshiped as the shrine of the Earth Mother, Bolhai, in Madhya Pradesh,

Central India. The Goddess is represented by a smooth, oval, red-coated stone. The capstone is about seven feet long, and rings like a bell when struck, or when rubbed with another stone in a ritual still practiced. The whole surface has been fashioned without metal tools as a representation of the Earth Mother who is



Mother-goddess c. 2500 B.C.E.
Harappa, terracotta.

‘the personified abstraction of cosmic life.’ She is the first creation, and conceived of as the Great Mother.

In the Kaimur region of Central India, archaeologists describe concentric triangles ‘where concretionary sandstone and, especially, triangular laminae are set up as shrines for the worship of the female principle, *Shakti*, which was built by the group of final upper palaeolithic hunters/gatherers. This Upper Palaeolithic monument is known locally as the Shrine of Kalika Mai (Mother Kali). Another monument in the same area is the prehistoric Kerai Ki Devi shrine. From Kashmir through the Vindhyan range to South India, monuments dating from as early as 8000 to 200 B.C.E. symbolize ‘the great active power in the universe,’ the feminine principle, *Shakti*.

– Ajit Mookerjee, *Kali The Feminine Force*

East Meets West

In India, from the most ancient times, the Goddess's esoteric tradition has remained intact. Can we find glimmerings of the hidden spiritual content of the Western Goddess traditions in our sister tradition in India? I believe we can. In 1945 two peasants broke open a jar lying along the south face of a boulder near Nag Hammadi in Egypt. In it they found tattered manuscripts nearly 2,000 years old. They had stumbled upon what scholars would soon call the Nag Hammadi library, early Christian texts dating back to the time the biblical Gospels themselves were being composed. The texts reveal a radically different understanding of the Goddess's place in early Christianity than I was taught in Sunday school. Perhaps the most fascinating of these manuscripts is "Thunder, Perfect Mind," the poignant testament of Isis spoken just as humanity is turning away from the Goddess. The text is entirely tantric. The resonances with Indian goddesses are unmistakable. I don't think it a fluke that the Celts worshiped a Kali-like goddess of destruction called *Cailleach* or that their "Green Man" so closely resembles India's Shiva Pashupati. We may do well, therefore, to look to Shaktism for clues about what the original Western Goddess tradition may have been like. There exists the tantalizing possibility that Indian Shaktism represents not only an offshoot of the primeval Goddess faith, but its source.

Let me offer an explicit example. My Indo-European ancestors in Norway believed in a world tree called *Yggdrasill*. At the bottom of the tree lay the joyless netherworld called *Hel* (to which the English word "hell" is related). At the center of the tree lay our human world, *Midgard*, the "middle region." At the top part of the tree flourished *Asgard*, the "land of the gods." Near the top an eagle perched, its wings outspread. From its perch, dew showered down over the rest of the tree, refreshing and enlivening it. At the very bottom of the tree lay a coiled snake, always trying to strike the eagle far above it. At the very top sat *Odin*, the one-eyed king of the gods, surveying his domain.



Isis

Another ancient culture where the world tree is a dominant religious image is, of course, Hindu India. The central spiritual practice of Shaktism is *kundalini* yoga. The *Shakta* world tree represents the human spine. Toward the bottom of the spine lie the *chakras* associated with our animal urges: self-preservation, reproduction, and aggression, our "lower" nature, our personal "Hel." In the middle region of the spine lies the heart *chakra*, reflecting the capacity to love and

relate selflessly to others – the human world or middle region. The chakras above the heart represent our divine capabilities: creativity, intellect/intuition, and mystical absorption, "the land of the gods." Behind and between our eyebrows lies the "third eye," represented by a circle from which two wings spread out, as if from an eagle. From this area *soma*, the elixir of consciousness, drips into the body, producing health and ecstasy. At the bottom of the spine lies the serpent *kundalini*, barely awake in most of us, whose purpose is to strike upwards, reaching the center between the eyebrows, elevating our lowest energies and connecting them with our highest aspirations. Shiva resides at the topmost *chakra*, representing our own Higher Self, watching, guiding, guarding, testing us. When

Shakti, the *kundalini*, is reunited with Shiva, enlightenment occurs. Did old Norse shamans retain this understanding of the inner dimensions of *Yggdrasill*, the world tree? I suspect they did.

