

Shakta and Shakti

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THE cult of the Mother Goddess is as old as humanity. It is believed that in antiquity the cult extended to all the countries and thrived in all the civilizations from the Nile and Euphrates to the Aegean Sea; "Looking to the east of the Euphrates we see the Dusk Divinity of India, the Adya-Shakti and Maha-Shakti, or Supreme Power of many names as Gagadamba, Mother of the World, which is the Play of Her who is named Lalita," (Sir John Woodroffe).

In India, the Great Mother has been worshipped from the Himalayan mountains in the north to Cape Comorin in the extreme south; the word Cape Comorin is a corrupted form of Kanya Kumari or Kumari Devi, the Virgin Daughter, as the goddess is often called. The Vedas speak much of the goddesses. Their images are radiant with beauty, power and intelligence. From the Vedas themselves the *Shakta Tantras*, cult-books of the Goddess, derive their inspiration. In the Rig-Veda the goddess Sarasvati receives much homage: "Pure, Sarasvati, with all her bounties, rich in thoughts, inspires us towards truth, causes in us the required virtues, Sarasvati by her divinity awakens in us consciousness, illumines us in our thoughts." She is intelligence, science, arts, and all knowledge.

The word *shakti* comes from the root "*shak*," "to be able, to have power". Any thing, any activity, has power; if the power be not visible, it is latent. This is *Adya-Shakti*, Primordial Energy, or the force that emanates from everything. Shakti is the kinetic quality of Brahman, the inexpressible Godhead. "Herbert Spencer, the philosopher of modern science, carrying the investigation beyond physical matter, holds, as I have already said, that the universe, whether physical or psychical, whether mind or matter, is a play of force mind, life and matter being each varying aspects of the one cosmic process from the First Cause. This again is an Indian notion." (*Shakta and Shakti*, by Sir John Woodroffe). This "force" is Shakti, "The Divine Energy", as expounded in the Shakta branch of the Hindu religion. It is the "Cosmic Principle," the "Eternal Being," symbolised as *Jaggadamba* or The Mother of the Universe. The world in Sanskrit is known as *Jagat* which means "the moving thing." The Hindus believe everything to be in a state of ceaseless activity and perpetual movement.

For the Hindus the word *shakti* always bears many meanings *shakti* means "power" and in the highest causal sense is God as Mother; in another aspect, it implies the limitless universes that emanate ceaselessly from Eternal Being. The idea of Shakti, although generally implying the Deity of the Shakta or God as Mother, also equally means the "power" of God as such. "Obeisance to Her, who as Pure Being, Consciousness, Bliss, Power, exists in the form of Time and Space and all that is therein, and who is the radiant Illuminatrix in all beings," says the *Yoginihradaya Tantra*.

"Today Western Science speaks of Energy as the physical ultimate of all forms of Matter. So has it been for ages to the *Shaktas*, as the worshippers of *Shakti* are called. But they add that such Energy is only a limited manifestation (as Mind and Matter) of the Infinite Supreme Power

(*Maha-Shakti*), of Becoming in "That" (*Tat*) which is unitary Being (*Sat*) Itself." (*Shakta and Shakti*, by Sir John Woodroffe).

Thus we see that the idea of godhood, for many Hindus, has not been associated with an exclusively masculine image. On the non-manifested plane, beyond godhood, there is Brahman, formless, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent. But on the manifested plane God takes forms, and He is then addressed as Ishvara, who assumes the forms of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. On the manifested plane, some ascribe a male image to these forms, others see God through the form of a woman; God then becomes Shakti. Shakti, in fact, is the Divine Energy of God; without this energy, God is immutable; Shiva without Mahashakti remains inert.

Every deity we see in the Hindu Pantheon is a partial expression of Ishvara, or of the manifested God, and each deity is always accompanied by His consort, who is Shakti or the goddess. Brahman is beyond; beyond speech, beyond description, beyond qualification. Since It is infinite, our limited human language cannot attempt to describe It. Ishvara, on the dual plane, is personal and accessible to all; although He is not in fact separate from the Absolute Brahman He is realised as non-separable only after spiritual realisation.

