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The Devī-Māhātmya
A translation and commentary of selected verses, and a study of its importance in
Hindu Tantrism

Af stud. mag ved Institut for Kultur og Samfund - Religionsvidenskab
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1. Introduction

This paper consists of a translation and commentary of selected verses from the Devī-Māhātmya (DM), and a study of the text in relation to the Śākta Tantric tradition.

The DM is one of the most important texts of Hindu Śāktism, the theistic tradition centred around the worship of a personal Goddess as the highest principle of the universe. The text represents a culmination of a long development of Goddess worship in India, and the beginning of a long process in which the philosophies presented in the text developed and crystallized (Olesen 2005, 13).

A translation of selected verses with philological notes is presented in part 2. The translated verses were chosen because they illustrate different aspects of the Goddess that crystallized in DM,

and the cult that may have developed around Her. Part 3. consists of a commentary paraphrase to the selected verses, aiming to establish the text in its literary, historical, theoretical, practical and philosophical context. In this part other parts of the DM as well as other sanskrit sources will be drawn in as far as they are relevant to the paper.

Part 4. consists of a study of DM in perspective of the Śākta Tantric tradition crystallizing in the text's wake. This is largely based on Thomas B. Coburn's presentation of the *Guptavatī*, a commentary to DM written by the 17-18th century Tantric adept Bhāskararāya (Coburn 1991), and on David Kinsley's study of Kālī (Kinsley 1986).

A common denominator throughout this study turned out to be how the Goddess is viewed as both the unchanging Absolute, and at the same time the evolving substance of the universe.

2. Translation of selected verses from the Devī-Māhātmya

2.1 Prathama carita

~ Prathamo 'dhyāyaḥ: Madhukaiṭabhadraḥ, verse 67 ~

योगनिद्रां यदा विष्णुर्जगत्येकार्णवीकृते।

आस्तीर्य शेषमभजत्कल्पान्ते भगवान् प्रभुः ॥ ६७ ॥

yoganidrāṃ yadā viṣṇur jagaty ekārṇavīkṛte |

āstīrya śeṣam abhajāt kalpānte bhagavān prabhuḥ || 67 ||

At that time, when the universe turned into one ocean¹, Viṣṇu the illustrious lord, having spread out² Śeṣa³ at the eons end, fell into⁴ Yoganidrā⁵.

~ Prathamo 'dhyāyaḥ: Brahmāstutiḥ, verse 75, 77-78 ~

1 *Aṇavīkṛte*: predicate to *jagat* (world). *Aṇava* «flood, ocean» (MW) compounded with the past participle (p.p.p.) *kṛta* from *KṚ* VIII. «do, make» (MW). The last -a of *aṇava* changes into -ī in compound with *KṚ* VIII. to convey the sense of «turn into» (C). This is a locative absolute phrase.

2 *Ā* – *STR* V. «spread out», absolutive (MW).

3 *Śeṣa*: proper name; a snake on which Viṣṇu sleeps in the ocean.

4 *BHAJ* I. has various meanings. Here it is best understood as «fall into», taking the accusative *Yoganidrāṃ* (MW).

5 *Yoganidrāṃ*: «meditation-sleep» (MW). Determinative compound from *yoga* + *nidrā*. It is left untranslated not to alter the double meaning of the word, as both Viṣṇu's sleep, and a name of the Goddess.

त्वयतद्धार्यते विश्वं त्वैतत्सृज्यते जगत्।

त्वैतत्पाल्यते देवि त्वमत्स्यन्ते च सर्वदा ॥ ७५ ॥

tvayatad dhāryate viśvaṃ tvaitat sṛjyate jagat /
tvaiaitat pālyate devi tvam atsy ante ca sarvadā || 75||

By You this whole world is carried⁶, by You this world is created,
By You it is protected, O' Goddess, and in the end You always consume [it].

महाविद्या महामाया महामेधा महास्मृतिः।

महामोहा च भवती महादेवी महासुरी ॥७७॥

mahāvidyā mahāmāyā mahāmedhā mahāsmṛtiḥ /
mahāmohā ca bhavatī mahādevī mahāsūrī ||77||

[You are] the great knowledge, the great illusion⁷, the great intelligence, the great memory
and the great distraction, You⁸ are the great Goddess, the great Demoness.

प्रकृस्त्वं च सर्वस्य गुणत्रयविभाविनी।

कालरात्रिर्महारात्रिर्मोहरात्रिश्च दारुणा ॥ ७८ ॥

prakṛs tvam ca sarvasya guṇatrayavibhāvinī |
kālarātrir mahārātrir moharātris ca dāruṇā || 78 ||

And You are the substance of everything, manifesting⁹ the three constituents
The night of destruction¹⁰, the great night, and the cruel night of delusion.

6 *DHR* I. (MW), V. (Md.) «hold, carry, maintain»; passive of the causative stem (cf. Stenzler §243). This verb frequently occurs with causative stem without causative sense (MW). Hence, the causative meaning is not expressed.

7 *Māyā*: Translated here as «illusion» (MW), which is suitable in this context as a contrast to *vidyā*. The word is complex and has several connotations, which will be dealt with in the commentary.

8 *Bhavatī*: Respectful form of the 2nd pers. pron. (MW).

9 *Bhāvinī*: «being, manifesting» (MW); verbal noun derived from *BHŪ* I. It is formed by adding suffix *-in* to the strengthened verb root (f. *-ī*).

10 *Kālarātrir*: «Night of destruction» (MW), can alternatively be translated as «black night» or «night of time». It is

2.2 Madhyama carita

~Dvitīyo 'dhyāyaḥ: Maḥiṣāsurasainyavadhaḥ, verse 13 ~

अतुलं तत्र तत्तेजः सर्वदेवशरीरजम्।

एकस्थं तदभून्नारी व्याप्तलोकत्रयं त्विषा ॥ १३ ॥

atulaṃ tatra tat tejaḥ sarvadevaśarīrajam |

ekasthaṃ tad abhūn nārī vyāptalokatrayaṃ tviṣā || 13 ||

There that unequalled light¹¹ born¹² from the bodies of all the gods,
conjoined it became¹³ a women, [and] pervaded the three worlds with beauty¹⁴.

~ Caturtho 'dhyāyaḥ: Śakrādistutiḥ, verse 3, 7-10 ~

देव्या यया ततमिदं जगदात्मशक्त्या

निःशेषदेवगणशक्तिसमूहमूर्त्या।

तामम्बिकामखिलदेवमहर्षिपूज्यां

भक्त्या नताः स्म विदधातु शुभानि सा नः ॥३॥

devyā yayā tatam idaṃ jagad ātmaśaktyā

niḥśeṣadevagaṇaśaktisamūhamūrtyā |

tām ambikām akhiladevamaharṣipūjyām

bhaktyā natāḥ sma vidadhātu śubhāni sā naḥ ||3||

The Goddess by whom the world was spread out¹⁵ through her own creative energy

discussed in the commentary.

11 *Tejas* n.: «sharp edge, brilliance, light, fire, etc.» (MW). Noun formed from *TIJ* I. «to be sharp» (MW), by adding the suffix *-as* to the root in its *guṇa* grade (St).

12 *JAN* IV. «born» (MW). Root form where the final *-n* is dropped (in fine compositi) (St).

13 *BHŪ* I. Simple aorist (root-aorist), formed by prefixing the augment (*a-*) to the root. Here in 3.sg.

14 *Tviṣā*: «Beauty» (MW), I.f.sg. of *Tviṣ* f. Alternatively N.f.sg. of *tviṣā* f., «splendour» (MW), as a predicate to *tejas*: «Conjoined it [the light] became a woman, having splendour pervading the three worlds» (cf. Coburn's translation, 1991).

the embodiment of the collected energies of the whole group of gods
To Her, Ambikā¹⁶, to be worshipped¹⁷ by all the gods and great seers
we are surely bowing¹⁸ with devotion. May she grant¹⁹ us good fortune!

