

❧ Chapter 1 ❧

The Appearance of the Great Goddess Before the Mountain King Himālaya and the Gods

Translation

[King Janamejaya inquires of the sage Vyāsa about the appearance of the Goddess on the Himālaya Mountain.]

Janamejaya spoke:

1.1. You said earlier that the supreme lustrous power¹ manifested itself on the crest of Himālaya, the Mountain Lord.

This you mentioned only in passing. Now explain it to me in full detail.

1.2. What thoughtful person would ever tire of drinking the nectarine tales of Śakti?

Death comes even to those who drink divine ambrosia, but not to one who hears² this act of hers.

Comment

The *Devī Gītā*, constituting the last ten chapters of the seventh book of the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāna*,³ is part of an ongoing conversation between

King Janamejaya and the sage Vyāsa.⁴ In the preceding chapter, Vyāsa had related the story of the goddess Satī, including her suicide by yogic fire. The sage concluded the account of her death by asserting: “And that lustrous power of hers (*tan-mahas*) appeared anew on the crest of Himālaya.”⁵ Without further elaboration on the manifestation of this lustrous power, Vyāsa then proceeded to tell about the reaction of Satī’s spouse, Śiva, to her death (for more on the story of Satī and the aftermath of her death, see the Comment on verses 1.3–13 below). Janamejaya, thoroughly familiar with Vyāsa’s tendency to pass quickly over important points, is often compelled to seek fuller explanations. Accordingly, here in the first verse of the *Devī Gītā*, Janamejaya asks for an in-depth account of the appearance of the supreme lustrous power (*paraṃ mahas*) on the Himālaya Mountain.

The *Devī Gītā* thus begins with reference to the reappearance or rebirth of the goddess Satī. By tradition, Satī’s next incarnation was as the daughter of the Himālaya Mountain, known as Pārvatī (“She-Who-is-Born-of-a-Mountain [*parvata*]”). The commentator Nīlakaṇṭha⁶ immediately identifies the supreme lustrous power as Pārvatī. Yet such an identification is somewhat misleading in terms of the *Devī Gītā*’s own understanding of the Goddess. Satī and Pārvatī (or Gaurī, as she is called in our text) are simply empowered forms or potencies (*śaktis*), dynamic manifestations of the supreme Śakti, the highest Power of the Universe. The term *śakti*, feminine in gender, characterizes the essential nature of the Goddess as the energizing force impelling and enlivening the cosmos, and accordingly she herself is called Śakti. The Goddess later in the first chapter (1.63cd) promises Himālaya that her *śakti* Gaurī will be born as his daughter. The Goddess clearly transcends such incarnations as Satī and Gaurī, although in one sense they are identical with her (cf. the Comment on 1.54–65 below). The term *paraṃ mahas*, while connected with Satī’s rebirth, more importantly evokes the notion of Brahman, the ultimate reality of the Upaniṣads (see note 1 below). The *Devī Gītā*, then, opens with an implicit affirmation of the Goddess as the supreme Brahman.

Notes

1. *mahas*: literally “light, luster,” as well as “greatness, power.” In the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (1.5), *mahas* is the fourth (*caturthī*) mystic syllable, beyond *bhūh*, *bhuvah*, and *suvaḥ*. The *Taittirīya* specifically identifies this *mahas* with Brahman (*maha iti brahma*), and as the power by which the various worlds and entities “become great.” The notion of *mahas* as the fourth also suggests the idea of the fourth state of consciousness (*turīya*), beyond waking, dream, and deep sleep, and thus points to the supreme, aniconic form of the Devī as pure consciousness.

The *Śāradā-Tilaka Tantra*, with which the author of the *Devī Gītā* was almost certainly familiar, begins with an invocation of this supreme reality, *mahas*. There, it is described as having the form of bliss, all-pervading, as being the “sound-Brahman” (*śabda-brahman*), and as the inner consciousness. (Cf. in the same work 23.37 and 25.56, which give similar descriptions of this supreme power.) Woodroffe, in his summary of the first chapter of the *Śāradā-Tilaka* (p. 5), comments: “The [beginning] verse as it stands . . . refers to the Mahah [*mahas*] (Radiant Energy) in the neuter gender. [The commentator] Rāghava shows how this can be interpreted to apply either to Shiva or Shakti.” The *Devī Gītā* applies it exclusively to the Goddess, and affirms in the process that her power (*śakti*) is the same as the lustrous power of Brahman.

2. Hearing or listening (*śravaṇa*) to the stories or virtues of the Goddess is considered one of the main devotional acts that one can offer to her (cf. 7.11, 19 below; cf. also 8.31, where listening to the virtues of the Devī’s sacred dwelling places is extolled). The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* popularized the *bhaktic* ideal of *śravaṇa* with reference to the deeds/virtues of Kṛṣṇa. Thus, the *Bhāgavata* (2.2.37) declares in words similar to the *Devī Gītā*’s above: “Whatever persons drink the nectarine tales of the Lord, the Self, poured into the cups of their ears by the holy, they purify their hearts . . . and attain his lotus feet.” Cf. *Bhagavad Gītā* 10.9, where Kṛṣṇa declares that the wise “rejoice in constantly talking about me.”

In earlier, non-*bhaktic* Vedānta, in the practice of the yoga of knowledge (Jñāna Yoga), *śravaṇa* refers to hearing the teachings of the Upaniṣads as the first step, along with reflection (*manana*) and intense meditation (*nididhyāsana*), on the path to self-realization or the realization of the identity of the individual self and Brahman. In the *Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, *śravaṇa* often serves as a first step to realization of the identity of the self (or Self) and the Goddess. Cf. *Devī Gītā* 2.1 and 4.40.

3. *Devī-Bhāgavata* 7.31–40.

4. Regarding Janamejaya and Vyāsa, see the Introduction, pp. 4–5.

5. *Devī-Bhāgavata* 7.30.38ab.

6. For information on Nīlakaṇṭha, see the Note on the Translation, p. 32.

Translation

[Vyāsa begins the story of Śiva’s sorrow following Satī’s suicide, and of the ensuing world crisis.]

Vyāsa spoke:

- 1.3. You are blessed and completely fulfilled;¹ you have
been taught by those of great heart;
And you are fortunate, for you possess true devotion
to the Goddess.

- 1.4. Hear, O King, this ancient tale. When the body of Satī was consumed in flames,²
The bewildered Śiva wandered about, falling here
and there motionless on the ground.³
- 1.5. He was unaware of the manifest world, his mind
being fully absorbed.⁴
Regaining his self-composure, he passed the time
contemplating the true form⁵ of the Goddess.
- 1.6. Meanwhile, the three-tiered universe,⁶ with all that is
mobile and immobile, lost its auspicious charm⁷
When the entire world with its oceans, continents,
and mountains, was bereft of energy.⁸
- 1.7. Joy shrivelled up in the heart of each and every being.
All peoples were despondent, their careworn spirits
exhausted.
- 1.8. Then, ever drowning in a sea of misery, they were
consumed by disease.
The planets retrogressed ominously; the fortunes of
the gods declined.
- 1.9. Kings, too, suffered misfortune due to material and
spiritual forces set in motion by the death of Satī.⁹
Now at that time arose a great demon, Tāraka by
name.
- 1.10. The fiend became master of the three-tiered universe
after procuring from Brahmā this boon:
“Only a legitimate son of Śiva shall be your slayer.”
- 1.11. With his death thus fixed by Brahmā, the great demon,
Realizing no lawful son of Śiva existed, roared and
rejoiced.
- 1.12. And all the gods, attacked by Tāraka and driven from
their own homes,
Lived in a state of persistent anxiety due to the absence
of any legitimate son of Śiva.

The gods thought:

- 1.13. Śiva has no wife; how shall he engender a son?
How can we prosper, deprived of good fortune?

Comment

The story of Satī's suicide, as Vyāsa says, is indeed ancient, with numerous variations appearing in the *Māhābhārata* and many of the Purāṇas.¹⁰ The basic motive underlying the suicide was an insult by her father Dakṣa directed toward her and her husband Śiva. Dakṣa had refused to invite them to an important sacrificial feast, so Satī sacrificed herself in protest.

The *Devī-Bhāgavata* tells its own version of the story in the chapter immediately preceding the *Devī Gītā*.¹¹ According to this account, Dakṣa wrongfully indulged his own sexual desire, and as a result of that offense grew hostile to Śiva and Satī. It was due to this enmity (without further explanation) that Satī took her own life. Śiva was devastated by the news of his wife's death and destroyed Dakṣa's sacrifice. He then took the charred remains of Satī onto his shoulders and wandered about in a distracted state of mind. The gods were concerned about Śiva, and so Viṣṇu cut off Satī's body, piece by piece, with his arrows. Wherever the parts of her body fell to the earth from Śiva's shoulder, there he took up residence in various forms, passing the time in practicing recitation, meditation, and absorption (*japa*, *dhyāna*, and *samādhi*). The dispersal of Satī's body parts underlies the notion of the sacred sites of the Devī (the *śākta-pīṭhas*), dealt with in detail in chapter 8 of the *Devī Gītā*.

