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C H A P T E R O N E

The Call of the Creative Spirit

If you have picked up this book and begun to read, chances are you have experienced the power of the creative spirit. This power is not a figment of your imagination; it is not an abstract concept. It is real. It is a force that manifests itself, not just mentally and spiritually, but physically. If you don't believe this, the next time you feel the urge to create, sit with the feeling. Go to a place of stillness, become completely in touch with your body, bring your consciousness to bear on this urge, and you will feel it *in* your body: a sensation, perhaps almost imperceptible, that begins in the nest of your pelvis, then rises up, reaches your heart and throat, and bursts into an aching, a longing, a profound need.

Ideally, when this feeling is upon us we are able to let it out, to

allow it to flow into the creation of beautiful words, stirring melodies, graceful movements, or vibrant colors on a canvas. But all too often we use all our might to try to push it back down and dam it up so that it can't escape.

Whether you are a professional in the arts or a person who is just beginning to express yourself creatively, you probably already know that we do all of this out of fear. We are afraid we aren't good enough, talented enough, or skilled enough to create. Or we are bullied by guilt, by the belief that creativity is frivolous and that we have no right to take time from our *real* jobs of breadwinning and nurturing to allow ourselves the "luxury" of creative expression.

You are probably already aware that you *can* overcome all the fear and guilt that block your creativity. This book is here to affirm this awareness and to acknowledge the work you may have already done on overcoming your fears. More importantly, however, it is here to say that not only can you allow yourself to be creative, but that you *must*.

The reason for this is simple. *When you feel you are being moved by the creative spirit, you are in fact being moved by the divine feminine.* The haunting call we feel to be creative is a cry that comes not just from the feminine side of our being but, at its most profound level, from a cosmic feminine force. Now, I admit this is a sweeping statement. And although it is one I have believed for years, it is also one I wouldn't have had the courage to make quite so blatantly if I hadn't learned what I did in the five years I spent researching this book. The reason for this will become clear as you read the stories that follow of the extraordinarily creative women mystics and the ordinary women who have been profoundly touched by the creative spirit. These stories will help you understand how this force is working in your life, how opening up to its power will help you move forward both creatively and spiritually, and why trying to suppress this force is a little like trying to cork a volcano with a coconut.

This awesome feminine force is the single most important factor in our personal creative and spiritual unfoldment, and yet it would be a mistake to ignore, as some contemporary spiritual movements have done, the divine masculine principle. For it too exists and, as will be discussed in some detail later, has an essential role in creative expression. Still, the divine feminine will be emphasized far more heavily than the masculine in the following pages. The most obvious reason for this is, as

we all know, the Divine has been “masculinized” for centuries while the divine feminine has been ignored, denigrated, and suppressed.

But there are other reasons, too. One is simply that it is time. The idea that we are at a critical point in history is a widespread one in the contemporary spiritual movement, and some of our greatest thinkers believe it is a particularly crucial time in terms of the divine feminine. Marion Woodman, one of the most widely respected Jungian analysts of our day, concluded her wonderful book *Dancing in the Flames: The Dark Goddess in the Transformation of Consciousness* with an eloquent plea for us to realize that our most crucial job right now is to learn to *embody* the divine feminine. Writers from the East echo this idea. Right up to his death in 1984, the yogi and philosopher Gopi Krishna wrote and spoke tirelessly on the idea that absolutely nothing is more important at this time in history than understanding how this divine feminine force is awakening in the lives of individuals around the planet and what this means for the human race.

Implicit in these and many other great thinkers’ perspectives is the notion that the divine feminine is in some way related to evolution. In other words, the cosmic feminine not only creates the universe, as she is seen to do in so many traditions, but also keeps propelling it along; moving both the cosmos as a whole and all the individual forms of consciousness within it towards some specific goal.

Allusions to this idea can be found in many goddess traditions and in the three manifestations of the divine feminine that will be examined most closely in this book: Shakti, the all-powerful cosmic feminine principle in Hinduism; Sophia, the powerful creative force known as Wisdom in the Old Testament; and Shekinah, the feminine face of God in the Jewish mystical tradition.

It is this force I’m referring to when I talk about the *feminine fire*. This feminine fire is a primordial, elemental force that is powerful beyond our wildest imaginings. *It is, in fact, power itself*. Ironically, I didn’t discover anything about how this concept is viewed in the Judeo-Christian tradition as Sophia and the Jewish mystical tradition as Shekinah until years after I had begun learning about it in the rich sacred tradition known as Tantra and the philosophical teachings that form the basis of hatha yoga. There, this feminine, generative force is known as Shakti.