–Linda Johnsen, *The Living Goddess*

* * *

*Sometimes you appear as the peaceful helpmate
seated beside Shiva in quiet harmony.*

*Sometimes you manifest as the radiant cosmos
and its countless living beings.*

*Sometimes you play as the incomparable Radha,
courageous lover of Lord Krishna.*

*Other times you manifest as Mother Kundalini,
the evolutionary potency
coiled as the root of the subtle body.*

*But this mad poet refuses to pay heed
to any theology, any philosophy.*

I can only weep: Ma, Ma, Ma!

This is your sweetest name, transcending all descriptions.

– Ramprasad, Tr. by Lex Hixon, *Mother of the Universe – Visions of the Goddess and Tantric Hymns of Enlightenment*

The young man's mind now turned altogether away from the world and its impermanence,¹ towards the one resource which he believed to be unailing. He became passionately resolved to obtain a vision of Kali, the Divine Mother – to know the Reality within the image he worshiped daily in the shrine. Obsessed by the love he felt for Kali and by his desire to see her, he spent every moment that he could in the temple. . . .

As the months of this year, 1856, went by, Ramakrishna's spiritual efforts became more and more intense. Addressing the image of Kali in the temple, he exclaimed piteously: 'Mother, you showed yourself to Ramprasad and other devotees in the past. Why won't you show yourself to me? Why won't you grant my prayer? I've been praying to you so long! And he wept bitterly.

'Oh, what days of suffering I went through!' Ramakrishna used to say, as he recalled this period in after-years. 'You can't imagine the agony of my separation from Mother! . . . Often, before the shrine, he became absorbed and stopped the performance of the ritual; sitting motionless for hours at a time. Because of this, some of the temple officials became impatient with him; others laughed at him for a half-crazy fool. But Mathur was impressed. And he told the Rani: 'We have got a wonderful devotee for the worship of our Goddess; very soon, he will awaken her.'

Before long, Mathur was proved right. This is how Ramakrishna describes the experience: 'There was an unbearable pain in my heart, because I couldn't get a vision of Mother. Just as a man wrings out a towel with all his strength to get the water out of it, so I felt as if my heart and mind were being wrung out. I began to think I should never see Mother. I was dying of despair. In my agony, I said to myself: "What's the use

of living this life?" Suddenly my eyes fell on the sword that hangs in the temple. I decided to end my life with it, then and there. Like a madman, I ran to it and seized it. And then – I had a marvelous vision of the Mother, and fell down unconscious.... It was as if houses, doors, temples and everything else vanished altogether; as if there was nothing anywhere ! And -what I saw was an infinite shoreless sea of light; a sea that was consciousness. However far and in whatever direction I looked, I saw shining waves, one after another, coming towards me. They were raging and storming upon me with great speed. Very soon they were upon me; they made me sink down into unknown depths. I panted and struggled and lost consciousness.'



Bhavatarini

Sri Ramakrishna's 'Ma', the presiding deity of the Kali Temple at Dakshineswar

It is not quite clear from Ramakrishna's narrative whether or not he actually saw the form of Mother Kali in the midst of this vision of shining consciousness. But it would seem that he did; because the first words that he uttered on coming to himself were 'Mother, Mother!' After this vision, Ramakrishna was so absorbed that he was often unable to perform the temple worship at all. Hriday had to do it for him. Hriday was so disturbed by the mental condition of his uncle that he called in a doctor to treat him. It would be interesting to know what form the treatment took. Needless to say, it was quite ineffectual.

– Christopher Isherwood,
Ramakrishna and His Disciples

* * *

*Mother, I give You my soul, soul, soul call;
You can't remain hidden anymore.
Give my Mother a soul, soul, soul call.
She can't remain hidden anymore.
Come out of the silent sky;
come out of the mountain glen.
Come out of my secret soul;
come out of my cave of silence.
Mother, I give You my soul, soul, soul call.*

– Paramahansa Yogananda. From *Cosmic Chants*,
published by Self-Realization Fellowship © 1938; 1996.

¹Sri Ramakrishna had recently suffered the loss of a close loved one.

