



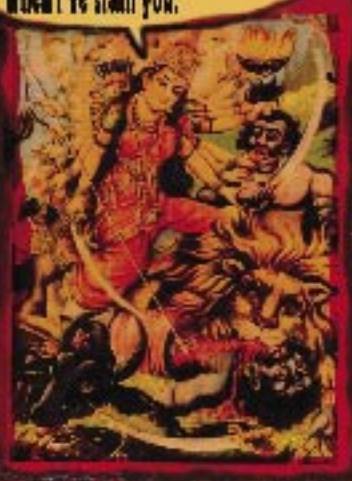
The Feminine noun 'Mātr' ending in ऋ (r)

ऋकारान्तः स्त्रीलिंगः 'मातृ' शब्दः

Case	Singular	Dual	Plural
	माता Mātā	मातरः Mātarah	मातरः Mātarah
	मातरि Mātarām	मातृभ्याम् Mātr̥bhyaṃ	मातृभिः Mātr̥bhiḥ
	मात्रा Mātrā	मातृभ्याम् Mātr̥bhyaṃ	मातृभिः Mātr̥bhiḥ
	मात्रे mātre	मातृभ्याम् Mātr̥bhyaṃ	मातृभिः Mātr̥bhiḥ



Roar, roar on, O fool... The gods will soon roar in this very place when I've slain you.



He
feeling
1. with/thro
together



Mātarau
forms :
2. Mother (object) 3. By/
for/to Mother 5. from/than
7. in/on/at/among Mother



NAVA RĀTRĪ

DR. ROBERT E. SVOBODA

Adapted from a talk given at

The Old School, Temple, NH during Nava Rātri 2003

FEW NATIONS CAN COMPETE WITH INDIA when it comes to frequency and range of religious observances. In many lands the sacred origins of traditional celebrations have been quite forgotten, but the majority of Indian festivals continue to serve both as social occasions and spiritual events.

Even in India, however, evident fervor notwithstanding, few devotees know more than the superficial significances of the holidays they observe. The following article examines in greater depth one of these annual spectacles, *Aśvin Nava Rātri*, the nine (*nava*) night (*rātri*) period that recurs each late September or early October, as indicated by the moon.

Children of Ma, the Mother Goddess, dedicate themselves to all-embracing adoration of the Great Goddess during the nine nights of Nava Rātri, the primary yearly occasion of goddess worship. Before Nava Rātri begins, we prepare our hearts to receive Her grace by celebrating the *Pitr Pakṣa*, the fortnight during which we remember our ancestors. We venerate our foremothers and forefathers during this fortnight for the very good reason that they, alive or dead, but particularly dead, exert a strong influence upon us. This is but logical—we are after all making use of genes and chromosomes that they think of as theirs. During the period that they were alive all their energy—their mental and physical *śakti*, their *prāṇa*, their very auras—continuously imprinted on these genes and chromosomes. As long as we work with genetic material thus imprinted, we remain connected to the imprinters.

Being thus connected is a particularly good thing when our ancestors happen to be saints and sages, wonderful people, always equitable, ever bent on promoting prosperity in all the three worlds. But even when our predecessors are less

benevolent, we must still befriend and love them. If one forebear happened to be a particularly troublesome person, then we will simply need to love the sinner without agreeing with the sin, just as Jesus advised us to do. By loving our ancestors unconditionally we extend love to our own genetic material, which translates into a desirable current of love and self-acceptance within ourselves.

Autumn, when the year is heading towards its end, presents us with a perfect opportunity to remember our ancestors and to thank them for having provided us with the genetic material by virtue of which we all exist here and now in physical bodies. It is also a fine time to remind them that they are dead, no longer connected directly to a physical body and to that genetic material to which they were once so tightly connected. Now they need to go their own way, to find a nice new womb from which to be born, that they may bind themselves to new genetic material, and be less tempted to live vicariously through us.

Ancestors living vicariously through us would be less problematical if their “living” was merely symbolic; but in fact they live through us in a very literal, material way, though in a manner not easily perceptible to us, the living. Our ancestors influence our thinking processes, desires, and paths through life so significantly that encouraging them to shift their fixation away from us before Nava Rātri begins is vital. This is because it is during Nava Rātri that we attempt to accumulate *śakti*, to open ourselves to the Mother Goddess and encourage Her to pour energy into us.

Energy is amoral. It is neither positive nor negative, neither good nor bad. For example, there’s nothing like good or bad electricity. Organized and channeled properly, electricity gives good results; used improperly—as by

sticking your finger into a socket—electricity delivers bad results. It’s the same way with *śakti* in general. We may have a good relationship with the Goddess, and She may be in a position to deliver *śakti* to us, but this in no way guarantees that we will employ that *śakti* wisely. In particular, should we elect to invoke some sort of *śakti* that is for us inappropriate, we will not digest it well; and when we have trouble digesting *śakti*, we will very likely find that it will move us in a direction that will be beneficial neither for it nor for us.

THE ANCESTOR FORTNIGHT PRECEDES Nava Rātri to help improve our “*śakti* digestion.” Immediately prior to the ancestor fortnight comes the Gaṇeśa festival, during which we request Gaṇeśa to remove any obstacles that might stand in our way. Gaṇeśa is the obstacle-remover par excellence, but he specializes in obstacles due to *gaṇas*. Gaṇeśa literally means *gaṇa īśa*—“lord of the *gaṇas*.” Gaṇa, like all good Sanskrit words, has a number of different meanings, at least three of which are very important in this context.

First, a *gaṇa* is a category; in this context, “the *gaṇas*” means all the categories in the world. In *Āyurveda*, for example, we have all manner of different categories, including the *viratarvādi gaṇa*, the group of plants that begin with *virataru*, and the *kṛmighna gaṇa*, or the group of plants that remove parasites.

We would like very much for all the categories in the world to cooperate with us, so that whenever we require something, its category will automatically suggest itself to us. If I am practicing law, for example, I don’t want to waste time sitting in front of a pile of law books poring over each one searching for precedents; no, I want the precedent to jump out at me, which it will do if the law categories and I relate

well together, if we are on good terms. Getting the world's categories to be on good terms with us is the first good reason to worship Gaṇeśa.

Second, “the gaṇas” are the sense organs. We definitely want Gaṇeśa to prevent our sense organs from causing us any kind of *vighnas*, or obstacles. The *ghna* portion of the interesting word *vighna* means “to kill,” and the *vi* here means “distinctive.” A *vighna* is thus an obstacle that “kills,” in a specific, special way; it may kill literally, but usually it kills figuratively, by interrupting our progress in a certain direction. A *vighna* “kills” our intention, our momentum; it diverts us from our goals. Our sense organs are particularly good at creating *vighnas*, particular ways of being destroyed; when our sense organs are allured by things that are not good for us, we find ourselves being led by those sense organs into situations where those *vighnas* can “kill” us.

But when Gaṇeśa is activated, he directs our sense organs to remain under control, either under his personal control or under the control of the *iṣṭa devatā*, the personal deity. Well controlled, our sense organs are freed from paying attention solely to our cravings and desires—cravings and desires that may be roused by dead ancestors who are looking for a body through which to enjoy the things that they wanted to enjoy just before they died. Controlling the sense organs is thus a second excellent reason for worshipping Gaṇeśa.

