

# Yoginis of Ancient India

The attendants of warrior goddess Durga helped her conquer the ever-multiplying demons... and today they have a message for women everywhere

By Jalaja Bonheim

The day I stepped into India's heat, colors, sounds, and smells, I instantly felt a profound sense of homecoming. It was 1981, and even though I had come to learn classical Indian temple dance, I would spend the next seven years of my life studying Hindu mythology and religion, mantra and chant, Tantric ritual, and meditation.

Although many Westerners think of Tantra primarily as a sexual practice, it is in fact a demanding spiritual path that includes meditation, yoga, dance, and elaborate circle rituals that evoke the ecstatic experience of union with the divine in and through the physical body. Through the practice of Indian dance, I was initiated into an ancient lineage of Tantric priestesses; and I was privileged to be blessed by one of the last living temple priestesses in India.

In my book *Aphrodite's Daughters*, I described how the ancient Indian foremothers appeared to me in dreams and meditations, asking me to share their wisdom with the women of my own day and age. Today, I know I am not alone: Many women have told me of similar dreams and visions, and of their own sense of connection with this ancient lineage.

Today, I'd like to tell you about a very unique and unusual group of Indian foremothers who are reaching out to connect with us across the centuries: the 64 yoginis of Hirapur. A small village in eastern India, Hirapur is a few miles from the city of Bhubaneswar. Its temple is a quiet, isolated sanctuary surrounded by paddy fields. Built in the 9th century, it is perfectly

round, is quite small—about 30 feet in diameter—and has no roof, a feature typical of yogini temples throughout India.

As you enter, you see 64 stone niches carved into the circular wall. Originally, each one was graced with an exquisitely carved yogini, and all but one remains intact. Some look like typical Hindu goddesses with full breasts, a proud gait, and a powerful presence. Some have animal heads, or stand on animals. Some are emaciated old women, and some carry bows and

arrows, or play drums. Shamanism is not a tradition we normally associate with Hinduism, yet it is impossible to deny the distinctly shamanic presence that pervades the ancient sanctuary.

Who are these strange beings? Hindu mythology describes them as attendants of Kali, also known as Durga, a powerful warrior goddess. Fierce and often fear-inspiring, she drinks blood, rides lions and tigers, and is associated with the red color of passion and the black of death.

Ancient myths credit Durga with saving the planet at a time when dark forces such as hatred, fear, and greed threatened to destroy it. In her form as planet-saver, Durga is sometimes shown with a thousand hands that hold a thousand weapons, symbols of the skillful means by which she trans-

forms injustice, cruelty, and violence into peace, compassion, and joy.

She is beautiful—so beautiful, in fact, that, according to Hindu myths, the demons were terribly distracted by her presence on the battlefield, and



could not take their eyes off her. Wielding her sharp sword, she liberated them from the illusions in which they had become trapped and set them free to rejoin the ecstatic dance of the cosmos.

In her battle against the demons, Durga's greatest challenge came from a demon called Raktabija, who possessed a special power: Whenever a drop of his blood touched the ground, a host of new demons would spring up. The 64 yoginis celebrated in the temple of Hirapur were expressly created to help Durga overcome Raktabija. Endowed with the power of flight, they surrounded him and lapped up his blood before it could hit the ground and multiply.

I had never heard of the yoginis of Hirapur until last year. But from the minute I first saw their images, I was fascinated. I knew that the Jewish and Palestinian women I lead circles for in Israel would intuitively identify with them and understand their meaning. Nobody has to explain to them how one act of bloodshed can multiply and trigger a hundred more. Moreover, they know that to prevent such escalation, we must acknowledge, feel, and transform the pain that acts of violence are born of, just as the yoginis transformed darkness into light by drinking the demon's blood.

For weeks, the yoginis kept haunting my dreams and tugging at the edges of my consciousness, until finally, I realized I needed to give them my undivided attention. And so, one windy day in late fall, I sat down with pen and paper and silenced my thoughts.

"Who are you?" I asked. They responded instantly, as if they had been impatiently waiting for my attention:

*We are your foremothers. We are yoginis in the original sense of the word: women who are inextricably, eternally yoked to the divine. We are lovers of God, embodiments of the goddess, and priestesses dedicated to union with the divine. If the erotic charge we exude makes some people nervous, ask them why they would forbid the goddess from making love, when all her creation does so? Besides making love, we perform rituals and sit at the bedsides of the dying. We study, teach, and celebrate the spirit of beauty. We practice yoga, music, dance, art, herbalism, midwifery, and philosophy. We live in sacred space and are guardians of sacred space.*

*Many people are afraid of us. Talk to the villagers around here, and they will tell you stories of ritually beheaded corpses and of ceremonies that break all religious*