Hymn to Our Lady

*Calm, O maiden most pure,
the wild storm of my soul,
for you alone showed yourself on earth to be
the port of all who set a course
through the perils of life.
You who gave birth to the Light,
brighten, O Pure Lady, the eyes of my heart.
You were given to us on earth
as protection, bulwark and boat.
You were given to us as a tower
and sure salvation, O maiden.
For this we no longer fear the adversary,
we who devoutly glorify you.*

– Saint Joseph the Studite (726-832 C.E.)
Metropolitan of Thessalonika

* * *

Oh My Goddess!

In yoga traditions, the goddess is considered the embodiment of life-giving energy. Whether we encounter this energy spontaneously or explore it deliberately as a practice, the energy of the divine feminine can open us to our own inner source of empowerment. The yogic sages – especially in the Hindu and Buddhist branches of Tantra – anticipated quantum physics by claiming that a subtle vibratory energy is the substratum of everything we know. Unlike physicists, however, yogic seers experience this energy not simply as a neutral vibration but as the expression of the divine feminine power, called *shakti*. Reality, the tradition says, is *shakti*'s dance, which takes form as our body, our thoughts, our perceptions, and also the physical world.

The Hindu traditions are comfortable with the idea that absolute reality, while formless, also manifests itself as divine entities. So *shakti*, the formless source of everything, is understood to take on forms: goddesses, or personifications of the energies that make up the world and our consciousness. Whether or not we “believe” in goddesses, contemplating them can help us become intimate with universal forces that otherwise can seem vast and impersonal.

Paradoxically, goddess practice can also reveal how the forces that move our thoughts and emotions are ultimately not personal but are archetypal energies we all share.

Jung and his followers looked at mythology as the self-revelation of the archetypal psyche. The Hindu deities are just as much a part of humanity's psychic structure. Like any other powerful symbolic form, the Hindu deities represent, and can also uncover, helpful psychological forces. They personify energies that we feel but may never have thought to name.

This understanding lies behind the practice of deity meditation, which advanced practitioners in the Tantric traditions have developed into a living science for transforming consciousness. Deity meditation can unsnarl psychological knots – for instance, issues with power or love – and call forth specific transformative forces within the mind and heart. It puts us in touch with the protective power within us and can change the way we see the world. This is particularly true of the goddess energies of the Hindu tradition. So, looking for your inner goddess isn't just a girl thing. The goddess transcends gender, and men as well as women benefit from tuning in to these vibrant forces.

An obvious way to tap into goddess energy is by contemplating Durga/Kali, Lakshmi, and Saraswati – the personified powers of strength, beauty, and wisdom. There are many legends about these goddesses. Durga (her name means “the unfathomable one”) is the cosmic warrior, the force within consciousness that battles ignorance and darkness. Durga rides a lion, and her arms bristle with weapons, which she uses to slay an assortment of demons and negative forces. Her face, however, shines with peace and compassion.

Durga's most fearsome manifestation, Kali (“the black one”), represents both the consuming power of time (which dissolves all things) and the timelessness of deep meditation. Kali – her tongue sticking out – is the energy that takes us beyond convention. She's adorned with a garland of human heads, which represents the sound vibrations that are manifested as thoughts, all of which are “devoured” when we enter the stillness of meditation.

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*Featuring News and
Information About Your
Vedanta Center*

Swami Vivekananda once said that the worship of Mother is central to the vitality of our modern world. We need Mother's grace to move the Vedanta movement into something great. And with Mother's vitality, the Atlanta Center will expand in ways that will surprise us all.

– Swami Brahmavidyananda

Call for *ProVisions* Submissions!

You have undoubtedly noticed that this issue of *ProVisions* is dedicated to the theme of the Divine Mother. Our plan is for each upcoming issue to focus on a theme, and we'd like your input . . . and contributions! To coincide with the birthday celebration for the Buddha, the theme for the May issue will be the "**Buddha/Buddhism**". If you have an article, anecdote, poem, drawing, photograph, essay, favorite quote, prayer, song – or just a thought – about the topic, please submit it to us **by April 15** for possible inclusion in the newsletter. The topic for the June issue of *ProVisions* will be "**Favorite Spiritual Images,**" and the deadline for those submissions is **May 15**.

Volunteer Opportunities

If you can write, rake, plant, bake, phone, type, staple, stamp, weed, hoe, wire, mow, sing, mop, clean, chop, OR if you can categorize, systematize, computerize, organize, decorate, collate, co-create, or pull your weight., we need you! If you're interested in

contributing any of your time and/ or talents to the Vedanta Center, please contact us.