A third important meaning of *gana* is “ethereal being.” Gaṇas are also disembodied intelligences of every variety: *bhūta*, *preta*, *piśāca*, *brahma-rākṣasa*, *vetāla*, *vimāna gandharva*, *yakṣa*, *yakṣiṇī*, *ḍākinī*, *śākinī*, and so on. Some of these were once embodied; some have never been embodied. Some were once human, and some have never been human, but all can influence humans because they are so subtle. They can slip into our fields of energy and influence us, usually without our even being aware of what is going on. Since we don't approve of such behavior in beings who are pursuing their own agendas, we request Gaṇeśa to keep all of them under control as well.

Worshipping Gaṇeśa is thus imperative. The question then arises: Once Gaṇeśa has taken care of all the gaṇas, all ethereal beings, why should we even bother with our ethereal ancestors? One answer is that Gaṇeśa is in charge of ethereal beings that are basically “external” to us, not part of our innate, intrinsic reality, while our direct progenitors are an integral part of the process through which we enter the human mold.

In order for you to become a human you have to be poured into the human mold, for which you need a womb. The basic cosmic principle that generates the human womb has evolved into that form and function over millions and billions of years, producing individuals generation by generation. Ancestors tend to believe that, simply by virtue of the fact of having been born in a certain lineage, by familiarity with the wombs in that lineage, they have a right to continue being nourished by the people who follow them in that lineage.

Cultures the world over have recognized this ancestral expectation early on, and have developed rituals to address it; in India, the *ṛsis*, or Seers, established the *Pitṛ Pakṣa*, a fortnight (*pakṣa*) dedicated to feeding all the ex-humans in one's lineage (*pitṛ*), with the aim of satiating them for a while. Satiated, they are less likely to inflame our cravings. This is especially necessary during *Nava Rātri*, when we try to accumulate śakti. Trying to accumulate śakti in the presence of substantial residual cravings can lead to all sorts of difficulties. Amassing śakti after getting our cravings under control, even temporarily, can make that śakti available to us for other applications, like lessening the impact of the karmas that create the *vighnas* that obstruct us and “kill” our progress, and increasing the positive influence of the *iṣṭa devatā*, the personal deity, in our lives.

THIS BRINGS US TO *NAVA RĀTRI*. During the nine nights of *Nava Rātri* devotees focus every evening on worshipping the Goddess, encouraging her energy to move in their direction. *Nava Rātri*'s culmination arrives on

Vijaya Daśamī, at sunset. *Vijaya* means “victory,” and *Daśamī* is the tenth day of the lunar fortnight. A *daśamī* can be either of the bright fortnight, during which the moon waxes (from new to full) or of the dark fortnight, during which the moon wanes (from full to new). In our solar system the moon is the archetypal female energy, and the sun is the archetypal male energy. During *Nava Rātri* the moon waxes; this gives us an opportunity to accumulate feminine energy of the archetypal variety during a time when the celestial feminine energy is waxing. *Nava Rātri* is a fine time for men to come to appreciate their inner femininity, and for women to flower in an ever more fully feminine way.

Note that the moon also represents the mind, and the sun represents the soul. We need both mind and soul to exist in a dualistic world like the one in which we live. Like the soul, the sun is relatively constant: it daily rises and sets in more or less the same place. The length of a day may vary, and the apparent brightness of the sun in a particular location may fluctuate (depending on the angle that the sun makes with the horizon), but the sun's absolute brightness never varies. The sun continues to put out, with but small deviations, the same amount of energy that it has put out for many millions, and possibly billions, of years.

In contrast to the sun, the moon varies moment by moment. It is the fastest moving celestial object that we can see, and it changes its shape as it moves. Sometimes you can even detect—though it's very subtle—a difference in the size of the moon from the time it rises, to the time it sets. Like the moon, the mind is always becoming something other than what it was a few seconds before—at least until that point when it takes on that quality of the soul that we call *sthairya*, stability.

Your soul, your indwelling spirit—which is a reflection in you of the supreme, absolute consciousness—does not change. There is nothing changeable in it. It has no qualities, no limitations, no attributes of any sort. It never becomes colder or hotter, further up or further down, brighter or dimmer,

more intelligent or less intelligent; it can never become anything other than what it already is. Even though we can't really describe the ultimate reality as having a quality, this immutability gives it, from our perspective, the property of being much more stable than anything else in the universe. As the mind takes on this quality of being firmer and more stable, it will automatically start to shine with greater brilliance and constancy.

Even amidst change—when the chemistry of our blood is strongly affecting the way in which we think, when our ancestors are exerting their influence, and when the seasons revolve—the better the mind relates with the spirit, the more the mind will take on the spirit's quality of stability. Greater stability means that change becomes less likely to throw us off balance.

As we become better balanced, more centered, continuity develops, of a kind that facilitates our re-visioning of ourselves, recreation in the image of the deity that we worship. Transmutation requires energy. The Goddess is immensely generous, and will provide you with that energy any time you ask for it. It becomes easier to procure and process energy during Nava Rātri, when hundreds of millions of other humans will join your energies with theirs to worship the Goddess. We should take advantage of the astral gravity that becomes activated for goddess worship during this period, and open ourselves to the Mother during this time, that she may bless us for the coming year.

Each lunar month actually harbors its own Nava Rātri. Worshipping the Goddess from the first day after every new moon through the tenth day after every new moon is likely to provide extra benefit. But three of the Nava Rātris during the year are particularly notable. Most notable among these is Aśvin Nava Rātri, so termed because it occurs during the lunar month of Aśvin, when the moon is full in the lunar constellation (*nakṣatra*) of *Aśvinī*.

Aśvinī occupies the first part of the sidereal constellation of Aries, which differs from the tropical sign of Aries. When you think of a planet in the tropical sign Aries, in western astrology,



Durgā

three times out of four that planet will actually be in the constellation of Pisces. Why? Because of the precession of the equinox.

In *Jyotiṣa*, Indian sidereal astrology, however, when we say the moon (or any other planet) is in a particular constellation, it does in fact occupy that constellation in the sky. So when we say in *Jyotiṣa* that the moon will be full this month in Aries, as the so-called Hunter's Moon, it will in fact tenant the constellation of Aries, at the beginning of the zodiac; this acts as a "new beginning" for the moon. From the Indian point of view this moon, called *Kojāgari Pūrṇima*, is particularly noteworthy, being the night on which

the moon sweats drops of nectar down onto the earth. Five days after the end of the Aśvin Nava Rātri, the wise collect this nectar as it drips down, and make good use of it to help them get into right relationship with śakti, and to enhance the organism's ability to accumulate and digest śakti.

Another important Nava Rātri is called *Śākambarī* Nava Rātri. A third, which is second in importance only to Aśvin Nava Rātri, is *Caitrī* Nava Rātri. *Caitrī* Nava Rātri happens during the spring, when the moon is full in the *nakṣatra* of *Citrā*, a *nakṣatra* which is split equally between the last degrees of Virgo and the first degrees of Libra. On the border of sidereal Virgo and Libra is

the bright star Spica, so this Nava Rātri basically occurs just before the full moon and Spica conjoin, on the opposite side of the sky from Aśvin and Aries.

The year's two most important Nava Rātris are thus roughly six months apart, the Caitra Nava Rātri occurring in the spring when new birth is happening, and the Aśvin Nava Rātri occurring in the fall, the time of death. Rāmacandra, hero of the Rāmāyaṇa and seventh among the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, was born on the ninth day of Caitri Nava Rātri; six days later, on the ensuing full moon, comes the birthday of Añjaneya, or Hanumān, Rāma's devoted servant. Two important personalities met their end on Vijaya Daśamī; Rāma slew his adversary Rāvaṇa, and the goddess Durgā slew Mahiṣāsura, the buffalo demon.