Here in the first chapter, after recounting Śiva's distraction, Vyāsa elaborates upon the ensuing chaos on Earth due to the absence of the Devī's energizing power in the form of Satī. Satī represents *saubhāgya*: "good fortune, auspiciousness, beauty or charm." *Saubhāgya* refers particularly to the auspicious state of a married woman whose husband is still living, as opposed to the inauspicious state of widowhood. Here, in something of a reversal, it is the world that endures such an inauspicious state when it loses Satī.

At this point, Vyāsa introduces the story of Tāraka, an archetypal demon who terrorizes and displaces the gods. The traditional accounts of this demon attribute his death to Śiva's son Skanda, whose mother (in the best-known versions at least) is Pārvatī. This tradition is recognized and appropriated into the boon given by Brahmā to Tāraka, which creates the dramatic rationale for the reappearance of the Goddess. The boon necessitates that the widower Śiva procure a new wife, namely Pārvatī/Gaurī.

Brahmā is well known for his granting boons to demons (as a reward for their *tapas* or asceticism) that jeopardize the welfare of the gods. As Brahmā is father of both gods and demons, his generosity to the latter is somewhat understandable. He grants them what they wish—comprehensive invulnerability in the form of a set of conditions

seemingly guaranteeing immortality—but always with a loophole, which the gods eventually discover and exploit.

The model for the *Devī Gītā*'s boon to Tāraka appears in the *Matsya Purāṇa*. In its account of the Tāraka myth, the *Matsya* relates that the demon first asks Brahmā for absolute invulnerability, but such a request, as always, is refused. Brahmā instead suggests that Tāraka request that death come only from someone he does not fear. Accordingly, Tāraka asks that he be slain only by a seven-day-old baby.¹² After granting this boon, Brahmā later explains to the gods that the slayer of Tāraka will be born of Śiva, currently without a wife (due to Satī's death), but that the Goddess will soon be born of Himālaya. The son born of her by Śiva, when seven days old, will kill the demon chief.¹³

The *Devī-Bhāgavata* recounts a number of demon tales at great length, frequently emphasizing the clever boons that allow the gods, with the help of the Goddess, finally to overcome their demonic adversaries. But such tales, focusing on the warriorlike aspects of Devī or her *śaktis*, are not the main concern of the *Devī Gītā*. The *Devī Gītā* has little interest in the story of Tāraka as such, using it simply as a means to link together the accounts of Satī and Pārvatī, and thereby providing the traditional Śākta setting for the dialogue between Himālaya and the Goddess (see the Introduction, pp. 9–11, and the Comment on verses 1.66–1.74). The actual Tāraka story, including the birth of Gaurī, her marriage to Śiva, the birth of Skanda, and the slaying of the demon, is told by the *Devī Gītā* in a mere one and a half verses (10.39–40ab).

Notes

1. *kṛta-kṛtya*: literally, "having done what is to be done"; that is, having nothing left to do or accomplish. In the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, it is often a synonym for the person liberated while still living (*jīvan-mukta*). The text affirms, for instance, that after completing the mental worship of the Goddess, "then one becomes liberated while living and attains final release at death; thus, a person is completely fulfilled (*kṛta-kṛtya*) who worships the World-Mother" (3.12.58; cf. 7.30.98). In *Devī Gītā* 6.30, the person who attains knowledge of Brahman is also referred to as *kṛta-kṛtya*, as is the person who performs the various ritual acts of devotion to the Goddess in 8.49. Cf. also 6.19, 8.2, and 10.30.

The term acquired a special, technical meaning in Advaita Vedānta. In *Pañcadaśī* 14.3, the sense of having achieved *kṛta-kṛtya* is one of four aspects of

the blissful state of Brahman; the other three are: (1) absence of misery (*duḥkhābhāva*), (2) attainment of one's desires (*kāmāpti*), and (3) the sense of having attained what is to be attained (*prāpta-prāpya*). Cf. *Pañcadaśī* 14.58–62 (and 7.291–95), where a man who has experienced such aspects is repeatedly said to feel “blessed” (*dhanya*), a term used by Vyāsa earlier in the verse to describe Janamejaya. Cf. also *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 488: “I am blessed (*dhanya*), completely fulfilled (*kṛta-kṛtya*), and liberated (*vimukta*).”

The term *kṛta-kṛtya* already appears in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Laws of Manu*. In the former (15.20), Kṛṣṇa declares that the person who realizes the truth of his teachings is wise and completely fulfilled. And in the *Laws of Manu* (12.93), the famous law-giver affirms that a person, especially a Brahman, who gives up other activities or duties, concentrating on knowledge of the Self, tranquillity, and study of the Veda, accomplishes all that is to be done (i.e., is completely fulfilled).

2. *Satī* is so called, according to the *Devī-Bhāgavata* (7.30.23ab), because she is of the nature of truth (*satya-tvāt*). The term *satī* also refers to the true wife who follows her husband even in death (i.e., on his funeral pyre). In the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, however, *Satī*'s self-immolation precedes her husband's death. To preserve the integrity of a virtuous wife (*satī-dharma-dīrḡkṣayā*), she burns her body, not, however, with ordinary fire, but with the fire of yoga (*yogāgninā*) (7.30.37cd).

3. According to the *Kālikā Purāṇa* (18.5), Śiva in his grief for *Satī* “would fall on the ground one moment, then rising the next would run about; he wandered around one moment, and then would shut his eyes.”

4. *samādhi-gata-mānasa*: literally, “his mind gone to a state of absorption.” In the traditional eight limbs of yoga, *samādhi* or intense absorption is the final stage and goal. Our text later defines this stage as “constant contemplation on the identity of the individual self and the supreme Self” (5.25). Here, the term is used in a more general sense, as Śiva is apparently absorbed in his grief. Such world-forgetting absorption, however, is clearly therapeutic, for it induces Śiva to meditate on the Goddess.

5. *svarūpa*: “one's own inherent form, or true nature.” The *Devī*'s highest nature is pure consciousness, symbolized by light, but the term *svarūpa* is not used in a strict or consistent sense in the *Devī-Bhāgavata* and may well refer here to her beautiful, four-armed form as *Bhuvaneśvarī*, her supreme iconic form.

6. *trailokya*; the Earth, the heavens above, and the nether worlds.

7. *saubhāgya*; *Nīlakaṇṭha* glosses the word with *aiśvarya*, “the pervading, sovereign power” of the World-Mother. As noted in the Introduction (p. 24), *aiśvarya* is the primary characteristic traditionally associated with *Bhuvaneśvarī*.

8. *śakti*; refers both to the Goddess in her form as *Satī*, and to her energizing power. When *Satī* was born, described in the preceding chapter of the

Devī-Bhāgavata (7.30.20–22), the reverse occurred: gods and saints rejoiced, the rivers began to flow in their channels, the sun shone brightly, and everything looked auspicious.

9. The text of 1.8cd–1.9ab is highly elliptical. What the text clearly intends is a general parallel and causal connection between the natural, social, and celestial realms in their mutual deterioration. On the material (*adhibhūta*) and spiritual or divine (*adhidaiva*) forces, see R. Nilkantan, *Gītās in the Māhābhārata and the Purāṇas*, p. 74.

10. See D. C. Sircar, *The Śākta Piṭhas*, pp. 5–7, for a detailed discussion of the variations and development of the myth. Most of the relevant discussion is quoted in Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, pp. 86–88.

11. *Devī-Bhāgavata* 7.30.26–50.

12. *Matsya Purāṇa* 147.16cd–25.

13. *Matsya Purāṇa* 153.47–54.

Translation

[The gods seek counsel with Viṣṇu, who indicates the solution to their predicament.]

Vyāsa continued:

1.14. Thus afflicted with worry, all the gods journeyed to
Viṣṇu's heaven,
Taking counsel with him in private. He then explained
their proper recourse:

Viṣṇu spoke:

1.15. Why are you all so worried, for the Auspicious
Goddess¹ is a wish-fulfilling tree?²
Dwelling in the Jeweled Island³ as Ruler of the
Universe,⁴ she is ever attentive.

1.16. She neglects us now only because of our misbehavior.
Such chastisement by the World-Mother⁵ is simply
for our own instruction.

