

Article

Embodying Devī: Śākta Narratives of Healing and Transformation

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Abstract: This article explores how twelve practitioners of a contemporary Western Śākta community relate to Devī, experience Her presence in their lives, embody Her through the practice of deity yoga, and find their manner of relating to self, others, and the world transformed by it. The narratives were obtained via semi-structured interviews and thus increase the ethnographic data in the field of tantric studies. Altogether, these testimonies suggest that deity yoga and its metaphysical framework, when interpreted through both a theistic and non-theistic lens, may enable a decrease in self-conscious emotions and negative affective reactivity, and an increase in positive affect and self-confidence or trust, as well as empathic or affiliative changes. The latter may result in changes in motivation or goals that are prosocial in nature and enable desirable changes in one's interpersonal relationships and interactions. Additionally, it may potentially decrease the severity of the impact that neuroticism, mental disorders, substance use disorders, and negative affect can have on an individual's life, or even assist in eliminating their presence, over time. Finally, it may effectively help some in navigating and overcoming grief or accepting the inevitability of death.

Keywords: Tantra; Śākta; deity yoga; *sādhana*; Devī; *bhāva*; mantra; embodiment; cultural phenomenology; transformation



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1. Introduction

This article focuses on the lived experience of twelve Western female practitioners of Śākta Tantrism¹ (*sādhakīs* or *yoginīs*) belonging to Laura Amazzone's *kula* (traditionally referred to as "family" or "clan" but also a "group of practitioners" or "community") who volunteered to participate individually in semi-structured, open-ended interviews via Zoom that lasted between one and a half hours to six hours (across multiple sessions in some cases). It offers a preliminary view of some of the data that were collected within the much larger scope of ongoing doctoral research that mainly examines how deity (*devatā*) yoga transforms Tibetan Buddhist and tantric Śākta practitioners' manner of relating to self, world, and others, in a Western context.² Other than Amazzone, all participants were given pseudonyms.

The roots of Śākta Tantrism have been posited by some to be traceable to India's Upper Paleolithic era and its "[...] concepts of a fertile mother goddess and ancient systems of her worship" (Joshi 2002, p. 39), as well as "[t]he growth of the cult of the Goddess between the third century B.C.E. and the first century B.C.E." (ibid., p. 42). Its development became more salient after the start of the Common Era, reaching a golden age during the 4th–6th century and continuing throughout India's medieval period (ibid., pp. 42, 50). The *sādhana* (disciplined practice) of Śākta Tantrism is centered on the worship of Śakti, the dynamic power that underlies and is expressed through all of creation and differentiation within the universe and is more directly knowable to humans in feminine form as Goddess (Devī) and Mother (Maa), the different aspects of which (e.g., compassion, beauty, warrior strength, etc.) manifest as a variety of female deities. In the case of Śākta *sādhana*, deity yoga refers to a process of self-deification that is meant to bring the practitioner to a liberating

realization that their inherent nature is identical to that of Devī's as *sat-cit-ānanda* (being-consciousness-bliss). Through a combination of meditative and ritual acts that include *japa* (recitation of mantras), *nyāsa* (installation of the power of mantras on the body), *mudra* (symbolic physical gestures), *upāsana* (contemplative/meditative worship), *puja* (ritual worship), and visualization, an invocation of and identification with a given deity is meant to be achieved within the practitioner's experience.

Since Amazzone's female guru from northeast India initiated her into *miśra Śrīvidyā*, which is a blend of both its Kaula and Samaya forms, and her male guru, a shaman from Kerala, India, who was born into a lineage (*paramparā*) devoted to Kālī initiated her into Kaula Śaktism in the broader sense, the practices that the *kula* engage in are a combination of both. This means that they perform both internal and external forms of practice and use, although only to a very limited degree, substances deemed taboo by orthodox Vedic standards. Although Amazzone was not appointed as a guru-successor, she was encouraged by her gurus to teach and form a *kula* in order to be a guiding light for *yoginīs* who may be in search of a more authentic and dedicated practice than what most of the current Western buffet of commodified adaptations of Tantra has to offer.³ She holds a master's degree in philosophy and religion, with a specialization in women's spirituality, and provides academic lectures, especially on Hindu goddess traditions.