THE STORY OF DURGĀ AND MAHIṢĀSURA is told in the *Durgā Saptasatī* ("Durgā's 700"), the text that offers us our basic stories about the Great Goddess. *Durgā Saptasatī*, which is also known as the *Devī Mahātmyam* ("The Greatness of the Goddess") and the *Caṇḍī Pāṭha* ("Caṇḍī's Text"), is told by a ṛṣi to a king and a merchant. The humbled king and merchant have become *śaktihīna*, deficient in power. The king had been kicked out of his kingdom by powerful enemies in concert with his wife and son, and the merchant, who sports the meaningful name Samādhi, had been similarly ejected from his home, also by his family. Expelled from their respective realms these two wandered about, unsure of what to do with themselves, until each independently stumbled upon the ṛṣi's *aśram*. Symbolically, of course, they represent you and me, wandering around in the world, separated from our true family, the family composed of the great gods and goddesses. Cut off from direct communion with the ultimate reality of universal consciousness, and from reality's ultimate substrate, the Great Goddess, we drift aimlessly along, longing for direction.

The king and the merchant meet at the ṛṣi's *aśram*, and jointly seek the ṛṣi's guidance. The ṛṣi's name is Medhas, literally "Intelligent," and he is as clever as

his name suggests. He tells his guests not to worry: "I shall now relate to you some stories about the Great Goddess because, as you will soon clearly see, whenever the gods have a problem that they themselves cannot solve it is to Her feet that they go and bow. She and She alone will be able to solve your problems."

The ṛṣi then proceeds to tell the king and the merchant three stories. The first is about a time when Viṣṇu lay sleeping calmly on his thousand-headed snake Śeṣa, floating in the Ocean of Milk. Śeṣa means the remnant, that which is left over; everything in the universe that is not part of the divinity that Viṣṇu here symbolizes is a part of Śeṣa. Viṣṇu preserves the cosmos. Saying that Viṣṇu is asleep suggests that the entire universe has been destroyed by Lord Śiva dancing the *Tāṇḍava*, the dance of destruction, enjoying as he did so the bliss of the intense intoxication that dissolving the cosmos brings.

All of creation had vanished save Brahmā, the creator, who remained sitting calmly on his lotus that opens from a stalk that grows from Viṣṇu's navel. It just so happened that, at this point, for reasons that can only be understood by the Goddess or by someone who has Her ear, out of Viṣṇu's ears appeared two demons, created from his earwax. They were known as Madhu and Kaiṭabha. *Madhu* means the sweet thing, the desirable thing, the useful thing; *kaiṭabha* is waste, the thing that is leftover, unwanted. So it was Mr. Desirable and Mr. Undesirable who emerged from Viṣṇu's ears. Both were demons, and all they could see when they looked around themselves was Brahmā, the creator, who sat quietly on his lotus hoping to avoid being seen. When they saw him, they decided immediately to kill him, as they had nothing better to do, and because they were, after all, demons. Brahmā was, of course, terrified by this danger. He wanted very much to preserve his life as long as possible, just like you and me, and he understood that, number one, Viṣṇu, the only being who could save him, was sleeping; and number two, that even though he, Brahmā, is the creator of the universe, he had neither the

ability nor the *adikhāra*—the right—to awaken Viṣṇu.

What did he do? He used his noggin—he sang a hymn to the goddess of sleep. The goddess of sleep had embraced Viṣṇu intimately, which is why Viṣṇu slept. All of his sense organs, his very awareness, had been completely embraced by the darkness of *tamas*, of inertia. Brahmā started his song to the goddess of inertia, which is the very power that creates the universe. Creation can only occur when one portion of the supreme consciousness comes to believe itself to be separate from the ultimate reality, which it can do solely by embracing inertness. And the whole purpose of creation is to permit individuals to arise who will shake off inertia and rejoin with the supreme. This is what the Great Goddess is all about: She causes things first to become very dense, then to become subtle again; She causes the cosmos to wander far away from ultimate reality, then leads the cosmos back to that reality. At the time of the dissolution of the universe everything that had set forth at its inception returns to embrace Viṣṇu, with great intensity and great closeness, and Viṣṇu embraces it back. All of his attention goes in that direction, and then there is quiet in the cosmos.

But Viṣṇu apparently forgot to wash out his ears before he went to sleep. This is a good reminder for all of us to remember to always keep all of our sense organs, not only our teeth, but also our eyes and ears and everything, very clean, to discourage demons from being created during sleep.

Inspired by impending calamity, Brahmā sang such a beautiful hymn to the Goddess that She became so pleased being that She disengaged herself from Her intimate embrace with Viṣṇu, and Viṣṇu came promptly back to consciousness. Being Viṣṇu, he instantaneously understood the situation, and rose up to fight with those demons. Having just woken up, he had nothing better to do, so the fight continued for many thousands of years.

Viṣṇu played about with those demons until they become thoroughly intoxicated with their strength and

energy, their śakti. They became so intoxicated that they came to believe themselves to be utterly mighty; otherwise, how could Viṣṇu have been unable to subdue them for so long? They said to Viṣṇu, “We have become pleased with you, O great Viṣṇu! Ask a boon from us and we shall grant it to you!”

This is what Viṣṇu had been waiting for; after all, they were parts of him. He didn't want to kill them unilaterally, he wanted to wait for them to request death, which they had just done. Viṣṇu replied, “If you are pleased with me then grant the boon I request. Permit me to slay you now.”

Now they were stuck; they had said that they would grant whatever Viṣṇu asked. Looking around they saw the entire universe covered with water, and so they said, “Please kill us where there is no water,” thinking, “Ha! Ha! Ha! Now Viṣṇu is the one who has been tricked!” But of course, Viṣṇu is far ahead of them. If he were playing chess, he would be the grandmaster of all grandmasters. Viṣṇu said, “There is no problem. I'm above the water. I shall put you here on my lap and kill you here.” So with his discus he chopped off their heads. They were, after all, a part of him; he could have solved this problem earlier, with a swab. But because he did not Brahmā was motivated to compose a beautiful hymn, and the tradition of calling on the Goddess in times of supreme need was established. This initial karma served as the foundation for the process that led to the second incident.



Lakṣmī

THE SECOND INCIDENT CENTERS ON THE demon Mahiṣāsura. *Mahiṣa* means buffalo, as in water buffalo. Cows are respected in India as embodiments of *sattva* (think of *sattva* as everything that is sweetness and light, and equanimity and equilibrium, and good feeling and happiness, and unselfishness and altruism, and the like). Indians regard cows as being archetypally maternal, which is why they worship them; instead of eating cows, they feed them.

In spite of this, the vast majority of people in India who drink milk, drink water buffalo milk, because the buffalo produces more milk, and that milk has

more cream. Is this a good idea? Not from the traditional Āyurvedic point of view. Even though the buffalo is maternal in its own way, water buffalo milk is said to contain *tamas* instead of *sattva*. *Tamas* means inertia, heaviness, density. It is true that inertia and heaviness are essential cosmic factors; the world would not exist without them. But we are better off having no more *tamas* than we absolutely require. Drinking water buffalo milk in excess makes the mind dense and dull.

This is of course relative. A diet of broiled cow will create more *tamas* in your mind than will a diet of water

buffalo milk (provided of course that you are digesting both properly). The *tamas* inherent in roast beast is greater than that in milk, even water buffalo milk. But, when we compare milks, we find cow's milk to be energetically superior to buffalo's milk.