हेतुः सम्स्तजगतां त्रिगुणापि दोषै-

र्न ज्ञायसे हरिहरादिभिरप्यपारा।

सर्वाश्रयाखिलमिदं जगदंशभूत-

मव्याकृता हि परमा प्रकृतिस्त्वमाद्या ॥ ७ ॥

hetuḥ samstajagatām triguṇāpi doṣai-
r na jñāyase hariharādibhir apy apārā |
sarvāśrayākhilam idaṃ jagadaṃśabhūta-
m avyākṛtā hi paramā prakṛtis tvam ādyā || 7 ||

[You are] the cause of all the worlds; although containing the three constituents, You are not known
with fault; [You are] even by Viṣṇu, Śiva²⁰ and the rest [of the gods] difficult to be got at²¹,
the dwelling of all, [You are] this whole world consisting of parts²²
because²³ You are the undeveloped, most excellent substance being at the beginning.

यस्याः सम्स्तसुरता समुदीरणेन

तृप्तिं प्रयाति सकलेषु मखेषु देवि।

स्वाहासि वै पितृगणस्य च तृप्तिहेतु-

15 *Tatam*: p.p.p. *TAN* VIII. «spread» (MW), N.n.sg., qualifies *jagat* n.

16 *Ambikā*: «mother» (MW), epithet for the Goddess.

17 *Pūjyām*: “to be worshipped”. Gerundive from *PŪJ* X. “worship” (MW). Formed by adding the suffix *-ya* (f. *-yā*) to the root.

18 *Natāḥ*: p.p.p. of *NAM* I. «bow» (MW) in N.m.pl. «bowing to» + acc. (*Ambikām*) (MW).

19 *Vi-DHĀ* III. «grant» (MW). Imperative 3.sg.

20 *Harihara*: epithets of Viṣṇu and Śiva.

21 *A-pārā*: «difficult to be got at, whose shore is difficult to reach» (MW). Privative comp., with prefix *a-* to *pārā* n. «shore, opposite side, reach the end, fulfil» (MW).

22 Nominal sentence where *jagad* n. Is a predicate to the implied *tvam*. *Akhilam*, *idaṃ*, and *aṃśabhūtam* qualifies *jagad*.

23 *Hi*: particle of emphasis, also conveying the sense «for, because» (MW).

रुच्चार्यसे त्वमत एव जनैः स्वधा च ॥८॥

*yasyāḥ samastasuratā samudīraṇena
trptim prayāti sakaleṣu makheṣu devi /
svāhāsi vai pitrgaṇasya ca trptihetu-
r uccāryase tvam ata eva janaiḥ svadhā ca ||8||*

By means of whose pronunciation the whole race of gods
advance towards²⁴ satisfaction at all sacrifices; O' Goddess
You are surely Svāhā, and the group of forefathers' cause of contentment
Surely therefore are You uttered²⁵ by men as Svadhā²⁶ too.

या मुक्तिहेतुरविचिन्त्यमहाव्रता त्वं

अभ्यस्यसे सुनियतेन्द्रियतत्त्वसारैः।

मोक्षार्थिभिर्मुनिभिरस्तसमस्तदोषै-

र्विद्यासिसा भगवती परमा हि देवि ॥ ९ ॥

*yā muktihetur avicintyamahāvratā tvam
abhyasyase suniyatendriyatattvasāraiḥ /
mokṣārthibhir munibhir astasamastadoṣai-
r vidyāsi sā bhagavatī paramā hi devi || 9 ||*

You who are the cause of release, [and] acts of devotion beyond comprehension – You
are concentrated upon²⁷ by those having the essence of true due to well disciplined senses,
by those longing for liberation – the sages – having thrown off [of themselves] all fault²⁸;
for You are the supreme, blessed knowledge, O' Goddess.

24 *Pra-YĀ* II. «advance towards» + acc. (*trptim*) (MW).

25 *Ud-CAR* I. with causative stem, «cause to sound, utter» (MW). Pass. 2.sg.

26 In Vedic ritual, *Svāhā* is the exclamation uttered when an oblation to the gods is poured into the sacrificial fire.
Svadhā is the exclamation that accompanies an oblation to the spirits of departed ancestors.

27 *Abhi-AS* IV. «to concentrate ones attention upon» (MW) Pass. 2.sg

28 In this verse, a number of Buhuvrīhi (BV) compounds occur in I.m.pl., all referring to *muni* m. «sage, ascetic, devotee, etc.» (MW).

शब्दात्मिका सुविमलर्ग्यजुषां निधान-

मुद्गीथरयपदपाठवतांच साम्नाम्।

देवी त्रयी भगवती भवभावनाय

वार्ता च सर्वजगतां परमार्तिहन्त्री ॥ १० ॥

*śabdātmikā suvimalargyajuṣāṃ nidhāna-
m udgītharayapadapāṭhavatāṃ ca sāmnam |
devī trayī bhagavatī bhavabhāvanāya
vārtā ca sarvajagatāṃ paramārtihantrī || 10 ||*

Sound-souled, the resting-place of the perfectly pure Ṛg-, Yajur- and Sāma-Vedas
and uttered in the delightful recitation of the Udgītha²⁹.

[You are] Goddess, the glorious triple³⁰, attending to³¹ creation and existence

The foremost destroyer of the whole world's pain.

2.3 Uttama carita

~ *Saptamo 'dhyāyah: Caṇḍamuṇḍavadhaḥ, verse 6* ~

भ्रुकुटीकुटिलातस्या ललाटफलकाद्द्रुतम्।

काली करालवदना विनिष्क्रान्तासिपाशिनी ॥६॥

bhrukuṭīkuṭilāt tasyā lalāṭaphalakād drutam |

kālī karālavadanā viniṣkrāntāsipāśinī ||6||

From her forehead's surface having curved, contracted brows³², quickly

Kālī having a gaping mouth came out with sword and snare.

29 *Udgītha* m. refers to a method of chanting the hymns of the Sāmaveda.

30 i.e. the three Vedas mentioned above (*Ṛg-*, *Yajur-*, and *Sāma-*)

31 *Vārtā*: verbal adjective from *VṚT* I. «toattend to, intent on» (+ dat.) (MW). Formed by adding the suffix *-a* (f. *-ā*) to the strengthened root, here in *vṛddhi*, to make adjectives or substantives denoting the agent (St).

32 Kālī does not emerge from the eyebrows, as it appears from Coburn's translation (1991). Rather, *bhrukuṭīkuṭilāt*, “curved, contracted brows” qualifies *lāṭaphalakād*, “forehead's surface”.

~ Aṣṭamo 'dhyāyaḥ: Raktabījavadhāḥ, verse 63 ~

ततस्ते हर्षमतुलमवापुस्त्रिदशा नृप।

तेषां मातृगणो जातो ननर्तासृङ्गदोद्धतः॥६३॥

tatas te harṣam atulam avāpus tridaśā nṛpa |
teṣāṃ mātṛgaṇo jāto nanartāsṛṅmadoddhataḥ ||63||

Then the gods³³ obtained³⁴ unequalled happiness, O' king,
[and] the group of mothers belonging to them³⁵ danced, agitated from intoxication of blood.

~ Daṣṭamo 'dhyāyaḥ: Śumbhavadhāḥ, verse 5-6 ~

एकैवाहं जगत्यत्र द्वितीया का ममापरा।

पश्यैता दुष्ट मय्येव विशन्त्यो मद्विभूतयः॥ ५॥

ekaivāhaṃ jagaty atra dvitīyā kā mamāparā |
paśyaitā duṣṭa mayy eva viśantyo madvibhūtayah || 5 ||

I am alone here in the world. What second is there, not being of me³⁶?
Behold³⁷ these, you Villain, my many existences going back into me alone³⁸!