1.17. As a mother feels no lack of compassion whether
indulging or chastening her child,
Just so the World-Mother feels when overseeing our
virtues and vices.

- 1.18. A son transgresses the limits of proper conduct at every step:
 Who in the world forgives him except his mother?
- 1.19. Therefore go for refuge⁶ to the supreme Mother without delay,
 With sincere hearts. She will accomplish what you want.

Comment

As is typical in stories of the conflicts between the gods and demons, when the latter gain the upper hand, the gods seek refuge with some higher counselor, often one of the famous triumvirate (Trimūrti). This counselor, being less than the supreme power and physically not up to the task at hand, then defers to the ultimate supreme ruler, most commonly identified in the older epic and Purāṇic accounts with either Śiva or Viṣṇu, depending on the particular theistic leanings of the storyteller. That Viṣṇu is here cast into the role of the counselor is a clear rejection of the supremacy claimed for him by the Vaiṣṇavas. It is from Viṣṇu's own mouth that the supremacy of the Goddess as World-Mother is proclaimed.

Viṣṇu's counsel to the gods addresses one of the great paradoxical aspects of the Goddess, her great love for all her children and her seeming indifference. This paradox parallels in some ways the tension between her benevolent and horrific sides, the latter often manifesting in brutal violence, primarily in battle against demonic foes. In the *Devī-Bhāgavata* as a whole, the violent, martial nature of the Goddess, while much on display, is ultimately subordinated to her maternalistic compassion. Thus, even her bloody victories over the demons, who after all are still her offspring, are really meant simply to save them from their own evil ways. In the *Devī Gītā*, Viṣṇu explains that her compassion may manifest as indifference in order to teach. As Nīlakaṇṭha elucidates Viṣṇu's words in verse 1.16: "Her neglect is not for our destruction (*nāśāya*), but . . . for our instruction (*śikṣaṇāya*)."

Notes

1. *śivā*; "the auspicious one" (feminine form); a common name for Pārvatī, resonating with the sound of her husband's name Śiva. In the *Devī Gītā*, however,

the Goddess in her true nature is beyond all marital relationships: she is simply the auspicious energy that makes all life and prosperity possible, but is the consort of no one. Śivā is here a name applied to Bhuvaneśvarī, the Goddess who resides in the Jeweled Island.

2. *kāma-kalpa-druma*; a mythical tree in Indra's paradise able to grant all one's desires. See note 6 on 1.46 below.

3. Maṇḍivīpa, the Jeweled Island, is the Devī's own celestial kingdom, high above all other heavenly worlds, including Viṣṇu's Vaikuṅṭha. For a brief description of this paradise, see the Introduction, pp. 24–25.

4. *bhuvaneśānī*: "Female Lord or Ruler of the Universe," a close synonym for Bhuvaneśvarī.

5. The maternal nature of the Goddess, expressed in such epithets as Jaganmātrī, Jagadambikā, Amba, Parāmba, etc., is the most common characterization of the Goddess in the *Devī Gītā*.

6. *śaraṇa*: "refuge, or protection." The term also conveys a sense of extreme devotional commitment, of submitting or surrendering oneself, of turning one's life over to one's chosen deity, in this case the Goddess.

Translation

[The gods proceed to the Himālaya Mountain to worship the Goddess.]

Vyāsa continued:

- 1.20. Thus enjoining all the gods and accompanied by his wife, the great Viṣṇu,
As chief of the gods, set forth at once with his fellow lords.
- 1.21. He came to the great rocky crag, Himālaya, Lord of mountains,
And all the gods commenced the preliminary acts of worship.¹
- 1.22. They then performed the Mother's sacrifice,² knowing well her ceremonial rites.
All the gods hastened to perform her ritual observances, including the third-day rites,³ O King.
- 1.23. Some of the gods were fully absorbed in meditation; others were focused on her name.
Some concentrated on her hymn,⁴ while others were intent on reciting her names.

1.24. Some were devoted to chanting mantras, or practicing severe austerities.

Some were absorbed in mental sacrifices,⁵ and others implanted mystic powers in their bodies.⁶

1.25. Unwearied, they worshiped⁷ the supreme Śakti with the mantra known as Hṛllekhā.⁸

Many years thus passed away, O Janamejaya.

Comment

The Mother's sacrifice or worship described above is similar to other invocatory scenes recounted elsewhere in the *Devī-Bhāgavata*. Of particular relevance here are two stories focusing on the humbling of the gods by the Goddess. The first story, regarding the humbling of Viṣṇu and Śiva (told, interestingly enough, just prior to the *Devī Gītā*),⁹ finds its resolution when the sage Dakṣa and his peers go to the Himālaya Mountain to worship the Goddess. They practice austerities and meditate on the supreme Śakti, but the key practice is their repetition (*japa*) of the sacred mantric syllable of the Goddess, known as the Hṛllekhā or the Māyā-bīja (seed mantra of Māyā).¹⁰ The protective nature of the Goddess as manifest in the Hṛllekhā is suggested by the etymology of its name. According to the commentator Nīlakaṇṭha, the syllable is called the Hṛllekhā because the Goddess "keeps watch in the furrow (*lekha*) of the heart (*hr̥d*)."¹¹ The second story, the humbling of Agni, Vāyu, and Indra, is likewise resolved when Indra, instructed by the Goddess herself, recites the Māyā-bīja while fasting and meditating.¹² In both stories, the recitation of the sonic essence of the Goddess who resides in the heart brings about her visible presence. (For a brief account of these stories, see the Comment on verses 1.26–29 below.)

The general purposes of mantra recitation are threefold: propitiation of a god or goddess, acquisition of some material good or other desired end, and identification of the worshiper with the power/deity being invoked.¹³ In the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, such ends are almost always mediated through a vision or revelation of the Goddess. Thus, the recitation of the Māyā-bīja in the two "humbling" narratives and in the *Devī Gītā* has for its immediate end an audience with the Goddess. Then, once she appears, a request for various worldly gains can be put to her, or she can give calming assurances of safety.

From the devotional, *bhaktic* point of view, receiving a vision (*darśana*) of the Goddess is in many ways its own end, as the *Devī Gītā* itself later suggests.¹⁴ From the point of view of wisdom or knowledge

(*jñāna*), the appearance of the Goddess is an occasion for revelation of the supreme truth that leads to union with that truth. In the *Devī Gītā*, the undertaking of the Mother's sacrifice with recitation of the Hṛllekhā is ostensibly for the purposes of propitiating the Goddess and acquiring victory against Tāraka. But as Hīmalaya's request in 1.73 makes clear, identification or union with the supreme Goddess is the final goal.

Notes

1. *puraścaraṇa*: "preparatory rite," often in Tantra involving the recitation of the name or mantra of the deity, accompanied by other ritual acts such as fire offerings and the observance of dietary restrictions.

2. *amba-yajña*; the word *yajña* means both "sacrifice" and "worship." Worship in this sense means a ritual act of devotion, to honor a deity with sacrifices and other material and immaterial offerings. In the *Devī Gītā*, *yajña* is basically synonymous with *pūjā* (translated as "worship"), a term appearing in 1.25ab.

3. *trītyādi-vratāni*; this refers to those rites that are to be performed on the third day of the dark and bright fortnights of the lunar month. These third-day rites are dedicated especially to the Goddess or various goddesses. See 8.37–38 below for more on these rites.

Nilakaṇṭha indicates that the various rituals are described in the third Skandha or Book of the *Devī-Bhāgavata*. In *Devī-Bhāgavata* 3.12, the Devī's sacrifice (*devyā yajña*) is explained at some length. Of special interest is the fourfold division of the types of worship according to the three *guṇas* of nature (see 7.4–10 and the Comment thereon for an explanation of the *guṇas*). The fourth type, beyond the *guṇas*, is the mental worship (in contrast to the three preceding external forms), referred to in the *Devī Gītā* two verses down (1.24). In *Devī-Bhāgavata* 3.13, the Devī's sacrifice (also referred to as the *yāgam ambikāyāḥ*, "the Mother's sacrifice") that Viṣṇu performed after visiting the Devī in her Jeweled Island and following the creation of the world is briefly described.

4. *sūkta-parāḥ*; Nilakaṇṭha glosses this: "*ahaṇi rudrebhir ity ādi devī-sūkta-jāpina ity arthaḥ*." ("The meaning is that they [the gods] were engaged in reciting the hymn of the Devī that begins with the words, 'I, with the Rudras. . .'"") The words quoted by Nilakaṇṭha are the first words of the famous "Devī Sūkta" of Ṛg Veda 10.125. In *Devī Gītā* 10.22, the Goddess explicitly recommends reciting the "Devī Sūkta" for her enjoyment. Interestingly, the *Devī Upaniṣad*, just prior to its own "Hymn to the Goddess," has the Devī herself recite the "Devī Sūkta." The *Devī Gītā* has borrowed many motifs and verses from this Upaniṣad (see the Comment on 1.42–53 below).