I have had a long relationship with water buffalo. Six of the years I lived in India I spent in Pune, in the Āyurvedic college hostel. My room was right next to the overhead water tank, and the men who filled the tank didn't bother paying attention to when the tank had filled; they would just leave the pump on and, of course, the tank would always



overflow. As a result a small pond had developed outside my window, and every day water buffalo would come to wallow in the pond; as their name suggests, they are very fond of water. So everyday I had the *darśan*—the vision—of water buffalo. It was not hard to enjoy the vision of cows either, but I usually had to go out into the street to find them, whereas the water buffalo came to me. That said something I suppose either about the college or about me, or both.

In any event, I became intimately associated with these water buffalo, and found that, while they are not inherently bad animals, they are indeed inherently tamasic. This means that they follow the principle of inertia—whatever is happening goes on happening. Static inertia means that a vase is highly unlikely to jump off a table and start to dance around the room. It will instead stay where it is until energy arrives

from somewhere and causes it to move. Dynamic inertia means that something that is already in motion will tend to stay in motion until it is interrupted. A train that is moving down the tracks has very powerful dynamic inertia, because it is a large mass that has been accelerated into motion. Should such a train run into something, that something will probably be destroyed, by that sizable mass that dynamic inertia will continue to try to move forward even after the collision.

A water buffalo enjoys both static and dynamic inertia. Sitting down, he is static—if you try to move him, it will not be an easy thing to do. Walking, he is dynamic; if you stand in front of him, he will run you over simply because you happen to be in his way. There is nothing personal about it really; he will simply think of you as one more obstacle to be overcome. Unlike Gaṇeśa, who gets rid of obstacles in a very tasteful

and adept way, the water buffalo gets rid of obstacles by simple bulldozing. Or, I suppose, by “buffalo-doing.”

Mahiśāsura displayed this sort of attitude. He was an *asura*, a selfish astral being of extreme power, who had taken the form of a buffalo bull, which made him extremely tamasic. The demons (*asuras*) and the gods (*suras*, or *devas*) are cousins; their mothers were sisters, Diti and Aditi. And, as you well know, cousins often don’t get along well with one another. The *suras* became overlords of the universe, which annoyed the *asuras* sufficiently to cause them to vow eternal warfare against the *suras*. The *devas* are filled with *sattva*, they are chiefly *sattvic*—but they also display a certain amount of *tamas*. They are satisfied very easily—they sit up in heaven eating lotuses and drinking ambrosia, and don’t tend to pay attention to what’s going on elsewhere.

The asuras live down in Pātāla, under the earth. Convinced that they should be running the cosmos, they nurse an unending grudge, which spurs them into eternal plotting to conquer the celestial regions. Asuras have tremendous tamas, plus just enough sattva to inspire them to perform penance. The inertia of tamas permits them to become intensely focused, and when they decide to focus on accumulating energy and śakti, they can get so fanatical about it that they might stand on one toe for 10,000 years, living only on the smoke from sacrificial fires. Such terrific penances allow them to generate tremendous energy, which they then use to conquer heaven. Their problem is that once they conquer heaven they don't know what to do with it, and the universe then becomes very chaotic. Eventually someone graciously helps the gods; someone reminds them of how stupid they were to get into this problem by failing to pay attention, because of their own tamas, and how now it is time for them to reform and repent. And after they have sincerely reformed and repented and bowed down, somebody helps them reconquer heaven. Usually it's the Goddess.

Mahiṣāsura accumulated a lot of energy down in Pātāla, and he used that energy like a water buffalo bull uses its energy, to bulldoze everyone in its way. Mahiṣāsura tossed the devas on his horns, he trod them with his hooves, he kicked them out of heaven. The gods fell down to earth, where they wandered around helplessly, like ordinary mortals. Eventually they pulled themselves together and said to themselves, "When Brahmā was afflicted by Madhu and Kaiṭabha, he hymned the Goddess, who was kind enough to help him out. This happened thanks to Viṣṇu, so let us go and visit with Viṣṇu."

Taking Brahmā the Creator with them, they all proceeded to where Viṣṇu and Śiva were visiting with each other, and explained everything in detail. On hearing the situation Viṣṇu and Śiva became mightily irate, dreadfully offended; they became *amarṣa pūrṇa*—filled with righteous indignation. Righteous indignation so unsettled them that from their bodies emerged

tremendously powerful goddesses that closely resembled them. Then the gods, who were still fairly clever, caught on. They instantly became furious, and from each of them emerged a powerful goddess. All these redoubtable goddesses then merged into one supremely potent goddess, whom they named Durgā.

Dur means far away; *ga* means to go. The word *durga* means inaccessible, unattainable; it can also mean a citadel, fort, or stronghold. The Goddess Durgā is remote, hard to reach, impossible to conquer; it is exceptionally difficult to accumulate the energy required to align oneself with Her. This mighty Durgā mounted Herself on a lion, and set out to destroy Mahiṣāsura, which She did after an epic battle that takes up several pages in the *Durgā Saptasatī*.

Toward the end of that mēlée all of Mahiṣāsura's underlings and all his armies had been slaughtered by Durgā, Her lion, and Her armies. All died except Mahiṣāsura, who continued to frolic about. Durgā then grabbed a cup of mead, drank, and spoke:

गर्ज गर्ज क्षणं मूढ मधु यावत्पिबाम्यहम् ।
मया त्वयि हतेऽत्रैव गर्जिष्यन्त्यासु देवताः॥

*Garja! Garja! kṣaṇam mūḍha, madhu
jāvat pibāmyaham. Mayā tvayi
hate'traiva, garjiṣyantyāsu devatāḥ*
(*Devī Mahātmyam* III.35)

"Roar, roar on, O fool, while I quaff this mead. The gods will soon roar in this very place when I've slain you."

Durgā enjoyed Her mead, which reddened Her eyes. As Her eyes reddened, She took Her trident and pinned down the demon. Pinned down, he came out from his buffalo body in a quasi-human form, unable, perhaps, to pretend any longer to be something he was not. He had only partly exited from that buffalo form when Durgā took Her sharp sword and sliced his head from his body. Down it fell, at sunset on the tenth day of Aśvin Nava Rātri.

The gods were so happy that they roared with joy, and then sang another beautiful hymn describing the Goddess and Her wonders. Durgā then appeared to them and said, "I'm pleased that you have sung my praises. What would you like?" And they said, "Our heart's desire is that, the next time we let our chestnuts

fall into the fire, You should please come and pull them out again." Durgā replied with the single word "*Tathāstū!*"—"Let it be so!"—and so ended the second story.

By now the merchant and the king were listening very closely, noting that thanks to the Goddess good things can happen even to those who have been discomfited. King and merchant had begun to think that there might be hope for them as well.

THE ṚṢI NOW CAME TO THE THIRD STORY, which concerns the conquest of the cosmos by two demon brothers, Śumbha and Niśumbha. Again the gods were mortified, but on this occasion they didn't waste any time. Instead they promptly recalled, "The last time we were assailed by asuras the Goddess assured us that all we need do was remember Her, and all our difficulties would be eliminated." So inspired, they sang a beautiful song. Here is one verse: या देवि सर्वभूतेषु शक्ति रूपेण संस्थिता नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमो नमः ॥३१॥

*yā devi sarvabhūteṣu śakti rūpeṇa
saṁsthitā namastasyai namastasyai
namastasyai namo namaḥ*

(*Devī Mahātmyam* V.31)

"To that goddess who is, among all created beings, the very embodiment of energy and power in the universe we bow down to you we bow down to you we bow, profoundly bow, to you."

The gods sang this song, describing the many wonderful qualities that the Great Goddess embodies. This naturally pleased Her no end, and She appeared to them to say, "I see that you are in great distress, and I have come to solve all your problems." She then made Herself most beautiful, and positioned Herself atop a mountain.