ततः समस्तास्ता देव्यो ब्रह्मणीप्रमुखा लयम्।

तस्या देव्यास्तनौ जग्मुरेकैवासीत्तदाम्बिका॥६॥

tataḥ samastās tā devyo brahmāṇīpramukhā layam |

33 *Tridaśā*: «thirty», i.e. four group of deities making thirty in number: 12 *ādityas*, 8 *vasus*, 11 *rudras*, and 2 *aśvins* (MW).

34 *Ava-ĀP V*. «reach, obtain» (MW), perf. 3.pl.

35 *Jāta* + gen. «belonging to», can alternatively be translated «born from», but in this sense an abl., loc., or instr., would be expected (MW).

36 *Mamāpara*: lit. «other than of me, other than mine». The genitive case of the 1st.pers.pron. is generally not paid attention to in translations (cf. Coburn 1991, Jagadiswarananda 1953, Jacobsen 2007, Kālī 2003). This is a pity, as this verse corresponds with the idea of the Goddess as prakṛti: nothing exists in the world that is not made of the Goddess (cf. commentary)

37 *PAŚ IV*. «behold», imperative 2.sg.: one of the few forms of this verb to occur outside the present tense (MW).

38 *Eva* emphasizing *mayī*: «going back into me alone».

tasyā devyās tanau jagmur ekaivāsīt tadāmbikā ||6 ||

Thereupon, having been united, the goddesses, headed by Brahmāṇī, went to the dwelling
in the body of the Goddess; then alone was Ambikā.

~Trayodaśo 'dhyāyaḥ: Surathavaiśyayor varapradānam, verses 9-12 ~

सन्दर्शनार्थमम्बाया नदीपुलिनसंस्थितः।

स च वैश्यस्तपस्तेपे देवीसूक्तं परं जपन् ॥ ९ ॥

sandarśanārtham ambāyā nadīpulinasaṁsthitaḥ |

sa ca vaiśyas tapas tepe devīsūktaṁ paraṁ japaṁ || 9 ||

For the sake of beholding the Mother, abiding on the riverbank
he and the merchant practiced austerities³⁹ while repeatedly muttering⁴⁰ the great Devī-hymn.⁴¹

तौ तस्मिन्पुलिने देव्याः कृत्वा मूर्तिं महीमयीम्।

अर्हणां चक्रतुस्तस्याः पुष्पधूपाग्नितर्पणैः ॥ १० ॥

tau tasmin puline devyāḥ kṛtvā mūrtiṁ mahīmayīm |

arhaṇām cakratus tasyāḥ puṣpadhūpāgnitarpaṇaiḥ ||10||

The two, on that shore, having made from the soil⁴² an idol of the Goddess,
performed⁴³ Her worship with flowers, incense, fire, and water.

निराहारौ यताहारौ तन्मनस्कौ समाहितौ।

ददतुस्तौ बलिं चैव निजगात्रासृगक्षितम् ॥ ११ ॥

39 TAP I. «to be burned, hot, practice austerities», perf.3.sg., with object *tapas* n. «heat, austerities» (MW).

40 Japan: present active participle from JAP I. «mutter, whisper repeatedly» (MW). The present active participle is used for actions contemporary with the main verb (*tepe*), hence «while repeatedly muttering...» (C).

41 Contrary to the verses below, this verse is not composed in dual. In theory it should thus be translated: «and he, the merchant...». Due to the context, I have translated it as dual despite the grammar. This is supported by other translation of the verse (cf. Coburn 1991, Jagadiswarananda 1953, Jacobsen 2007, Kālī 2003).

42 *Mūrtiṁ mahīmayīm*: lit. «an image consisting of earth» (MW).

43 KR VIII. Pf.3.dual, taking the dem.pron.dual *tau*, «the two», as subject.

nirāhārau yatāhārau tanmanaskau samāhitau |
dadatus tau baliṃ caiva nijagātrāsṛgukṣitam ||11||

[The two were] fasting, abstemious, concentrated with minds⁴⁴ fixed on her,
and the two even gave⁴⁵ an offering sprinkled with blood from their own limbs.

एवं समाराधयतोस्त्रिभिर्वर्षैर्यतात्मनोः।

परितुष्टा जगद्धात्री प्रत्यक्षं प्राह चण्डिका ॥१२॥

evaṃ samārādhayatos tribhir varṣair yatātmanoḥ |
parituṣṭā jagaddhātrī pratyakṣaṃ prāha caṇḍikā ||12 ||

While intensely worshipping⁴⁶ her thus with restrained selves⁴⁷, within three years⁴⁸
the supportress of the world⁴⁹, Caṇḍikā⁵⁰, became completely satisfied, [and] spoke forth before
their eyes.

3. Commentary

3.1 Introduction to the text

Devī-Māhātmya (Glorification of the Goddess), also known as Durgā Saptasatī (700 verses to Durgā), is a hymnal text of praise to the Great Goddess, which includes three myths and four hymns. One cannot be sure of when exactly it was composed; probably it was some time around 550 C. E. The text is part of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, of which it is considered to be a late addition (Olesen 2005, 23). As part of a Purāṇa, it belongs to the *Smṛti* literature, an “indirect revelation”. As an independent text, however, it has been considered *Śruti*, i.e. as a direct revelation, and is considered to hold extraordinary powers. The text plays an important role in the ritual life centred

44 *Tanmanaskau*: the suffix *-ka* is sometimes added to BV comp. without altering the meaning (St).

45 *DĀ* III. «give» (MW). Perf.3.dual.

46 *Samārādhayatoḥ*: pres.active participle from *ā-RĀDH* IV. with causative stem, “worship”. The indeclinable *sam-* expresses intensity (MW).

47 Locative absolute phrase (*samārādhayatos...yatātmanoḥ*). Due to the pres. active participle, a translation in the present tense is required (C).

48 Instrumental case expressing «time within which» (C).

49 *Dhātrī*: «female supporter», but also «nurse», and «mother» (MW). Here in a genitive tatpuruṣa with *jagad*.

50 *Caṇḍikā*: epithet for the Goddess.

around the Goddess, and is used in the daily liturgy in Goddess temples all over India (ibid., 12).

3.2 Prathama carita

~ Prathamō 'dhyāyaḥ: Madhukaiṭabhadhah, verse 67 ~

“The Slaying of Madhu and Kaiṭabha”

This first one of DM's myths is a reinterpretation of a Vaiṣṇava myth also found in the great epic Mahābhārata (MBh) (Coburn 1984, 212). In the DM version, the Goddess appears as the personification of Viṣṇu's yogic sleep (*Yoganidrā*). The myth displays a cyclical cosmogony thoroughly developed in the Purāṇas. The universe exists in eons (*kalpa*), periods of which it will go through four ages (*yuga*) of gradual degeneration. At the end of each eon, the universe is destroyed and becomes submerged into the primordial water while the god of creation is asleep. When this god awakes, the universe will again be created (Doniger 1975, 43).

Seen from the perspective of comparative mythological studies, the primordial waters picture a chaos from which the universe emerges. This has parallels in the creation myths of the near Orient (e.g. Egyptian mythology). Creation myths from all over the world imagine creation as an act of making order out of chaos (Sørensen 1994, 21; 65). The particularity in Hinduism, however, is that the universe is not only made out of chaos, but dissolves back into it again in a continual cycle of creation and destruction.

The Madhu/Kaiṭabha-myth was firmly associated with Viṣṇu when it was reformulated to the version found in DM (Coburn 1984, 212). Viṣṇu was understood as the supreme Lord of the universe, controlling the cycle of creation. Thus, at a period between destruction and creation, when the world has been dissolved into one ocean, he is asleep on the snake Śeṣa [1.67]. The creator-god Brahmā emerges from his navel seated on a lotus, ready to create when Viṣṇu allows it. But while the Lord is asleep, they are threatened by the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha. In the MBh version, Brahmā shakes the lotus stalk to awake Viṣṇu (ibid., 213). In the DM version, he prays to the Goddess dwelling in Viṣṇu as Yoganidrā. If she does not release him, the Lord cannot awake. The Goddess arises from Viṣṇu, who awakes and defeats the demons [DM 1.70-103].

