

Bhairava: The Wrathful

by Phil Hine

Bhairava (The Wrathful) is one of the more terrifying aspects of Shiva. He is often depicted with frowning, angry eyes and sharp, tiger's teeth and flaming hair; stark naked except for garlands of skulls and a coiled snake about his neck. In his four hands he carries a noose, trident, drum, and skull. He is often shown accompanied by a dog.

In this short essay I will examine this particular aspect of Shiva and the central legend (which has numerous variants) which concerns this deity.

Bhairava is Shiva at his most terrifying, at his most fearful. He may be understood as a particular manifestation, or emanation of Shiva, or as Shiva displaying himself at a very high level. In some myths, Shiva created Bhairava as an extension of himself, in order to chastise Brahma. Bhairava is the embodiment of fear, and it is said that those who meet him must confront the source of their own fears. His name describes the effect he has upon those who behold him, as it derives from the word *bhiru*, which means to become fearful - of feeling great fear. In some sources, Bhairava himself is said to have eight manifestations, including *Kala* (black), *Asitanga* (with black limbs), *Sanhara* (destruction), *Ruru* (hound), *Krodha* (anger), *Kapala* (Skull), *Rudra* (storm) and *Unmatta* (raging). Dogs (particularly black dogs) were often considered the most appropriate form of sacrifice to Bhairava, and he is sometimes shown as holding a severed human head, with a dog waiting at one side, in order to catch the blood from the head.

THE PRIMAL FOREST MYTH

The cycle of legends which particularly relate to this primordial god tells of the encounter between Bhairava and a group of forest-dwelling sages. The events which lead up to it can be briefly summarised as follows: Brahma, the Creator, lusted after his mind-borne daughter, and grew four heads in order that he might continually see her. In creating these four heads, Brahma divided the world into the four directions, due to his desire for that which no longer was within himself. It is said by some that Brahma's desire for his daughter was caused by Kama (desire) who was born to madden and delude people, a task for which Brahma gave him magical arrows, which he immediately tested upon the Creator himself. Embarrassed by the attentions of Brahma, his daughter, who is known by many different names, ascended heavenwards. This provoked Brahma to manifest a fifth head, the quintessence of the other four, and reached out to 'cohabit' with his daughter. Upon seeing this, Shiva cut off the fifth head of Brahma with his sword (in some versions of the myth Bhairava merely uses the nail of his left thumb).

In this act of murder, Shiva-Bhairava became 'Kapalin' or skull-carrier, a name which also refers to a particular tantric sect which I will turn to shortly. The skull of Brahma's fifth head became stuck to his hand and although himself a god, Shiva-Bhairava had to somehow expiate his sin and, in order to do so, Bhairava became the Supreme Beggar, the archetype of the

Kapalika, who is divine, yet debased. Bhairava took upon himself the Kapalika vow, which was to wander the world, begging alms, until the skull fell from his hand. It was whilst he was wandering through a great forest that Bhairava encountered a group of ascetic sages.

The sages practiced austerities and tended a sacred fire, and they did not recognise Shiva-Bhairava, who appeared as a naked mendicant, carrying only the skull-bowl. He howled and danced, appearing as a madman with a black face. Not only did this startling apparition disturb the rites of the sages, he also attracted their women to him. The sages cursed the lingam of this supreme beggar, and it fell, transformed into a pillar of fire. Some variants of the legend say that another linga appeared to replace that which had fallen, and when the sages saw it, it too was cursed, and fell to earth in a blaze of fire, only to be replaced instantaneously by another linga, which in turn too was cursed, and so on. In another, after the linga fell, Bhairava vanished. In a third version, Bhairava leaves the forest, accompanied by the frenzied women of the sages. He appears at the house of Vishnu, whereupon his passage is barred by Visvaksena, Vishnu's doorkeeper, who does not recognise Bhairava. The unfortunate doorkeeper is slain by Bhairava, using a trident (the weapon commonly associated with Shiva). Vishnu then caused blood to spurt from his forehead, in an attempt to fill the skull-bowl which Bhairava carried. Bhairava dances on, carrying the corpse of Visvaksena and a skull full of the blood of the preserver, until he reaches the holy city of Varanasi (Banaras), after which he is liberated from the skull vow.

