

Dasha Maha Vidya: Wisdom from the Ten Directions

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A tradition unique to Indian Spirituality views the Universal Mother as ten 'Wisdom Goddesses' or 'Dasha Maha Vidya', each representing a concept related to a particular way of life, outlook and mindset, whose ultimate goal is to direct the aspirant towards spiritual progress. By virtue of the concepts represented the Maha Vidyas are associated with the ten directions. This article explores the philosophy and directions of the Wisdom Goddesses.

Introduction

It is no secret that Indian Spirituality is one of the most profound in the entire world, time-tested for thousands of years, and still going strong in a nation of over a billion, reaching depths of wisdom and philosophy that other civilizations simply couldn't fathom.

Testimony to this depth of philosophical wisdom is the tradition of 'Dasha Maha Vidya', translated to 'The Ten Great Wisdom Goddesses'. In this time-tested tradition prevalent all across the subcontinent, the Mother Goddess is viewed in ten different forms called 'Maha Vidyas', each representing a particular concept. This concept is related to a particular way of life, outlook and mindset, whose ultimate goal is to direct us towards spiritual progress, where the ultimate destination is the Self ('Atma'), or 'Brahman'. To understand this, it is first essential to comprehend the essence of Indian Spirituality that has been repeated thousands of times in myriad ways in texts such as Upanishads, Vedas, Puranas and Itihasas.

In Indian Thought, viewing the Divine ('Brahman') as the very life and the consciousness underlying the self, is the highest form of spirituality, far exceeding the greatness of any physical temple.

What is the nature of this Divine Brahman? Upanishads and various other texts proclaim that the Self (Atma) is itself the Brahman. The Self is not limited to this physical body, mind or the emotions within. Rather, a broader perspective is called for where the Self is infinite without beginning or end, and which transcends the limitations of space, time and concept. In fact, the Self, as Brahman, even transcends existence – it is neither existent nor non-existent. Thus, Brahman is beyond intellectual comprehension. But, what one does know of Brahman, are the following attributes:

1. Atma: The Brahman is the Self and is not distinct from it.
2. Sat: The Brahman is eternal. Sat is the root of 'Satya' – Truth, since, everything that is not truth fades away at some point in time.
3. Chit: The Brahman is pure Consciousness, and thus, is the most fundamental reality.
4. Aanandam: The Brahman is pure bliss. All emotions and thoughts arise from a limited perspective of the self, and vanish away when the true nature of Brahman is understood. Thus, in the absence of any thought or emotion, the only feeling that remains is pure bliss, eternally.

Further to the above attributes, one also understands that whatever be its nature, Brahman is the very basis from which all existence and all life originates in the very beginning and in which all that is created merges at the very end. Thus, being the originator of existence, Brahman is seen as the Universal Mother, or 'Ambika'.

Finally, one also understands that it is by the very nature of Brahman to play ('Leela') that existence and all the worlds are created. Thus, due to possessing a playful nature, Brahman as Ambika is termed 'Lalitha' or the One who plays. Understanding the Brahman as the "Lalitha Ambika" lies at the core of a spiritual tradition known as 'Sri Vidya', and this highly esoteric tradition is considered among the highest and most powerful forms of spirituality, since it gets the closest possible to understanding the Brahman.

It is this Universal Mother, Lalitha Ambika, manifest in the ten different forms called Maha Vidyas. Each of these Maha Vidyas represents a concept and a mindset that leads ultimately to the Brahman. By virtue of the concepts represented the Maha Vidyas are associated with the ten directions (east, west, north, south, northeast, northwest, southeast, southwest, above and below), each of which is associated with a Guardian ('Dikpaala'). Each of the ten Maha Vidyas is explored below, with reference to the concept represented, and the association with the corresponding Dikpaala.

1. Kaali: Wisdom of the East

The foremost of the Dasha Maha Vidyas is the Goddess Kaali, whose name is derived from the word 'Kaala', meaning 'time'. Physically, it is possible to ascertain time only through change. For example, in a sun-dial or hourglass, one understands the passage of time through changes in shadows of the sun-dial, or through change in levels of sand in the hourglass. Similarly, one ascertains seasons through change in vegetation.

Thus, it is a fundamental property of time to bring about change in state. Physically, it takes effort and energy ('Shakti') to bring about change in state, and this is called 'work', translated in Sanskrit as 'Kriya'. Thus, Kaali is also known as the 'Kriya Shakti'.

With the passage of time and change in state, objects appreciate or depreciate in value based on how useful they are to the universal and individual progress. For example, material objects, wealth etc, depreciate in value, and eventually perish, highlighting their transitive and non-permanent nature. On the other hand, knowledge and wisdom appreciate in value, and a person becomes wiser and more mature with age.