This is DM's shortest myth, and Devī⁵¹ appears in it as remarkably less of a heroine than in

51 I use 'Devī', «goddess», and 'Goddess' with a capital 'G' when referring to the supreme form of the Goddess, i.e. the form from which other goddesses in the text are manifested. When using other names (Durgā, Kālī, etc.) I am referring to a specific manifestation.

the two following myths. Nevertheless, it makes an important point of cosmogony; being the world-lord's sleep, the Goddess controls the cycle of creation.

~ *Prathamo 'dhyāyah: Brahmāstutiḥ, verse 75, 77-78* ~
“*Praise by Brahmā*”

The prayer uttered by Brahmā in the Madhu/Kaiṭabha-myth is the first of DM's four hymns. The hymn presents the reader with the nature and cosmic roles of the Goddess.

1.75 presents the Goddess as the creator, protector and destroyer of the universe. Devī is thus put in a role associated with great cosmic powers. These powers are often associated with the *trimūrti* (three forms): Brahmā (the creator), Viṣṇu (the protector), and Śiva (the destroyer). More importantly, however, these cosmic functions were upheld by the supreme deity in the great theistic traditions (Olesen 2005, 10)⁵². To ascribe these three functions to Devī alone is therefore a demonstration of her role as the supreme being of cosmos, and an expression of the theism developing around Her.

The concept of the Goddess in Śāktism centres around her paradoxical nature. This ambiguity is captured in **1.77** by a number of opposites. We learn that she is both the great knowledge (*mahāvidyā*) and the great illusion (*mahāmāyā*). She is intelligence (*medhā*) and memory (*smṛti*), but also confusion (*mohā*). She is the great Goddess (*mahādevī*) and the great Demoness (*mahāsuri*). This implies that she controls everything, good and evil. Further, in a non-dualist sense, the Goddess *is* everything – hence all good and evil that is part of our reality (Kālī 2003, 57; Coburn 1984, 197). As will become clearer below, there are no such polarizations in the universe as good and evil. All that exists, is the Goddess alone.

The knowledge (*vidyā*) that is referred to, pertains to an universal truth: that the manifest world is an illusion and that everything is part of the great cosmic Goddess (Coburn 1984, 188f). This invokes the Upaniṣadic teachings of the unchanging ultimate principle Brahman (in neuter gender – neither male nor female). This Absolute is part of everything in the world. Saying that the Goddess is *vidyā* implies that She is this ultimate universal principle. However, the Goddess is also *māyā*, the force that blinds people from seeing the truth. This understanding of *māyā* was developed in the Upaniṣads as a cosmic illusion confusing people to think of the nature as real, when in fact

52 Olesen points out that the concept of *trimūrti* is misleading (2005, 10). It is not to be understood as three equal deities upholding one role each – one creator, one protector, and one destroyer. Rather, these three roles are all carried forth by the supreme deity of any theistic traditions, which will assume a form appropriate for the situation. Thus, Śiva, Viṣṇu and Devī are all creators, protectors and destroyers in their respective traditions.

Brahman is the only reality (Hume 1921, 38f). However, the whole concept of māyā can not be understood by the simple word “illusion”. According to the Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary, māyā had in earlier language the positive meanings of 'supernatural powers'. It was more specifically related to the power of creation (Goudriaan 1978, 1f). This double sense of māyā is captured in DM, because māyā here is related to the force of creation (*śakti*, cf. commentary to verse 4.3 below). Thus, the first two lines of DM 11.2, here in Coburn's translation, read (1991, 74):

You are the power [*śakti*] of Viṣṇu, of boundless valour; you are the seed
of all, the supreme illusion [*māyā*].⁵³

It is important that, in this sense, māyā is not only a trick the Goddess plays, blinding us from the truth. It is also a phenomena related to the process of creation. Thus, creation and illusion are two aspects of the same phenomena. This becomes even clearer when related to the idea of *prakṛti*, seen below.

1.78 proclaims that the Goddess is the substance (*prakṛti*) of everything, manifesting the three constituents (*guṇa*). Here, the Goddess' nature is explained in the terminology of classical Sāṃkhya philosophy. Sāṃkhya is originally a dualist system, in which *prakṛti* denotes the primordial material substance of the universe as contrasted with pure spirit (*puruṣa*). *Prakṛti* consists of three *guṇas*: *sattva* (the principle of luminosity), *rajas* (principle of change, passion), and *tamas* (the principle of darkness) (Jacobsen 1999, 240). When in balance, these *guṇas* constitutes a perfect equilibrium. However, if they are disturbed, a process of manifestations begins; thus the universe and all its beings are created (ibid, 75). When this happens, the world becomes manifest and is perceived of by humans as manifold. In this way, the Goddess is māyā, illusion, as her nature as *prakṛti* fools people into thinking that the world is anything but Her alone. She is the creator of the universe, and the substance the universe is created from.

Seen in relation to the cosmogony described above (cf. commentary to 1.67 above) the *guṇas* will return to an equilibrium in *prakṛti* when the manifest world is dissolved at the end of an eon. The epithets *kālarātri* and *mahārātri* points to the Goddess' cosmic role as a constant of the universe, which is also related to its dissolution. The destruction of the universe has been pictured in purāṇic cosmology as a dark night, the *kālarātri*, which occurs during the creator's sleep between eons (i.e. Yoganidrā, cf. commentary to 1.67 above). The great night, *mahārātri*, is a period existing

53 My brackets.

when the life-span of this creator is over, and everything becomes dissolved into the Absolute (Kālī 2003, 58). Thus, the cycle in this cosmogony unfolds on two levels, both pervaded by the Goddess which is the constant remaining after the dissolution.

3.3 Madhyama carita

~Dvitiyo 'dhyāyaḥ: Maḥiṣāsurasainyavadhaḥ, verse 13 ~

“The Slaying of Maḥiṣāsura's Armies”

The second myth of DM became the most known and popular one in the later history of the Goddess (Coburn 1984, 221f). In the verse translated, **2.13**, Devī is created from the collected energies of all the male gods. The whole story goes as follows: The universe is threaten by a buffalo-shaped demon, Maḥiṣa, of such a horror that the gods are unable to defeat him. They fill with anger, and from their angry faces a strong glare of light shines forth. This light is collected into a beautiful woman. This is Devī in her form as the lion-riding warrior named Durgā, often identified as the supreme form of the Goddess (ibid., 115). She has ten arms wielding all the weapons of the gods, which symbolizes that she possesses all their properties (Jacobsen 2007, 42). Durgā fights the demon, and defeats him [DM 2.2-3.43].

The structure of this myth belongs to the common paradigm of Hindu myths, where a god intervenes in the world to slay a demon which threatens the cosmic order (cf. Kinsley 1986, 101). Devī's incarnations in the world can in this regard be seen as a counterpart to the Vaiṣṇavite avatāra-theology, where Viṣṇu descends in the world to uphold dharma i.e. the cosmic order. According to Kinsley, there are strong parallels between the perception of Viṣṇu in Vaiṣṇavism, as it became developed in the wake of Bhāgavadgītā (BhG), and Durgā in Śāktism post-DM. She is in many ways “a female version of Viṣṇu”, being approached by the Gods in distress, incarnates in the world, and as the Brahmāstuti has informed us: creates, protects, and destroys (ibid., 102).

The manifestation of the Goddess from the gods' tejas has a counterpart in the Manusmṛti. Here a king is created from particles of all the gods to protect the world (Coburn 1984, 229). However, it would be a misconception to conceive of the Goddess of DM as a protectress created by the gods, when in fact, it is they who are created by her. In the Brahmāstuti [1.84] Brahmā says (Coburn trans. 1991, 38):

Since Viṣṇu, Śiva and I have been made to assume bodily form
By you, who could have the capacity of (adequately) praising you?

