



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

---

## “Creative Destruction of a Mother Goddess”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

A sermon delivered on November 6, 2016

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*I [Devi, divine mother] have created all worlds at my will, without being urged by any higher being, and I dwell within them. I permeate the earth and heaven, all created entities with my greatness, and dwell in them as eternal and infinite consciousness.*

Devi Sukta, RIG VEDA 10.125.8

*O Durga! Great Being, the fierce bestower of victory! O personification of Victory!...O thou that bearest an awful spear, O thou that holdest a sword and shield...I praise you, O great goddess; let victory always attend me through your grace, on the field of battle.*

Arjuna's 'Hymn to Durga,' MAHABHARATA

### Sermon (*this followed a telling of the Goddess Durga's battle with the Buffalo Demon*)

When I selected today's subject, a goddess in the Hindu tradition whose primary responsibility is to fight demons who threaten the cosmos, I didn't have in mind presidential politics. But as I worked on this service, the similarity of Durga with the world's modern female leaders – Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, Golda Meir, Angela Merkel, and even Hillary Clinton – seemed obvious.

None of these legendary women could be confused with beautiful goddesses like Aphrodite or Athena. None of these women quite match descriptions of Gaia and other Earth Mothers, either. Wives, mothers, and grandmothers they may be or have been, however, they seem more like warriors.

Is it just me, or can you picture Hillary as the warrior goddess Durga battling the buffalo demon Donald? Whatever your political persuasion, doesn't the image of seem apt? [I don't mean to offend by comparing Donald to a demon, but they clearly are two fierce warriors.]

This presidential election battle has been unprecedented. Personally, I feel the existence of the world, maybe the cosmos, is at stake. It feels apocalyptic, as if two primordial warring forces fight for supremacy. I feel powerless to vanquish the candidate I oppose, and the one I support has a shadow-side I fear.

I'm scared for what may happen on Tuesday. I'm scared of what may follow, no matter who wins the presidency. I'm scared for entirely different reasons, but I fear for our country regardless of who wins. I'm scared of the battles that won't end come Tuesday. I'll do my part to pick the person I believe is most qualified. I'll wield my vote as my weapon, but I'll also pray to every god and goddess I can think of that the world survives this epic contest.

Durga is one of many goddesses worshiped in the Hindu pantheon. The presence of female deities and their importance is striking. The diversity of all gods and goddesses distinguishes Hinduism from other world religions, but don't let this divine multitude convince you they actually exist separate from one another, or from you or me.

Hindus may appear to worship millions of deities, but only one ultimate reality exists for them. This nameless and formless reality is worshiped in various concrete forms assumed by the many gods and goddesses. But they are symbolic aspects, or avatars, of this one reality. This unity is called *brahman* or *brahm* (not to be confused with Brahma, one of three primary male gods). As the late mythologist Joseph Campbell said, "The one god wears many masks."

A formless reality is difficult to conceive or worship. As one ancient Hindu text explains, (*Vishnu Samita*, Ch. 29, verses 55-7):

Without a form how can God be meditated upon? If (God is) without any form, where will the mind fix itself? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to, it will slip away from meditation or will glide into a state of slumber. Therefore the wise will meditate on some form, remembering, however, that the form is a superimposition and not a reality.

Durga's ten arms and weapons symbolize she is not human and has powers greater than any human. Even Durga's name is symbolic, meaning invincible, inaccessible, and fortress, further conveying the mighty goddess's immense strength.

Devout Hindus understand that when they pray to Durga, they're hoping for her help in battling their own demons, internal or external. Formed out of divine male energy, she has abilities well beyond any male god and this elevates her above them. In Sanskrit, wisdom, or *shakti*, is feminine. Surprisingly, Sophia, the Greek word for wisdom, is also personified in the Bible as a feminine incarnation of G-d, as is the original Hebrew word, *chokma*. In the Hebrew book *Wisdom*, an apocryphal, or non-Christian book, Sophia (quote) "pervades and penetrates all things, for she is a breath of the power of G-d, a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty. ... a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of G-d, and an image of his goodness." (*Wisdom* 7:25-26). Sounds a bit like Durga, though Sophia doesn't outrank the masculine Lord God.