To understand the transformational claims of these practitioners, it is first necessary to address the diverse forms and functions attributed to Devī that underpin their manner of relating to Her and their process of meaning-making. This includes the emic concepts of *bhāva* and *rasa* that are used to explain how these forms manifest within mundane reality. Following this, the article will discuss how the physical responses and shifts in perspective that unfold from the recitation of mantra are interpreted by practitioners as being affirmative, meaningful, noetic, and direct encounters with Devī. For them, a direct encounter implies merging with or embodying Her in ways that may sometimes enable transformation or healing to occur. To clarify how deity yoga might actualize long-term changes that transfer from the meditation cushion into daily life—as described by the testimonies of the final section of this paper—the section on mantra will provide an overview of points made by the field of ritual studies, practice and performativity theory, the cultural phenomenology of embodiment, perspectivity theory, and actor-network theory.⁴ The manner in which practice makes the abstract and transcendent immanent within the body, thereby enabling practitioners to realize meaning and transformation, will be further exemplified by their accounts of the impact of *nyāsa* and *mudra*. Finally, their narratives of the transformative impact of deity yoga will be organized across three main themes, namely: self-acceptance, compassion, and resilience; improved interpersonal relationships and interactions; and improved mental health and an acceptance of and re-framing of death. The findings in each theme will then be summarized according to some of the domains (affective, cognitive, conative, sense of self, social, and somatic) and categories that are defined in Lindahl et al.'s (2017) article and the *Phenomenology Codebook* that is appended to it.

2. What Is Devī?

2.1. Devī as Ādiśakti/Primordial Power

In answer to the question of what Devī is first and foremost, at an ultimate level, Amazzone provided the following description:

One thing I think is absolutely essential is not to use the article "the" because we never say, "the God," unless we're referencing a lesser god. She is Goddess, no "the". Capital "G". She is reality. She is the underlying reality within, without, She's not an archetype. Yes, there's a certain way that we can functionally look at Her as a role model, but She's beyond the collective unconscious. She's everything [...] She's the grand, undifferentiated, so vast, my mind can't even conceive it [...] She's absolute consciousness [...] She's the form and the formless, the immanent and the transcendent, She's all of that [...] She's God.

From this state of expansion, Sabrina explained that Devī contracts Herself through creation into as many forms as there are beings in existence “just to have the sheer joy of the experience”, which is the main purpose of everything. This is known as her *līlā* or divine play that manifests the *māyā* or illusion of relative reality as we experience it, which is interpreted in a positive manner by the Śākta tradition (Mukhopadhyay 2020, p. 51). This creative impulse takes effect by virtue of the trifurcation of Devī’s power into the power of will (*icchāśakti*), the power of action (*kriyāśakti*), and the power of knowledge (*jñānaśakti*) (Brooks 1990, p. 97).

By manifesting different aspects of Herself into the forms of gods and goddesses, Audrey explained that Devī’s otherwise ungraspable nature as the animating force of the universe becomes more accessible and relatable to us, and something that we can interact with. Through practice, Amazzone and her *kula* consider themselves to be entering into contact with Devī as a field of consciousness, and by focusing on a specific deity or manifestation of Her, they come to embody a pattern of energy that has its own unique *bhāva*. *Bhāvā* has many meanings, including attitude, condition, ecstatic state, emotion, experience, feeling, mood, nature, and state of being, among others (McDaniel 2018a, pp. 236–38; Smith 2006, pp. 307, 355). The *bhāva* that one experiences is induced by the *rasa* that one encounters—an abstract flavor or emotional essence that—in this case, is supernatural (*alaukika*). It transcends the realm of the senses but can be evoked through the natural world (McDaniel 2018b, p. 120). Prior to being applied to religious emotion, these concepts were expounded upon by Bharata (who wrote sometime between the second century B.C.E. and the second century C.E.) in terms of the aesthetic experience of art, according to which he defined the eight *rasas* as being: “[t]he loving or erotic, the comic, the tragic or pathetic, the furious, the heroic, the terrible, the disgusting, and the marvelous”, each of which respectively evoke the *bhāva* or “[...] moods of love, humor, sorrow or compassion, anger, courage, terror, loathing, and amazement” (ibid., p. 121). In the Śākta context, these *rasas* consist of Devī’s essences through which She interacts with or makes Herself known to her devotees when they perform *sādhana* or acts of devotion (*bhakti*), while *bhāva* refers to the temporary states of being that arise from encountering, immersing oneself in, or partaking of these essences (McDaniel 2018b, p. 135; Smith 2006, p. 355). When I asked Brenda how she knows that she has become the deity during practice or what signals this shift in her awareness, she described *bhāva* as follows:

There’s a definite feeling or mood and I think that’s the thing about Durgā, she has so many forms that to distinguish between the forms, one of them is like “what mood is that? What *bhāva* is that form?” [...] having that mood, that form, will be one of the markers [...] mostly it’s this feeling or mood: I am in the presence. That’s what it is.