Kālī (2003) underlines this point by making a reference to the verbal element *ja*, which is used in this paper's translation thus: “*born* from the bodies of all the gods”. This word means not only “born, produced”, but also “growing in, living at, connected with” (MW): “the *tejas* that emerges from the bodies of the gods is not their creation, but the Devī's already indwelling presence” (Kālī 2003, 71). It seems thus, as Devī is not created, but rather *provoked* to manifest in a physical form.

~ *Caturtho 'dhyāyaḥ: Śakrādīstutiḥ, verse 3, 7-10 ~*
“*Praise by Indra and the others*”

In the second hymn, the Śakrādīstutiḥ, the Goddess is praised by Indra and the other gods after her slaying of Mahiṣa. The verses of this hymn gives further elaborations of the Goddess' nature, initiated with Brahmāstuti. The non-dualist aspects of DM, and the Goddess' identification with the Absolute of the universe (Brahman), is clarified in this hymn.

4.3 presents the term *śakti* from which the name of the theistic Goddess-tradition, *Śāktism*, derives. Śakti means among others “power, ability, strength, might, energy” (MW). It has come to refer quite explicitly to the feminine active and creative power, without which the universe could not have been created. Hence, śakti became personified as the female consorts of the male gods, who were otherwise unable to create (Jacobsen 2007, 26f). However, in our verse, we learn that śakti is a cosmic power possessed by the Goddess. Through it, she spreads out the world. Further, she is the embodiment of the śaktis of all the gods. This is why she, in the Mahiṣa-myth, was manifested from their energies (*tejas*). Thus, she controls the power of the gods, because she *is* this power.

4.7 states that the goddess is the cause, or impulse (*hetu*) of all the worlds, i.e. of the creation or manifestation of the worlds. By this, the verse makes a non-dualist point (*advaita*). In Sāṃkhya dualism, as it developed in the Purāṇas, creation will take place if puruṣa comes in contact with prakṛti and disturbs the equilibrium of the guṇas (Jacobsen 1999, 75). However, verses 4.3 and 4.7 together shows that the Goddess is herself the impulse leading the guṇas to manifest. Through her own śakti, prakṛti is set in motion, and the world is spread out. How everything is issued forth from (and returns to) the Absolute, is described as sparks issuing forth from a fire in the Muṇḍaka-

Upaniṣad 2.1.1 (Hume trans. 1921, 370):

This is the truth:-
As, from well-blazing fire, sparks
By the thousand issue forth of like form,
So from the imperishable, my friend, beings manifold
Are produced, and thither also go.

“And thither also go” in the last line is referring to the Upaniṣadic doctrine of the reunification of the human soul (ātman) with the the Absolute (Brahman). It seems to have a material counterpart in the idea that the manifest world dissolves back into prakṛti, from which it was made (cf. commentary to 1.78 above).

Since the Goddess is prakṛti and manifests the guṇas, she is “this world consisting of parts” (*idaṃ jagad aṃshabhūtam*). However, this does not alter the perfection of the Goddess: although manifesting the guṇas, she is faultless. This can be interpreted as to mean that her unity as the Absolute is not altered despite of her development into the world (Kālī 2003, 90).

Further it is said that the Goddess is difficult to be got at, even for Viṣṇu and Śiva. By using the word *apāra*, the unaccessible reality of the Goddess is captured in an allegory of a further shore difficult to reach (MW). This reminds of her name Durgā, which is usually interpreted as “difficult to reach” from *dur*, “difficult” and the root *GAM*, “to go, reach” (MW). Her unfathomable nature invokes the Kena-Upaniṣad which states that Brahman is almost impossible to understand [4.9-11]. Even the gods do not know It [4.14-15]. Yet knowledge of this “It” is important, being the cause of immortality [4.12-13] i.e. release from the existence in māyā, and unification with Brahman. By jumping ahead to verse **4.9** of our text, a parallel can be made. In this verse the text reads that the Goddess is concentrated upon by the sages longing for liberation. This is because she is the supreme knowledge. By realizing this knowledge, one overcomes māyā, and is reunified with the divine.

The two remaining verses, **4.8** and **4.10**, both identify the Goddess with sound (*śabda*). Being the Sound-souled one or having an essence that is sound (*śabdātmika*), is yet another way of identifying Devī with Brahman. In this case she is related to the idea of Brahman as sound (*śabdabrahman*). The idea has roots back to the Ṛg-Veda, but was most thoroughly developed in the Upaniṣads, where Brahman became identified with the sacred syllable *Om* (Padoux 1990, 5ff). Brahman thus is pure sound. The creation of the universe is pictured as a vibration of this sound

(ibid., 86)⁵⁴.

The personification of sound as a goddess goes back to the Ṛg-Veda, as the feminine word Vāc, “voice, sound, speech” (MW), early on became identified as a goddess. Vāc was a creative and powerful force, and as ritual speech important for the cosmic order (Kinsley 1986, 11). Speculations of sound in the Ṛg-Veda were largely related to the Vedic sacrifice and the mystical sacrificial formulas. The sacrifice in Vedic thought had a powerful cosmic significance, and had to be accompanied by sacred utterances to be successful. Such utterances are exemplified by *Svāhā* and *Svadhā*, which in verse 4.8 are identified with the Devī. The verse reads that by reciting the sacred formulas identified with the Goddess, all sacrifices will be successful. As the sacred word she is essential for the effect of sacrifice, thus: “she is the basis of the whole sacrificial structure of the Vedas” (Coburn 1984, 130). As sacred sound, the Goddess is also the source of and the manifestation of the Vedas – the knowledge revealed to ancient seers – seen in 4.10.

3.4 Uttama carita

~ *Saptamo 'dhyāyaḥ: Caṇḍamuṇḍavadhaḥ, verse 6* ~

“*The Slaying of Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa*”

The third and longest of DM's myths elaborates extensively on the many metamorphoses of Devī. This begins already at the outset of the myth, when the Goddess appears from the body another goddess, Pārvatī: The gods are again helpless against the demonic forces, and prays to the Great Goddess for help. Pārvatī, being nearby, approaches. Devī then steps forth from her body, and Pārvatī turns into the black one (*Kālikā*) [5.85-88]. In the verse translated above [7.6], Kālī emerges from the Goddess' forehead as Her concentrated anger. In the following verses of the myth, one reads that Kālī has a frightening appearance [7.7-8], crushes demons between her teeth [7.11], and drinks their blood [8.53-61]. The most terrible and destructive aspects of Devī, the Demoness, is thus given a body.

The origin of Kālī and her sudden rise to prominence in the Sanskrit literary tradition is noteworthy. She is almost not mentioned in the Sanskrit literature prior to the DM. In the few texts where she is mentioned, she is regularly associated with the periphery of society; with thieves, low-

54 Kālī makes an interesting parallel to the semitic religions: «In the first chapter of the Genesis, the phrase «And God said...» signals in turn the creation of light, the heavens, the earth, and all living creatures. The Johannine Gospel proclaims the Word (Logos) as the creative force coeternal and consubstantial with God» (2003, 56).

casts, and tribal people (Kinsley 1986, 116f). Scholars agree that her actual origin must be as a non-sanskritic village goddess. Such goddesses are often fierce and ugly, in stark contrast to the mild and beautiful wives and mothers of Vedic and Purāṇic tradition. Thus, Kālī 's identification with the Goddess of DM illustrates the process of Sanskritization – the process in which indigenous traditions, perhaps with roots from pre-Vedic times, becomes integrated into the authoritative religious tradition (Coburn 1984, 9ff).