It is through such changes in state that Kaali leads a spiritual aspirant to the inner Self of Parabrahman, showing it to be the only entity that lasts forever without any depreciation. In fact, the very imagery of Kaali is in the middle of a cremation ground with skulls and bones all over, representing death, decay and depreciation.

Among the Dikpaalas, Kaali is associated with Indra, Guardian of the East and the foremost as well as King of the Devas. The Sanskrit word for East is 'Poorva', also translated as 'early', another indicator of the concept of time.



2. Dhumavathi: Wisdom of the Southeast

The word 'Dhuma' translates as 'smoke', and Dhumavathi is referred to as the Smoke Goddess. Smoke here is an allusion to negativity, which is apparent from the very appearance of the Goddess, with an unsightly posture, dishevelled hair and appalling nature. The philosophy here is that the Goddess keeps throwing negativities such as losses, discomforts, pains, frustration and disappointments at the aspirant. Such negativities form a smoky screen in front of the aspirant, blocking view and access to the pleasures of materialistic life. The result is that the aspirant's focus is shifted inwards, to the inner Atma, which is a perennial source of bliss, free from all negativities. This concept is very similar to numerous examples around the world where setbacks and losses in lives of many great thinkers have turned them to philosophers.

Dhumavathi is the Goddess of Southeast, whose Guardian is Agni. Agni has the distinction of being extolled by the very first verse of the Rig Veda – "Agnim Eele Purohitam Yajnasya Devam", which is arguably the oldest prayer ever identified in the entire world. Agni is the Lord of Fire, and is associated with the change in form of objects (transformation) that fire brings about. Fire moulds metal into shapes, and can drastically change the properties of any object. However, the transformation brought about by Agni through its heat is painful and intense, very similar to the transformation Dhumavathi brings through negativities.



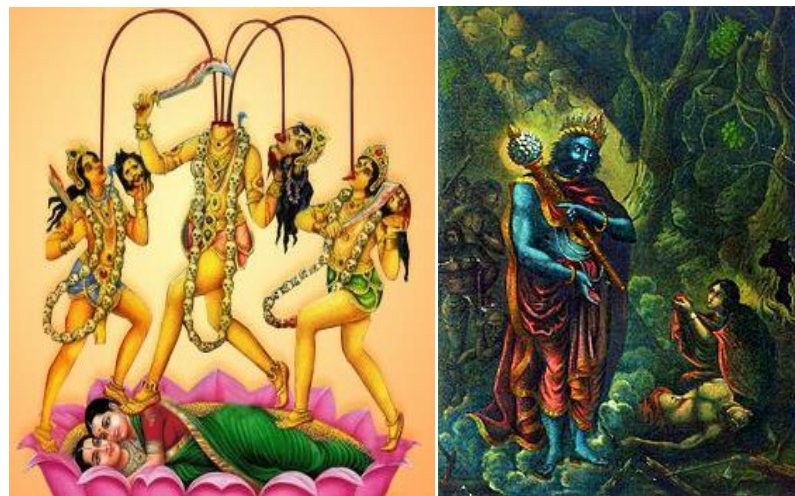
3. Chhinnamasta: Wisdom of the South

The name Chhinnamasta is derived from the words meaning Severed ('Chhinna') and head ('Masta'). Though mythologies around the world have a variety of shape and form descriptions for various Gods, very few are as disturbing as Chhinnamasta. This Goddess is depicted with a severed head, with the hand of the Goddess holding the severed head, and blissfully drinking the blood emerging from the severed body.

In this representation, the severing denotes liberation and cutting away of bondages. While on the one hand, the aspirant is asked to cut off from traditions and norms, and seek, reason out and investigate the ultimate truth without blindly believing religious books, on the other hand, the severing denotes the cutting away of material bondages, responsibilities and norms that hold an aspirant back from seeking the inner Self.

A major bondage that needs to be severed is the limited association of oneself with the body, brain and mind. One must identify the self with the larger 'Paramatma' which transcends space, time, concept and is eternally blissful. However, losing one's identity to the bigger Paramatma is the philosophical equivalent of death, since, this body, brain and mind are now instruments of the divine Mother and cease to have identities of their own.

This is why, Chhinnamasta, representing this severance and philosophical death is associated with the South, whose guardian is Yama, the Lord of Death.



4. Bhairavi: Wisdom of the Southwest

The name of Bhairavi, as well as the corresponding form of Shiva, Bhairava, are derived from the root word 'Bhaya', translating to fear. Bhairavi is most easily described as the Goddess of destruction, and depicted as the Goddess adorned with skulls of the dead. The philosophy is that while Kaali represents the depreciation of the non-permanent with time, Bhairavi represents the complete destruction of such material objects. This She does by creating disorder, disturbance and turbulence.