While attempting to describe this experience, Amazzone stated that “[i]t’s like different levels of intimacy with a person. And I get to just experience another side of Her.” As Margaret specified, although each goddess is different,

[...] they work together, as much as singularly. But as a field of consciousness, not just a symbol: a living thing that you can personally interact with [...] So, it really is a field of consciousness that is moving through all of it, it’s not me doing a ritual and then transgressing reality. I think it’s real in-and-of-itself.

Outside of the ritual sphere, Devī’s power as divine creatrix and presence as creation can be perceived throughout nature and its plants and elements. As Sallie referred to the necessity of engaging in daily practice to maintain its effects as ‘plugging into that source’, I wondered if using the term “source” meant that she held an agnostic view of what Devī is. However, she answered that she does not. She relates to Devī as a natural force “with a capital N”, and her surroundings are a reminder of this power:

There’s vast wilderness here where you can literally step outside and feel the *bhāva*, feel the qualities [...] I feel like that pulse and all of the qualities of nature are constantly surrounding me and I relate it to Devī directly.

When I asked if she attributes agency to Devī then, she remarked that although unlike some of her fellow *kula* members, she does not feel that it is authentic to use language like “Maa made this happen,” she does believe that Devī has agency. Later, she mentioned that she is convinced that her encounters and interactions with the deities during visualization are really happening in another realm, due to how vivid they are, which highlights how the practitioner may relate to both the transcendent and immanent forms of Devī. Kaylah similarly referred to the manifestation of Devī’s presence in nature while explaining how despite having lost her yoga studio and job due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she still feels sustained and like everything is going to be okay. She attributes this to how her connection with Devī has been strengthened by moving to a remote area that is surrounded by forests and “all this Maa energy”. She feels as though the sudden changes and hardships that she has endured, and which led to this move, have purposefully brought her closer to that energy and granted her far more opportunities to immerse herself in it.

2.2. Devī as Self

As parts of Devī’s *līlā*, humans and the universe at large are not held to be qualitatively different but just the concrete manifestation of transcendent (*pāra*) divine energy to different degrees. This principle applies to the relationship between the body and the mind. Essentially, everything is made up of the same ontological substance and elements, with that which is of a subtle (*sūkṣma*) nature deemed closer to the primordial source than that which is coarser (*sthūla*). From this perspective, the greatest error lies in mistaking the mind and body and the body and world as being fundamentally separate, which in turn leads to a distinct sense of self that produces attachment and suffering. To remedy this, tantric metaphysics provide the template of the universe’s coming-into-being as a map by which one can attempt, through *sādhana*, to navigate the inner and outer planes of the embodied self and reverse the process of devolution into differentiation, thereby re-cognizing (*pratyabhijñā*) one’s true nature as expansive, limitless wholeness, and reidentifying with Devī (Brooks 1990, pp. 4, 59, 67–68, 106; Kripal 2009, pp. 239, 243–4; Padoux 2002, pp. 165–70; Timalisina 2012, pp. 77–78). What is primarily transformative or healing about deity yoga is thus how it enables the practitioner to overcome “[...] impediments that interfere with realizing (i.e., knowing and achieving) one’s Self-nature in its full identity and freedom” (Fields 2001, p. 168). As Amazzone phrased it:

We’re always practicing to remember that we’re not these bodies, we’re not these thoughts, that the greater reference is this particular form [of Devī] and these different forms [goddesses] have different functions, so different experiences when we’re in that *sādhana* [...] She IS us and we’re working to uncover that [...] She’s absolutely not separate, so it’s about how you can hear your intuitive voice (buddhi) and begin to see and extend that to “there She is, in that tree, in that cat,” and it’s not just a concept, it’s really having an experience [...] what is your experience of Her, and what is that inner knowing telling you? [...] we don’t need anyone between us [...] She’s outside ourselves in the sense of being unlimited—we are limited. We are Her, but our consciousness is limited, it’s in this container, and we can only go so far when we’re identifying with our body and our mind and so forth [...] what graces us is that She takes these anthropomorphic forms so that we can relate to Her.