The first time I came across the concept of Shakti was many years ago when I traveled to Kashmir with a group of friends to meet Gopi Krishna. While we were there we walked up into the foothills of the Himalayas to his home near the little village of Nishat and listened to him speak for several days about this mighty force. During one of the talks someone in the audience asked if it was possible to control this power. Gopi Krishna just shook his head and laughed. If, he said, you could take a ball of fire no bigger than a baseball from the center of the sun and bring it within two hundred miles of the surface of the earth, the heat from that small ball would scorch the ground beneath it. Then, he suggested, try to imagine not just that small ball of burning energy, but the energy of the entire sun. Next, he said, try to imagine not just the energy of that sun but of all the billions of suns in the universe. And then imagine, not just the energy of all suns, but the force that moves all these suns and all the planets around the universe. That force, he said, is Shakti.

This image leaves little doubt about our inability to *control* this divine feminine energy, and yet the imagery also suggests that this is the energy of life, of creation itself, and that it must pulse through each of us and have a role to play in our daily lives. Indeed this is the case, for yogic tradition tells us there is not only a cosmic Shakti, but also a shakti that makes her home in each one of us as individuals.

The cosmic Shakti—a sort of “capital S” Shakti—is Divine. In the story of creation told in some Hindu traditions nothing existed in the beginning but the One, the Absolute. In other words, there was nothing anywhere but God Consciousness. The next stage of the universe to come into existence was divine masculine consciousness. Known as Shiva, this masculine principle is sometimes characterized as being Consciousness itself or Pure Thought—absolute, quiescent, static Thought. This is a very difficult concept for our Western minds to comprehend, because what we’re talking about here is thought without thinking. Thinking implies mental movement, change, or activity—and with Shiva, in the beginning, there is only *stillness*.

Fortunately, we don’t have to worry about “thought without thinking” for long, for once masculine consciousness comes into being it is instantaneously followed by the creation of divine feminine consciousness. This feminine principle is known as Shakti. The One has now become Two: Shiva, the static masculine principle, and Shakti,

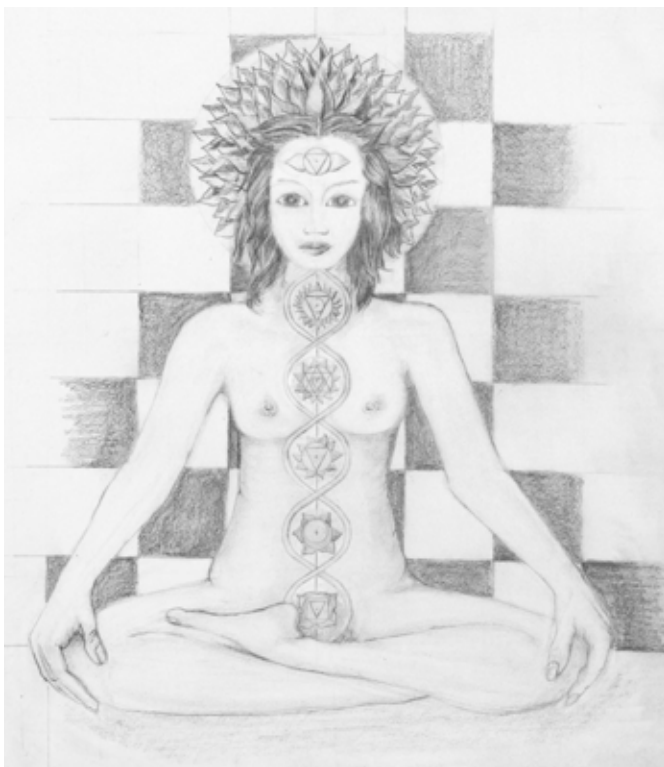
the dynamic feminine principle. Once Shakti springs into action, the cosmos begins to burst into existence. Her essence begins to divide and subdivide into the various attributes and properties that make up the universe until the process of creation begins to explode exponentially, and the myriad aspects of the universe as we know it are propelled into being.

Although there would be no universe at all without both Shakti and Shiva, it is Shakti who is the driving force behind creation. Without her, Shiva is powerless. This concept is portrayed graphically in the many Hindu paintings and statues that show Shiva lying on the ground with Shakti dancing joyously on his supine and lifeless form. Another example is found in the Hindu sacred texts known as the *Purānas*, where it says, “Just as the moon does not shine without moonlight, so also Shiva does not shine without Shakti.”

Shakti is, thus, the creative force that has generated the entire cosmos into existence. But her role doesn't end there. Once the cosmos has been created, she continues to propel evolution throughout time. Her job is not just to create more creatures and more highly advanced creatures, but also to bring the myriad forms of existence closer and closer to God Consciousness until, ultimately, all creation is propelled in a vast circle that leads it back to the One. In this sense, Shakti is *the* evolutionary force. As this great cosmic power, Shakti is sometimes envisioned as a great goddess, indeed the greatest of all goddesses, who is known as Kundalini.