Kālī represents everything that is not acceptable. She is an exemplary anti-model. Her liminal nature can be explained as a way of negotiating notions of purity and pollution in social conduct. According to Mary Douglas, every philosophy that rejects something as polluting, must also find a way of affirming this pollution. This is because all polluting substances are unavoidable parts of our reality. Kālī is associated with blood, death, and other polluting substances. In this way, she may be picturing an acceptance of that the social ideal world of purity is only part of the reality, and she may give a place for the dangerous, wild and polluting aspects of the same reality (Kinsley 1986, 129). Further, Kālī 's central position in Hinduism can be understood by invoking Max Weber's concept of *Theodicy*. This is what O'Flaherty does, when she interprets the worship of goddesses “of disease and filth! As a necessary means for accepting evil in the world (O'Flaherty 1976, 46ff).

~ *Aṣṭamo 'dhyāyah: Raktabījavadhah, verse 63 ~*
“*The Slaying of Raktabīja*”

The group of mothers (*mātrgaṇa*) described in **8.63**, appeared in verse 8.13 as the embodied śaktis of the male gods, drawn forth by the Goddess. This mirrors the manifestation of the Goddess from the gods' collected tejas. However, here the śaktis form separate goddesses instead of unifying into one. In addition, a fierce śakti of Devī herself is leaping out of her own body:

But then, from the Goddess' body came forth the utterly cruel
Caṇḍikā-śakti, beyond terrifying, howling like a hundred jackals [8.23]⁵⁵.

Counting Kālī as well, there are now ten fierce warrior goddesses at the battleground in addition to

55 My translation. The Sanskrit text reads (Jagadiswarananda 1953): *tato devīśarīrāt tu viniṣkrāntātibhīṣaṇā | caṇḍikā śaktir atyugrā śivāśataninādinī || 23 ||*

the supreme form of Devī. They are all fierce, they drink the blood of their enemies and get intoxicated by it. Kinsley considers the possibility that these śaktis could be possible predecessors of the *Mahāvidyās*, a group of ten goddesses worshipped in Tantrism (1997, 30ff).

Each śakti is described as bearing the characteristic marks of the god she stepped out from. There are seven of these mothers (*mātrī*): Brahmāṇī from Brahmā; Māheśvarī from Śiva; Kaumārī from Skanda; Vaiṣṇavī, Nārasimhī, and Vārāhī from Viṣṇu⁵⁶; and Aindrī from Indra. Coburn notices that their names are not merely feminine versions of the male name, except for Brahmāṇī. In stead, the derivative *vṛddhi*-form is used, which in Sanskrit signalizes “belonging to” or “proceeding from”. This, he suggests, could be a way of breaking with the view mentioned above – that śakti is simply a spouse or creative aspect of the superior male deity (Coburn 1984, 132f; 133 note 170). In the translation above, it was noted that *jāta* with genitive case can convey the sense of “belonging to”, and was translated thus: “the group of mothers belonging to them”. This corresponds with Coburn's reasoning. Jacobsen sees the fact that Devī has her own śakti as another way of breaking the association of śakti as consorts (Jacobsen 2007, 47). It is a force solely belonging to the Goddess.

~ *Dashamo 'dhyāyaḥ: Śumbhavadhaḥ, verse 5-6 ~*
“*The Slaying of Śumbha*”

10.5-6 demonstrates figuratively the identifications of Devī with Brahman, prakṛti and māyā. The villain (*duṣṭa*) addressed by the Goddess is the demon Śumbha, who has mocked the Goddess for being aided by the śaktis in battle [DM 10.3]. Devī's reply is a clear statement of her nature as both Brahman and prakṛti: She is alone in the world. Nothing exists that is not made of her, i.e. made of prakṛti. Since it is only her, there is no dualism. In the verse translated above the word *apara*, “other”, is used, which is the opposite of *sva*, “one's own” (MW). Thus the Goddess is stating that there is nothing being in the world that does not belong to her. The reason why Śumbha did not see this in the first place, is because of māyā: “The māyā s a veil, a shroud, like a shroud in the temple by which the image of God is usually concealed from the eye of the spectators” (Goudriaan 1978, 19). Deluded, Śumbha could not see the true reality of the One Goddess. But as she lifts her veil of māyā, he sees the śaktis disappearing into her (Kālī 2003, 149). This can be understood as a revelation of the divine similar to the famous verse of BhG 11.9 where Kriṣṇa lifts *his* veil of māyā

56 These two latter śaktis appear to be of different avatāras of Viṣṇu. Nārasimhī of the man-lion avatāra, and Vārāhī of the wild-boar avatāra.

and reveals himself as the supreme Hari. Here quoted are the verse leading up to this revelation, where the Lord says that he is visible in many forms, but difficult to recognize in his own supreme form [BhG 11-5; 8] (Edgerton trans. 1972, 55):

Behold My forms, son of Pṛthā
By hundreds and by a thousands,
Of various sorts, marvellous,
Of various colours and shapes.

But thy canst not see Me
With this same eye of thine own;
I give thee a supernatural eye:
Behold my mystic power as God!

Upon her saying so, the goddesses unite and go back to their dwelling where they belong – in the body of the Goddess. The idea that a God can be one and many, back tracing to the Upaniṣads, got firmly established with the rise of theism (Michaels 2004, 206f). However: “Whatever form of a particular goddess appears, even if it is differently known, is in reality only her [the Supreme Śakti]” (Bhāskaraṛāya, cited in Brooks 1998, 73).

~Trayodaśo 'dhyāyaḥ: Surathavaiśyaḥ varapradānam, verses 9-12 ~
“The Grating of Boons to Suratha and the Merchant”

This part of our text brings us out of the mythical universe of cosmic war, to the frame-story of DM. The former king Suratha and the merchant Samādhi have just heard the myths of DM by the seer Medhas. They decide to seek a vision of the Great Goddess, and practices austerities to achieve their goal. All the practices they perform in verses **13.9-II** can be related to modern religious practice. *Japan*, the practice of repeatedly uttering a sacred text or mantra, is an often occurring part of different types of rituals pertaining to the Goddess (cf. Rodrigues 2003, part II). Further, Suratha and Samādhi made an idol of the Goddess of the riverbank soil. Kālī suggests that this could be similar to the clay images made for the annual Durgā Pūjā festival (Kālī 2003, 180). They worship the image with flowers, fire and water, resembling a regular pūjā (Michaels 2004, 243f)

Suratha and Samādhi sprinkled an offering with their own blood. Blood as part of a sacrifice is a peculiarity not found in the other theistic traditions. It is related to the village *grāmadevatā* cults, but in Śāktism also to the Purāṇic Goddess-tradition (Olesen 2005, 36). It is practiced up to date in the pan-Indian Durgā Pūjā festival (Rodrigues 2003, 211ff). The idea behind blood-sacrifice seems to be, on the one hand, that the wild and dangerous forms of the Goddess demands it (Jacobsen 2007, 30). It has already been explained above that the wild śaktis of the Goddess enjoy to drink blood. On the other hand, blood sacrifice is related to a symbolism of controlling fertility (Rodrigues 2003, 297). The Kālikāpurāṇa, which is considered to be an expression of both grāmadevatā cult and Sanskrit Purāṇic religion (Olesen 2005, 36), includes the blood from one's own body as elements suited for a food-offering [57.3-4], thus closely resembling the DM variant.

The last verse in this translation, **13.12**, shows that the exertions of Suratha and Samādhi were fruitful: within three years of austerities the Goddess became satisfied and appeared before their eyes. Such a vision of the divine is a central goal for many forms of meditation and worship in India (Jacobsen 2007, 59). It implies that it is possible to experience the Goddess. Further, it should be noticed that she appears when she feels satisfied, that is, at her own will. It is thus an act of grace.