While the aspirant whose focus is fixed on the inner Self is not affected by such destruction, the one attached to the material world largely feels its impact, through which Bhairavi brings to light the transitory and perishable nature of the material objects.

Among the directions, Bhairavi is associated with southwest, whose Guardian is Nirruti. With a name translating to lack ('Nir') of order ('Ruti'), Nirruti represents the turbulence and disorder caused due to the destruction aspect of Bhairavi. While on the one hand, this disorder and chaos provides the impetus for one to turn the focus away from material objects and desires, such chaos also adds variety to the rich tapestry of life itself.



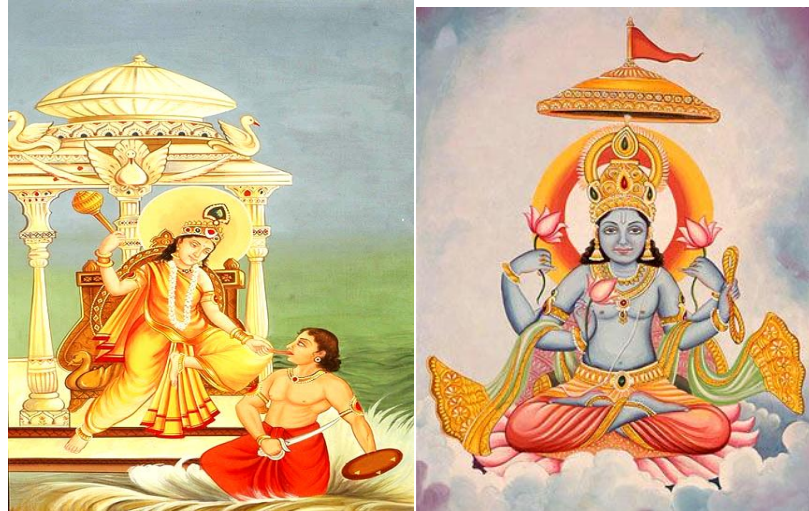
5. Bagalamukhi: Wisdom of the West

Bagalamukhi, also called the Yellow Hued and Stork faced Goddess, is depicted as clad in yellow, and holding the tongue of a demon in one hand with a weapon in the other. The philosophy represented is that She gives the aspirant victory by paralyzing all the enemies.

The enemies here are allusion to one's temptations and material desires, which hold one back from spiritual progress. For example, when a person possesses considerable interest in money and wealth, and keeps working day and night, overtime, with the greedy aim of accumulating more and more wealth, Bagalamukhi frustrates his efforts by making all the hard work go unrecognized. Out of sheer vexation, the person is forced to look inward towards other sources of bliss.

The Guardian of West, which is associated with Bagalamukhi is Varuna. In the Vedas, Mitra and Varuna are seen as representing the rising and setting sun respectively and in particular, the setting sun, Varuna represents the increase in vulnerability and gullibility of people with rise of the night. Through this, Varuna creates temptation of the material world and gives the opportunity to indulge in evil and unethical acts. However, if one human can fabricate an evil scheme, another human can definitely see through that scheme and identify the culprit. Thus, Varuna ultimately punishes the miscreant, through which he learns the folly of temptations and the perishable objects.

This quality of temptation and punishment of Varuna is said to be vast and all-pervading, like the ocean, and nobody can escape his sight. This is why, in subsequent philosophy, Varuna came to be associated with the waters.



6. Maatangi: Wisdom of the Northwest

The name Maatangi is derived from the same root that also gives rise to 'Mati', 'Mada' and 'Medha', all referring to thought, intellect and wisdom. Thus Maatangi represents attaining of spiritual progress through wisdom. In Sri Vidya, She is seen as Mantrini, the counsellor of Lalitha Ambika and representing the chanting of Mantras, music and other forms of worship through which one can reach the divine.

The philosophy here is that out of billions of people who have lived in this earth, there have been thousands of great men and women, who have made efforts and succeeded in reaching the highest Brahman. Fortunately, they have recorded their experiences, revelations, understandings and observations, and these form the bases for the vast collection of scriptures, which are storehouses of knowledge. Maatangi encourages the spiritual aspirant to access such scriptures, not as the ultimate authority, but as guidelines, where by applying such knowledge practically in one's life, one gains wisdom.

The guardian of the northwest, associated with Maatangi, is Vaayu, the Wind God. In functionality, Vaayu represents scattering of particles in all directions. It is in such manner that wisdom of great ancestors have been scattered in all directions, and it is upto us to gather together the essence of such a valuable resource and direct it towards spiritual progress.