The servants of Śumbha and Niśumbha saw Her there, and returned to report: "O kings! You already own everything in the universe that is worth owning, but somehow you have missed this most beautiful woman of all. Why should you not own her?" Śumbha and Niśumbha agreed, and sent a messenger, who said to Her, "Beautiful woman, my masters, Śumbha and Niśumbha, own everything in the universe that is of any value—everything except you. Kindly

come willingly with me, that they may own you too.” And the Goddess replied, “Gosh, I would love to oblige, but unfortunately I cannot. Long ago I took a foolish oath that I would only marry that man who could beat me in battle. Having taken that oath, I must fulfill it. Have one of those great warriors come and defeat me, and as soon as I yield, I will marry him.”

These words filled the messenger with annoyed amazement. He replied, “My masters have conquered the entire universe, subduing every man and god therein. You are but a helpless woman. How will you be able even to stand in front of them, much less meet them in battle?” The Goddess said, “I’m sorry. It is true that I am a helpless woman. But there remains the matter of my foolish oath. Let’s not waste time; just have one of them come here and face me. It will be a mere formality for such champions. Once I am defeated, we will marry.”

THE MESSENGER WENT BACK AND indignantly explained this effrontery to Śumbha, the elder of the brothers, and therefore king. Śumbha immediately called over his general Dhūmrālocana (“Smoky Eye”), and ordered, “Proceed immediately to that shrew, and insist that she accompany you back to me! Should she refuse, discomfit her by dragging her by her hair.” Dhūmrālocana enthusiastically, gleefully went about his errand, and soon found the Goddess, smiling gently at him from a high peak of the Himālaya. He called out to her, “O divine one, come quickly! If you don’t, I shall distress you by dragging you by your hair!” The goddess then smilingly uttered the sacred syllable *HUM*, which at once turned Dhūmrālocana into ashes. He started out with a smoky eye, and ended up a pile of ashes. He had issues with fire, clearly.

After Dhūmrālocana met his doom, his army became very upset. They tried to attack the Goddess, which incensed Her. From Her sweetly smiling gentle goddess self emerged the extremely intensely irate dark goddess Kālī, who was impossible to look upon, much less withstand. Frightful teeth gleaming

in her dreadful mouth, Kālī laughed loudly, with earsplitting fury, as she minced her adversaries. She hoisted even war elephants into her mouth, and maniacally munched them with their riders, bells and other accoutrements. She was extraordinarily, splendidly put out, and she quickly put an end to that entire army. One messenger survived to report the debacle to Śumbha.

This news so annoyed Śumbha that he summoned his two top generals, Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa, and shouted at them, “Hey Caṇḍa! Hey Muṇḍa! Bring that shrew to me, dragging her by her hair! Slay her lion! And, should anyone stand up to protect her, be he man, gandharva or god, strike him down, smite him ruthlessly!” Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa, of course, were also impressed with their imagined cleverness, and off they went. By this time, the Goddess was really enjoying herself, and decided that She’d had enough of being only Kālī, so She created from Herself seven additional goddesses, each with a different weapon and a different power, who proceeded to slaughter Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa’s entire army. Kālī herself slew Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa, for which deed she became known as Cāmuṇḍa. Then the goddesses danced, intoxicated with the blood they had drunk from their foes. Everyone was blissful—except of course the dead asuras.

Śumbha now became so upset that he realized he’d have to handle the situation himself. He ordered a general mobilization of all the asura armies, which he himself led into the field—his name means “killer,” and he was ready to kill. This pleased the goddess no end, of course; this was part of the plan from the beginning.

When the armies were ready for battle, the Goddess created yet another version of herself, one that shouts with the clamor of a hundred jackals. This goddess called to Lord Śiva: “Great Lord! Go as my messenger to those scoundrels! Tell Śumbha and Niśumbha that if they want to remain alive, they should return immediately to where they belong, and leave heaven to the gods. Otherwise, let them come, and let my jackals be satiated with their flesh.” This goddess

was named Śivadūtī, because she made Śiva her *dūtī*, her messenger.

What Śiva said to the demons is not recorded in the *Devī Mahātmyam*, but we can imagine that it went something like this: “Now look here, Śumbha and Niśumbha! You are my devotees, and it is thanks to having worshipped me for so long that you have ended up with such power. But don’t let that power go to your heads! You want to marry the Great Goddess, but She is too much of a woman for the likes of you! Go back down to Pātāla, and live there in comfort. If you remain here, you’ll be finished.”

But, of course, demons are tamasic; once they set out on something, they say, “We can’t go back. Even if we’ve made a mistake, we have to go forward.” So they probably answered Śiva in this way: “We’re sorry, Great Lord! Though we are indeed your devotees, we have embarked upon this course of action, which we will pursue until we succeed or die.” And Śiva probably replied, “You are most fortunate to be killed by the Goddess; you will be most blessed to lose your lives at Her hands. Have a nice death.”

A giant battle now ensued, which continues for several chapters, during which all manner of exciting events occur. At one point the demon Raktabija (“Blood-seed”) appeared. From every drop of his blood that fell to the ground a new asura sprang up, looking just like him, and equally strong. Eventually the goddesses had to grab him, cut his throat, and allow all of his blood to drain into Kālī’s mouth, so that none could fall onto the ground and create more asuras.

The goddesses fought with abandon, Vārāhī powdering asuras with her snout, Maheśvarī piercing them with her trident, Aindrī blasting them with her thunderbolt, and Vaiṣṇavī dicing them with her discus. Kālī, Śivadūtī and the lion devoured any that escaped, until finally no demons were left alive except Śumbha. The other goddesses then returned into the goddess’ body from whence they came, and that one supreme Goddess then slew Śumbha—after which the entire cosmos returned to balance and calm. The gods then sang

the Goddess' praises, which pleased Her greatly. She told them, "Just in the same way, O gods, that I have eliminated your recent troubles, I shall offer the same sort of benefit to anyone who repeats these three stories of mine during Nava Rātri. All difficulties will surely be removed from anyone who worships me with enthusiasm and devotion during this period."

AS LONG AS THE GODDESS IS THERE to back you up, you will have no problems in life. Nava Rātri is the perfect time to worship the Goddess and obtain great benefit, and it is quite possible that you will want to perform some sort of *kāmya pūjā* during this period. *Kāmya* means with a particular desire, and *kāmya pūjā* is worship performed with a particular intention, a particular result that you wish to obtain. Of course, you should always ask yourself whether you are in a position to know what is good for you or not. Usually even if you think you do, you do not. Most often it is better to perform a *niṣkāma pūjā*, in which you simply invoke the energy of the Goddess, requesting Her to deliver to you what you most require, what is best for you.

Since the distant past, of course, people have been convincing themselves that they know what is good for them, and have permitted their personal intentions to spill over into their worship. One result of such thinking is that, since classical times in India, three principal goddesses have been worshipped: Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī, and Kālī. People tend to choose their goddess for worship according to whether they believe creation, preservation, or destruction to be most necessary for them at any one moment. Each of those three stories in the *Devī Mahātmyam* is dedicated to one of these goddesses—the first tale, the Madhu-Kaiṭabha ear-wax allegory, to Mahā Kālī, the Mahiṣāsura myth to Mahā Lakṣmī, and the Śumbha-Niśumbha saga to Mahā Sarasvatī.

There is in reality, however, but one Goddess, who can and does create as many versions of Herself as She pleases. Just before She slaughters

Śumbha, he says to Her, "Do not be so haughty, you wicked woman! The many goddesses who assist you are the ones who have destroyed my army!" She replies, "Villain! All these goddesses are merely my manifestations. Look!" After drawing Her many materializations back into Herself, she says, "See! There is but one of me, just as there is but one of you. Stand resolutely and fight!" And that was the end of him.