5. *antar-yāga*, "internal or mental worship." In the third book of the *Devī-Bhāgavata* (3.12.39–63ab), this mental sacrifice (*mānasa-yāga*) is described at length. The sacrificer visually creates in the imagination the worship hall and altar,

mentally provides the priests and material substances to be offered, etc. This internal sacrifice is for those who have no worldly desires, only desire for *mokṣa*. Specifically, it is said that it should not be performed by kings desiring victory (verse 63). This suggests that at least some of the gods, in the scene described in the *Devī Gītā*, are not particularly concerned with Tāraka, using him merely as an excuse to worship the Goddess! In any case, according to the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, the final result of successfully performing the mental sacrifice is said to be a vision of the Goddess as the embodiment of infinite being, consciousness, and bliss (*sac-cid-ānanda-rūpiṇī*), and the attainment of liberation while living (*jīvan-mukti*) (3.12.56 and 58). Cf. *Devī Gītā* 9.3; 9.44–45ab; and 10.12cd.

The *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* says that a practitioner, having worshiped the supreme Brahman who is *sac-cit-svarūpam*, should “in order to attain union with Brahman, worship with offerings of his mind,” before commencing external worship (3.50–51, Woodroffe’s translation).

6. The implanting or installing of mystic powers in one’s body is called *nyāsa*, literally, “placing, putting down.” In Tantric ritual, it refers to the placing or assigning of various powers or deities to different parts of the body, by touching those parts using symbolic gestures (*mudrās*), accompanied by invocatory mantras. Through this process, the practitioner is fully protected in all his/her limbs and becomes the embodiment of those powers and deities. *Nyāsa* is discussed in *Devī Gītā* 10.6–8.

7. Literally, “performed the worship (*pūjā*)”; the types and procedures of *devī-pūjā* (“Goddess worship”) are the primary topics of chapters 9 and 10 of the *Devī Gītā*.

8. As Nīlakaṇṭha points out here, the Hṛllekhā is the seed mantra of Bhuvaneśvarī (and later, commenting on verse 10.6, he indicates it is also known as the *māyā-bīja* or seed mantra of Māyā; see also his comment on 8.30, discussed in the note to that verse below). It is the sacred syllable Hṛīm (see the Comment on 1.42–53 below for an explanation of Hṛīm). The name Hṛllekhā itself literally means “mark or scratch on the heart,” thus “anxiety, desire.” As a name of the seed mantra, it may be thought of as the audible essence and sign of Bhuvaneśvarī’s heart.

As for the general significance of seed mantras, Guy Beck writes with specific reference to the Hṛllekhā: “A Tantric mantra in the form of a syllable is . . . a very compact form of the god or power that it ‘is’ in essence. A single mantra may focus the energy of a deity into a grosser or more bodily representation. The heart mantra, for example, is known as HRĪM and is based on the Sanskrit word *hṛdaya* for heart, used when the heart energy of a deity is to be evoked” (*Sonic Theology*, p. 128). (For more on seed mantras, see the Introduction, p. 19.)

A contemporary Hindu explains the significance of Hṛllekhā as follows: “In Tantric lore, Bhuvaneswari is called, among others, by the name of Hrillekha. It means the Power which is resident in the heart of man in the form of a creeper holding fast to him and guiding him. . . . Now, competent authorities identify this Hrillekha with the *Kundalini Sakti* resident in man” (V. A. K.

Ayer, "Mother Bhuvaneswari," *Tattvāloka* 11, no. 4 [1988]:45). (For Kuṇḍalinī Śakti, see 5.33 below.) Thus, the Ḥṛllekhā is both the Goddess and her essential sonic form, as well as her power manifest within the human individual.

The Ḥṛllekhā is also regarded as the energizing point/sound from which the entire universe unfolds. As another contemporary Hindu affirms, this syllable is the essential, dynamic point of the universe containing the pattern for all manifest forms: "Paradoxically, the dynamic point is the perfect potential universe. This is *bindu* [the primal point]. Words in common parlance can never express the basic idea or pattern (*ḥṛllekhā*). An aspect of the basic pattern is sought to be expressed in Tantra by the mystic syllable or formula *hrīṃ* (*māyābīja*)" (Swami Pratyagatmananda, "Philosophy of the Tantras," in *The Philosophies*, ed. Haridas Bhattacharyya, *The Cultural Heritage of India*, vol. 3, p. 442).

In the Vaiṣṇava *Lakṣmī Tantra*, the Ḥṛllekhā is said to be the seed mantra of the supreme goddess known variously as Śrī, Lakṣmī, or Tārā. In 27.7, Śrī declares, "ḥṛllekhā, the supreme vidyā . . . is identified with me; she is my divine, absolute śakti, perpetually endowed with all my attributes" (Sanjukta Gupta's translation).

9. *Devī-Bhāgavata* 7.29.23–7.30.17.

10. See note 8 above.

11. Nilakaṇṭha, comment on *Devī Gītā* 8.30 (see note 1 on 8.30 below).

12. *Devī-Bhāgavata* 12.8.12–86.

13. This classification is given by Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, pp. 111–13.

14. See 10.38 below, and the Comment on 10.38–43ab.

Translation

[The Goddess appears before the gods as a blazing light.]

1.26. Suddenly, on the ninth lunar day in the month of
Caitra, on a Friday,¹

That lustrous power revealed in scripture appeared
before the gods.²

1.27. Praised on all sides by the four Vedas incarnate,
It blazed like ten million suns, yet soothed like ten
million moons.

1.28. Flashing like ten million streaks of lightning³ tinged
with red,⁴ that supreme lustrous power
Shone forth unencompassed above, across, and in the
middle.⁵

- 1.29. Without beginning or end, it had no body, no hands,
no other limbs,⁶
Nor did it have a woman's form, a man's form, nor
the two combined.⁷

Comment

The sudden appearance of the Goddess in the form of an infinite, blazing mass of light closely parallels the account of her manifestation in the famous story of the humbling of the gods Agni, Vāyu, and Indra as told near the end of the *Devī-Bhāgavata*.⁸ The *Devī-Bhāgavata*'s account is itself an elaboration and interpretation of the same story as found in the *Kena Upaniṣad*.⁹

The basic myth as told in the *Kena* concerns the arrogance of the gods in claiming for themselves a victory that was actually achieved by Brahman, the supreme power, on their behalf. To curb their false pride, Brahman appeared before the gods in the form of a spirit or *yakṣa*. The gods were curious to know who or what this spirit was, and first sent the fire god Agni to find out. Agni, approaching the spirit, was suddenly asked by the *yakṣa* what power he possessed. The fire god replied that he had the power to burn anything on Earth. The spirit then placed before him a blade of grass, which Agni was unable to burn. Humiliated, Agni returned to the gods, who then sent the wind god Vāyu, who has the power to blow away anything on Earth. But Vāyu was unable to blow away the blade of grass placed before him by the spirit. Finally, Indra was sent to the *yakṣa*, but it disappeared in front of him. Then, in that same space in the sky, Indra came across a woman, the brilliant and beautiful Umā Haimavatī, who revealed the identity of the *yakṣa* as Brahman, to whom the victory was due. In the subsequent tradition, Umā Haimavatī came to be identified with Brahmanvidyā, the knowledge revealing Brahman.

The *Devī-Bhāgavata*, in its elaborate recounting of the *Kena* story, explicitly identifies the World-Mother with the *yakṣa*, and thus with Brahman itself rather than just with a mediator of Brahman. Further, the *Devī-Bhāgavata* adds a number of other details. The *yakṣa* when it first appears is described as a mass of light (*tejas*) like ten million suns, soothing like ten million moons, without hands, feet, or other limbs. This spirit is also referred to as the supreme lustrous power (*paraṇi mahas*). When it disappears before Indra, it instructs him to recite the Māyā-bīja. For one hundred thousand years Indra devoutly carries out

the repetition of this mantra. Then suddenly, on the ninth lunar day in the month of Caitra, the light reappears, in the midst of which manifests a beautiful young woman, identified as Umā Haimavatī Śivā, while her description is that of Bhuvaneśvarī (the emergence of Bhuvaneśvarī out of the light in the *Devī Gītā* is described in the next several verses).