7. Bhuvaneshwari: Wisdom of the North

'Bhuvana' is the Universe, and Bhuvaneshwari is the Goddess of the Universe, representing Space, just as Kaali represents Time. 'All the world's a stage, and all men and women merely players' – as these words of Shakespeare, the fabric of the universe, which is the giant stage, is viewed as the very body of Bhuvaneshwari. What then holds men and women fixed to the stage? Gravity, or Iccha Shakti, the power of attraction – This Iccha Shakti is Bhuvaneshwari.

The philosophy is that by merely observing the play of various elements in the universe and understanding the Iccha Shakti behind all of these, an aspirant understands the transitive nature of the play while being drawn inwards to the Atma, who is Bhuvaneshwari Herself.

Bhuvaneshwari is the northern wisdom, whose guardian is Kubera, the Lord of wealth. Kubera is identified with the elephant-faced God Ganesha, both of whom share appearances with enormous bodies. Ganesha is praised in the verse 'Gananam Tvam Ganapatim Havamahe' as Brahmanaspati, which means the Lord of Brahmana, and this term is derived from the root 'Brah' meaning to expand. This is why the expansive universe is called 'Brahmanda' and is a reference to Bhuvaneshwari.



8. Tripurasundari: Wisdom of the Northeast

Tripurasundari translates to the most beautiful ('Sundari') of the three worlds ('Tripura'), and this is further reinforced by the extremely pleasing appearance of the Goddess. The philosophy of this Maha Vidya is beauty. In particular, Tripurasundari makes the aspirant aware of the inherent beauty in everything, every thought, every feeling, every action, every living or non-living object. The aspirant realizes that the main reason behind such beauty is completeness, perfection. Everything natural or man-made (which ultimately is built of natural sources) is beautiful and perfect. This is because all of these originate as manifestations of the Universal Mother Lalitha, who is the Brahman. She is the only one who is complete, perfect and beautiful, since everything else are but Her children. She is the sixteenth aspect of the moon, signifying completeness, as well as beyond the trinity of Gods. This is why full moon worship is special to Tripurasundari, who represents completeness.

Among Dikpaalas, Tripurasundari is associated with the most supreme of directions, northeast with Guardian Eeshana, which is another name for Lord Shiva. Eeshana is derived from 'Eesha' or 'Eeshitva' or 'Eeshvara', all translating to perfection, which is a hallmark of Tripurasundari.



9. Taara: Wisdom from Above

Taara means star, and the Goddess Taara is referred to as a star shining bright even in the fiercest of storms, so that a navigator lost in the middle of the tempestuous sea can find direction. The philosophy of this Goddess is guidance. In particular, Taara, in regular intervals, keeps throwing crossroads at the aspirant. These crossroads appear as major decisions and choices to be taken in life, career etc. In each of these crossroads, there is atleast one option leading to inner spiritual progress, and atleast one which takes the aspirant away from the inner Self. And in each crossroads, She shines brightly like a star, guiding the aspirant towards the Self. Should the aspirant fail, Taara gives yet another opportunity, till the focus turns inwards.

The guardian of the upward direction is Brahma, the creator God, who has four faces in the four directions representing the four Vedas. The representation is that, through whichever direction one approaches, one reaches the central wisdom that is Taara.



10. Kamalaatmika: Wisdom from Below

The last Maha Vidya is Kamalaatmika, whose name refers to the Lotus (Kamala), an allusion to material wealth and pleasure. She is the Tantric form of Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth. The philosophy is that Kamalaatmika showers the aspirant with abundance of wealth. As a consequence, the aspirant is faced with an overflow of wealth, more than that can be handled, as well as a dilemma on how to spend such wealth. In due course, the aspirant understands that the biggest bliss lies in focusing one's interest and wealth in spiritual pursuit, and is eventually guided to the inner Self.

The guardian of the downward direction is Lord Vishnu, and one of His epithets is 'Srinivasa' meaning the One where wealth resides, a reference to Lakshmi and thus Kamalaatmika.



Conclusion

The ten Maha Vidyas represent ten concepts or mindsets corresponding to various aspects of everyday life, through which an aspirant may be guided to seek spiritual progress, and ultimately oneness with the Atma as Brahman. These forms of the Mother are testimony to the heights of philosophy and wisdom the Indian Spirituality has reached.

For the present era (Kali Yuga), Lalitha Ambika assumes the young and playful form of Baalaa, manifest as the Lord Venkatesha in temples as well as in the heart. The Maha Vidyas form the ten sides of the 'Peetham', the very platform on which Venkatesha stands.

