



Rather than looking outside ourselves for wisdom, knowledge and love, we begin to recognize that these capacities are bubbling up from the sacred feminine within us.

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DASA mahavidyas

Introducing the Dasa Mahavidyas - 10 Great Goddesses.

'Dasa' means 10, 'Maha' stands for great and 'Vidya' translates to both wisdom, discipline and mantra in feminine form.

So you can read it as the 10 great mantra forms, or the 10 great wisdoms or the 10 cosmic powers. In this chapter we will get a background on these goddesses, and then dive fully into the first two.

The Mahavidyas make their debut in the Puranas, the spiritual narratives of ancient India scribed between 300-700 CE, yet likely entrenched in the oral tradition long before that.

These entities take center stage in both Tantric and Puranic manuscripts, exuding a distinctive flair. Bengal, in particular, has a fondness for Mahavidyas in its spiritual tapestry; temples pay homage to the entire ensemble, or giving each deity dedicated sanctuaries or you'll see them making guest appearances alongside other divine entities. Their messages are sometimes inspiring and sometimes frightening because they represent life itself, but they are always instructive to those who are looking for something beyond the ordinary realm.

The Goddess or cosmic feminine force in Tantra is worshiped as Shakti, generally translated as "power", and the masculine force is worshiped as Shiva, meaning "peace", and Shakti is the power of Shiva, the power of peace. The power which comes forth from the void, like the life that comes forth from the womb. Shakti is not a power which is asserted against something, but a power that enlivens everything from within.

PRESENTING THE GODDESSES

This is the traditional sequence when presenting the Goddesses, but it can certainly be the case that the 10 wisdoms enter your life in a different order. You might naturally be drawn to someone at a certain point in your life, and they may not come in this particular sequence. However, this is the traditional sequence in which the goddesses are studied. It also reflects the sequence of creation.

**KALI - TARA - LALITA TRIPURA SUNDARI - BHUVANESHVARI - BHAIRAVI
CHINNAMASTA - DHUMAVATI - BHAGALAMUKHI - MATANGI - KAMALATMIKA**

Whether congregated or in solitary splendor, each goddess commands yogic superpowers - the formidable 'siddhis'. They deftly harness formidable magical forces, often of a disruptive nature.

Tantra affirms the importance of the body as a temple for the Divine, and grants it a sacred reality. It views our psycho-physical organism as a microcosm in which the individual soul can understand the workings of the entire universe.

The body is the best vehicle nature can provide to aid us in our spiritual growth and is a great symbol for the different levels and powers of the cosmos. However, the body is not our true Self. The truth is that we are inherently happy and free as conscious beings, even without a body.

There are many interpretations of the Goddesses identities and relevance vary across a spectrum of perspectives, here you'll hear a few:

IN THE APPEARANCE OF SATI

Now, let's delve into the mythological narrative featuring Shiva and Sati in the Shakta tradition, where the goddess assumes the form of Sati to entice Shiva back into his cosmic role as the destroyer. This tale unfolds in the broader context of familial dynamics and the cosmic drama.

Now, Sati is the daughter of Daksha, who's the son of Brahma, a King and priest responsible for keeping sacrificial rituals on point. Daksha's been praying forever for the goddess to reborn as his daughter. After a meeting with her, she lays down the law: "Dear Daksha, I will surely take birth in your wife's womb and marry Shiva. But there is one condition. If ever, in the future, you are to disrespect me, I will cast off this body and take birth somewhere else."

As the story progresses, Daksha forgets Sati's divine origin and begins to exert control over her. Tensions rise when Daksha opposes Sati's union with Shiva. The narrative reaches a critical point during Daksha's grand sacrificial ritual, to which Sati and Shiva is not invited. Other gods question this omission, emphasizing Shiva's integral role as the God of Destruction. Sati, disturbed by the disrespect, is caught in the ensuing conflict.

Shiva remains unaffected about the rituals, but forbids Sati from going where she is not invited, and Sati becomes angry that he limits her. It is said that she takes on a glowing, fearsome form and suddenly ages, with a long, swinging tongue. When Shiva sees this, he tries to close his eyes, and attempts to escape her, but in every direction he turns, she takes on a new form—and these forms are the Dasa Mahavidyas. When Shiva realizes he cannot escape his wife, he closes his eyes, and when he opens them again, a stunning woman stands before him, with a face like a lotus flower (something considered very beautiful in India). She is entirely black, with a beautiful face, completely naked, in the form of Kali. "Where is Sati?" Shiva asks. "Can't you see Sati standing before you?" the goddess replies.