The *Devī Gītā*'s introduction of the Goddess clearly resembles, and seems consciously to have in mind, the story of the humbling of Agni, Vāyu, and Indra as a mythological backdrop. Nīlakaṅṭha immediately identifies the supreme lustrous power as Umā Haimavatī (see note 2 below), and the *Devī Gītā*, in its concluding chapter, refers to the Devī as Haimavatī (10.39). The introduction thus establishes by dramatic means the identity of the Goddess as the supreme Brahman of the Upaniṣads, an identification enhanced by the frequent use of Upaniṣadic terminology (verses 1.28–29). The blazing light symbolizes her nature as pure consciousness, her supreme, aniconic or formless form.

Of interest here also is the placement of the *Devī Gītā* in the *Devī-Bhāgavata*. In the preceding two chapters of the *Devī-Bhāgavata*,¹⁰ Vyāsa narrates the story of the humbling of Viṣṇu and Śiva, a thoroughly Śāktacized transformation of the *Kena* motif. In this Śākta rendition, Śiva and Viṣṇu, the two most prominent deities in the older Purāṇas and members of the ruling triumvirate (Trimūrti), falsely claim credit for victory over a host of demons, a victory due in reality to the power of the Goddess. The consorts or energizing powers (*śaktis*) of the gods, Gaurī and Lakṣmī, offended by the arrogance of their husbands, abandon them and thereby render them unconscious. The third member of the triumvirate, Brahmā, is forced to carry out all three functions of creation, preservation, and destruction. To relieve the overburdened creator and revive the other two deities, Dakṣa and other sages retreat to the Himālaya Mountain to worship the Devī, reciting her Māyā-bīja. In time, she graciously appears before them in her form as Bhuvaneśvarī and promises to restore to Viṣṇu and Śiva their lost wives (cf. the Comment on 10.38–43ab). Śiva's wife is restored to him as Satī, whose death by fire and rebirth as Himālaya's daughter provides the lead-in for Vyāsa's narration of the *Devī Gītā*.

The *Devī Gītā*'s introductory frame story thus fully resonates with the mythic and theological motifs of the two "humbling" stories. The frame story thereby implicitly establishes the Goddess not only as the highest reality affirmed by the Upaniṣads, but also as the supreme power behind the primary gods of *bhakti*—Śiva and Viṣṇu—extolled in the earlier Purāṇas.

Notes

1. The bright or waxing half of the lunar month Caitra (March/April) marks the beginning of the lunar year in much of India. It is also the time for celebrating the vernal Navarātra or “Nine Night” ritual of the Goddess (see 8.42). The culmination of the celebration occurs on the last, or ninth lunar day (night). Although the *Devī Gītā* does not explicitly indicate that the ninth lunar day belongs to the bright half (rather than to the dark half) of Caitra, it seems clear that the bright ninth is intended, given the significance of the day.

The solar day Friday is generally auspicious, though with ambivalent qualities. It is regarded as highly appropriate for worshiping benevolent goddesses (cf. note 5 on 8.38, concerning Friday rites, and 10.18). The Goddess thus chose an especially powerful conjunction of lunar and solar days for her appearance (cf. Lawrence A. Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy*, p. 113, and Diana L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light*, pp. 255–56, 258). It was also on the ninth lunar day of Caitra, according to the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, that the Goddess appeared before Indra in the story of his humbling (see the Comment above).

2. Nīlakaṇṭha quotes from the *śruti* [*Kena Upaniṣad* 3.12] in explaining the identity of the lustrous power: “In that same space [where the spirit had disappeared] he [Indra] came upon a woman brilliantly beautiful, Umā Haimavati,’ thus [says the *Kena*]. And so [Umā Haimavati] is the ‘lustrous power of Śakti revealed in scripture.’ ”

3. This description of the lustrous power, beginning with “It blazed like ten million suns . . .,” is identical to the description of the spirit/light that appeared before the gods in the *Devī-Bhāgavata*’s story of the humbling of Agni, Vāyu, and Indra (12.8.19cd–20a).

4. According to Nīlakaṇṭha, the red color is due to the lustrous power’s assuming the quality of activity (*rajo-guṇa*) for the sake of showing favor (*anugraha*). (Red is especially the color associated with *rajas*, whereas white is associated with *sattva*, calming rest.) Nīlakaṇṭha’s explanation is indirectly supported elsewhere in the *Devī-Bhāgavata*. In its story of the humbling of Agni, Vāyu, and Indra, the *Devī-Bhāgavata* says that the World-Mother appeared in the form of a blazing spirit (*yakṣa*) specifically to show favor (*anugraha*) to the gods (12.8.18–19).

5. This line closely resembles *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 4.19a: “Nothing encompasses that one above, across, or in the middle” (*nainam ūrdhvaṃ na tiryāṅcam na madhye na pariagrābhat*). This latter line also occurs in the *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad* (1.10a). Cf. *Devī Upaniṣad* 3, where the Goddess declares: “I am below, above, and in the middle” (*adhaś cordhvaṃ ca tiryak cāham*). (See the Comment on 1.42–53 below for discussion of the relation of the *Devī Gītā* and the *Devī Upaniṣad*.) Cf. also *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 2.2.12, a verse quoted by the *Devī Gītā* in 6.14, which asserts that Brahman alone extends below and above, etc.

6. *Muṇḍaka* 1.1.6 describes the supreme as “without eyes or ears, without hands or feet.” In the *Devī-Bhāgavata*’s account of the humbling of Agni, Vāyu, and Indra, the spirit/light that manifests itself before the gods is described as “lacking hands, feet, etc.” (12.8.20).

7. In *Maitrī Upaniṣad* 6.5, the supreme is characterized as “woman, man, and eunuch,” and in *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 4.3, as “woman, man, boy, and maiden.” (This latter text, however, goes on to describe the individual self as “neither a woman, nor a man, nor a eunuch” [5.10].) Such gender-inclusive descriptions of the ultimate emphasize the all-encompassing nature of the highest reality, and are especially prominent in the more theistic descriptions of that ultimate, who appears in the form of a personal deity (*īśvara* or *īśvarī*) endowed with various sexual characteristics. The nontheistic Hindu perspective accents the transcendent/ineffable nature of the supreme, in the form of the neuter Brahman, which is “*neti neti*,” neither this nor that, including neither male nor female. The *Devī Gītā* synthesizes the theistic and nontheistic perspectives: in her aspect as pure consciousness, the Devī is identical with Brahman and is symbolized by the aniconic form of dazzling light, without limbs, and without gender. In her most compassionate aspect as World-Mother, she is symbolized as the auspicious, four-armed Bhuvaneśvarī, who is about to emerge from the dazzling light.

8. *Devī-Bhāgavata* 12.8.12–86.

9. *Kena Upaniṣad* 3.1–4.3.

10. *Devī-Bhāgavata* 7.29.23–30.19.

Translation

[The light evolves into a beautiful, four-armed woman.]

1.30. The dazzling brilliance blinded the eyes of the gods,
O King.

When again their vision returned, the gods beheld

1.31. That light appearing now in the form of a woman,
charming and delightful.

She was exceedingly beautiful of limb, a maiden in
the freshness of youth.

1.32. Her full, upraised breasts put to shame the swelling
buds of the lotus.

Her girdle and anklets jingled with clusters of tinkling
bells.