Deity or Ishvara is within the pale of human cognisance and description. Shakta is the worshipper, the devotee, the knower of Shakti. Shaktas believe that the real nature of Shakti is beyond speech, description and conception. They identify Shakti with Brahman the Absolute. But just as Ishvara, Being, appears under three principal aspects as Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, so do the manifested multifarious aspects of Shakti correspond to the various goddesses, inasmuch as the Maha-Shakti is manifested in different images.

The aspect of Shiva-cum-Shakti represents the dual concept of being and power. Shiva is the power-holder; He is "being-consciousness bliss" while Shakti is power and becoming. Shiva represents the consciousness aspect of the real; Shakti represents this aspect as mind, life and matter. Shiva is the release or liberation (*moksha*) aspect of the real, while Shakti is the form of the universe as *samsara*, the World's Flow. But before passing through this vast universe of *samsara* and there acquiring the grace of the Mother, there is no liberation or release for beings. As Shiva-Shakti are in themselves one, similarly *moksha* and *samsara* are at root one.

Ardhanarishvara, the image of Shiva and Shakti shown as an androgyne figure, illustrates the equality and indispensability of the two. The Indian mind has by this concept consciously or unconsciously defined the status of womanhood. Art and literature abound on this subject.

Shiva-Shakti: Shiva symbolises the unchanging aspect of the reality and Shakti its changing aspect. "... God in mother form as the supreme power which creates, sustains and withdraws the universe... God is worshipped as the great Mother, because in this aspect, God is active and produces, nourishes and maintains all..."

The Shakta who worships her lotus feet, the dust of which are millions of universes, knows the power aspect of the immanent Being which is therefore called Shakti. In her static transcendent aspect the Mother or Shakti is of the same nature as Shiva or "the God". Philosophically speaking, Shiva is the unchanging consciousness and Shakti is its changing power appearing in mind as well as matter. Shiva-Shakti is therefore consciousness-power.

The Indian bird which is often referred to in metaphysical doctrines as Hamsa, the Swan, symbolises this same truth: *Ham* being Shiva and *Sah* being Shakti, this bird, as it swims in the blissful waters of the mind, symbolises their union.

The central idea of the Indian religions is that the universe or cosmos is an order. It is not a chaotic entity, without bindings or relations or rule; therefore one has to be the perfect knower, the *Jnanin*, in order to swim first in the ocean of life, then in the ocean of bliss.

It is Brahman acting through Its trinity of powers (*Ichchha*=Will; *Jnana*=knowledge; *Kriya*=action) which is really the cause of all. It is out of this conjunction of the three, that the world (*Samsara*) with its ceaseless flux and influx of births, deaths, transformations and transitions, mutations and reincarnations is drawn in, as it were, at the end of a cycle to reappear in a ceaselessly new creation until liberation is achieved. The cremation ground, which is one of the high places of the Shakti worshipper, is but the symbol of this cosmic dissolution. The Shakta should not only visit it every day but should meditate on its sacred ground and be aware of it constantly in his mind. We have known many Shaktas who after a full day of work in an office would spend their nights at the burning-ghat in meditation.

The image of Mahakali dancing on the sacred soil of the cremation ground over the white breast of Shiva as he lies inert, attended by jackals feeding on a bleeding skull, is not a rosy picture of God. But it is eminently symbolic of the cosmic truth, which does not have to comply with the wishful thinking of mankind.