From this non-dual view, it follows that everything required to reach the absolute is already contained within oneself; thus, the body is utilized as an altar in *sādhana* and worship that is concentrated on the different levels of the body and its subtle energetic counterpart is imagined and experienced as being tantamount to worshipping and bringing oneself into contact with Devī (Samuel 2008, p. 286; Timalisina 2012, p. 74). As an esotericist for the past forty years, Brenda explained that the Hellenistic system of theurgy, which posits that “we are all part of deity and can interact with deity in the world and in ourselves”, had played a central role in her life. However, it completed her life arc to discover this principle being

carried out and experienced as a living system through Tantra and Śrīvidyā. When asked what Devī is, she responded:

What I understand is that Devī is us, that we carry Her also, so there's this gigantic, infinite consciousness of which I am a very small part. But I *am* part of that consciousness, and I can tune into other parts of that consciousness that are greater than me and help to sustain me when I am in difficulty. Also, to expand me to the joy of living and the joy of *sādhana* in its ultimate goal, which is to merge my consciousness into that great consciousness.

Inhabiting one's body with such a co-extensive view through practice allows for an inter-subjective sense of self to develop over time, meaning that many things otherwise held to be separate and closed off from one another are instead experienced as being in relation and thus liable to influence, overlap, penetrate, exchange, or share something of themselves with each other (Johnston 2010, p. 352). Indeed, tantric philosophy and *sādhana* blur any strict distinction perceived between inner and outer levels of "reality", that is to say, between the physically manifest "out there" and what is internally experienced and imagined. As Kaylah expressed:

Do I believe that there is a goddess or deity of the feminine divine? It's because I'm here to experience it. It is me [...] it's really, really all about self-awareness and connection, self-awareness that you are a source, that you have a connection to Source [...] it [the practice] gives you more connectivity to the world around you and to the world within you.

Nevertheless, although some within the *kula* accept, understand, and resonate with the above on a conceptual level, they have not yet fully internalized it. For example, Rachel, who has been practicing in the *kula* for the past three years, stated that in the Śākta and non-dual traditions

[...] you believe that you are ultimately the deity. I feel like there's more acceptance for that, but I still don't think that I'm a deity. I mean first of all, I'm learning all of the time, just constantly learning about what these ideas might mean and the complexity of them. But I certainly don't think that I'm a deity. But I definitely have much more self-compassion.

Others, like April (see Section 2.4) who espouses a non-theistic view, overcome this difficulty by interpreting it differently. In her words: "I come at it from the perspective that the divine is no different from me, versus like I am the divine, if that makes sense." Besides, some also emphasized how their life paths as householders, with partners, children, or certain responsibilities and careers, require them to resist fully merging into this realization and to maintain their normative ego identity so that they can function socially and carry out their roles.

2.3. Devī as Maa: Supportive Mother and Loving Presence

Among the many roles (child, friend, lover) that Devī is said to play through her interactions with devotees, this group of practitioners relates most prominently to her as the Divine Mother or Maa. Despite the wrathful or fierce appearance that Devī's forms sometimes take, and which can be unsettling to some, Śākta devotees come to perceive the sweetness that lies behind it (McDaniel 2018a, p. 44). Referring to Devī's simultaneously fierce and protective nature, Sadie stated: "I experience Kālī as the most loving, the fiercest mother. She's the mother who will lift the fucking car off the baby that is trapped beneath." For Margaret, who has been in the *kula* since May 2020 but exploring the world of yoga since 2002, this realization occurred gradually. She admitted that in the beginning, she did have an underlying fear, stemming from her prior Christian background, that goddesses such as Kālī were demonic and going to harm her. However, this changed:

[...] I've really sensed the gentleness and motherliness of that and come to see their powers as very much transformative and into the light, or a more loving consciousness [...] Even the fiercer manifestations have a sweet and loving side

that can be felt because they are essentially all mothers [...] They're like mothers that birth my soul into maturity, into the world.