So why ever bother with more than the One Goddess? Why not always rely on that One to send you creation, preservation or destruction as you require, instead of respecting goddesses of creation, preservation and destruction independently? One answer requires that we consider human nature, and the nature of our world, which is a world dominated by *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.

To understand why this is, we must review the *Sāṅkhya* philosophy, which forms the basis for *Āyurveda*, *Jyotiṣa*, *Vāstu* and other Indian classical sciences, and is the philosophical system that many of the *purānas*—the "histories"—employ. In essence the *Sāṅkhya* philosophy outlines the cosmology that modern physics describes, that before creation all that existed was contained in one point without magnitude, a singularity. Modern and ancient physics differ in this regard: Ancient physics believes that the singularity was a condensation of awareness, and modern physics believes that singularity was a condensation of matter. Indian science teaches that matter materializes as consciousness progressively densifies, and modern physics teaches that consciousness is created somehow—by some inexplicable process—out of matter.

Both cosmologies describe a similar process, a process of outward expansion and inflation that enlarges, with inconceivable violence over an infinitesimal period of time, that dimensionless singularity into a cosmos approximately eighteen billion light years in extent. This inflation occurs, according to the *Sāṅkhya* philosophy, because of the desire of that consciousness to experience itself. When consciousness exists only in its singularity, it has no attributes of any kind, no up or down, no anterior or

posterior, no space or time, no causation. Nothing exists other than *sat*, *cit* and *ānanda*, the reality of consciousness, the awareness of that reality, and the bliss that arises from that awareness.

But even this state is not ultimately satisfying, because there is no way for that ultimate reality to experience itself. There is no outside, no objectification, no external position from which reality can view itself. Among the writings of Jñāneśvar Maharāj, the well-beloved saint who lived about 750 years ago in Maharashtra, is a beautiful text known as the *Amytānubhava* (The Nectar of Experience). In it Jñāneśvar observes that, just as a human requires a mirror in order to see his or her face, the ultimate reality of absolute consciousness requires a mirror in order to perceive itself. The universe is that mirror, and the individual human being—the culmination of billions of years of evolution—is the best medium yet developed through which consciousness can mirror itself. The individual human is regarded as a microcosm of that macrocosm because humans have been engineered by nature to act as vehicles through which that ultimate reality can perceive itself. You and I and all other humans were born to serve as mirrors for the ultimate reality, and it is in the direction of fulfilling that destiny that we should all be moving.

The question then arises: Why is it that desire for self-perception should arise within the supreme reality? Whence this desire? Some say that it is the result of previous karmas from past universes that have not been completely exhausted—which is not much of a reason. Where did those past universes come from? Some current cosmological thinking holds that when enough energy enters into that singularity known as a black hole, and the black hole can't hold onto it any longer, then the energy projects suddenly into a new universe. Of course, that still begs the question of where the black hole and the energy that destabilizes it came from? Clearly it came from a preceding universe, and where did that come from? We don't know. It's unending, end-less.

Thinkers in India have postulated over this problem for centuries, and

most of them eventually conclude that the ultimate reason for creation is *acintya*, which is Sanskrit for “you can’t even think about it, so don’t try.” Italian has a similar word: *bo*, which means “We don’t know where it came from, we don’t know what it’s doing here, we don’t know what’s going to happen to it, let’s leave it be.” We humans will likely never know how things began, where they came from. What we can know is how they have developed from that start.

At the moment of creation, a certain portion of that unlimited consciousness came under the impression that it was limited, separated from the rest of the boundless ocean of consciousness. That sense of limitation was the only difference from the instant before (we speak of it as an instant, but of course there was until then nothing like time), but as differences go, it was inconceivably colossal. Before time began, everything was completely homogenous. Time began the moment that a part of that consciousness believed itself to be different. A part of that consciousness turned to face what previously had had no face, and then two faces faced one another. The portion of consciousness that turns is called *prakṛti*, which becomes the basis of the entire cosmos. Prakṛti is Ādya, the Original Goddess, the Ultimate, Supreme Goddess, the Number One, thanks to whom everything in any sort of manifestation, of any type, however subtle or dense, is generated.

That Ultimate Goddess is utterly ultimate at this stage. The only difference between her and the Ultimate Reality is that She believes Herself to be different. The only reason She believes this is to permit the *līlā*, the cosmic play, to unfold. Because She has such a great desire to facilitate this cosmic play, She is willing to submit to the influence of Her own *māyā*, Her own illusion, and convince Herself that She is something She is not. Like an actor in a play, She takes on a different persona for as long as the play continues. To be an effective actor, you must believe that you are someone other than who you actually are, until the end of the play, at which point you will go back to being yourself—we hope.

IN THE CASE OF THE COSMIC PLAY, which goes on for billions or trillions of years—or more—the Great Goddess willfully believes Herself to be separate from the Ultimate Reality. Without that firm belief, no creation would take place. When the curtain comes down on this play, She tosses off Her *māyā* and, like the goddess of sleep embracing Viṣṇu, re-embraces Ultimate Reality, and they again become one. So as long as she is separate, Viṣṇu can exist, the world can exist, things can exist; at the end of that time they recombine, and all differentiation is lost.

It is thanks to the Goddess alone that any sort of manifested reality can exist. But She can do what She needs to do only if She is eternally focused on that ultimate consciousness. From the instant of the first separation She is totally focused on the ultimate consciousness, and He is totally focused on Her. If things stayed like that there would still be no creation. He and She would enjoy bliss, but nothing else would be created—so intelligence must be added. Intelligence, which we call in Sanskrit *mahat*, or *buddhi*, is the perception of the fact of this face-to-face.

The He-She face-to-face could go on indefinitely, the Divine Couple simply enjoying one another, paying no attention to anything other than their enjoyment. And, at a certain profoundly deep, ultimate level of the universe, this is exactly what’s going on. What keeps this state from going on forever is the development of the awareness of being aware, which is one step further removed from the awareness itself. The awareness of being aware is also a variety of *māyā*, for once you become busy being aware of awareness, you will tend to lose sight of the undifferentiated consciousness that is the source of all awareness. You begin to pay more attention to the reflection than to the thing reflected, and as you do you strengthen that reflection.

At this stage we have unity consciousness, which is self-aware; duality consciousness, which is aware of the Supreme Self; and intelligence, which is aware of both Supreme Self and limited selfness. But even at this stage, the awareness of being aware is totally

and completely homogenous; it exists equally throughout the entire cosmos, and as such no further development need ever occur.

But the cosmos itself arrived from some perturbation in the singularity, due presumably to some pre-existing preferences, and that perturbation acts on *buddhi*, on the awareness of awareness, to create individuality, individualized portions of intelligence. Individuality is the real beginning of manifestation. The force that partitions *buddhi* into discrete pieces of intelligence is called *ahamkāra*, literally, the “I-creator.” *Ahamkāra* creates selfness, “I-hood.”

Even now, evolution could have ceased, leaving a bunch of individualized consciousnesses that would have wandered independently around the universe—except that space did not yet exist, so there would still be nowhere for them to go. The drive for self-expression now instigates *ahamkāra* to create the *mahāguṇas*, the three great attributes that allow manifestation to continue to evolve. These are *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.

