

Kali: Her Name and Her Iconography

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Her Name

To understand Kali's iconography, it is necessary to understand her Name. One of the meanings of the Sanskrit word *Kal* is "to count" or "to measure." Derived from this, *Kala* is the Sanskrit word for the abstract concept of time. *Kali* is the feminine form of *Kala*, which suggests action. Hence *Kali* is "action through time." Time itself is eternal, but everything physical (in *Maya*) is created, preserved, and ultimately destroyed within it.

Time is the womb from which all creation occurs. From this womb, Kali as the mother goddess brings forth all of creation.

All things transform over time. Ideas, concepts, and thoughts exist as a manifestation of knowledge gained over time. These manifestations can outlive the physical existence of individuals or they can die with them. They can be preserved or modified by future generations. Or, over the course of time, they may be destroyed or forgotten.

Time is the scythe that ultimately reaps its own creation. To bring about new growth it is sometimes necessary to destroy the old. To change the material nature, attitudes, or dogma of humanity can require destructive intervention. "Knowledge" may also be lost. Such destruction may be caused by natural phenomena or by humanity itself. The spirit/soul of that which is destroyed—the little spark of the divine—is the only thing preserved.

Even after such destruction, however, time, and hence creation, goes on. The divine spark of that which was gone is reborn in a new form, and lost knowledge is recreated or reinvented as time progresses.

Kala/Kali has another meaning, one that represents "darkness"—not simply "darkness" as in the lack of light, but instead, "Darkness" as the lack of anything manifest—a void. When something is completely obliterated by the passing of time, when it can no longer be counted or measured, nothing of it remains in the physical world (*Maya*) until/unless it is reborn/recreated again ... over time.

The root word *Kal* can also represent something that is "well formed," and it is used to describe beauty in this manner. It represents the concept of beauty—again, not mere physical beauty, as the physical form ages over time and such beauty is often lost. To a mathematician beauty may be found in an elegant proof. In humanity, it is the spirit/soul of an individual—their divine spark—that contains true beauty.

Her Iconography

Her iconography is intentionally difficult to look at and process. It requires attention and even "fearlessness." Her very nature, one that guarantees impermanence of all things

physical (in Maya) is difficult for humans to relate to, or at the very least to want/desire to relate to. Her form is often misunderstood by many, even many Hindus.

Kali may be represented as a playful child, a voluptuous young woman, a warrior, or a decrepit old hag. As a young woman, she is in her form as the Mother goddess, or that of a wanton harlot, totally free from human behavioral norms. As a warrior, she is either the preserver/defender (right foot forward) or destroyer (left foot forward). As a hag, she represents the impermanence of all things material, a reminder that physical manifestations of beauty are passing, that it is the inner beauty of the spirit/divine that matters.

She is black or midnight blue, representing the darkness (void) of time manifest, from which all things physical come from and ultimately return.

She may have wild hair and lolling tongue, which represent ultimate freedom in action and freedom from human-perceived constraints.

She typically holds a sword in one hand and a severed head in another. The head represents the “ego” of humanity. The sword is used to separate us from the “ego,” to remove the desire for and help us escape the material/physical world (Maya) and be closer to the divine. When you meditate and awareness of your body and the physical world fades, you are experiencing this aspect of her.

With her remaining hands she often makes gestures (mudras) or holds objects (lotus flowers, conch shell) that represent things such as the bestowing of boons and the dispelling of fear.

She may wear a garland of skulls around her neck, or a skirt made of human arms. There are often 50 skulls—one for each letter of the Sanskrit alphabet. Hence, the garland of skulls represents dominion over and the power of words and thought, indeed all knowledge. The skulls, woven together, also represent the interconnectedness of all creation. Creation, nature manifest, can be beautiful; however, it may also be benign at best, and at times utterly merciless. The skirt of arms represents her power over action and work—our ability to “do” things—our Karma.

Kali’s iconography may be bloody. Prana, the life force, is distributed by blood. When blood stops flowing, material existence ends and death occurs. Yet, blood can be a boon; a transfusion of blood may help you survive. Kali the destroyer can become enraptured by bloodlust and lose control, destroying everything in her path. Yet, in some iconography, an aspect of Kali decapitates herself and feeds her devotees with her own blood, as a preserver.

She may be standing on, dancing upon, or having sex with a body on charnel ground—the body of her husband, Shiva. Corpses burning in charnel ground, as well as the body of Shiva, represent the transcendence and transformation of life force. Only when stepping upon the body of her husband does Kali’s dance of destruction end. Dancing upon the body shows the ultimate bliss of transformation, of the ego being gone, of the reunion of the divine spark within us all with the divine itself. Having sex with the body represents the birth/rebirth that comes from death and transformation.