4. Devī-Māhātmya in the context of Śākta Tantrism

The word 'Tantra', “extension” or “warp on a loom”⁵⁷ has historically been referring to a set of scriptures exploring certain doctrine and practice. Thus, 'Tantrism' quite loosely refer to a form of religiosity associated with these scriptures, bearing certain characteristics that are recognized as Tantric. However, these characteristics are varying within traditions to such a degree that, although Tantrism is often spoken of as a religious system of its own, arriving at a definition of the phenomena has proved difficult (Goudriaan 1979, 5). Coburn suggests that it is best to understand Tantrism as a “style of religiousness”, and leans on Padoux' statement (cited in Coburn 1991, 124f):

Tantrism may be briefly characterized as a practical way to attain supernatural powers and liberation in this life through the use of specific and complex techniques based on a particular ideology, that of cosmic reintegration by means of which the adept is established in a position of power, freed from worldly fetters, while remaining in this world and dominating it by the union with (and proximity to) a godhead who is the supreme power itself. [...] Thus it may be said

57 The word has often been explained to derive from two Sanskrit verbal root: *TAN* VIII. «stretch, extend, spread» and *TRAI* I. «to protect, rescue from» (MW).

that, for a Tantric adept, the quest for liberation and the acquisition of supernatural powers result from a tapping, a manipulating of this ubiquitous power.

Thus, Tantrism builds on an understanding of the Absolute as available in the world, and centres around practices to experience It. It is as such Tantrism will be understood in the following.

4.1 Philosophical considerations

The philosophy of DM, bears striking similarities with Tantric philosophy, suggesting that the DM has been important in the formation of the Tantras, or that they were developed under the influence of each other⁵⁸. The Tantric understanding of reality is inherited from both Sāṃkhya and Advaita (Brooks 1990, 58); both these systems continues the elaborations of the Absolute initiated with the Upaniṣads (Michaels 2004, 264; 269). However, they are somewhat conflicting, for whereas Sāṃkhya promotes a dualism separating puruṣa from prakṛti, Advaita is, as the name indicates, in principal non-dualist. Nevertheless, as seen in the commentary above, these two positions were reconciled in the DM, where it is stated that the Goddess is prakṛti *and* the ultimate reality. It seems that this perception has been inherited in Tantrism, as will be seen in the following.

~ *The evolution of the Absolute* ~

Brahmāstuti ad Śākrādistutiḥ identify the Goddess with prakṛti consisting of the three guṇas, which pervades every part of the world. In a similar vain, Śākta Tantrism centres on the idea of the evolution of the Absolute into every part of the world. From the most supreme unity, Brahman evolves gradually into more mundane elements – until It becomes the elements of the world as we perceive it (Brooks 1990, 58f). In the Śākta Tantric philosophy, prakṛti and the guṇas became identified with the forms of the Great Goddess as Brahman; this was elaborated upon in the Aṅgas, the “limbs” or appendages of DM⁵⁹, which describes the evolution of the Goddess from the supreme Absolute into deities manifest in the world. These ideas were further elaborated by the Tantric adept Bhāskararāya in his commentary to DM, the *Guptavatī* (“containing what is hidden”) (Coburn 1991, 131ff).

58 Although Wienternitz argues that no Tantra existed prior to the 7th century, Banerji notes that the practice may have existed for centuries already (Banerji 1988, 9).

59 The Aṅgas have been associated with the DM perhaps as early as the 14th century (Coburn 1991, 101). They consist of six independent texts elaborating on the philosophy of DM and the ritual use of the text.

Bhāskararāya explains the evolution of the Goddess as Absolute thus: There is an absolute reality of the universe, the (neuter) Brahman, also known as (feminine) Mahālakṣmī. Mahālakṣmī is transcendent yet immanent, through the evolution of the One into many. Bhāskararāya presents a dualist thought within a monist frame: The Absolute, Mahālakṣmī, can take the nature of Caṇḍikā, also known by the name Mahālakṣmī. Caṇḍikā-Mahālakṣmī can divide herself in two parts, one becoming Śiva and the other his consort, Devī. It is in the unification of these two that the evolution of prakṛti takes place. Caṇḍikā-Mahālakṣmī, which is prakṛti, then assumes three aggregate forms. These are identified with the three guṇas (ibid., 134f; 143). In the Aṅgas, a similar idea had been put forth, naming these forms Mahālakṣmī (dominated by rajas), Mahākālī (consisting of tamas), and Mahāsarasvatī (consisting of sattva), which Bhāskararāya confirms in his commentary (ibid., 142f).

~ Śākta Tantric non-dualism ~

The unity of the Goddess is demonstrated in DM when the Goddess absorbs the śaktis (cf. commentary to 10.5-6 above). It teaches that the Goddess is at once one and many. Everything is made of her, and yet she is only one. Bhāskararāya writes of the Supreme divine as both beyond this world, and manifest in it as a theistic deity. He is non-dualist and theist at the same time; he is non-dualist in the sense that he believes in one ultimate reality, an impersonal Brahman, something that is divine, constant and unchanging; he is at the same time theist, believing that God is manifest in the world and can be worshipped accordingly (Brooks 1990, 58). The Advaita philosopher Śāṅkara explained this idea in the famous terms of *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* Brahman – Absolute with and without qualities. Śāṅkara explained it as the same reality looked upon from different angles (Coburn 1991, 128). However for Tantrics, the different forms of the Absolute are not merely perceived, they have actually evolved *from* the Absolute. Thus, the Absolute is unchanging and evolving at once, just as it is presented in the DM. The view is captured in the Lakṣmī-Tantra through a poetic metaphor of the ocean [2.52] (Gupta trans. 1972, 13):

My manifestation in creation is only another facet of my existence which
involves no duality, in the same way as waves surging up in the ocean
(remain the same water).

The Aṅgas' and Bhāskararāya's use of the name Mahālakṣmī for several manifestations illustrates

this point. At one level, Mahālakṣmī is used as a name for the highest Brahman. On the second level, there is the Mahālakṣmī which according to Bhāskararāya is the deity Caṇḍikā manifesting the guṇas. Then, on the third level, there is a Mahālakṣmī as one of the three aggregate forms (i.e. one of the guṇas). It captures the evolution of the one into the many, while illustrating that there is an unchanging continuum of Mahālakṣmī in this evolution (Coburn 1990, 143). It invokes the DM 4.7 which explains that the Goddess is faultless even though she manifests the guṇas (cf. Commentary to 4.7 above).

4.2 The Saptaśatī Mantra

As an independent text the DM is perceived of as holding extraordinary powers. In a Tantric sense, it has been regarded as a mantra. That means, the words of this text are perceived of as being the Goddess herself.

~ *The Goddess as Sound* ~

Bhāskararāya recognizes DM as a mantra of the Goddess in his Guptavatī. He thus calls it “ the *mantra* whose form is a multitude of verses (*ślokas*), consisting of three episodes (*caritas*).” (ibid., 139). that means that the Goddess is present in the words of the DM, and that recitations of these words can reveal her. Gonda captures this concept of a mantra thus (cited in Brooks 1992, 81):

The essence of a mantra...is the presence of a deity: only that mantra in which the devata has revealed his or her aspect can reveal that aspect. The deity is believed to appear from the mantra when it is correctly pronounced.

The Goddess' identification with sound became thoroughly developed in Tantrism. As Padoux puts it: “it is with Tantrism that these considerations about the powers of the Word, which is henceforth identified with the divine energy itself (*śakti*), will come to their full development” (Padoux 1990, 4). As explained in the commentary above, creation from sound is thought of as a strong vibration. In Tantrism, this vibration is provided the Absolute by *śakti*. This is expressed in the two first lines of the Tantric text Saundarya-Laharī:

If Śiva is in contact with *śakti*, he is able to come forth

If not, the God is by no means even able to vibrate.⁶⁰

The infinitive *spanditum*, “to tremble” or “to vibrate”, denotes creation (ibid., 96f). From this trembling, the Absolute as sound assumes increasing degrees of manifestations as it descends into the physical universe. In the most gross form, the Absolute is present in every-day speech. In a potent form, It is present as the deity of a mantra: “Recognizing an unbroken continuum through all the levels of existence, Śākta Tantra regards mantra as the actual presence, or embodiment in sound, of a deity.” (Kālī 2003, 93). The potency of mantras are thus based in the idea that by using these sacred formulas, the adept can backtrace the evolution of the Absolute – from the many back into the One (Brooks 1990, 61).