The goddess under this aspect is called Kali, because she devours *kala* or Time. Her black flowing hair is time itself. The white bones of the dead are strewn around her; like the scene of the burning ground they symbolise the dissolution of all things. Her own dark form is the Void (*Shunya*). As *Digambari* she is naked, but Her nakedness is space itself. "The series of universes appear and disappear with the opening and shutting of Her eyes". The Mother's play or this cosmic manifestation is a continual process of creation, maintenance and dissolution, usually symbolised by the Hindu Trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. She is standing on the white breast of Shiva, because Shiva is the transcendental aspect of consciousness. "She and He are the twin aspects of the same." The garland of skulls hanging around her neck (*varnamala*), fifty-one in number, according to some Shaktas represent the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet; according to other devotees they signify supreme knowledge. In a general way these letters symbolise the universe of names and forms (*namarupa*).

Shakti or power of spirit is considered as pure consciousness; by constant evocation in us of that idea we ultimately release ourselves from the bonds of matter. *Prakriti*, which is the ground of Maya-Shakti, is veiled. In order to pierce through this thick layer of illusion or to pass beyond *Maya*, we have to identify ourselves with Supreme Spirit or Shakti, the pursuit of which is the path of light. This is the central inspiration in all the Hindu sects, or in religions emanating from Hinduism.

The desire of the universe creates the endless chain of life, like an endless silver tissue of illusions; but the moment the sword of knowledge is unsheathed the tissue is cut through. The darkness of *Maya*, as emanated by Maya-Shakti, is temporary, yet it will last as long as the knowledge of the Divine Mother is denied by ignorance (*avidya*); nevertheless those in quest of that supreme knowledge of the Mother are never denied the attainment of knowledge. At the Shakta's invocation, Shakti from her impersonal aspect becomes personal; as *Ishta-Devata* she initiates the Shakta and shows him that it is within himself that the realm of pure consciousness is to be found. Then Shakta and Shakti become one; but, until then, it is a hard, long battle, for the "ego" is difficult to efface. It is this "ego" of the Shakta which deludes him on all the erroneous paths, thus causing him ceaseless sufferings as well as temporary pleasures, through

its arousing of greed, desire, pain, deaths and births; victory over the "ego" is the immersion of the Shakta in the Shakti.

Maya-Shakti is an attribution of Shakti by which She projects her creation, her infinitely varied creation of which there is no beginning and no end—except in the cosmic dissolutions, which are periodic. The outward garb of Shakti is the phenomenal world, her projected creation is like a dream, as the Vedanta describes it. Shakespeare spoke truly when he said that "we are such stuff as dreams are made of."

Shakti procreates out of her will the Cosmos, which she absorbs and dissolves in the regular cosmic dissolution. The whole of life, visible or invisible, is the underlying substance of being-in-itself. Maha-Kali or Maha-Shakti or the Great Mother is that life.

Sir John Woodroffe says "The whole world is a living manifestation of the source of all life which is Absolute Being. It is sometimes made a reproach against Hinduism that it knows not a "living god". What is meant I cannot say. For it is certain that it does not worship a "dead god," whatever such may be. Perhaps by "living" is meant "personal". If so, the charge is ill-founded. Ishvara and Ishvari are rulers in whom all personalities and personality itself are. But in their ground they are beyond all manifestation or that limitation which personality, as we understand it, involves. Man, the animal and the plant alone, it is true, exhibit certain phenomena we have commonly called "living". But it does not follow that what does not exhibit the phenomena which belong to our definition of life is itself altogether "dead". Life cannot emerge from the "dead". Life comes from life. Where the visible ends or the invisible begins, where the plant life, vegetable and animal life begins and ends, there is really no clear line of demarcation. This entire gamut of existence is referred to Maha-Shakti or Maha-Maya. The Great Mother creates her own dreams, absorbs, re-creates continuously."

