

Chinnamasta

Many Faces, Three Shimmering Apples

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“If God had no desire, there would be no creation.”¹

¹ Harish Joshi, 6/20/2009 http://www.sanatansociety.com/indian_art_galleries/chakras.htm

Where is She and What Is She Doing?

If we were to want to visit a temple dedicated to Chinnamasta today, there are few, but one is close to Rajrappa Falls in Hazaribagh District of Jharkhand in India.

Here is part of an article from The Telegraph, Calcutta, India, Narim Verma author, describing this temple and suggesting unusual, difficult activities.²

"Another important aspect of the temple is the awe it generates among its devotees. Worshipping the Chhinamasta demands certain rituals to be observed, requiring arduous religious discipline. The pujaris confide that ordinary mortals find it hard to visit the temple after sunset when tantriks seeking siddhi gather there to do their special puja."³

Three Apples of Wisdoms and Three Severed Heads

Although Hinduism and Buddhism are both enlightenment philosophies i.e. they focus primarily on transcendence as the method of solving the problem of human suffering, I believe that the Ten Mahavidyas, including the severed headed goddess Chinnamasta, share practices, aims and wisdoms with Women's Spirituality. The specific orientation of Tantra reinforces this tendency. As Harish Johari says, "If God had no desire, there would be no creation, no world. Tantra performs the unique work of studying this desire."⁴ A world where the

² 6/22/2009 <http://www.india9.com/i9show/-Jharkhand/Rajrappa/Chinnamasta-84955.htm>

³ Narim Verna, Calcutta India, *The Telegraph*, 1/1/2007

⁴ Johari, www.sanatansociety.com

animating spirit is desire is a world full of itself, full of presence, full of apples and wisdom and heads.

In Pagan, Wiccan, Goddess and other Earth-centered spiritual paths, we place emphasis on immanence, on the presence of the divine manifest, especially the Divine Herself Immanence of Gaia. We stress involvement. Our energy, rather than upward, is, as Anodea Judith says, “Down and within, towards manifestation, soul and body and toward engagement with the world around us.”⁵ We are seeking to alleviate suffering by “engaging the forces that cause it.” We are part of what she calls an “embodiment” philosophy and we share our basic beliefs with “somatic therapies and bioenergetics”⁶ and I believe with aspects of these two transcendent philosophies, both of which have Tantric traditions and a goddess called Chinnamasta (Hindu) and Chinnamunda (Buddhist).

In our Goddess traditions we engage in many ways: by direct action in our communities and homes; by ritual; by magic and prayer; by spells and devotions; by meditations and reflections. So do the devotees of Tantra, although with the stated final aim of seeing through all the play to its essential illusion, not of mining the wisdom of the body, communing with earth devas or cleaning up the river as ends in themselves.

In Mahayana Buddhism the end vision of the Tantric vehicle (Vajrayana) is Buddhahood. This state is gained by mastery of the six perfections: generosity, ethical conduct, patience, effort, meditation and transcendent insight of the essential voidness of reality.⁷ With the exception of the last perfection, Goddess paths share these aims. To master the perfections, to attain Buddhahood, may take many lifetimes. The Tantric path, known to be quicker, has the reputation of being definitely more dangerous. The temptation to use the special skills one

⁵ Anodea Judith, *Eastern Body, Western Mind*, Revised (Berkeley, CA Celestial Arts, 1996) xi

⁷ Elisabeth Anne Benard, *Chinnamasta* (Buddhist Tradition Series, Ed. Alex Wayman, Vol 22, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, India 1994) 63

acquires to expedite progress for personal gain, rather than for the good of all, is known to ensnare many students.⁸

Is It a Bird, a Witch or a Tantrika?

The eight great siddhis or mundane powers strived to by Tantric Buddhists are explained thus by Elisabeth Anne Bernard.

Khadga—the power to be invincible with a sword empowered with specific mantras

Anjana—an eye salve that removes ignorance

Padalepa—a salve applied to make one swift of foot

Antardhana—ability to become invisible

Rasa-Rasayan—the alchemical ability to transform base metals into gold

Khecara—the ability to fly through the air

Bhucara—the ability to go anywhere in an instant

Patala—the power to go to the nether worlds.⁹

One may also acquire the six suprasensory perceptions: clairvoyance, clairaudience, understanding of illusions and miracles, reading others thoughts, remembering ones previous lives, eradication of 'fluxes'.¹⁰

Feel at home, Divine Feminine?

In the Hindu Tantric tradition, the worship of Chinnamasta is basically the same as for other Goddesses and Gods--one repeats her mantra, draws or imagines her yantra and asks to become one with her form through mediations.¹¹ It is a call to be the vessel for a particular face of the Deity and in this way can be the most profound relationship a person may have in their lives. It is specific.¹²

⁸ Bernard 76.

⁹ Bernard 64.

¹⁰ Bernard 64

¹¹ David Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine* (University of California Press, Berkeley, California 1997) 163

¹² Kinsley 3

According to David Kinsley, “The adept must know, ‘perfect’, and repeatedly recite the goddess’s mantra (japa sadhana) throughout out the worship rituals, carefully select and protect a place of worship with the appropriate mantras and mudras (hand gestures); correctly imagine and interiorize the goddess; draw or carefully imagine and worship her yantra; invoke the goddess’s hymns including her hundred and thousand name hymn...¹³ In general the sadhaka (practioner) seeks to identify with the goddess in question, to have a vision of her.” All of this is secret between guru, sadhaka and goddess. Not the student’s family and definitely not the public will know the details.¹⁴

It is worth noting that Chinnamasta is only one of two of the ten Great Wisdom goddesses who are a ‘left-hand path only’ goddess. These goddesses are reserved for seekers who are particularly daring, as the left-hand path involves, “partaking in the five forbidden things: meat, fish, wine, a particular type of grain (possibly a drug of some sort) and illicit sexual intercourse.”¹⁵

Needed A Skillful Snake Handler Not a Serotonin Uptake Inhibitor?