~ *The Devī-Māhātmya as a manifestation of the Great Goddess' sound-soul* ~

In correspondence with the Tantric identification of the Goddess with sound, the DM became perceived as the mantric sound-essence of the Goddess. Jacobsen noted in his study of DM in India, an unwillingness from priests to read the text with him. This was due to the extreme power identified with the text, a power that should not be unleashed rashly (Jacobsen 2007, 11ff). This idea of the text as extremely powerful was recognized in the Aṅgas. Thus, in the Kīlaka (the Bolt), Śiva puts certain restrictions on the text in order to control its infinite power (Coburn trans. 1991, 182):

(...)

Śiva ordained that all action should be successful,

And he made the hymn to Caṇḍikā (the Devī-Māhātmya) a secret.

There is no end to its merit, (so) he suitably (made) a restraint. [5-6]

The restrictions pertain to time of recitation, attitude, etc. When having removed this “bolt”, the full potential of the text is released and the reciter becomes divine [9]. The Tantric adept A.N. Jani, one of the informants of Coburn's *Encountering the Goddess*, sees the story of Śiva's restriction on

60 My translation. I have translated *pra-BHU* I. in the first stanza as «come forth». The word connotes meanings such as «arise, be able to, surpass, rule, etc» (MW). It is interpreted as having «power to create the universe» by Tapasyananda, and as being «able to exert his powers as lord» by Brown. The Sanskrit lines go thus:

*śivaḥ śaktyā yukto yadi bhavati śaktaḥ prabhavitum
na cedevaṃ devo na khalu kuśalaḥ spanditum api |*

the text as a mythological counterpart to a historical process that took place when the mantric potency of the DM was discovered. This process culminated in the development of Tantric ritual recitation. If uttered in the right manner, with the right attitude, etc., the power of these very words can be used to a variety of ends. But if they are not uttered rightly, they are potentially very dangerous. Hence they have to be restricted, so that everyone cannot use (or misuse) them (ibid., 146f).

In identifying the DM-as-mantra with the Goddess, Bhāskararāya identifies Caṇḍikā-Mahālakṣmī and her three aggregate forms (Mahākālī, Mahālakṣmī, and Mahāsarasvatī) with one hymn each. These hymns are the supreme parts of the DM-as-mantra. He characterizes them as having been “seen” (*dr̥ṣṭa*), not “made” (*kṛta*). They are *apauruṣeya*, “not coming from men” (ibid., 139f). It is thus in these hymns that the Goddess' presence is most potent. The hymn of the fifth chapters is identified with the supreme Caṇḍikā-Mahālakṣmī, and is therefore even more potent than the other three. It is one step above the others on the ladder of mantras that leads to the Absolute. The three myths were also identified with one aggregate manifestation each: Mahākālī with the first carita, Mahālakṣmī with the second, and Mahāsarasvatī with the third. In sum, the Goddess as Absolute pervades the entire DM, and if the secret to its proper recitation is revealed, the adept will experience this Absolute.

4.3 Kālī and the ritual way of realizing the Absolute in Vāmācāra Tantrism

In Tantric ritualism there are ways of experiencing the Absolute which involves to invoke the terrible aspects of the Goddess. In this regard, Kālī has become an important goddess. In DM she appears as a manifestation of Durgā, but it is fair to say that she has been given a promotion in the Tantric literature – several Tantras proclaim her to be the highest deity, or the Absolute⁶¹. The unacceptable nature of Kālī is probably the best way of understanding why she was suited for Tantric rituals. In relation to Hindu norms, Kālī represents everything that is forbidden. And that which is forbidden has become particularly important in “left-hand” (*vāmācāra*) Tantrism as a vehicle for realizing the Absolute (Kinsley 1986, 123ff).

It has been pointed out in the commentary to DM 1.78 above that the Goddess transcends dualism. She is both Goddess and Demoness. The whole reading of DM reveals a hidden truth: that the Goddess pervades everything that exists, whether we think of it as good or bad. In *vāmācāra*

61 Kālī is praised as the highest deity or highest reality in the Nirvāṇa-, Picchilā-, Yoginii-, Kāmākhya-, Niruttara- and Mahānirvāṇa-Tantras. In the Kāmadā-Tantra she is proclaimed to be Brahman itself (Kinsley 1986, 122f).

Tantrism, the forbidden, “evil”, aspects of reality are approached as a method for overcoming this dualism. To put it another way, because reality is veiled by *māyā*, we perceive of things as opposites: good and evil, male and female, sacred and profane, etc. Endorsing the forbidden aspects of this duality is a radical way of endorsing that there is no real duality – everything is Her (ibid.m 123).

In DM, Kālī is given prominence due to her terrible nature – she is the manifestation of the angry, dark side of the Goddess, bringing about pestilence and destruction. As these “forbidden” aspect, Kālī is confronted by the Tantric adept at her favourite dwelling place: the cremation ground (ibid., 124). The Goddess of the DM is both terrifying and beautiful. Experiencing her terrifying nature is therefore to experience her wholeness. The Karpūrādi-stotra, a work in praise of Kālī, describes the Tantric *vāmācāra* ritual of the five substances (*pañcatattva*). In this ritual, the Tantric adept is to partake of five forbidden things – wine, meat, fish, parched grain, and illicit sexual intercourse – at the impure cremation ground, where Kālī dwells. The stotra captures how Kālī is endorsed as a vehicle to realize one's own supreme nature (Avalon trans. Cited in Kinsley 1986, 124):

He, O Mahākālī , who in the cremation-ground, naked, and
with dishevelled hair, intently meditates upon Thee and recites
Thy *mantra*, and with each recitation makes offering to Thee
of a thousand *Akaṇḍa* flowers with seed, becomes without any
effort a Lord of earth. [15]

5. Conclusion

This paper opened with a translation and commentary of selected verses from the Devī-Māhātmya. The commentary of these verses revealed several aspects of the Goddess crystallizing in DM. This Goddess is a non-dual unity, the constant of the universe, like the neuter Brahman. The text reveals a theistic concept of seeing the supreme deity of the universe as manifest in the world in various forms. It explains this phenomena in terms of Sāṃkhya philosophy, but contrary to Sāṃkhya it is clearly Advaita. It explicitly states that only the Goddess exists, and no second entity. Due to her own śakti she manifests the world from herself.

The Goddess is further pictured as an ambiguous figure, and it seems as local village

goddesses have been Sanskritized and identified with her dark aspects. They fit well with her role as the Purāṇic destroyer of the universe, and they have added to the religious practice such elements as blood sacrifice. The Goddess is conceptualized as a cosmic heroine closely resembling Viṣṇu, and as him, she also reveals herself to humans devoted to her as an act of grace.

The philosophy of the evolution of a non-dual Absolute became important in the Tantras and the Tantric practice crystallizing in the wake of DM. The Tantrics seek to experience the Absolute as manifest in the physical world. Since the Goddess is both the Absolute and the evolved prakṛti, the DM-as-mantra can be used as a way of tracing the evolution process backwards to the One. The terrible aspects personified with Kālī were Sanskritized in DM, and has become important in Tantric rituals as a way of overcoming the polarizations of the manifest world, and realize the One.

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Abstract

Denne oppgaven tar form som en originalspråksoppgave. Den er dermed en øvelse i å oversette, kommentere og perspektivere en tekst lest på originalspråket. Teksten som er lest er enkelte avsnitt fra Sanskrit-teksten Devī-Māhātmya, “Glorifisering av Gudinnen, tilføyet et filologisk noteapparat. Teksten er deretter kommentert, og således satt i en bredere litterær, historisk, teoretisk og filosofisk kontekst. Deretter er teksten perspektivert med henblikk på dens relasjon til den senere Śākta-tantriske tradisjon. Fellesnevneren som går igjennom hele oppgaven, er at Gudinnen konseptualiseres som både et uforanderlig, ytterste prinsipp, og som en foranderlig substans i utvikling.