Shakti or Maha-Maya manifests Herself in all forms of life or matter and non-matter. In plant life, for instance, she manifests Herself. All ancient Hindu documents talk of the sensibility both of plants and minerals. Udayana said that plants have a dormant consciousness. Chakrapani affirmed also that plants possess a kind of "comatose consciousness"; whatever degree of sensation might separate the lowest animal from the highest of vegetable or plant-life, the matter is uniquely one of degrees. Even Manu mentions the pleasure and pain of plant-life. These ancient Hindu notions of "all-pervading life" come from the idea of a Cosmic Principle, underlying everything. In the epic of Mahabharata the sage Bhṛigu tells the sage Bharadwaj that plants possess various kinds of senses as they react to sounds, heat, vision, smells and taste. So, we see what universal qualities were vested in these ancient Indian sages.

The Great Mother creates, destroys, transforms constantly. The man who has realised the divine soul he is carrying within himself must do everything in his power to break the shackles of illusion. He must liberate himself by meditating on the Mother, in order to lose his identity as *atma* (soul) in *Paramatman* (Supreme Spirit).

But before man can have the privilege of release from this chain of birth and death and transformation he must reflect that he has passed through all the lower states of consciousness; this means according to the classical estimation 8,400,000 (eighty-four lakhs) existences as plants, aquatic animals, insects, birds, beasts and monkeys before being born as man. Then he is born 200,000 (two lakhs) times in the inferior qualities and species of mankind. Only slowly and gradually does man begin to be conscious of a higher and better life. The science of *yoga* is intended to help him in his quest of Light and Liberation. Until he is finally liberated from this

phenomenal world he will return to earth again and again; as his return is sure, so is his liberation. In fact, spiritual liberation is the birthright of man.

This view is held by all branches of Hinduism; Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism are alike in this respect; none of them differ in any of the basic principles. Likewise the Lord Buddha talked of his previous births before attaining Buddhahood, as plants, as a stag, etc. So, all the religions born out of the fold of Hinduism hold the same view.

The difference between the Shakta and the Advaitavadin lies in this, that the Shakta as long as he worships Shakti lives on a dual plane no matter how much he believes intellectually in the non-duality of the Supreme Being, whereas the Advaitavadin is one with Brahman. The day the Shakta identifies himself with the Real, he becomes the Advaitavadin. As soon as *avidya* or ignorance is eliminated, the Light will shine of its own accord.

There exist many schools of Shaktism, like the different schools of Vedanta and Mayavada, commonly identified with the Advaita Vedanta, as also the schools of Shaivagama, Shuddhadvaita or Vallabhacharya, etc. There is not just one way prescribed for the whole mass of humanity to the exclusion of all other ways. Nor are the philosophical schools of India divorced from the religious branches. Rather, the different religious sects are linked together by the principles held in common. The religious life is supposed to conduct man to dharmic life and thence to those metaphysical ideas which are the keys of spiritual liberation. The ultimate Wisdom is silence. Meanwhile, each one chooses the way that suits him best. The true Shakta also lands on the threshold of the Ultimate, whether he be called Sri Ramakrishna or Sri Ramprasad or Totapuri. Truth has no doors closed. The science of self-perfection through *yoga* is common to all the religious sects; the Shakta, by practising the *yoga* system, realises gradually that he has developed certain powers, latent in all human beings. If he does not stop short at using these powers (which can become most tempting) he will progress and attain Truth. The pitfalls of temptation are deep and dark, they can disrupt the entire spiritual life, wrench it from its normal course, luring the *sadhaka* (devotee) into the realms of power, lust, pleasure and pain. It is up to the *sadhaka* to be always aware of the true way "sharp like the razor's edge," as the Upanishad puts it.

The Shakti cult has often been confused with "magic". Magic is a big word. The power latent in a human being, a quasi material force or power-force in the world, is a definite if abnormal element which, through the practice of certain methods, can train the mind to produce desired results, good or bad; but it is up to man to discriminate and either stop on the threshold of illusion in the dual plane or else pursue Truth. Great Shaktas resemble the great saints of other religions.