When earlier we compared cows to buffaloes, we defined *sattva* as equanimity, happiness, altruism, and the like, and *tamas* as mental density and dullness. These are their specific functions in living beings. In a more general sense, *sattva* is the tendency externally, in the cosmos, and the tendency internally, in you, to move in the direction of equilibrium, balance. *Rajas* is the tendency, external or internal, to activity, and *tamas* is inertia, personal or cosmic. As these three Great Qualities combine, sometimes enhancing one another, more often suppressing each other, they create the universe we know.

Three cosmic characteristics, three chief goddesses: coincidence? Not at all; but neither is there simple equivalence. Despite our human preference for symmetry, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the *guṇas* and the goddesses. We can no more say that one goddess completely embodies *sattva*, another completely embodies *rajas*, and the third completely embodies *tamas*, than we can assert that the *suras*,

the gods, are completely sattvic and the asuras, completely tamasic. The gods are mainly sattvic, true, but they do have a streak of tamas, which gets them into trouble. The demons, the asuras, are mainly tamasic, but their streak of sattva permits them to consider performing penances. In this regard the asuras are superior to the suras: they employ rajas to activate their tamas, to create tremendous momentum that moves them in their chosen direction. Their difficulty is that their chosen direction is almost always selfish, tamasic.

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND HOW Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Kālī relate to sattva, rajas and tamas, we must dig a little deeper into the history of the Goddess. The Mother Goddess has of course been worshipped for tens of thousands of years, all around the world. Though today in India most people think of her in terms of Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Kālī, these goddesses were obscure during the Vedic era. People then tended to worship the goddess Śrī—She who provides prosperity, both material and immaterial. The Vedas also draw a distinction between light and dark, between Gāyatrī or Sāvitrī, the goddess of the sun, and Rātrī, the goddess of night. It was only during India's classical era that “triunity,” the threeness of the Goddess, became predominant, because of the great utility that the number three offers.

The number one provides us with a dimensionless point; the number two makes available a second point, and those two points extend outward to describe a line. Add a third point, and we get a plane, which describes a space. With three, multiple permutations become possible; and thus threeness, particularly the geometrical threeness of the triangle, came to symbolize the Goddess' creative potential. Look at the various *yantras*, the arrangements of abstract symbols that are the geometrical embodiments of the various goddesses, and you will find them filled with triangles.

Today the most famous of all yantras is the yantra of Lalitā Devī, the “playful goddess.” She is the Playful One because, thanks to Her *līlā*, thanks to Her play, the

entire universe is created, sustained and destroyed. Her yantra is the *Śrī Yantra*, which is composed of many triangles superimposed precisely upon one another. At the center of the *Śrī Yantra* sits a point: the singularity, the ultimate supreme consciousness that is limited by nothing whatsoever. That point is enclosed within a triangle, which is the Great Goddess Herself, in triangular form. This particular triangle represents the three fundamental śaktis of existence, *icchā*, *jñāna*, and *kriyā*. *Ichchā* means will or desire, *jñāna* means knowledge, and *kriyā* means action. These three powers prompt everything that happens in life: First comes the desire to do something, then the understanding of how that thing can be done, and finally, the actual doing of the thing.

At the center of the *Śrī Yantra* sits the supreme consciousness, which expresses itself in the world in the form of *icchā*, *jñāna*, and *kriyā*. Many books have been written about how to align the three goddesses—Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī and Kālī—with the three śaktis—*icchā*, *jñāna* and *kriyā*—and the three *guṇas*—sattva, rajas and tamas, but to little avail. These relationships resist simplification because of perspective. From our point of view the triune Goddess creates, preserves and destroys, but from Her point of view there is no tri-unity; She sees things solely in relation to Her point of unity, the supreme consciousness. She acts always in precisely the way She needs to act, at the precise moment that action is required.

We humans see things differently. When we look up we see the sky as blue, when in fact air has no color whatsoever; it appears blue because of the way that light gets scattered. Similarly, we ordinary humans can at best see the light of consciousness being scattered by the different aspects of the goddess, and so we think of Her as being multiple. This multiplicity is often useful to us, but we need to remember that it is but minimally useful from the Goddess' point of view. From Her viewpoint, reality is all that's important. She wastes no time pondering over whether She is at any one moment acting as creatrix,

preservatrix, or destructrix; She thinks only of what needs to be done, and does it.

IN OUR WORLD, OF COURSE, THESE three roles are quite essential, and though they often behave as if they act independently of one another, they are actually quite interrelated—what life is created must first be preserved until it can reproduce, then must be destroyed to provide space and resources for that new life. Creation predominates when a sperm and an ovum unite to create a zygote, and during childhood that zygote goes from being one cell to being an organism of one hundred trillion well-integrated cells, which integrate with other hundred-trillion-cell conglomerations to create families, associations, societies. During adulthood preservation predominates, and with age deterioration takes over; bodies fall apart, cultures fall apart. Our hope is that the awareness that *ahamkāra* has provided to these individuals has evolved during its period of earthly existence, that it may later continue to evolve into a fit mirror for consciousness.

However—from the moment a zygote is formed, creation, preservation and destruction all participate in its development. Looking at a child from the outside, it appears that the child is simply growing, that creation alone occurs, and this is true overall until we stop growing, around age twenty. But creation is in fact marching hand in hand with destruction, moment by moment, in every human, from birth until death—even during childhood.

Patterns are being created and destroyed perpetually inside each individual. A pattern was created in order to bring you into existence, and as soon as that pattern outlives its utility it is destroyed, and a new pattern arises. The entire evolution of life, from its earliest origins until its earliest human circumstances, is replicated within each fetus during the nine months that it sleeps in the womb. During the next twenty years outside the womb physical development peaks, then afterward winds down as mental and cultural development comes to

predominate, followed eventually by deterioration and demise.

Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Kālī inspire and control creation, preservation, and destruction, each performing these tasks in certain contexts. Sarasvatī, goddess of knowledge and learning, wears white clothes, and carries a book and a *viṇā*, a lute. Sarasvatī offers to help us gain the knowledge that we will need as we attempt to deal with *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*, in our lives. To know what we have to do in the world, what path we have to walk through life, that's our dharma. To accumulate the possessions that we require in order to achieve our dharma, is artha. To achieve what we need and want to achieve, stirred by those desires which drove us to take birth, is kāma. To recognize, at the end of life if not earlier, that the path, the accumulations and the desires are all inherently empty, is mokṣa. Mokṣa is the destruction of delusion. Hopefully we eliminate as many of our delusions as possible during the time we are alive, so that when we die we are deluded to the minimum, rather than the maximum.

Sarasvatī is, on the one hand, the goddess of creation, being as she is the śakti of Brahmā, the Creator, and because she creates knowledge. When we look at her we see mainly sattva. However, the very act of learning is limiting, destructive, in that sense that the acquisition of information fills, to some extent, your brain and mind, and so restricts the tabula rasa, the field of infinite possibility that stretches out in front of an unlettered child. To become a really good doctor, or astrologer, or lawyer, or carpenter, you will have to turn your attention in the direction of gaining that specialized knowledge and experience. By doing so, you turn away from all the other hundreds of millions of things that you could conceivably learn to do. To open yourself to learning is to shut yourself off from all those alternative possibilities that you do not have the time and energy to master; you effectively destroy those possibilities, however virtual they may have been.

But this destruction in order to learn is literal as well; there are for example two points—one occurs around age

three and the other around age ten, or maybe a bit later—when neurons and neuronal connections first proliferate tremendously in the brain before they are pared down to about ten percent of that proliferation. Just as during your development your brain selects a certain number of neural connections to preserve before destroying the rest, you as an individual select a certain variety and degree of connectivity to the world around you, which limits your ability to connect to everything else. Sarasvatī may be chiefly a goddess of creation, but she is able to create only because she also destroys. Destruction, and the knowledge to be gained through death, actually predominates in one form of Sarasvatī: Nīla Sarasvatī, the “blue” goddess of the cremation grounds.