The encounter unnerves Shiva, and variations in the narrative exist regarding his response. Some versions suggest Shiva allows her to attend the ritual, while others depict Kali proceeding despite Shiva's prohibition.

During the ritual, Sati, in her various forms, undergoes humiliation at the hands of her father. Confronted with this, she, as Kali, contemplates self-immolation (burns up with by her inner fire) or leaps into the sacrificial fire, with stories differing, leaving both Daksha and Shiva devastated.

The underlying theme in this rendition is the nuanced interplay between the masculine and feminine forces. Sati, embodying the 10 Mahavidyas, reclaims her autonomy, unsettling Shiva. Her laughter, depicted with a dangling tongue and rolling eyes, paralyzes Shiva, underscoring her authority. The story emphasizes Sati/Kali's transcendence over both Shiva and Daksha, challenging their authority and upholding a central theological tenet in the Shakta tradition – the primacy of the Goddess. Simultaneously, it reflects on the complex dynamics in relationships, resonating with the human experience of navigating familial ties and asserting individual agency.



What sacred feminine practice shows us is how to allow our cells to open to the wellspring of divine feminine power, whose purpose is to awaken us to the real meaning of our embodiment. Goddesses are mediators between your psyche and the deep structures of the cosmos.

IN THE APPEARANCE OF PARVATI

In the next version of the myth, the story revolves around Shiva and Parvati (the daughter of the mountain). In this narrative, Sati returns in a new form within Parvati, and they live together in Parvati's father's house. After a while, Shiva becomes restless and wants to leave, but Parvati forbids him to go. A conflict arises; he still wants to leave, but Parvati chooses to stop him by blocking the 10 openings of the house with all the goddesses. Each of the Mahavidyas positions herself around the house, and wherever Shiva tries to sneak out, they stand in his way. Tara at one door, Bhuvaneshvari at the next, Dhumavati at the window, and so on. This prevents Shiva from leaving, and from the goddess tradition perspective, it conveys a message to consciousness, "stay within your own body; there is nothing you need to reach out for elsewhere. It is okay to rest here in what already is."

This is considered a metaphor for when consciousness (Shiva) desires to leave the body, follow the whims of the mind, visit other places, when consciousness struggles to stay present in the moment. By blocking the 10 openings of the body, it is kept within. The ten openings are the nostrils, mouth, eyes, ears, genitals, anus, and through the top of the head.

In this similar tale, Shiva dwells with Kali during the Satya Yuga, the wisest and clearest of ages. Restless once again, but this time Kali does not attempt to restrain him; instead, she inquires, "Where do you wish to go?" Shiva replies rebelliously, "Wherever I please!" Embarking on

a journey, at every turn, he encounters a Mahavidya, a manifestation of his consort. Eventually, Shiva loses the desire to wander and declares, "Through the wisdom you have bestowed upon me, I see that there is nowhere I can go where you are not."

Shiva represents consciousness once more, but also the practitioner. He comprehends that in the world and in his spiritual practice, there is no place devoid of Shakti. Consequently, he remains calm and content at home with her. Shiva is neither frightened nor silenced, nor is he subjugated under Shakti's rule. Instead, he is beckoned home by understanding that there is nowhere he can go where she is not.

In this interpretation, Shiva's inclination to leave Parvati's abode expresses the individual's desire to let the senses roam wherever they please, without yogic discipline or control. What it shares with the first narrative is that the goddess controls Shiva through the Mahavidyas, bending him to her will and asserting her supremacy. This tale also more explicitly illustrates than the earlier one with Parvati that the goddesses can be interpreted as forces within the human organism that play a paramount role in yogic discipline or general sadhana.

The teaching of the Goddess of the divine feminine is that there is nothing inside you and nothing outside you that is not her.



IN THE APPEARANCE OF DURGA & KALI

This version is linked to the temporary Shakta tradition, centered around Devi (the goddess) as the upholder of Dharma, someone who ensures that the cosmos remains in order and that good always triumphs over evil. She orchestrates the arrival of all avatars in the world at the right time to set everything right.

This story revolves around the goddess Durga, who has been summoned to Earth to battle some demons, once again ensuring that balance is restored. Kali emerges through the furrowed brow of Durga when she is extremely angry and on the verge of defeat. The demon, Raktabija, has a superpower which lets every spilled drop of blood that touches the ground emerge into a new version of himself. Every time Durga cuts the demon, more of him appears. In this pressured moment, Kali leaps forward, bloodthirsty and emaciated, running wild across the battlefield, consuming even the most stubborn demons. She licks up the blood from every cut so that no blood is spilled on the ground, and eventually Durga can kill the demon.