The darker side of Shaktism, which at times has provoked criticism or scandal is, according to the genuine Shaktas, something which crept into this sect in a time of degeneration. I have known Brahmin families of Rajputana, traditionally Shakta for many centuries, who were pure vegetarians. They frowned upon all the so-called impure side of Shaktism. Sir John Woodruffe, the greatest exponent of Shakti in the West, says very correctly that the alleged "black magic" to be found in the Shakta sect was due to certain later Shaktas who, after having developed and tasted power, could not resist using it and even in some cases used it for evil purposes, which can easily happen where occult practices are concerned. There are many other Shaktas, however, who by this means try to do good and help others; but it happens that evil is more spectacular and thus tends to attract more notice than good. I have known Shaktas who have all their life

only rendered services to the suffering, using whatever occult power they had acquired.

If, as sometimes happens, a Sicilian bandit prays in front of the image of Mary for success over his intended victims, this does not by any means reflect on Christianity itself. This is true also in Hinduism, where there never has been any centralised religious authority to control people and their thoughts. People have written and expressed their views and thoughts freely. That is why we see such great diversities in Hinduism. Divine Revelations such as are recorded by the great sages of India, which really constitute the basis of the Hindu religion and its different sects, differ in their form, but their messages and ideals have remained the same; if certain darker shades as described above have occasionally crept into certain sects in the course of time including the Shakta sect, these form no part of the tradition revealed through the great Rishis (Sages) of India.

Shaktas believe that Spiritual perfection and attainment of Liberation (*moksha*) is not obtained by dogmatic adherence but is an experience, in fact the most important experience that life has to offer.

For the sake of attaining spiritual light in the Shakta sect the Goddess is the prime object of invocation. The image of the Goddess Kali or Jaggadhatri or Durga is for the Shakta the symbol of the whole Cosmos and the Cosmic Principle, both at once. It is in total identification with this Eternal Principle at the time of meditation that a devotee rises to the level of *Jnanin* or "gnostic," the *Jnanin* to that of *Yogin* or being in a state of "union", and the Perfect *Yogin* to the state of totally losing all self-identity, a matter of experience and knowledge. This experience can be gained by one's own effort or with the help of a spiritual guide or *guru*. The tradition of India is such, namely that the truth-seeker finds a guru with great difficulty after a long search, no matter to what sect he belongs. Self-appointed gurus have no place in the real tradition.

The Shakta devotee tries to establish the same link with his *Ishta*, (tutelary divinity), as do the devotees of the other sects. A true Shakta knows no fear, for fear is only possible on a dual plane of existence. If and when one says "*Sa'ham*" ("I am She") or "*So'ham*" ("I am That"), from that moment duality ceases, and with it fear. But to say it is not enough; one has to experience the reality behind the words. The whole idea of spiritual liberation is dependent on experiencing the ability to secede forever from the illusion of the dual plane. A drop in the ocean loses its identity. But before being able to realise this non-dual plane of existence, rituals are prescribed for the devotee so that he may canalise his human mind. Rituals in the Shakta sect, as in the rest of the Hindu religion, have a precise purpose; each ritual requires effort or *sadhana*. By merely hypocritical exterior efforts, perfection cannot come about. One has to be conscious of a daily spiritual experience within oneself. A great amount of human effort is needed to enter this path; a self-improvised meditation dwelling on "bliss", while evading any kind of strict discipline and austerity—this is usually practised by charlatans and bluffers. The great saints of India as well as of other countries have first passed through the hard channels of spiritual life. It cannot be otherwise. With daily austerities and efforts for mental purification, one comes to a level where rituals are no longer required. Great yogins and holy men do not have to perform rituals.

Before arriving at this exalted stage the daily practice of rituals, meditations and recitations of holy texts is prescribed by the tradition for all; in order to elevate the thoughts of a man he has to be ceaselessly made conscious of God.

The exterior forms of worship for the Shaktas, in the way of rituals or *yantras*, is relatively simple as compared to the subtler forms of meditation and concentration.