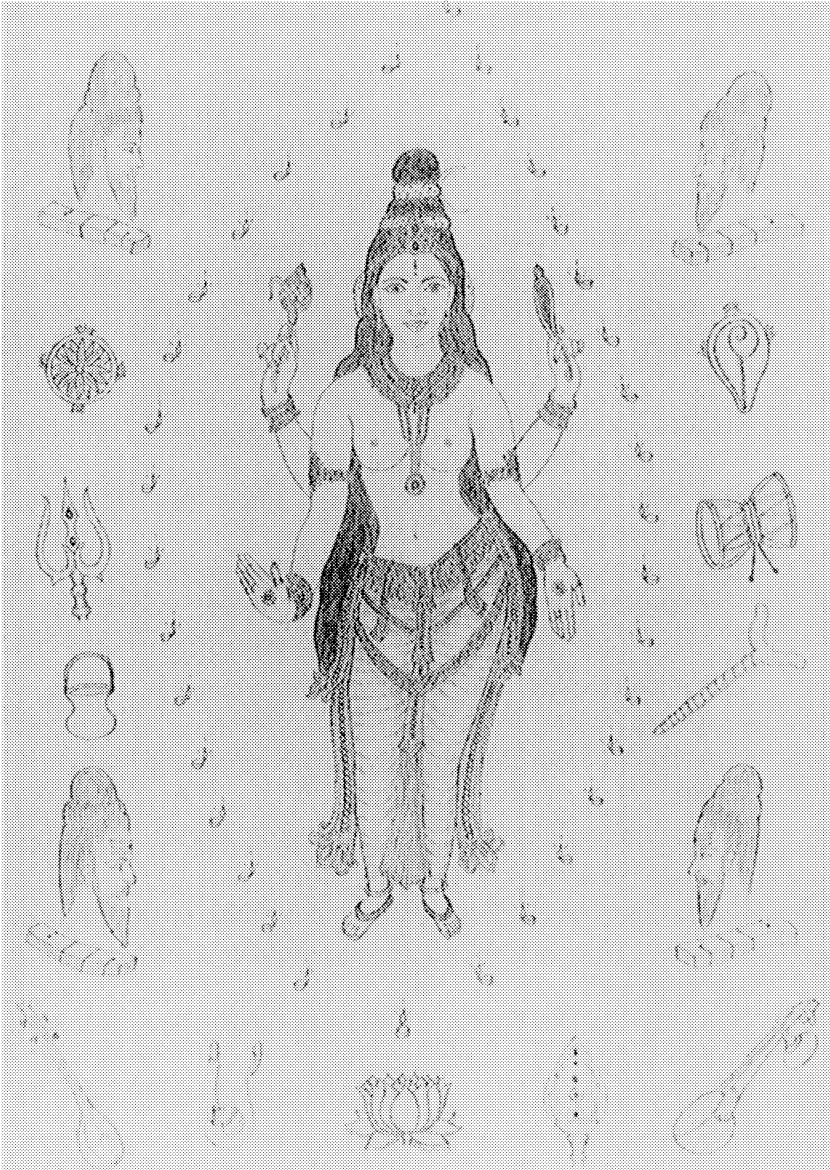


Figure 1.1 Bhuvaneśvarī Appearing in an Orb of Light before the Gods. The latter, including the Four Vedas, are symbolically represented by their standard symbolic emblems outside the perimeter of light. The orb of light is suggested by the encircling mandorla composed of lighted lamps. (Verses 1.30cd–41.) Pencil drawing by Dr. Bala Viswanathan.

- 1.33. She was adorned with a necklace, armlets, and bracelets of gold,
Her throat resplendent with a chain of priceless gems.
- 1.34. The locks on her cheeks shimmered like black bees swarming on delicate Ketaka blooms.
An exquisite line of down on her midriff enhanced the charm of her shapely hips.
- 1.35. She was chewing on Tāmbūla¹ mixed with bits of mint camphor.
Pendant earrings of shining gold graced her lotus face.
- 1.36. Above long eyebrows her forehead shone with an image of the crescent moon.
Her eyes were red lotus petals, her nose dignified, her lips like nectar.
- 1.37. Her teeth resembled buds of white jasmine; a string of pearls adorned her neck.
Her crescent-shaped crown sparkled with jewels; she was bedecked with ornaments shining like new moons.
- 1.38. A garland of jasmine flowers brightened her luxuriant hair.
Her forehead sported a saffron dot, while her three eyes reflected her playful mood.
- 1.39. Three-eyed and four-armed, she held a noose and goad while gesturing her beneficence and assurance of safety.²
She was dressed in red and appeared lustrous like blooms of the pomegranate.
- 1.40. Richly adorned in garments all suited for love,³ she was worshiped by all the gods.
Satisfying all desires, she is the Mother of all, the Deluder of all.⁴
- 1.41. The Mother's kindly face, so gracious, displayed a tender smile on the lotus mouth.
This embodiment of unfeigned compassion the gods beheld in their presence.

Comment

In the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, the beautiful, four-armed form of the Goddess described in the preceding verses is her highest iconic manifestation, the wholly auspicious Bhuvaneśvarī (explicitly named in verse 1.50 below). The iconography of Bhuvaneśvarī is rich and complex. Her lavish adornments attest to her sovereignty over all wealth, beauty, and prosperity. While her luxurious and splendid attire, including her “garments all suited for love,” points to an erotic element in the Goddess (discussed below), her wealth primarily emphasizes her maternal power, as World-Mother, to bestow all manner of comforts and pleasures on her children-devotees. She is endowed with three eyes, as she is ever awake and watchful, concerned with the well-being of her children. The crescent moon on her forehead symbolizes her power of renewal and regeneration that allows the Earth to replenish itself.⁵ Her four hands, symbolizing various gifts to her devotees, will be discussed in detail in a moment.

This splendid manifestation of the Goddess as Bhuvaneśvarī is the form she assumes in the beginning while undertaking the auspicious work of bringing the universe into existence. It is in her role as cosmic creatrix that her erotic side expresses itself. According to the *Devī-Bhāgavata*, the Goddess at the beginning of creation resides in her celestial paradise, the Jeweled Island, and for the sake of her own play (including amorous sport, we may assume), divides herself into two halves. One half becomes Bhuvaneśa (Śiva), the other half remaining as Bhuvaneśī or Bhuvaneśvarī herself, who takes her seat on Śiva’s left thigh. Only by such contact with her, the text stresses, is Śiva able to become ruler of all.⁶

A parallel cosmogonic motif is briefly narrated in the story of the humbling of Agni, Vāyu, and Indra. When questioned by Indra as to what the Yakṣa/Light truly is, Devī responds: “That [Yakṣa] form of mine is Brahman. . . . The single-syllable Brahman is ‘Om’;⁷ it is composed of the syllable ‘Hrīm’ (*hrīm-mayam*), so they⁸ say. These two seed syllables are my chief mantras. . . . I assume both parts in order to create the whole world. The former part is called infinite being, consciousness, and bliss. The second part is known as Māyā and Prakṛti—that Māyā endowed with supreme power is I, the Īśvarī (Ruler/Queen).”⁹ The Īśvarī, of course, is Bhuvaneśvarī, whose seed mantra is Hrīm. (See 1.53 below.)

After the creation, the Goddess remains in her form as Bhuvaneśvarī while overseeing the universe from her Jeweled Island. This is also the form she assumes when she appears in the world to greet or show favor to devout petitioners. Bhuvaneśvarī’s benevolent and compassionate nature toward her children, especially her devotees,

is well indicated by her four hands with their emblems and gestures. In a general sense, they represent her ability to bestow the four primary ends of life (*puruṣārthas*), that is, virtue, wealth, pleasure, and liberation (see the Introduction, p. 3).

The *Prapañcasāra Tantra* explains the four hands and emblems of the Goddess in more specific fashion.¹⁰ The noose (*pāśa*) embodies and reveals her ability to protect (*pā*) and to pervade (*aś*) the universe, since she protects all, pervading all things by a portion of herself that is the Self in all beings. The goad (*aṅkuśa*) symbolizes her power to draw or drag physical bodies toward the Self or Ātman. The Ātman is represented by *aṅ*, the body both by *ku* (meaning “earth,” or “body”), and by *śa* (for *śarīra*, “body”). The gesture of assurance (*abhaya*, literally, “fearlessness”) reveals her capacity to free a person from fear arising from the thought of losing one’s wealth, and from dismay when contemplating the inexorable cycle of rebirth. The gesture of beneficence (*vara*, “boon, blessing, or wish,” in the *Devī Gītā*; *iṣṭa*, “wish, desire” in the *Prapañcasāra Tantra*) signals her power to give what is just merely desired in thought.

Contemporary sources suggest other symbolic meanings to Bhuvaneśvarī’s four hands that stress her role in the binding and liberation of beings. The hands holding the noose and goad point to her ruling powers, especially her control over demonic and evil forces, both external and internal. With the noose, she binds, as it were, the Self or Ātman within the body, with its sensual cravings, and with the goad she disciplines the seeker to transcend the various obstacles to liberation, such as anger and lust. The noose also binds the very senses and cravings with which she has bound the Self, emphasizing her role not only as the enchanting and captivating Māyā, but also as the liberating knowledge that brings fearlessness and the full enjoyment of her bounty, symbolized by her gestures of *abhaya* and *vara*, respectively.¹¹

At times Bhuvaneśvarī appears directly to her devotees, as in the story of the humbling of Śiva and Viṣṇu.¹² At other times, as in the story of the humbling of Agni, Vāyu, and Indra, and here in the *Devī Gītā*, the Devī appears as Bhuvaneśvarī only after first manifesting as a blazing orb of light. Figure 1.1, page 63 illustrates the emergence of the Goddess out of the brilliant *mahas*, appearing before the stunned gods assembled on Himālaya, and surrounded on each side by the four Vedas singing her praise.