This legend, complex as it is, is woven around the crime of brahminicide - the killing of a Brahmin. A study of the vedic law books will show that the prescribed penance for the killing of a Brahmin involves the criminal living alone in the forest, living on alms, confessing his deed as he begs, and carrying always a staff and a skull - occasionally it is specified that such an individual should use as an alms bowl the skull of the brahmin he has killed. Such a penance could last for twelve years. Such penances sound very similar to the vows of ascetic, forest-dwelling sadhus.

Bhairava is one of those paradoxical figures of Indian myth - he has broken all fetters. He has severed one of the heads of the Creator, killed the doorkeeper of Vishnu, the preserver; he dances naked, accompanied by women (and in some versions of the myth, Vishnu), and he appears as a figure of horror and ecstasy.

The forest myth-cycle also clearly displays the wild aspects of Siva. He humiliates the ascetic sages in the forest, who are practising austerities; he seduces their wives and, by the falling of his lingam, causes holy places to manifest on the earth.

"On the mountain there is a wonderful forest called the forest of Dâru, where many sages live ... Shiva himself, assuming a strange form, came there to put their faith to the test. He was magnificent, completely naked, his only ornament the ash with which his whole body was smeared. Walking about, holding his penis in his hand, he showed off with the most depraved tricks."

".... Sometimes he danced lasciviously; sometimes he uttered cries. He wandered around the hermitages like a beggar. ... Despite his strange appearance and his tanned colour, the most chaste women were attracted to him. ... They let their hair fall loose. Some rolled on the ground. They clung to each other and, barring [Rudra's] path, they made

wanton gestures at him, even in the presence of their husbands.

The sages cried, this Shiva who carries a trident has a body of ill omen. He has no modesty. ... He is naked and ill-made. He lives in the company of evil spirits and wicked goblins." - (Shiva Purana, quoted in Daniélou p55-56).

THE BLAZING LINGA

One of the key elements of the forest myth is the sages' curse against Shiva's phallus, which in some versions, strikes the earth as a blazing pillar, and is then regenerated by the god. The sages curse again, and another flaming pillar strikes the earth whilst Shiva's phallus is 'reborn' - which again, in turn, is cursed. In another popular version, the cursed phallus becomes an immense pillar which pierces and fills all of the Three Worlds. (The 3 worlds - again recalls the importance of triplicities in Tantric magic. The 'piercing' of the 3 worlds or cities is a theme which recurs time and time again in tantric magical texts & practices.)

According to the Shiva Purana, the sages, once they had recognised Shiva, approached him reverently. Shiva replied that:

"The world shall not find peace until a receptacle is found for my sexual organ. No other being except the Lady of the Mountain may seize hold of my sexual organ. If she takes hold of it, it will immediately become calm."

(*op cit*, p63)

In The Linga Purana, Brahma himself instructs the sages in the reverence of Shiva's phallus:

"As long as this phallus is not in a fixed position, no good can come to any of the three worlds. In order to calm its wrath, you must sprinkle this divine sexual organ with holy water, build a pedestal in the form of a vagina and shaft (symbol of the goddess) and install it with prayers, offerings, prostrations, hymns and chants accompanied by musical instruments. Then you shall invoke the God, saying 'You are the source of the Universe, the origin of the Universe. You are present in everything that exists. The Universe is but the form of yourself, O Benevolent One! Calm yourself and protect the world.'"

In the Tamil *Kanda Puranum*, Shiva tests the forest sages by appearing with a beautiful courtesan, Mohini, by his side. This courtesan, Daniélou explains, is actually the God Vishnu, whom Shiva has commanded to take this form (Shiva had commanded Vishnu to take on this form on an earlier occasion, in order that Shiva might seduce Vishnu). In this form of the legend, the sages abandon their austerities to follow the disguised Vishnu everywhere, whilst Shiva, as the divine Beggar, seduced the women of the sages. In this version, the sages and their wives are brought together in the forest and realise that they have been tricked by Shiva and Vishnu. The sages summon a tiger which springs forth to attack Shiva. He kills the tiger and seizes it's skin to use as a garment. There then came a fire, which the god made into a trident; an antelope, which he took with his left hand, and snakes, which he used to adorn his head-dress. Demons then sprang at Shiva. He calmed them with a hand-gesture, and they agreed to serve him. All

the magics of the sages could not prevail against Shiva, and the sages finally agreed to practise the rites of Shiva's cult.