Interfaith Work in Inman Park

One of our devotees recently spoke about Vedic Spirituality at the Inman Park United Methodist Church. The lecture was part of an informal series of talks about world religions organized by the church's pastor, Reverend Leslee Samuelson, with support from Jan Swenson of the Faith Alliance of Metro Atlanta (FAMA). [Some of you may remember Swenson's inspiring talk at the Vedanta Center last year.] A different religion was represented each Monday night for five weeks – Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. The series was a wonderful reminder how some Christian churches are eager to reach out and understand other faiths. Samuelson invited anyone in Inman Park and surrounding neighborhoods to attend, not just her congregation, and about 30 people

were there for the Hinduism night. She asked attendees to be open and accepting of the various philosophies and beliefs presented.

Our devotee began with an explanation and history of the word Hinduism, covered some of the commonalities and differences between Vedic spirituality and Christianity, discussed Swami Vivekananda's love of America and his lessons for the West, and gave a brief overview of our principles and practices. The audience asked excellent questions, including:

Do the moral principles in Vedic spirituality differ from those in Christianity? How much are Hinduism and caste interconnected? What does "**Om**" mean? What community events do you have? What drew you to Vedic spirituality? Does your belief in reincarnation lessen your fear of death? Do you believe in God's grace? One couple was particularly interested in the *Bhagavad Gita*. It turns out that they are reading the *Gita* with their teenaged son as part of his home schooling curriculum.



The Shrine Garden requires regular care and attention from our volunteers.

REGULARLY SCHEDULED EVENTS

Sunday	10:30 AM 11:00 AM	Chant Service. Discourse , followed by Discussion and Guided Meditation .
Thursday	8 PM	We are reading <i>Way of the Mystic Part II – The Lectures of Swami Vivekananda On a Universal Approach to Mysticism</i> . The book is available for sale from the Vedanta Center of Atlanta. A half-hour's meditation in the Chapel follows the one hour class.
3rd Fri.	7:30 PM	RAM NAM will be held on April 17 th , 993 Walker Ave., Atlanta, GA.
Daily**	6 PM	Vespers/Arati – A short period of prayer is followed by silent meditation. ** <i>Except Sundays</i> .

APRIL 2009 DISCOURSE TOPICS & SPECIAL EVENTS

5	11 AM	The Four Yogas as a Universal Religion I. Talk followed by discussion.
12	11 AM	EASTER SERVICE. †
19	11 AM	The Four Yogas as a Universal Religion II. Talk followed by discussion.
26	11 AM	The Four Yogas as a Universal Religion III. Talk followed by discussion.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

† All are welcome at our **Easter Service**, on **Sunday, April 12**. You are invited to bring flower offerings for the shrine in celebration of this occasion.

Swami Brahmailyananda, our Resident Minister here at the Vedanta Center of Atlanta, will begin a new discourse series on April 5 entitled “**The Four Yogas as a Universal Religion**”. The Four Yogas of Vedanta are Raja, Bhakti, Jnana, and Karma. The series will continue through Sunday, May 3.

Our weekly **Koffee Klatch** has become a tremendous success! All are welcome following our Sunday service. We have coffee, herbal and regular teas, and snacks. Please join with us for the fellowship, lively discussions, and refreshments.

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Lakshmi (“good fortune”) on the other hand, is the essence of everything we hold desirable. As the deity of wealth, good fortune, and happiness (in a happy linguistic coincidence, her name is pronounced “Luck-shmi”), she stands atop an open lotus flower, as lovely as a Bollywood film star. Gold coins drip from one of her four arms, symbolizing her overflowing generosity.

In some parts of India, business people worship their money and ledgers as Lakshmi, for she is money. But Lakshmi also gives spiritual gifts – the feeling of bliss, for example, is a sure sign of her subtle presence. One of her other names, Shri (or Shree), means auspiciousness, and everything about this goddess conveys beauty, goodness, and harmony.

Saraswati (“the flowing one”) dresses in white and holds a book, a rosary, and a stringed instrument called a *veena* to represent the practice of mantra repetition. Her companion, the swan, is celebrated in Hindu iconography as the bird whose beak can separate the milk of wisdom from the water of material existence, for Saraswati’s great gift is the discernment that lets us find divinity in the world. Saraswati is also the deity of language and music, the power behind creative inspiration.