The Shakta considers his body as the Universe (*Atma-Shakti*) within which lies the latent *Ishta*, the self or *atman*. It is by the gradual "unfolding" of various existential sheaths that the Absolute *Atman* becomes One with the Sadhaka or Shakta. The dual plane of existence is in fact the long dark night of the soul for the Shakta, as it is for the Bhakta or mystic following the path of love. After the long night the Shakta becomes the Jnanin or Knower.

Many of the Hindu religious festivals celebrate the Shakti divinities with great pomp. The grand festival of Dassera, as it is called in the south of India, or Durga-Puja in the north, commemorates the victory of the Goddess over Evil, symbolised by the demon. Rama had thus thanked Her after his victory over Ravana. India in all the indigenous languages is called "Bharata-Mata." The sacred Bharata-Mata is identified with a goddess. Durga, Tara, Yaggadhatri, Kali, Maheshamardini, Sarasvati, Parvati, Lakshmi, Annapurna, Chandi, and many other images of the Goddess in various aspects of her multitudes of manifestations have been worshipped all over India since the dawn of time. Practically every village has its protecting deity.

Sri Lakshmi signifies: splendour, abundance, beauty and goodness.

Bhuvaneshwari: the Mother of the Universe.

Durga: Light overcoming Darkness.

Annapurna: the bounteous, She who is ever providing food.

Chandi: the Goddess who slew the demon whom even the gods could not kill, symbolising Truth conquering Evil.

Most Hindu girls are named after one of these goddesses. In many Hindu houses the images of goddesses are either kept permanently on the altars or else consecrated during religious festivals, in which case they are made of clay and are immersed in the rivers once the celebration is over; which again signifies that the image was not an end in itself, but only a temporary means.

The "Bodhana" ceremony at the Durga Puja is the symbol of awakening the Shakti of the Mother Durga, or the rousing of the consciousness of the Kundalini latent in us all. This 'awakening is attained by years of yogic practices, meditations, austerities and the repetition of *mantra* or sacred formula. In the Shakti cult the rousing of Kundalini has great importance. In his remarkable book Sir John Woodruffe explains it very clearly in scientific terms and that is why I am quoting him: "The Merudanda is the vertebral column. Western anatomy divides it into five regions; and it is to be noted in corroboration of the theory here exposed that these correspond with regions in which the five chakras are situated. The central spinal system comprises the Lalana, Ajnâ, Manas, Soma Chakras and the Sahasrara; as also the spinal cord extending from the upper border of the Atlas below the cerebellum and descending to the second lumbar vertebra where it tapers to a point called *filum terminale*. Within the spine is the cord, a compound of grey and white brain matter, in which are the five lower chakras.

It is noteworthy that the *filum terminale* was formerly thought to be mere fibrous cord, an unsuitable vehicle, one might think, for the Muladhara chakra-kundalini shakti. Recent microscopic investigations have, however, disclosed the existence of highly sensitive grey matter in the *filum terminale*, which represents the position of the Muladhara. According to western science, the spinal cord is not merely a conductor between the periphery and the centres of sensation and volition, but it is also an independent centre or group of centres. The Sushumna is

nadi in the centre of spinal column. Its base is called the Brahmadvāra or Gate of Brahman." (*Shakta and Shakti* by Sir John Woodroffe).

The physical body of man is supposed to be composed of five different modes of material substances; these commence at the spine. The aim is to arouse Kundalini, the Immanent Goddess. At the end of the spinal column lies the Cosmic power, but only in a dormant stage until it is aroused and reaches the throat. On the forehead, between the eyebrows, is the psychical centre and the sixth centre of mind. The symbolic seat of consciousness is the upper part of the brain. These are the main centres used in this *yoga*.

The experience of the Unlimited Supreme begins only when one's Kundalini is roused. From then on, man's limited world experiences cease because they simply cease to satisfy him any more. He begins a new life, flushed as it were by the stream of knowledge and by inner forces and insight.

The entire system of the science of Yoga is based on this. The word "yoga" comes from *yuj* which means to join. Here it means that the human spirit is linked with Divine Spirit and that, by the practise of yoga, the dark veil of ignorance is pierced by Light thus bringing about union with the Sublime.