Indeed, it is due to their effectiveness as catalysts of change that Amazzone normally makes her students firstly engage with fiercer manifestations of Devī in their practice. By opening oneself to Devī's *bhayānaka rasa* or terrible/frightful essence, one is made to first contend with one's own less-desirable qualities and habits to work through one's conditioning and obscurations. As the section on Devī as self (Section 2.2) elucidated, gaining a clarity and awareness of Devī's essentially loving nature is the same as insightfully experiencing one's own. As Kaylah describes it:

There's a presence of love, an ultimate feeling that my life has deeper meaning through this work—that I am in the process of life and that I'm cherished and loved, and that I'm meant to be here doing this. It's a re-finding or a re-remembering of the soul self.

The sense of familiarity that characterizes the kind of love that is felt to derive from connecting with Devī's presence was further described by Rachel as follows:

The relationship to the deity is the sweetest thing [...] It's remarkable to me to just sit and within a minute of establishing the field, there's like a feeling of bliss. It doesn't extend the entire time, but there's this sense of homecoming that's very physical—literally like I was washed over, I'm in the presence of this love or this presence that is love.

This comforting reunion was also referred to by Amazzone when she responded to my question of what she aspires most to attain through the practice:

I want to merge. I want to return home to Her and to that sense of how at home I have felt with this connection to Her, whether it's in *sādhana* or through some mystical experience I've had. There's so much in that heart space that has been so real and so resonant.

Similarly, Cheryl described what she experiences when she engages in deity yoga as follows:

For me, it feels like this overall merging with the Mother in a way that I've never been loved in the physical. Each form of Her offers a different essence of that deeper love.

While giving examples of the latter, she referred to how some forms of Devī and their corresponding practices provide her with strength and a sense of being carried and less alone in the world, while others she turns to when she feels a need to be nourished. This supportive quality is something that Kaylah also strongly experiences through the practice:

There's a connection and a protective, almost like the many arms of Devī, that are there to hold that space for me, so that maybe when the world gets tough, I don't have to hold it all by myself.

She further described her experience of this quality as being accompanied by a positive kind of humbleness and humility that overcomes her when the connection to it is strong in the following sense:

That I'm important enough to be seen, but I'm humble enough to realize that I don't have to carry the world, it's not my responsibility [...] the connective Spirit showing me that I'm important and loved but balancing that with the sense of being, when you get those direct experiences, of being humbled [...] and gracious and full of gratitude to have the experience in the first place. It's like that deeper sense of gratitude to be privileged enough to experience this.

This constitutes an example of darshan, an ecstatic experience of mutual recognition between the devotee and deity, during which the devotee not only sees the deity, but also experiences themselves being seen by the deity while in its presence (McDaniel 2018a, p. 236).

Ultimately, the love and affection that is cultivated in this relationship with Devī is that of a child toward a mother, which is characterized in Śāktism, among other Hindu traditions, as *vatsalya bhāva* (Coburn 1991, p. 167; McDaniel 2018b, p. 122). Referring to her upbringing in the conservative Midwestern United States, Amazzone remarked how compared to the concept of God the Father, who always felt so distanced and unresponsive to one's suffering, Devī "comes immediately", particularly in Her form as Durgā, which in the *Devī Māhātmyam*, incites devotees to call upon Her under any circumstance: "If you're distressed—I'll come; if the world is burning—call me, I'll come. If there's an epidemic—call me, I'll come." By this, Amazzone meant that Devī's presence is often immediately felt or manifested through certain signs. When this fails to be the case, she admitted that one may feel a sense of abandonment like a wounded child but that one learns to take a larger view. The latter is facilitated by how sacred scriptures such as the *Devī Māhātmyam*, which figures prominently in devotional practice, teach that although Devī may at times act in ways that appear negative or senseless, whether that be characterized by withdrawal, punishment, or conflict, it usually has the purpose of achieving the greater good (Humes 2009, p. 314).