The forest sages have lost sight of the goal of their austerities and rites - release from bondage. They have become bound up by conventions. The sages, interrupted by Shiva, are outraged by his behaviour. They are performing their rites and austerities out of a sense of lust for the power and 'merit' they will gain from doing so, not as a means to liberation. They do not see that Bhairava-Shiva breaks all boundaries and conventions precisely because he is *beyond* them.

Stella Kramrisch notes that not all who behold Shiva as the Supreme Beggar see him in quite the same way. By turns, Shiva baffles, enrages, seduces, sows confusion, and illuminates. He reveals to his devotee, his *bhakta*, in the shape and extent to which they are 'ready' to experience him.

"Having severed the head of the Creator and killed the guardian of the house of the Sustainer of creation, Bhairava had cut through all fetters. Horrendous, abject, naked, or in rags that emphasized his nakedness, self-contradictory and consistent with his unspeakable being, with an entrancing smile on his lips he bared his fangs. The images of the Lord show him young and in glory as Bhiksatanamurti, the Supreme Beggar. They show him as Kankalamurti, carrying the impaled by of Visvaksena; or emaciated and deathlike in his image as Bhairava; or stern, bloated, his matted hair surrounded by flames, fiercely ponderous, and black as Kala or Mahakala."- Stella Kramrisch, The Presence of Siva

In his display of contradictions, his suffering of the curse of the sages and their subsequent illumination, Shiva-Bhairava is expiating his Kapalika vow - that of carrying the head of Brahma. When Bhairava reaches the holy city of Varanasi, the skull falls from the hand of Shiva, and shatters into a thousand pieces. The ecstatic pilgrimage over, Bhairava is released from the fetters of his own making.

Bhairava is also said by some to be a gambler's deity. R.N Saletore (1981) recounts the following prayer addressed to Bhairava, by a gambler:

"I adore thee that sittest naked with thy head resting on thy knee; thy moon, thy bull and thy elephant-skin having been won at play by Devi. When the gods give all powers at thy mere desire and when thou art free from longings, having for thy only possession the matted locks, the ashes and the skull, how canst thou suddenly have become avaricious with regard to hapless me in that thou desirest to disappoint me for a small gain? Of a truth, the wishing tree no longer gratifies the hopes of the poor, as thou dost not support me, Lord Bhairava, though thou supportest the world ...

Thou hast three eyes, I have three dice, so I am like thee in one respect; thou hast ashes on thy body, so have I; thou eatest from a skull, so do I; show me mercy."

THE KAPALIKAS - SKULL-CARRIERS

The Kapalikas were a sub-sect of the Pasupatas. They went naked, used a human skull as a food-bowl, bathed in the ashes from cremations, and were believed to commit human sacrifice. Naturally, they inspired fear and distaste in the orthodox. The term 'Kapalika' can be translated as "bearer of the Skull-Bowl," and these sadhus worshipped Bhairava, as the Supreme Beggar and emulated his kapala vow. Perhaps, like other Indian Sects, the Kapalikas believed that great magical power could be transferred by taking on the penances of Bhairava. Through this identification with the god, the Kapalikas took on his powers. Like other sects who focus upon one deity (or aspect thereof), the Kapalikas held Bhairava to be the creator-preserver-destroyer of the Universe, and chief of all the gods.

R.N. Saltore recounts a legend that Bhairava once took up residence in the mouth of Goraknath (co-founder of the Natha Sect of Tantrikas and credited with laying the foundations of Hatha & Kundalini Yoga) and performed 'religious austerities' there. Goraknath was almost choked, and only managed to expel Bhairava by extolling his glory. Saletore takes this legend as an indication of a possible connection between the Nathas and Kapalikas, which is also noted in passing by M. Magee (author of Tantra Magick, Tantric Astrology, and numerous translations of tantric texts) in his Natha FAQ [see MikeMagee@magee.demon.co.uk].

It seems that yogis of the Kapalika sect were somewhat feared, having a reputation for possessing awesome magical powers, but reputed to carry off women and ensnare victims for human sacrifice.

In the Prabodha Chandrodaya, the following words are attributed to a wizard of the Kapalikas:

"My necklace and ornaments are of human bones; I dwell among the ashes of the dead and eat my food in human skulls. I look with eyes brightened with the antinomy of Yoga, and believe that the parts of this world are reciprocally different, but that the whole is not different from God. ...After fasting we drink liquor out of the skulls of Brahmans; our sacred fires are fed with the brains and lungs of men mixed up with their flesh, and human beings covered with the fresh blood gushing from the dreadful wound in their throats, are the offerings by which we appease the terrible god (Maha Bhairava)."