Lakṣmī is fundamentally a goddess of tamas, because she relates to material prosperity. Material prosperity means things like money, and money, of course, is very sticky stuff. Having been handled by lots and lots of people, money accumulates filth. Some years ago someone pointed out that every dollar bill in the USA had traces of cocaine on it. This may or may not be the case today, but all currency notes even today carry all manner of bacteria on them, and dirt of all kinds. In addition to the physical grime, money also accumulates subtle muck and contagion, in the form of mounds of desires. To possess money means to cling to a substance that has been spattered with the desires of everyone who has held it before you. Numberless cravings and sticky karmas get associated with money, which you and I carry in our very wallets, often, particularly if you are a man, very close to your heart.

Lakṣmī is thoroughly tamasic; but learn to employ that tamas in a good way, and you can transform it into creativity. In the Vedic hymn to Lakṣmī known as the Śrī Sūkta, she is described as being redolent of cow dung, because, of course, cow dung is very good fertilizer. Properly applied, fertilizer transforms itself into rice and wheat and vegetables and such, which can serve as sustenance, or can be turned into money. Either way, harvests facilitate

creation, of one thing or another, in your life. So even though Lakṣmī herself is tamasic, she produces substances that, when properly employed, can be used to help create sattva.

The facts are these: You and I are, from the perspective of the cosmos, about as dense as living beings can be, being composed as we are from the five elements, *pṛthvī*, *āpaḥ*, *tejas*, *vāyu* and *ākāśa*—earth, water, fire, air and space. Everything that is solid in our bodies is made up of the earth element, which is the densest of this group of five. We replenish the earth element in these bodies with the help of food which, having grown in and on the earth, is full of the earth element. To grow our food we require cow dung and similar fertilizers, which add their measure of tamas to food, which is already tamasic by virtue of being full of the earth element. Even sattvic food is thus full of tamas.

And money? Money is nothing but cow dung, at one remove; money is concentrated tamas. My mentor was always fond of remembering that the man who invented money—Croesus, king of Lydia in Asia Minor—came to an unhappy end. He created money, and when the time came for him to die, molten gold was poured down his throat. Why? Because money turned Lakṣmī into a trollop, a “loose śakti” who could be traded, hoarded, speculated on, gambled with. Back in the Vedic era people had no money; they bartered, and paid for large purchases in cows. Prices were denominated in cow tails, *gopucchā*. The tail being connected to the cow, something that cost ten cow tails would actually cost ten cows. Theoretically you carried those cows with you to the seller, and after you had formally handed their tails over to him, you owned your purchase. In practice, you might only hand him one tail, and keep the other cows in a pen, since you might have difficulty holding ten cow tails together (unless those cows were on exceptionally good terms with one another, and with you).

Before money, Lakṣmī was a stability-creating factor. Cow dung, though inherently quite unstable, will, when

mixed with dirt and applied to the base of a plant, cause that plant to grow and develop, thereby becoming more stable. Though itself unstable, cow dung is a form of the earth element, and the very nature of earth being to create stability, cow dung, and Lakṣmī, can increase stability in life.

But once money came into the picture, Lakṣmī became a destabilizing factor, because she became unstable (*cañcala*). She began to wander from hand to hand and house to house, accumulating bad vibes, desires piling atop her as she was passed from person to person. Here we have to draw a distinction between *prāptā* Lakṣmī and *aprāptā* Lakṣmī. *Prāptā* Lakṣmī means that prosperity that has already become solidified, turned into money. *Aprāptā* Lakṣmī is Lakṣmī energy, prosperity that has not yet been converted into the reality of money. *Aprāptā* Lakṣmī is often less tamasic than *prāptā* Lakṣmī because it has not yet “solidified” into manifestation.

Like it or not, Lakṣmī is an essential ingredient in our lives, which means that we need to be on good terms with her. Unfortunately, people tend to become obsessed with Lakṣmī, either desperate to avoid her, or (more common nowadays) desperate to possess her. If we want to keep our minds from being too disturbed by the many negative influences that money carries, we should make sure that we focus on obtaining our prosperity directly from the goddess Śrī. Śrī’s subtle prosperity is available to us at all times, and can be converted into physical prosperity like money at a moment’s notice. Instead of “solidifying” all our prosperity at once, which might destabilize us, Śrī will retain the bulk of our prosperity with her, as *aprāptā* Lakṣmī, releasing it to us as we are able to “digest” it.

FINALLY THERE IS KĀLĪ. WHEN WE think of Kālī, if we do, we tend to think of her as the goddess of destruction, grinding up foes with her frightful teeth. On first glance this makes her look thoroughly tamasic—although we could argue that her predilection for chewing enemies to a pulp makes Kālī

more rajasic than tamasic. But, of course, Kālī is in fact no more one-dimensional than any of the other goddesses. They are all multi-dimensional, which is why they have to be described in terms of myths, because myth alone can describe the nonlinear celestial world.

It is indeed true that Kālī is the goddess of destruction. It is particularly true that Kālī will come to you at the end of your life, and will dismember you. Your body may be eaten by worms (if you are buried), devoured by fire, or (if you happen to be a Tibetan or a Parsi) consumed by vultures, crows and other birds of prey. But Kālī is also active within you, at every moment, destroying those parts of you that you no longer require, that no longer “fit” you. It’s thanks only to Kālī, to destruction, that creation can occur. Live cells can proliferate only after dead cells have been obliterated. New thoughts can appear in your mind only after dead thoughts have been removed. Most importantly, new self-definitions, new versions of the individual you, can arise only after previous iterations of your personal self-definition have dissolved.

Rather than posit independent goddesses of creation, preservation and destruction, we should picture them existing in a dynamic relationship with one another, as a goddess of creation who promotes preservation, a goddess of preservation who promotes destruction, and a goddess of destruction who promotes creation. Creation balances preservation balances destruction, everywhere and always.

DURING THE NINE NIGHTS AND TEN days of the goddess-worshipping period, people conventionally worship during the night. After all, the initial appearance of the goddess was in the form of sleep, which generally speaking happens during the night. The sun, the ultimate consciousness of the universe, expresses itself internally as self-luminosity that appears in all directions at every moment, but you and I can experience that luminosity only when we have adequate darkness to act as a contrast. Otherwise there would be no way of telling what was light and what was dark.

THAT GREAT GODDESS WHO IS THE very embodiment of darkness, by virtue of which we are able to exist, to identify light, and to flow in the direction of light, will be at your service during the nine nights of Nava Rātri. Take the benefit of her grace and mercy! If you are of a mind to do so, you can read the *Durgā Saptasati*—it is now easily available, translated into English. If you are not of a mind to do that, you can recite some mantra, for whatever goddess you most appreciate. Remember that the Goddess has all names and no name. Every goddess connects you to the Supreme Goddess, without any doubt whatsoever.

Go to that goddess who claims your devotion, be she Sophia, or Mary, Pachamama or Inanna. Envision that goddess as being present within you, in the form of your own śakti, as you direct your śakti to take on her image. Invite that goddess to reside within you; humbly request her to organize your life in the best possible way, for she is in the best possible position to know what you need, and how to deliver that to you. Bow down to that goddess, request her assistance, permit her to nourish and protect you just like a child. Nothing will remain for you to fear once you have curled up safely on Her lap. What maternal magnanimity! What love! ♣

JAI MĀ!