Amazzone's descriptions of her moments of anger and frustration upon wondering where Devī is or why She did not intervene in certain situations are reminiscent of both the *bhāva* or mood of anger and complaint and the *raudra* rasa that one finds expressed within Śākta poetry when anger is conveyed toward Devī's neglect or ill treatment of her children, and the misery that this causes to humankind (McDaniel 2018b, pp. 122, 124). As McDaniel (2018b) explains, "[t]he heroic devotee is one who can perceive her through the *māyā* of human experience. Anyone can love a god of blessing and happiness", but the Śākta "[...] devotee is one who can see beyond pain", which brings forth devotional love (p. 135). This was also brought up by Amazzone as she stressed the importance of persevering with devotion in the practice to obtain results or receive Maa's grace:

And what about a true devotion, when you're there at the bedside of your beloved who's dying? And as much as it's killing you and breaking your heart, you're crying to Her, or you haven't given up on Her. And I think that's what is so important, is to be able to experience our devotion in the most painful and horrific of times and continue.

Another way of responding to and questioning Devī's neglect is through the tragic or *karuṇā rasa* that it evokes, which consists of sadness and pity for the plight of others that can be transformed into compassion (McDaniel 2018b, pp. 122, 127–9). When Amazzone's *kula* gathers, they 'dedicate' the power that they have cultivated together in practice (meaning they intentionally direct it) to whatever global cause or conflict appears to need upliftment or resolution, and they do the same for fellow members within the *kula* who may be going through a hard time and unable to practice themselves. This is something that they are also encouraged to do in their private practice, and it involves surrendering to Devī's wisdom as one would do when falling at the feet of one's mother and asking for advice. As Amazzone put it: "it's like: Okay Maa, what is the greater picture? We don't know but please respond to the distress or the suffering of others." As an independent social worker and lawyer, Margaret has found Devī to be very much responsive to this. As she explained:

I will take problems to Her in my own *sādhana* and I'm amazed at how things unravel for the best outcome in my work. Ideas are given or pathways are opened up, as if by magic. Solutions found, changes of heart in the right people. Justice [...] I've had to deal with HUGE corruption issues [...] or wrong, poor decisions that have affected people's lives very negatively, and I'll be given some information or just a strength to see something through or speak something that needs to be spoken, or be silent when needed. It's as if it's bigger than me this stuff and it is in service to others, if that makes sense.

These examples demonstrate how Devī's functions as universal Mother or doer of miracles (namely, "*aghatanaghatanapatiyasi*", that is, the feminine divine who is able to make the

impossible possible”, Dr. Anway Mukhopadhyay, personal communication, 23 February 2022) and *Ādiguru* (primordial/first teacher) or *vidyā* (knowledge/wisdom) itself can overlap for devotees. As Mukhopadhyay (2020) put it, “[...] her compassion manifests itself through her enlightening function as a divine guru” (p. 84), the latter of which will be further elaborated in Section 2.5.

Despite relating to Devī as Divine Mother in all of these ways, it is important to note that Amazzone and her *kula* do consider “She” to be non-gendered at the level of ultimate reality. They explained that Devī’s qualities can be embodied by anyone but that the notion of femininity that is associated with them due to women’s similarly generative capacities is a useful metaphor in times when women are lacking strong models that they can identify with or realize their inherent divinity through. Amazzone made this point while comparing the empowerment of experiencing oneself as Maa Kālī, as opposed to the figure of Mary in Christianity, as follows:

To get out of the limitations of Mary, who’s not even a god, she’s a mother of a god, but she doesn’t even have divine status, she’s the virgin or the whore, and it’s like “okay, well where do I fit in?” And to experience myself as Kālī, who defies all of this consensus reality.

In her book *Goddess Durgā and Sacred Female Power*, Amazzone (2010) explains this issue further through the example of how Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devī, better known affectionately as Amma, has addressed it:

She contends that we must all cultivate the qualities of “universal motherhood”, qualities of fierce compassion, protection, courage, and unconditional love. Anyone—woman or man—who has the courage to overcome the limitations of the mind can attain the state of universal motherhood [...]. The love of awakened motherhood is a love and compassion felt not only toward one’s own children, but toward all people, animals and plants, rocks and rivers—a love extended to all of nature, to all beings [...]. This love, this motherhood, is Divine Love—and that is God. (p. 207)

