

Understanding the Deities in Yoga

Global yoga teacher Rachel Zinman writes about how she came to discover the amazing world of the Hindu deities and the effect on her practice of yoga and of life.

I was lying in savasana one late afternoon when it occurred to me; I was tired of expressing intensity in my life, tired of chopping my own head off to get to the truth. Years of meditation and yoga and the tireless pursuit of happiness had done nothing but leave me more confused and unhealthy.

I had exhausted every possibility, read every book, lit a thousand candles and embodied an equal number of aspects of what I thought the **SELF** was and still I disliked my body, my thoughts and the way I navigated relationships. Other yoga teachers had it made I told myself, not only Yoga teachers but everybody else but me had it made.



So how did it happen, how could I have fallen so far from my dreams of reaching enlightenment or samadhi- the bliss of what I thought yoga was all about? Looking back now I see that it was because I had bought into yoga as a **WAY of life** rather than understanding yoga as **LIFE itself**.

For me yoga as a way of life meant being a tantric practitioner. The word tantra comes from two words tanoti, expansion and trayati, liberation. The practices of tantra are designed to first expand your concept of reality and then free you of any supposed limitations. In order to perform such delicate surgery specific tools are used, mantra – sound and yantra – form because according to tantra both sound and form are the building blocks of our apparent reality and the whole idea is to use what is apparent rather than what is not to attain liberation.

The different mantras and yantras come from the deities – the ones who shine like stars in the presence of everlasting awareness. The first deity is named **Shiva**. Shiva is consciousness and his consort Shakti is energy and together they spin the web of what we call the world. Consciousness is in and throughout everything. Energy is the vehicle for the expression of consciousness and knowing ourselves, as inseparable from both energy and consciousness is the purest form of tantra. How can one be limited by what one already effortlessly is?

The number of deities are infinite as are their mantras and yantras and each human being resonates or is drawn to a particular deity based on their constitution, conditions and circumstances.

Being an intense person and wanting to get to the root of my ignorance I had assumed I needed **Kali** because she took no prisoners, sent heads rolling and would most likely force me to face every fear I had. But there was much more to Kali than I could glean from books and internet searches.

Kali is time. Her name comes from the Sanskrit root *Kala* and as time she is forever famished eating up the years, months, days, hours and minutes as we fill up on the minutia of our lives. Time takes away what we long to keep; our child like innocence but innocence inevitably gives way to street-smart individuality. You can't be innocent in a tiger's jungle because at any moment he could eat you alive! Kali demands accountability for Shiva's actions. Thinking and acting consciously isn't always pretty, but sometimes it's best to go for the **TRUTH** rather than harmony. Kali's harsh demands on the intellect and ego are sometimes likened to a mother's tough love. In order for us to grow up we have to leave behind her protective grace and face up to the consequences of our actions. Every thought is innocent until we take that thought and run with it. Once we act on a thought it gains momentum and we must face whatever that thought brings. Kali brings those implemented thoughts into the lime light and says, "What the heck where you thinking? For God's sake **DO THE MATHS!**"

Taking Kali on board as my preferred deity was a bit of handful to say the least and after numerous confrontations, which included a complete breakdown of my nervous system, the dissolution of my committed marriage and the beginnings of a major disease it was essential for me to get real with myself.

What was I longing for?

What was most important to me? What good was all this tantra if it left my dried up burnt out and afraid for my life?



They say that it's only through crisis that one begins to question one's life. If you're absolutely fine and happy why question anything? In the tradition they say you never disturb someone who is happy, what for? But often the whole reason one gets into yoga is to find contentment, peace, joy and abundance. It dawned on me that it might serve me better to look at who amongst this cavalcade of deities was an example of these qualities and I recalled a sweet story about the relationship between **Shiva** and **Parvati**, his second wife and most formidable match.

Shiva being seriously addicted to meditation decided to head off into the forest to spend some time in contemplation while Parvati knowing that



Shiva's definition of time was quite different to her own insisted he stay at home to help raise their two children **Ganesha** and **Skanda**. A large fight ensued and Shiva, determined to make a hasty exit, bolted for the front door. But Parvati, who had cleverly turned herself into the fierce Kali barred his escape. "Never mind," thought Shiva, "we live in a house with nine other doors." But as he rushed to the next one Parvati appeared in the terrifying form of Tara frightening him with her lolling tongue and gleaming scythe. For every door that Shiva turned to, a terrifying goddess prevented his escape until finally at the last door Parvati, tired from her transmutation, appeared as Lakshmi, the beautiful and gentle consort of Vishnu.

What was Shiva to do?

Lakshmi as the queen of both material and spiritual wealth only goes where there is beauty. She is the creative force that brings every seed, whether it is a physical seed or the seed of a thought to life. Shiva's only option was to surrender and ask for her forgiveness because he realise that contemplation is unnecessary when one knows oneself as the abundance and beauty itself.

Recalling the story of Shiva and **Lakshmi** reminded me that I am inseparably part of the beauty of life, that we all are and that no matter what we do and where we go nature is sustaining us. Even in the most terrible times when all seems lost, beauty is touching us.

Kali in the form of time had forced me to turn to beauty and to bring new seeds to fruition. How wonderful that the yoga tradition through story and allegory reminds us again and again of our unchanging nature. There is nothing to fear and everything to love about who we are.

Rachel Zinman is a yoga teacher who leads retreats and trainings worldwide. View her profile on Global Yogi for more info.