Hinduism's great respect for female energy and its near-absence in Semitic religions (from which Judaism, Christianity and Islam emerged), found voice in a collection of writings by Joseph Campbell published after his death (quote):

... with these masculine Semitic mythologies, we have for the first time a separation of the individual from the divine, and this is one of the most important and decisive motifs in the

history of mythology: that the eternal life and oneness with the universe are no longer ours. We are separated from God, God is separated from his world, man is turned against nature, nature is turned against man. (*Goddesses*, edited by Safron Rossi, p. 86)

This separation from the divine is symbolized in Adam and Eve being forced from the Garden of Eden. No longer one with God ('thou art that' Hindus might say), Christian religions see humans as profane sinners who only through a divine act of salvation can be one with God.

Though some Catholics may pray to Mary in an attempt to reconnect with divine feminine energy, and pagan practitioners might invoke a goddess, Hindu adepts have many goddesses to call upon. And if a person wants help battling a demon, that person calls upon Durga. In response, she will come into being to aid, teach or save whoever is in need. She is the Mother Goddess, or Mahadevi, full of limitless feminine power to destroy evil so that good can rise again. She is like the mother lion, protecting her cubs.

Sri Aurobindo, an Indian nationalist, yogi, and poet who died in 1950, wrote a modern prayer or 'Hymn to Durga.' The few ancient verses quoted in your order of service carry the voice of a human warrior, Arjuna, who has admitted to the god Shiva that he doubts he can win a battle he's expected to join. Shiva advises Arjuna to compose a hymn or prayer to Durga asking her to help slay his enemies and bring him victory. In contrast, Aurobindo's modern verses ask Durga to help India's fight for independence. The poem is quite long, but I'll still share several of its verses:

O Mother Durga!  
Rider on the lion!  
Giver of all strength!  
Mother, Beloved of Siva!  
We, born from Thy parts of Power,  
We the youth of India, are seated here in Thy Temple  
...  
Listen, O Mother, descend upon Earth,  
Come to our help!

O Mother Durga!  
Rider on the lion!  
Trident in hand!  
Thy body of beauty armor-clad!  
Mother, O Giver of victory!  
India awaits Thee,  
Eager to see the gracious form of Thine.  
Listen, O Mother, descend upon earth,  
Make Thyself manifest in this land of India.

O Mother Durga!  
India, world's noblest race, lay whelmed in darkness.  
Mother, Thou risest on the eastern horizon,

The dawn comes with the glow of Thy divine limbs scattering the darkness.  
Spread Thy light, Mother, destroy the darkness.

...

O Mother Durga!  
Enter our bodies in Thy Yogic strength.  
We shall become Thy instruments,  
Thy sword slaying all evil,  
Thy lamp dispelling all ignorance.  
Fulfill this yearning of Thy young children,  
O Mother!

...

Wield Thy sword and slay the evil,  
Hold up the lamp and spread the light of knowledge.  
Make Thyself manifest.

The poem continues with its plea for Durga's aid. Apparently it succeeded. India became independent three years before Aurobindo's death.

I pray that Durga comes to our aid, to vanquish the evil demons we face in America, the demons within and without. I know good lies within, struggling to rise victorious. May Durga, Sophia, and all the gods of our hearts, bring wisdom and weapons to these battles.

As Durga was created out of the combined divine energies of many, may all humans unite to bring stability to our world.

And may the love we hold in our hearts conquer all hate. May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. What battles might you be fighting that an assurance by Goddess Durga would be supportive?
2. Can you identify something you helped destroy so that something new could develop?  
Describe that experience and whether it was difficult or not.
3. How do the multiple deities or avatars in the Hindu tradition connect with your understanding of the divine?