In the daily rituals the Shakta has to sit on his seat (*asana*) cross-legged, meditating and repeating the sacred *mantra*; mantras differ from sect to sect. The science of mantra is found in the Vedas. The devotee has to perform the rituals to obtain *shakti* or power. In the process of the ritual, as if corresponding parts of the deity are to be found there, the devotee places his hands on certain parts of the body, finishing this rite (called *Nyasa*) by certain gestures as though besmearing his entire body with the Divinity. The word *tantra*, usually linked with the Shakti cult, has been derived from the root *tan=to* spread, while the suffix *tra* is from a root meaning "to save." Thus *Tantra* is the holy scripture from which knowledge (*jnana*) is spread in order to save people. Although, there are separate Tantrik scriptures for the Agama, Shaiva and Vaishnava sects, all Tantra is really a theology based on revelation or experiences of the spiritual order.

The Tantras say: "It is impossible to hold the entire firmament between a pair of tongs just as it is impossible to worship an attribute-less Brahman through a mind full of attributes." Rituals, austerities and meditations are able to conduct the seeker to knowledge of the Brahman. Tantra replaces the Attributeless, as an object of contemplation, by Shakti (the Creative Energy in all its forms, personified as feminine) which thus becomes the object of worship; the subtler aspects of Shaikti can be reached through her physical mantric forms.

The basic monotheism of the Shakta Tantra cult is unquestionable, for one who properly understands it.

The psycho-physical experience of the Universe by the individual is indispensable and is recommended by all sects of the Hindu religion.

Agama shastras are concerned with the manifested Ishwara revealed again and again in the Upanishadic epoch. The Tantras fall into the same category.

The *Kali Tantra* says, as do the Upanishads: "Having meditated in this way, a devotee should worship the Mother (*Devi*) as his own soul (*atma*), thinking "I am Brahman". The *Kubjika Tantra* also says: "A devotee should meditate on his own self, as one and the same with Her."

The moral teaching in the 8th chapter of the *Mahanirvana Tantra* reminds us very much of

Manu's Code, the Bhagavad Gita and the Buddhist sermons and all their ethical and devotional qualities.

"That man is released from the bonds of action who, renouncing Name and Form, has attained to complete knowledge of Reality of the Eternal and Immutable Brahman... Liberation does not come from Japa, Homa, or a hundred fasts; man becomes liberated by the knowledge that he himself is Brahman... All imagination of Name and Form and the like are but the play of a chid..." (*Mahanirvana Tantra*).

In these daily rituals of the Shakti cult symbols are of great significance. In the symbolic language used there the *yantras* (literally "instruments") symbolise the Deity, their purpose being to facilitate for the devotee the concept of the goddess. Shiva is represented by a triangle, which is supposed to be the most perfect and easiest form symbolising the Hindu Trinity, and also representing Trinity in Unity and many other triads such as Willing, Knowing and Acting.

By recitation of certain mantras as also by certain gestures of a single hand or both hands coupled with sustained effort of sincere concentration, also by ordered respiration, the Shakta, like the other practitioners of the Hindu religion, is able gradually to purify both body and mind, the physical as well as the psychic elements of his human make up.

The objects used to carry out a Shakta ritual resemble those of other Hindu rituals. (1) *Asana*, or seating the image; (2) *Swagata* or welcoming the Deity, like one welcomes a guest; (3) *Padya*, washing the feet, like one does to a guest (4) *Arghya*, or any offering, general or special; (5) *Achamana* or sipping water to purify the mouth; (6) *Madhaparka* or offering honey, melted butter, milk and curd; (7) *Snana* or bathing; (8) *Vasana* or clothing after bath; (9) *Abharana* or wearing jewels; (10) *Ghanda* or perfumes; (11) Offering of Flowers; (in the Shakta cult the chosen flower is the red Hibiscus whereas for the Vaishnavas it is a *Tulsi* (sweet Basil) leaf and for the Shaivas *Bilwa* leaf); (12) *Dhupa* or incense; (13) *Dipa* or Lights; (14) *Naivedy* or food; (15) *Vandana* or prayers.