The shakti—with a small “s”—that manifests in the individual can also be seen as having an evolutionary role. The easiest way to understand this is to consider it in terms of yoga. The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit *yuj*, a word that forms the root of the English word yoke, which means, of course, to unite or join. In this same sense, the goal of yoga is Union. This is the ultimate Union—the union of the individual self with the Divine or, as it is said in some yoga traditions, the Realization that the individual self is, and always has been, already one with the Divine.

Shakti with a small “s” is often referred to as kundalini-shakti or just kundalini. In one sense, she can be thought of as the trigger that brings this sublime realization—often called enlightenment—about. In the pictures seen so often of the cross-legged yogi with the seven chakras (wheels or vortices often referred to simply as “energy centers”)



drawn on his body, kundalini-shakti is depicted symbolically as a serpent coiled three-and-a-half times around the base of the yogi's spine. When this dormant serpent awakens, it is able to travel up the spine, through the chakras, to reach the seventh chakra. Known as the crown chakra, this center is sometimes called the seat of Shiva. Thus it is said that when shakti makes her way to the crown, she unites with Shiva and brings about God Consciousness—Oneness with the Divine—in the individual.

Although all this about Shakti as the evolutionary force might seem a bit abstract and immaterial to you, nothing could be further from the truth. For what it all means is, in short, that Shakti is propelling *your* evolution. She is moving you along and pushing you forward. Another way to look at this is to say she is transforming you and, in particular, transforming your consciousness. Although this transformation is occurring gradually over time in each and every

human being, for many of us today this process is being accelerated. In Tantric and yogic traditions this accelerated transformation is related to the “awakening” of kundalini-shakti in the body. Although this process—and the surprising parallels that can be found in Western traditions—are described in more detail later, what is essential to understand now is that the deep yearning you have to create is inextricably linked to both this accelerated process and the way cosmic Shakti is expressing herself in the world today.

This realization didn’t come to me all at once. It grew gradually over a number of years and developed out of an image that Gopi Krishna planted in my mind on that long-ago trip to India. At the time, he was describing the wave of interest in the spiritual that had first begun to sweep North America during the seventies—the curiosity about meditation, the exploration of alternative religions, the fascination with the paranormal, the attraction to Eastern traditions like Zen Buddhism—then he chuckled and said, “That, *that*—is kundalini!”

This statement triggered a vision in my mind’s eye of a great force, like an oceanic wave, that was flowing through each and every one of us who was actively searching for something “spiritual” in our lives. I could see this powerful force sweeping us along, I could feel its power moving through me and I felt part of something unimaginably immense. At exactly that instant I understood that our vast, collective yearning—whether it was to know the Divine or to bring peace to the world or to end suffering—was kundalini-shakti. That deep yearning was Shakti’s voice. And it was real; it was visceral; it was something I was holding in my body; it was something we were *all* holding in our bodies.

It took me much longer to associate Shakti—or in fact anything spiritual at all—with the great yearning I had always felt to express myself creatively. For most of my life, I’d seen my desire to draw, paint, and write as, at best, an indulgence and, at worst, a whim. Even after I had managed to become a professional writer, I always felt like I was cheating fate somehow and that I would eventually have to suffer for being allowed to work at something that was essentially so frivolous. These feelings were enforced, of course, by society’s general attitude about the arts and, even more specifically, by my family—a good example of this is how, even after my sixth or seventh book was published, my

mother would call and offer to send me back to school so that I could renew my long-elapsed teaching credentials and get a “real” job.

The casting aside of these negative feelings and coming to understand the true nature of creative longing began one morning when I was attending a conference on spirituality in Monterey, California. Just before dawn broke, I went out onto the beach to do Tai Chi. With the blue-green waves washing onto the shore and my bare feet digging into the cold, damp sand, I began to move slowly through the set of exercises. As I focused my eyes on the horizon and began the fluid move known as “Wave Hands Like Clouds”, something in my perception shifted. The line separating sky and water began to dissolve. Sky and water became one, water became one with the sand, and slowly all boundaries, all lines of demarcation dissolved. Suddenly, I could see, actually physically see, that all edges were illusion. Everything that had once appeared to be separate to me was in fact One—one vast, limitless expanse of pulsating life energy. Intense sensations began to rush through my body, and my heart exploded with love for this Oneness and everything it contained.