*taboos. Yet we are expressions of pure love, and our intent is not to harm but to heal. Our goddess Kali is black, not because she is evil, but because she is unknowable, vast, eternal, and uncompromising. As a sharp knife becomes an instrument of healing in the hand of a skilled surgeon, so our destructive powers serve the cause of life.*

*We have contacted you because we want to impart our courage to you and your sisters. We want to help you cut through the fear that holds you back from giving yourself over to love, and to life. See how we stand naked, vulnerable, yet unafraid! If you hope to birth a new world, you too must have the courage to embrace the vulnerability so abhorrent to your ego.*

*Many women in your society are terrified of their own*

*power, a fear that has been instilled into them for centuries. You must shed that fear now; for otherwise, you will remain helpless to overcome the dark forces in your world. The practice of yoga awakens power within you, and teaches you to channel it in service of goodness. Remember that the greatest power is that of love, which dissolves the ego and allows you to realize your oneness with all beings. Serve the cause of love, and you will become invincible.*



I paused in my writing, listening to the wind howling around the house. My mind was so full of questions, I hardly knew where to begin. "Why do some of you have the heads of horses, lions, rabbits, and elephants?" I asked. I sensed the yoginis laughing among themselves. Then, they said:

*We have animal heads because we have animal powers. You too have the ability to merge with the consciousness of animals, trees, rivers, and mountains. You must remember this if you hope to heal the planet. Open to the subtle grace of the leopard, the big-hearted wisdom of the gorilla, and the soaring vision of the falcon. Sit with the rose, and rest in the stillness of a rock. Free yourself from the tyranny of the busy human mind, and let your yoga incorporate not just physical but also inner stillness. When you practice the Corpse Pose, give yourself to the earth like a child to the mother. Let go of thought, and rest in silence.*

*You face challenges we never did. In our world, earth, air, and water were pure and clean. Global warfare and terrorism were unknown. While we cannot solve your problems, we can tell you with certainty that you will not find the solutions you seek unless you align yourselves with the powers of nature, honoring them as gateways to the mystery beyond name and form.*

Since I lead circles, and train women in circle leadership, I was especially intrigued to learn that the yoginis supposedly always form a circle when they touch ground. When I asked them to talk about this, they responded:

*We stand in a circle because we are sisters. Though each one of us is different and unique, we are equal and united. On your own, each one of you can do only so much. But together, your power is immense.*

*Together, you represent the many faces and forms of the Divine Mother.*

*Claim the power of your sisterhood! Stop treating one another as rivals and competitors, and recognize your sisters as mirrors that reflect both your own face, and the face of the Divine Mother who lives within you.*

*Remember that there is no greater channel of sacred healing energy than a circle of spiritually dedicated people.*

*To us, circle gatherings are a basic element of spiritual practice. Though we value solitude, we cannot imagine a spiritual life that does not also include circle gatherings. Circles amplify our power, and help us reach the state of union that is the ultimate goal of yoga.*

Finally, I asked the yoginis whether they had a special message for the yoginis of this day and age. I heard them say:

*We want to speak especially to the young girls among you. Granddaughters, mothers of the future, you are beautiful and perfect, just as you are. Your bodies are worthy of love, reverence, and worship. Relish the softness of your bodies. Be proud of who you are, and stop judging your beauty by the standards of others. When you realize that the goddess lives within you, your standards will change entirely.*

*Never forget that the true source of authority lies within. Honor your teachers, but listen within, and make your own decisions. You too are servants of the goddess. Value yourselves, and do not keep company with people who treat you with disrespect. To protect the planet, you must dare to become visible. Knowing your own worth will empower you to step forth with confidence to speak your truth in the world.*

"Thank you," I said to the yoginis. "Is there anything else?"

There was a moment's silence before they answered.

*Tell your sisters that we love them. Tell them to call on us. Tell them we are here to help.* 🙏

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## Talking to the Yoginis

If you have a question about your life that you would like the yoginis to help you with, try this:

- Sit down in a quiet place with paper and pen, and write your question down.
- Now, close your eyes and calm your mind, giving yourself permission to relax and sit in silence. Reassure yourself that right now, there is nothing you need to think about or figure out. Let go into an oasis of peace.
- After a few minutes, mentally reach out to the yoginis. Let them know you want to connect with them. Approach them with respect, humility, and receptivity. Be open to the possibility that they might want to speak to you.
- When you feel ready, open your eyes, and write down the words: *Dear (your name)...*
- Now, simply listen with all your heart, body, and soul, and write down whatever presents itself. Try not to let your inner critic get in your way. Keep the channel as wide open as you can, and record whatever comes without judgment, in a spirit of light-hearted curiosity. Don't edit, censor, or question anything—just write it down.
- When you feel complete, thank the yoginis, set aside your journal, and spend another few minutes resting quietly.