Although the text does not explicitly mention Mahavidyas, in the living oral tradition, it is often said that the Mahavidyas spring out of her as all these goddess forms emerging from Durga, the great goddess, to aid her on the battlefield, and she later calls them back into herself. Therefore, this myth strongly indicates that Mahavidyas are seen as aspects of the larger divine – there is only one power, Devi, and only one energy, but that energy takes infinitely

many forms. Hence, Mahavidyas are considered different faces, different personalities of the same fundamental benevolent force.

The extraordinary powers of Mahavidyas, manifested through Sati, Parvati, and Durga, completely embody the goddesses' siddhis. When the feminine power is threatened, overlooked, or disrespected, the destructive forces step in to restore order. However, it is evident that very few of these goddesses seem solely occupied with restoring order. Instead, their mission appears to be about shaking up the status quo. Simply looking at them reveals that these are not classical heroines or assistants to the patriarchy. No, these goddesses are anti-normative. They do what women should not do. They are naked, laugh loudly, are destructive rather than constructive, associated with blood and death rather than birth and fertility. They lack a male counterpart, and if associated with a male deity, they dominate him, either by standing on top of him or sitting on him in a so-called reverse copulation position. They often defy our expectations, prompting us (or perhaps the traditional male practitioner) to avert our gaze in disgust and horror. Is this to emphasize that the divine is beyond our conceptual frameworks? That the divine encompasses even that which we reject? It also speaks to the power of the transgressive, the boundary-crossing.

So how can one incorporate the goddesses into their practice and life? According to tradition, the mere interest you show in Mahavidyas indicates that you have practiced with them in a previous life. It is enough to be interested in one of these goddess forms, as it will automatically lead you to the next as needed, and all the qualities of wisdom are inherently embedded in each of them. Your devotion and dedication are more than sufficient for this path. Well worth noticing is also that Shakti is not an external power but Vashakti, one's own power. To worship the Shakti is to take back one's own power, which is to recognize the power of one's own consciousness, the womb which in the energy of enlightenment is born.

The purpose of Tantra is to energize that Shakti dormant within us by unfolding all the different levels and rhythms of her movement, as she naturally seeks her native abode in the Supreme.

The sequence of the Mahavidyas also reveals a cosmic order, reflecting tantric cosmology. It describes how creation has progressed from a vast potential to an increasingly dense reality. As a microversion of the macrocosmos, we undergo the same evolution and development. Through our spiritual growth, we experience a kind of involution, moving from the dense/material back to identification with the absolute, then returning to identification with the relative—the constant pulse, known as 'spanda' in Sanskrit, the dance between contraction and expansion. Particularly if we also view the goddesses as an expression not only of our individual spiritual process (sometimes referred to as involution) but also of the cosmic process as a whole (evolution).

So, the goddess's path is never just about relating to the absolute or the transcendent, abandoning our relationships, or our body and bodily experience. It is always the pulse between the limiting form, a blessed form providing a specific experience of life on Earth in this body and during this time, and the journey back to identification with consciousness and energy. The Goddess represents what is hidden, secret, subtle and sensitive, what has to be searched out and discovered. As the Word, she represents both the teaching and its comprehension. She is thus the inner guiding power. Maybe look at this spiritual practice as also an art which cannot be approached mechanically but requires creative participation, let the Goddess come to work through you. This way of yogic knowledge is a theater or play in the mind, it contains all of life and all of the universe as flowing through our own nervous system.

TANTRA, MANTRA & YANTRA

In Tantric teachings, three fundamental elements are intertwined: tantra, mantra, and yantra. Tantra serves as the teaching, embodying the reality one seeks to realize. Mantra represents the sound form of the deity, acting as the force of consciousness propelling one toward realization. Yantra is a geometrical design where various mantras can be inscribed. Through it, the deity, Tantra, and mantra can be visualized and internalized.

Although typically interconnected, it is possible to chant a deity's mantra without delving into its corresponding teaching.

Mantra:

Each deity possesses a specific mantra, serving as its mental form. Deities have singular seed-syllable, bija mantras, and more extensive mantras that may include the deity's name along with other words.

Yantra:

Distinct yantras exist for each of the ten Mahavidyas and for most Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Yantras symbolize a subtler level of reality compared to the anthropomorphic image of the deity. They reveal the energy or law governing the deity's body.