One of the ways Chinnamasta has been seen that interests me is as an iconographic representation of Kundalini energy.¹⁶ The streams of her blood are surging cosmic energy. This energy is sometimes described as a feminine serpent lying coiled at the base of our body’s trunk.¹⁷ As it rises and wakens it can express itself in much uncomfortable and unrecognized physicality.¹⁸ Our culture, unaccustomed to this experience, is just now beginning to open up to the possibility that some afflictions are the symptoms of Kundalini awakening.

¹³ Kinsley 4-5

¹⁴ David Gordon White, *Tantra In Practice* (Princeton Readings In Religion) 42

¹⁵ Kinsley 166

¹⁶ Kinsley 159

¹⁷ Kinsley 47

¹⁸ El Collie 6/20/2009 <http://www.elcollie.com/st/symptoms.html>

El Collie in her e-book *Shared Transformation* explains her personal experience, and she dedicates a website to helping others to understanding similar challenges.

She says, “The Goddess is as merciful as she is fierce, and for some, spiritual awakening may arrive in gentle waves of personal insight and gradual revelation. But many of us are discovering that the road to enlightenment often veers through rugged terrain as well as billowing fields of bliss. Spiritual energies can storm the senses like a psychic hurricane, relentlessly smashing through every level of obstruction to inner growth. Once unfurled, there is no way to reverse the expansive, consciousness-raising intent of fiery Kundalini.”¹⁹

Read these stories about awakened Kundalini if you are attracted to this path and feel a cautionary take interesting. Bernard says that, “Since Tantra is fraught with dangerous methods they could make a person insane without the guidance of an adept teacher.”²⁰ Viewed as Kundalini, the image of Chinnamasta's blood is her Kundalini energy and we can see this energy has literally taken her head off, freeing it in the service of her companions and herself.

Here is a story that emphasizes an overtone of compassionate sacrifice in the Chinnamasta story, a theme I explore in my first essay ²¹about Her.

Once Parvati went with Her friends Dakini and Varnini to take a bath in the Mandakini River. Parvati was feeling very happy and a lot of love was welling up inside Her. Her complexion darkened and the feeling of love completely took over. Her friends on the other hand were hungry and asked Parvati to give them some food. Parvati requested them to wait and said that She would feed them after a while, and began walking.

¹⁹ El Collie 6/18/2009 <http://www.elcollie.com/st/st.html>

²⁰ Bernard 118

²¹ Sondra Tudor, *Chinnamasta: The Headless Goddess*, 2008
<http://www.daughtersofthegreening.com/Chinnamasta.html>

After a short while, Her friends once again appealed to Her, telling Her that She was the Mother of the Universe and they Her children, and asked to be fed quickly. Parvati replied that they should wait until they got home. Her friends could not wait any longer and demanded that their hunger be satisfied immediately. The compassionate Parvati laughed and with her finger nail cut Her own head. Immediately the blood spurted in three directions. Her two friends drank the blood from two of the directions and the Goddess herself drank the blood from the third direction. Since she cut Her own head, she is known as Chinnamasta."²²

The tone of this tale contrasts with stories that highlight the darkest aspect of feminine power—a goddess who wants blood and blood sacrifice²³ (A Hindu custom rejected by Buddhists) and with other stories speculating that Chinnamasta is a reflection of the most heroic warrior within us—one who faces the terrors of death and embraces those transforming powers. Here is a ditty, best sung, from me to those powers, to Her.

Three for Her

Three apples you lay at my feet dear one
Three apples that shimmer the night
These apples bereft of their tree dear one
As you are without a head tonight
A kiss a kiss a kiss for the maiden
And one for the Queeny too
Three kisses again for the hag, in pleasure
For she's the one who holds your treasure
Outside its usual place.

²² Kinsley 147

²³ David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses* (University of California Press 1998) 171;
Kinsley, *Tantric Visions* 238-240

It may be we need to go
Beneath the
Waves of daylight
To find to fetch to give
The things she finds for her delight
And wizened or headless those
Apples to give are really for us
We know and once she gets the treats
Expected through the Gate
We'll go.

And here we meet another philosophical view—integrative. This is where we might pause and see as the great thinker-feeler Jung did that the very essence of the mind is to create the illusion of opposition, that this illusion serves us in a profound way, but that the deeper we delve the more the we might encounter the wholeness and transformation of the Soul's path. Here, as women disenfranchised for Goddess knows how long, we are winding our way back and through all of history, discovering our story both specific and universal. Each of us is looking at Chinnamasta with fresh eyes, with gratitude, amazed at another face of the Feminine, a reflection of ourselves this time as a Goddess of sacrifice, transformation and courage, her apples shimmering in our new light. We are the light.

So Mote It Be!

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This essay is part of a longer investigation of the ways Women's Spirituality interpenetrates other spiritual paths and will be published on RedJadeHummingbird's website www.ripeningthesoul later this year.