Metaphysically, one has to reckon with Becoming, the experience of Samsara, thence rising to Perfect Experience or transcendent Being which is Liberation or Nirvana.

"What is there in the great Devi Sukta of the Rig Veda (Mandala X, Sukta 125) which the Shakta Tantra does not teach? The Rishi of this revelation was a woman, the daughter of Rishi Ambhrina. It was most befitting that a woman should proclaim the Divine Motherhood. Her hymn says, "I am Sovereign over the Treasury of all treasures; the chief of all objects of worship whose all-pervading self all Devatas manifest; whose birthplace is in the midst of the causal waters the breathing forth gives form to all created worlds and yet extends beyond them, so vast am I in greatness." (*Shakta and Shakti* by Sir John Woodroffe).

Like the rest of Hinduism, Shaktism also lays stress on the theory of *karma* and emphasises that *jiva* (the human soul) cannot attain liberation until man gives up the desire for the fruit of action even in his spiritual life, renouncing the world in his own mind. The infinite number of universes, plurality of lives and worlds, the Devas and Devis (gods and goddesses) Heaven, Hell, are but aspects of the Maha-Shakti.

It sounds simple when the holy texts say: "The temple of Chidâmbaram is right in one's heart", but to be able to realise this, one has to go through much experience, discipline and knowledge.

Spiritual experience is more important than elaborate theological explanations of the

Immortal and Eternal, this has been the general trend of Hindu thought. Consequently in the cult of Shakti the devotee, with the help of a spiritual teacher or *guru*, is also supposed to go through certain disciplines, which can help him to realise the presence of Divine Consciousness. However, there is no absolute guarantee that, by merely practising these disciplines, a man will be entitled to spiritual realisation. Something more than just austerities is required of him.

Lord Brahma is supposed to have told the Sage Vashishta, concerning Shakti, the Goddess:

"Do thy worship to Her with all thy heart. She will grant thee thy boons. She is the Supreme Force. She shines like ten million suns. She is like ten million lightnings. She saves all beings from dangers. She is cool like ten million moons. She is the spouse of Kala, Kalakamini. She is the beginning. She helps in crossing the ocean of life, *samsara*. She is Buddheshwari (Mistress of Intelligence). She is in the Atharvaveda." (quotation is from the *Rudramala*).

Real religious feelings and experience are universal, for they emerge from the depth of the same human heart. Yet at times the Tantras have a distinctive exposition of their own, which makes them definitely stand out, carved as it were in granite, instead of marble or alabaster; there is no getting away from the fact that man's expression varies. If some Tantras differ from other Indian religious documents, this simply shows that the freedom of human expression included this possibility.

Oh! mother of Pilgrimages or virtues
of mental control or of Liberation
of austere vows or of charity
I know not.
In thee I find my only refuge
And my only help—Oh Bhavani.

(Shankaracharya, Hymn to the Goddess).

The great Vedantist and exponent of the "non-dual" wisdom Shankaracharya composed many moving hymns to the Goddess. So many other mystics and sages of India have composed beautiful songs and hymns in her honour. Shakti in its spiritual cult excludes caste distinctions; here Brahmin and Shudra are distinguished according to their spiritual merits only. Shakta saints have come from all the castes. Like the Mother Ganges, the Goddess rushes from Her source in the pure abode of the Himalayas, and every second Her waters rush towards Her children. Similarly, there is not an hour when one of those hymns dedicated to Shakti the Goddess is not sung, the words of which, with the perfumed smoke of incense rise towards heaven from the soil of India carrying with them the noble aspirations of countless devotees.

"The Father, the Mother, all is Brahman"—says the Sage.