Bhuvaneśvarī’s emergence from the light closely resembles that of the beautiful Lalitā in the *Lalitā Māhātmya* of the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*. There, when the gods (tormented by demons, as per custom) worship the Goddess with human flesh, a huge mass of light first appears before them. Then in its midst they perceive the lovely Lalitā, lavishly adorned, the abode of love, gracious, with a noose, goad, sugarcane

bow and five arrows in her four hands.¹³ The close resemblance of these two thoroughly auspicious Tantric goddesses was noted in the Introduction (pp. 25–26).

The various manifestations of the Goddess out of the blinding brilliance parallels Śiva's emergence from the Emblem of Infinite Light (Jyotir-liṅga) in the famous myth of the origin of his Liṅga (see the Introduction, pp. 11–12). The motif of Devī's emergence from her own orb of infinite light serves as a counterpart to Śiva's self-manifestation, suggesting at once her superiority over one of her chief male rivals, as well as her identity with the supreme Brahman that is the infinite light of consciousness.

The lovely, four-armed Bhuvaneśvarī is not only the Devī's preferred form for auspicious manifestation, it is also one of three aspects of the Goddess that are prime objects of meditation. The other two are her aspects as infinite being, consciousness, and bliss (*sac-cid-ānanda*), and as the Cosmic Body (Virāj).¹⁴ The latter we shall meet in chapter 3 of the *Devī Gītā*. The former, of course, is the Goddess as Brahman, that is, as pure consciousness, symbolized aniconically by the blazing light called *mahas*. These three forms as meditation objects are discussed in chapter 9 below. While in such meditative contexts, the iconic forms tend to be subordinated to the aniconic, the beautiful Bhuvaneśvarī is the object of loving description, rich in symbolic meaning, and the focus of the highest devotion throughout the text.

Notes

1. Tāmbūla is a mixture of betel nut, betel leaves, and several other spicy ingredients such as cardamom and clove, chewed after meals to freshen the breath. It is a standard offering to the gods in *pūjā* (cf. 10.21), and descriptions of the Goddess often describe her as chewing on Tāmbūla, as in the description of Lalitā in the *Lalitā-Māhātmya* of the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* (37.79). Cf. Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. 2, pp. 734–35.

2. This line specifies the essential, identifying characteristics of the Goddess as Bhuvaneśvarī. The *Śaradā-Tilaka Tantra* catalogues the *dhyānas* (iconic forms to be visualized in meditation) of a number of gods and goddesses. Chapter 9 of that work is devoted to describing Bhuvaneśvarī, introducing her as the World-Mother (*jagad-dhātṛī*). Her *dhyāna* given there is as follows: "One should worship Bhuvaneśvarī as having the luster of the rising sun, with the moon in her crown, with prominent breasts, three-eyed, smiling, gesturing beneficence and assurance of safety while holding a noose and goad" (9.14). The *Devī Upaniṣad* (24) gives a similar meditation for Bhuvaneśvarī: "I worship her who resides in the lotus of the heart, shining like the sun, bearing the noose and goad, gentle, gesturing beneficence and assurance of safety, three-eyed,

dressed in red, a wish-fulfilling cow to her devotees." In the *Prapañcasāra Tantra*, a goddess called both Prakṛti ("Nature") and Prapañca-svarūpā ("Essence of the Universe"), and who appears to be identical with Bhuvaneśvarī, is described as having the brilliance of a thousand rising suns, ever radiating through the infinity of space, with a crescent moon on her head, and bearing in two of her hands the noose and goad, while gesturing her assurance and blessings with the other two (11.64; cf. 10.10 for a similar description). While other divergent *dhyaṇas* or descriptions of Bhuvaneśvarī exist, including even a twenty-armed form, the above four-armed form seems to be the classic standard.

3. *śṛṅgāra*; it is one of the nine poetic sentiments and refers specifically to erotic love and sexual passion. For the significance of the erotic aspect of the Goddess, see the Comment above.

4. The Goddess as the universal Mother fulfills the desires of her children, yet these very desires are due to the illusion of being separated from her, an illusion brought about by her own deluding power of Māyā.

5. The above observations regarding the significance of the three eyes and the crescent moon are based on an unpublished ms. on Bhuvaneśvarī ("Bhuvaneśvarī: Whose Body is the World," pp. 15–16), by David Kinsley. A complementary interpretation of the crescent moon is provided by Alain Daniélou, who quotes from a Hindi source: "With the ambrosia made from the lunar essence, that is, the seed, the sacrificial offering, *soma*, she [Bhuvaneśvarī] quenches the thirst of the world. This is why the all-powerful goddess has the moon, the cup of *soma*, as her diadem" (*Hindu Polytheism*, p. 279).

6. *Devī-Bhāgavata* 12.12.13–14, 17, 39.

7. Cf. *Bhagavad-Gītā* 8.13.

8. The Vedas, according to Nilakaṅṭha.

9. *Devī-Bhāgavata* 12.8.62–66.

10. *Prapañcasāra Tantra* 10.11–14.

11. The interpretations given in this paragraph are derived from descriptions given by Kinsley in his unpublished manuscript on Bhuvaneśvarī (p. 16). His descriptions are based in part on interviews with Hindu informants in Varanasi.

12. *Devī-Bhāgavata* 7.30.1–3.

13. *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* 3.4.12.68–73.

14. See e.g., *Devī-Bhāgavata* 7.30.15–16.

Translation

[The gods sing the praises of Bhuvaneśvarī, Ruler of the Universe.]

- 1.42. Seeing her, the embodiment of compassion, the entire
host of gods bowed low,
Unable to speak, choking on tears in silence.
- 1.43. Struggling to regain their composure, their necks
bending in devotion,
Their eyes brimming with tears of loving joy,¹ they
glorified the World-Mother with hymns.

The gods spoke:

- 1.44. Hail to the Goddess, to the Great Goddess; to the
Auspicious One always hail!
Hail to Nature,² to the Propitious One; we humble
ourselves attentively before her.³
- 1.45. To her, the color of fire, blazing like the sun with
ascetic power,⁴ and who is worshiped for attaining
the fruits of action,
To her, the Goddess Durgā, I go for refuge. Hail to
that raft of swift crossing.⁵
- 1.46. The gods created the Goddess Speech, whom animals
of all sorts speak.
This Speech is pleasing to us, this cow yielding food
and strength. She is well praised; may she come to
us.⁶
- 1.47. To Kālarātrī praised by Brahmā,⁷ to Vaiṣṇavī,⁸ to the
Mother of Skanda,
To Sarasvatī, to Aditi, the Daughter of Dakṣa,⁹ we bow,
to the pure Auspicious One.¹⁰
- 1.48. We know you as Mahālakṣmī, we meditate on you
as the Śakti of all.
May the Goddess inspire that knowledge and meditation
of ours.¹¹

- 1.49. Hail to her in the form of the Cosmic Body;¹² hail to her in the form of the Cosmic Soul;¹³
Hail to her in the Unmanifest State;¹⁴ hail to her in the form of the glorious Brahman.¹⁵
- 1.50. Through her power of ignorance, she shows herself as the world, like a rope appearing as a serpent, wreath, and the like.¹⁶
Through her power of knowledge, she dissolves the world back into herself.¹⁷ We glorify her, Ruler of the Universe.¹⁸
- 1.51. We glorify her whose essence is pure consciousness, represented by the word *Tat*,¹⁹
And whose nature is undiminished bliss. It is she to whom the Vedas refer as their goal.
- 1.52. Transcending the five sheaths,²⁰ witness of the three states of consciousness,²¹
She is also in essence the individual soul, represented by the word *Tvam*.²²
- 1.53. Hail to her in the form of the syllable Om;²³ hail to her embodied in the syllable Hrīṃ.²⁴
To her composed of manifold mantras,²⁵ that is to you the compassionate Goddess, hail! Hail!”

Comment

This Hymn to the Goddess may be divided into three parts. The first, verses 44–48, uses Vedic or Vedicized mantras in praising the Goddess. These five verses have been borrowed from a “Devī Stuti” (“Hymn to the Goddess”) in the Śākta *Devī Upaniṣad*.²⁶ The *Devī Upaniṣad*’s hymn represents a collection of more ancient mantras in honor of various female divinities (the original source of each is indicated in the notes to the verses). Well before the time of the *Devī Upaniṣad* (ninth to fourteenth centuries),²⁷ the different goddesses had come to be seen as simply diverse manifestations or aspects of the Great Goddess.²⁸ In any case, for the devout practitioner, these five verses resonate with the power of Vedic utterances and affirm the Vedic identity of the Goddess.