The connection between this profoundly spiritual experience and creativity began to make itself known later that same day. As I was sitting in one of the talks at the conference, a lengthy poem poured out of me that would become the first in a series of the best I have ever written. This poetry, along with many other pieces of writing, came to me over the next several months in exact tandem with the rushes of energy I was experiencing. The pulsations would begin near the base of my spine, move upward and burst, usually near my heart but sometimes near my throat. Words would begin to flow into my mind in rhythmic cadences that kept time with the surges of energy moving through my body, and I would have to write them down. I could not *not* write. It was impossible to resist this compulsion.

Still, even though the spiritual experiences and the creative rushes were occurring at the same time, I might never have realized that their source was the same if it hadn't been for how intense this sensation was. It was so potent, so consuming, that I had no choice but to sit with it, to be with it—to look it, as it were, in the eye. At some point in the process of being flooded with this feeling, I suddenly *recognized* it: although it was vastly more emphatic, it was the same old yearning I'd felt for so many years; it was the longing to become

a better person, to discover my true self, to learn to meditate, and to live by spiritual principles. It was the passion that had driven me to fight for social justice issues and to become an environmental activist. And I finally realized that it *felt* exactly the same as the yearning that had compelled me to spend hours drawing as a child, to paint and write poetry as a teenager, to begin university as an art major, and to eventually end up as a writer. It felt the same because it was the same. It was all Shakti, calling out with a Siren's call.

The moment I recognized this in myself for what it truly was, I began to see it working in others. And as I taught an increasing number of workshops on creativity, I began to realize just why recognizing this yearning as Shakti's voice was so important. One reason for this was that I discovered there were so many other women who had the same conflicted feelings about their longing to be creative that I had had. Even though most of them had never put it into words, they saw their spiritual yearning and their creative yearning as forces that pulled them in opposite directions: the spiritual towards the high and worthy; the creative towards the frivolous and self-indulgent. While they had been diligently honoring their spirituality, they had been ignoring, minimizing, or at worst, denigrating, the creative side of their natures.

If you are anything like me or the many women I have met in these workshops, you have been enduring this same disharmony in your life: your spirituality is something you work at; your creativity is something you play at. And you play at it only when you have time, when nothing else—your work, your family, your relationship, your dog, your goldfish—is deemed more important. Even if you are a professional in the arts, you have probably had to work long and hard to convince yourself (if you are indeed convinced!) that you are not cheating fate by being allowed to do something so wonderful with your life.

This dichotomy will vanish when you understand that the yearning you feel is the voice of Shakti. You can begin to see your longing for creative expression as an integral part of your spiritual path; not as a guilty pleasure to be enjoyed only when you have nothing "better" to do. If you are not already a professional in the arts, it might even mean that you would eventually commit yourself full-time to your creative pursuits. But this is not by any means always—or even often—necessary. What is vastly more important is learning how to listen to

the voice of Shakti. Then and only then will you know that you are moving in the direction she is calling you to go. And this direction, though it may take you on many marvelous creative adventures during your lifetime, is ultimately about transformation.

In the ancient Tantric and yogic texts this transformation is described, at least in terms of its ultimate goal, as a process that can turn the ordinary spiritual seeker into an enlightened saint or sage. These texts almost always describe a monumental mystical experience that, classically, signals the onset of enlightenment. In these descriptions, the mystical experience itself is almost always portrayed as including a vision of blindingly brilliant, radiant light; sensations of bliss, joy, and love that defy description; and an unfathomable awareness of being one with the Divine or with all of creation.

Although not all instances of enlightenment begin with a mystical experience (some yogis are said to be born enlightened; others to attain this state through a gradual, almost imperceptible process), in the cases most often described in the yogic texts this type of experience marks the beginning of a transformation in which the yogi develops certain traits that either weren't present before or present only in a lesser degree. One of the most important of these traits is a compassion and concern for others that encompasses a passionate desire to end the suffering of humankind. Another is a kind of charisma; people are drawn to the rare yogis who have reached this state and delight in being in their presence. Yet another trait is the development of *siddhis*. Known as *iddhis* in Tibetan Buddhism, these are paranormal abilities and include such things as prophesying the future, accurately interpreting dreams, and, in extreme cases, the manipulation of the natural environment.

Probably the most significant trait of all, however, is the facility to receive divine inspiration. In the highest cases of enlightenment this takes the form of revelation: the great founders of spiritual traditions, for instance, brought new knowledge, new ways of seeing the world, new codes for conduct and behavior that revolutionized thinking in their time and place. But even the yogis who reached only lesser levels of enlightenment would receive some degree of inspiration. In fact, being able to receive inspiration was once used as a test to verify the authenticity of an awakening. When a yogi would come to his guru and claim to have reached the higher state of con-