Each of these goddesses represents energies that are expressed in every arena of life – physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. Yet traditionally, they are said to have two faces. When they aren’t recognized as expressions of the divine, we can experience their energies in deluding, excessive, or even negative ways.

For example, Durga energy in its pure form is a sword that cuts through obstacles and rights imbalances. That same energy can show up as aggression or harshness, as in the sharply critical judgment directed at others or ourselves. When Lakshmi’s abundance energy moves through the prism of ego, it might be experienced as greed or compulsive spending, as addictions to food or sex, as vanity or enslavement to pleasure. Saraswati’s power of divine speech becomes the endless flood of information that plays on all

channels of the modern world, or the uncontrollable thoughts and fantasies that parade through the mind.

The practice of deity yoga is a powerful way to free these archetypal energies from the nets cast by our egos, so they can reveal themselves in their purest, most sublime forms. Moreover, when we invoke the goddesses as a source of our own power, we train ourselves to stop identifying so personally with our skills and talents and gifts, and to open up to the subtle current of divine energy always present within us, ready to guide us if we let it. This takes a radical trust and an experimental spirit, one that may feel strange when you’re used to identifying yourself as the doer of your actions. Yet if you can embrace the feeling that divine energy flows through your actions, it will put you right into the state of flow, in which your actions are effortlessly graceful.

– Adapted from Sally Kempton, “Oh My Goddess,”
Yoga Journal December 2005.



*Creator, Earth Mother,
we thank You for our lives
and this beautiful day.
Thank You for the bright sun and the rain we
received last night.
Thank You for this circle of friends and the
opportunity to be together.
We want to thank You especially at this
time for the giveaway of their
lives made by the chickens, beets,
carrots, grains, and lettuce.
We thank them for giving of their lives
so we may continue our lives
through this great blessing.
Please help us honor them
through how we live our lives.*

– Mary Fallahay, Bear Tribe Medicine Society
Spokane Washington.
From *One Hundred Graces*. Ed. Marcia and Jack Kelly.

Swamiji's Lectures

With this issue, we begin a series devoted to the lectures of Swami Vivekananda. The following excerpts are taken from a lecture he gave in Hartford, Connecticut, March 8, 1895. Captions are provided by Sw. Brahmavidyananda.

Soul, God and Religion

Creeds and sects have their parts to play, but they're for children, they last but for a moment. Books never make religions, but religions make books. We mustn't forget that. No book ever created God, but God inspired all the great books. And no book ever created a soul. We must never forget that. The end of all religions is in realizing God in the soul. That's the one universal religion. If in all religions there's one universal truth, I place it here—in realizing God. Ideals and methods may differ, but that's the central point.

Without Inner Perception, We're All Atheists

People may believe in all the churches, carry in memory all the sacred books ever written, they may baptize themselves in every river on earth – still, if they have no perception of God, I'd class them with the rankest atheist. And others may have never entered a church or mosque, nor performed any ceremony, but if they feel God within themselves and are thereby lifted above the vanities of the world, they are holy, saints, call them what you will.

All Religions Converge in Realization

There may be a thousand radii, but they all converge at the center, and that center is the realization of God -- something behind this world of sense, this world of eternal eating, drinking and talking nonsense, this world of false shadows and selfishness. There is that beyond all books, creeds, and the vanities of this world, and it's the realization of God within you.

The Proof of One Religion Is the Proof of Them All

As soon as somebody stands up and says he or she is right or their church is right and all others are wrong, they themselves are all wrong. They don't know that the proof of their own religion depends on the proof of all the other religions. Love and charity for the whole human race – that's the test of true religiousness. I don't mean the sentimental statement that all people are brothers and sisters, but one must feel the oneness of human life.

It's Good to Be Born in a Church but Bad to Die There

So far as they're not exclusive, I see that all the sects and creeds are mine. They're all grand. They're all helping people toward the real religion. I'll add that it's good to be born in a church, but bad to die there. It's good to be born a child, but bad to remain a child. Churches, ceremonies, and symbols are good for children, but when grown, he must burst the church or himself. We mustn't remain children forever.



Vedanta Center of Atlanta

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