In classical literature, Kapalikas are occasionally mocked, appearing as drunkards or evil sorcerers. This view of the Kapalikas as drunkards is, at least on the surface, reinforced by the following quote from the Kulinarva Tantra:

"The adept should drink, drink and drink again until he falls to the ground. If he gets up and drinks again, he will be freed from rebirth. His happiness enchants the goddess, Lord Bhairava delights in his swooning, his vomiting pleases all the gods."

The skull carried by the Kapalika devotee was identified with that of Brahma, and used for eating and drinking from. David Lorenzen, in *The Kapalikas and Kalamukhas* (1972), feels that it was unlikely that the Kapalika devotee would resort first to brahminicide in order to

obtain the 'right sort' of skull, although he does say that the skull carried had to be that of a man of noble caste. However, bearing in mind the Kapalikas' reputation for conducting human sacrifice, and their occasional martial ardour, we might draw our own conclusions as to the possible role of ritual murder in the cult's rituals.

The basis of Kapalika devotion appears to have been bhakti in the form of personal devotion to Bhairava. If the critics of the cult are to be believed, then the foremost method of ritual propitiation of Bhairava was through animal or human sacrifice. It was (and probably remains) widely believed that a human sacrifice, being extremely gratifying to primordial deities such as Bhairava or Candika, removes all transgressions from him who makes the offering. Self-sacrifice through austerities, practice of mental and physical disciplines and occasional self-mutilations, also appear to have been practised within the Kapalika cult. Since Bhairava, in the legends, appears to be very much of an ecstatic figure, one might conclude that his worship also included dionysiac revelry. There are also numerous allusions made to the effect that puja employing corpses was part of the cult's practice. Whilst many of these reports are doubtless biased, such practices are well within the corpus of legends relating to Shiva-Bhairava's love of corpse-grounds, and the legions of ghouls, spirits, ghosts and demons who attend him therein. In addition, it is clear that Kapalins practiced Sex-magical rites and sought the siddhis (achievements - i.e. magical powers) through the practices of Hatha yoga, and, as already noted, were known as sorcerers of much (though often ill-) repute.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I would suggest that the forest myth is central to unravelling the mysteries of Shiva-Bhairava. Daniélou uses this myth-cycle to draw our attention to the similarity of Shiva's primordial cult and the Dionysian mysteries of ancient Greece. It should also be noted that some Tantric sects have always mocked the practice of extreme austerities or conventional rituals for their own sake, and this is again reflected in Bhairava's testing of the forest sages. Also, like many divine dramas, the consequences of the Lord's acts have wide ramifications. By severing the head of Brahma, Shiva must, in order to expiate his sin, manifest in the world. As a result of his visit to the forest, Shiva's cult is strengthened and holy places exist upon the earth. Deliberately acting drawing upon oneself the disfavour of others, as an aid to one's own liberation (and that of others) is an ancient technique in Indian magic, as practiced for example, by the Pasupati Sect of Shaivites, to whom the Kapalikas have been historically related.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MAGICAL WORK

In considering the question of magical work with Bhairava, we might take a bone from the corpse of Kapalika sadhana, as it were. Intoxicated identification with the god through dance, perhaps whilst visualizing oneself undergoing the forest encounter with the sages and their women would seem to be an obvious basis for Bhairava devotion, ending in exhaustion. As in all forms of bhakti, all acts of will and gnosis may be offered to the god, particularly sexual gnosis. Whilst one may deduce from the above that Bhairava devotion requires a healthy attitude to sensual hedonism, especially in terms of drinking and screwing, it should be remembered that

such elements are not without their 'initiated' levels of interpretation. The Kapalikas were often characterised as licentious hedonists, but like many other tantric sects, there was much more to them than met the eye.

I would also suggest that offering oneself (i.e. ego-complex or core identifications) as sacrifice to Bhairava could become the basis for a monasticism based around the deliberate transgression of personal taboos and boundaries. In general though, one should avoid too literal an emulation of Kapalika practices and vows; for one thing, you just can't get the parts these days!

Sources

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