The second part of the hymn, verses 49–52, utilizes the teachings of Advaita Vedānta in order to establish the essential nature of the

Goddess as the nondual Brahman. She is identified with the four quarters or states of consciousness that constitute the four aspects of Brahman as delineated in the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*. As Brahman, she is the substrate of the universe, appearing as the world through her power of ignorance or *Māyā*, her relation to the world being illustrated by the famous Advaitic analogy of the rope appearing as a snake. At this point, the gods refer to her as *Bhuvaneśvarī*, the great Tantric goddess who rules the universe. And finally she is identified with both the "Tat" and the "Tvam" of the Upaniṣadic Great Saying, "Tat tvam asi" ("You are That"), an affirmation in itself of the essential unity of Brahman ("Tat") and the individual soul ("Tvam").

The third part, consisting of the final verse, 53, refers to the two chief mantras of the Goddess: *Om*, the one-syllable mantra of Brahman; and *Hrīṃ*, the seed mantra of *Bhuvaneśvarī*, also known as the *Hṛllekhā* (see verse 1.25). The significance of *Hrīṃ* vis-a-vis *Om* in Tantric practice is nicely set forth in the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*. According to that text, in the first three world ages, the recitation of mantras was preceded by the *Praṇava* (the syllable *Om*), but in this Kali age, the same mantras are recited, but preceded by the *Māyā-bīja* (*Hrīṃ*).²⁹ The implication is that in this dangerous and degenerate age of Kali, the Tantric *Hrīṃ* is a more powerful and efficacious means of attaining the fruits of mantra recitation than is the Vedic *Om*. *Hrīṃ* is referred to, in fact, as the Tantric *Praṇava*.³⁰

The *Devī Gītā* in its practical and devotional side focuses much more on *Hrīṃ* than *Om*, but here, in its theoretical and symbolical representation of the nature of the Goddess, balances the two. The *Devī Gītā*'s hymn thus concludes by fusing Vedic and Tantric sonic symbolizations of ultimate reality. The verse hereby points to the two highest modes of the Goddess: her formless, aniconic aspect as Brahman, and her supreme iconic manifestation as Ruler of the universe, *Bhuvaneśvarī*.

Regarding *Hrīṃ* itself, it is the sonic essence of the World-Mother reverberating throughout the universe and within the hearts of beings, uniting all opposites in peace and harmony. Such cosmic and salvific meanings are embedded in the very structure of the syllable itself, in its letters and parts, according to various esoteric, Tantric explanations. For instance, the Goddess is said to be the mother who shines within, or pervades (from *ī*, "to shine," and "to pervade") the heart of beings, removing (from *hṛ*, "to carry away") their pain.³¹ Or, the *h* represents Śiva, the *r* Śakti, and *ī* their union that produces tranquillity.³² The *Varadā Tantra* provides the following esoteric correspondences, synthesizing the above two interpretations: "The letter 'h' signifies Śiva; 'r' means Prakṛti; the 'ī' indicates Mahāmāyā; the *nāda*

(the nasal sound of the 'm') represents the Mother of the universe; and the *bindu* (the dot of the 'm,' the silent reverberation of the syllable following its audible recitation) signifies that she is the remover of sorrow."³³ (For another set of esoteric correspondences, see note 5 on 1.45.)

Notes

1. *preman*; ecstatic love or loving joy, characterized by such signs as weeping, stammering, and hair standing on end. Such emotionalistic devotion is emphasized in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and has roots in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, in Arjuna's response to the cosmic revelation of Kṛṣṇa (11.14,35). Cf. *Devī Gītā* 3.41–42ab, 7.20, and 10.24 below.

2. In Śākta theology, Nature (Prakṛti) is an aspect or form of the Goddess and is not simply unconscious matter as in the Sāṃkhya philosophy. She is, rather, the power behind all the manifest world, including the power of consciousness.

3. This verse is identical to the opening verse of the hymn of praise offered by the gods to the Goddess in the fifth chapter of the *Devī Māhātmya* (5.7). In the *Devī Māhātmya*, the gods have gone to Himālaya to praise the Goddess to obtain help against the demons Śumbha and Niśumbha, a somewhat parallel situation to that of the gods in the *Devī Gītā*.

Nilakaṇṭha refers to this verse as a Vedic (*vaidika*) mantra, probably because it is also the first verse of the "Hymn to the Goddess" in the *Devī Upaniṣad* (8–13). The following four verses of the *Devī Gītā* are also found in the *Devī Upaniṣad*'s hymn, which is the immediate source of quotation for the *Devī Gītā*'s author. The *Devī Gītā* specifically mentions the *Devī Upaniṣad* (referred to as the *Devī Atharvaśiras*) in 10.22.

4. Nilakaṇṭha interprets "ascetic power" (*tapas*) as "knowledge" (*jñāna*), indicating the omniscience (*sarva-jñā*) of the Goddess." In support of this explanation, Nilakaṇṭha refers to the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* {1.1.8–9}, where Brahman is called omniscient (*sarva-jñā*), and whose ascetic power is said to be knowledge (*jñāna*).

5. "Swift crossing" refers to crossing over the ocean of troubles that is samsara. Cf. the praise of the Goddess in *Devī-Māhātmya* 4.11b: "You are Durgā, the boat that takes men across the difficult ocean of worldly existence" (Jagadisvarananda's translation).

Nilakaṇṭha says the verse (*Devī Gītā* 1.45) is a "Ṛg mantra." In fact it is identical with the Ṛg Veda's Rātri Khila 4.2.12 (which repeats the final refrain) and recurs also in *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* 10.1. In this latter passage, there occurs a series of Gāyatrī mantras invoking various deities, one of whom is the goddess Kātyāyanī/Durgī. The *Devī Gītā* has its own "Devī-Gāyatrī" three

verses down (1.48). The *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* then quotes *Ṛg Veda* 1.99, a one verse hymn to Agni (Fire) as a boat of safety, and then gives the verse quoted in the *Devī Gītā*. (For discussion of the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* passage, see Thomas B. Coburn, *Devī-Māhātmya: The Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition*, pp. 117–18. Coburn provides a translation of the whole of the Rātrī Khila on pp. 265–67. See also Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, vol. 5, p. 1045.) The immediate source of the quotation on which the author of the *Devī Gītā* relied is almost certainly the *Devī Upaniṣad* (see Comment above).

Nilakaṇṭha, citing the third and fourth chapters of the *Prapañcasāra Tantra* as authority, provides an esoteric, Tantric interpretation of the verse: the word *agni* (fire) represents the seed mantra of Agni, i.e., *raṃ*, or the letter *r*; the word *tapas* (ascetic power) signifies Māyā, which represents the letter *ī*; *virocana* (sun) represents the seed mantra of Sūrya, i.e., *haṃ*, or the letter *h*; and the sovereign power within the sun that is the essence of *h* is the *bindu* or *ṃ*. (Regarding the correlation of deities and *bījas*, see Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, pp. 117–18, and the Comment above.) Thus, Durgā is the embodiment of the Māyābīja, Hṛīṃ. In other words, according to this Tantric-style interpretation, to take refuge in Durgā is to take refuge in the mantra of Bhuvaneśvarī.

6. As Nilakaṇṭha points out once again, this verse is a *Ṛg* mantra, in this case being identical to *Ṛg Veda* 8.100.11. The immediate source, however, is the *Devī Upaniṣad* (see Comment above).

Speech, or *Vāc*, is one of the most important female deities of the Vedic texts. She is often portrayed as an all-pervading, cosmogonic principle, associated especially with the creative power of the waters. This verse reveals that “*Vāc* apparently also has a more nourishing, maternal dimension [in the Vedic literature], and, like other goddesses . . . , she is likened to a cow and is described as yielding food” (Tracy Pintchman, *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition*, p. 40). (See also André Padoux, *Vāc: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*, p. 8.) The cow, in her aspect of providing the comforts and desires of life, came to be idealized in the image of a magical “wish-granting” cow, the *kāma-dughā*, similar to the notion of the “wish-fulfilling tree” (*kāma-kalpa-druma*). The Goddess in her beneficent mode is likened to both. (See 1.15 above, and 1.55, 3.22 below.)

7. This refers to Brahmā’s eulogizing of the goddess Yoganidrā, on the occasion of the battle between Viṣṇu and the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha, described in the first chapter of the *Devī-Māhātmya*. In his praise, Brahmā refers to the goddess as Kālarātrī (1.59), the “Night of destruction,” signifying her role as the destroyer of all at the time of the cosmic dissolution. The *Devī Gītā*, while not denying the destructive power of the Goddess, emphasizes much more her creative and nurturing aspects.

8. According to Nilakaṇṭha, “*Vaiṣṇavī*” and the following two names of the Goddess, “*Mother of Skanda*,” and “*Sarasvatī*,” refer to the *śaktis* of the Trimūrti: Viṣṇu’s Lakṣmī, Śiva’s Pārvatī, and Brahmā’s Sarasvatī, respectively.