Thus, as the *Devī Māhātmyam* teaches, “[...] the Goddess is female because of her embodiedness and creative power, but she is also female because of her wondrous, compassionate use of virile power in service to others.” (Humes 2009, p. 316). While Humes’ (2009) fieldwork in Vindhyachal has indicated that perceiving these qualities as suggesting an isomorphism between Devī and human women is not common among devotees who are not Śākta, Śaiva, or tantric, and sometimes not even espoused by these, others have suggested that this correspondence makes it easier for female practitioners to identify with Devī than it is for male ones who must transcend their gender to do so (Dobia 2014, p. 70; cited in Mukhopadhyay 2020, p. 124). Furthermore, there exists accounts of *sādhakī* who were thought to have progressed in their practice and achieved enlightenment more rapidly than their male counterparts for these reasons (Mukhopadhyay 2020, p. 88). Such a view was also held by Swami Vivekananda, who believed that since the spiritual wisdom that had been transmitted to him via his guru Ramakrishna was essentially derived from the ultimate guru and mother Kālī, it would be more effective and productive to entrust it to female recipients (ibid., pp. 133–34).

2.4. Non-Theistic Interpretations of Devī

Out of the eleven of Amazzone’s students whom I interviewed, three held non-theistic views of what Devī is. April, who has been in the *kula* for thirteen years and is married to a research scientist, answered that she does not believe in an interventionist Devī. To her, “[t]he divine is that which is unconditional.” Elena, who has been part of the *kula* for the past eight years, leads a “hardcore traditional finance life on the outside” and identifies as an atheist. Having studied ethnography at the start of her university education, she came to understand gods and goddesses in the framework of myth, which she explained serves the social function of enabling us to navigate life better and to hold society together so that

it can function. When I asked her if this means that the divine is not an external reality to her, she answered:

Right [...] The orientation that I take is that these are our essential natures [...] they're just myths to show us things about ourselves and they're teachings. They are not doers; they are frameworks to understand life a little better.

When I asked what identifying with the deity in practice means to her then, she responded:

[...] it's kind of like changing up your wardrobe to feel a little bit different. If you're having a shit day and you put on a sun dress [...] people respond to you differently and you're like "wow, the world isn't that bad." You didn't do anything different. You just put on different clothes and then you started interpreting the world differently because the world responded differently to you. So, when you do these practices, what is the wardrobe that you're bringing into the world? I don't really know how else to describe it. You're just kind of tapping into different energies, like what clothes are you putting on? How are you presenting yourself to the world? [...] And how does that affect the world around me?

Ultimately, she explained, the practice is about "the best way to embody something that we need to have" in order to become aligned with and express "the things that are most real in us in order to participate in harmony." When we do the latter, we are fulfilling our dharma, which she defines as our "instinctive role in the world." Although her belief in the principles of karma and dharma may seem to clash with being an atheist, she provided a lengthy explanation of how they are scientific and part of how the natural world works, which will be discussed once more in Section 4.3. Furthermore, this is not unknown in the traditional literatures, where an atheistic orientation might be combined seamlessly with karma-dharma doctrines. This sensibility—that karma and dharma are natural (scientific) laws of the cosmos—can be assimilated by practitioners into their Western scientific worldviews with little concern or revision (Dasgupta 1992, p. 258).⁵

As a former research scientist who is now pursuing a doctoral degree in clinical psychology and as one who has been part of the *kula* for the past seven years, Sadie also found it important to clarify the following nuances about her relationship to certain concepts pertaining to Devī:

So, when I use the word "Maa" when I say "Maa is doing this" or "Goddess is doing this", I think I want to just frame it in the context of my agnosticism, which is still very much there. So, it's not like this dogmatic belief in this literal entity or being that is out there and has omnipotent control and power over my life. As a human being, I think it's important to take responsibility for my own choices and I'm turned off by dogmatic religious beliefs in general. I think it's dangerous and limits human beings. And so, when I say "Maa is doing this" or "Goddess made it all happen", I'm not meaning it in a literal way, even though I am. It's truly my subjective experience that I do not universalize. I think what I can say is truth with a capital 'T' for me is that the mystery is, at the end of the story, unknowable and unnameable. And She will always be a mystery in that way. So, any time we try to frame it in terms of dogmatic, rigid beliefs about who or what this thing that we're calling Maa is, I get cringy and I don't want that to be interpreted as the narrative that I'm espousing. I want it to be understood that you don't have to be a believer to follow this path. It's not about belief, it's about direct experience.

In response to her statement about belief being unnecessary, I asked "What about devotion?", to which she replied: "Devotion happens on its own. It's not something you have to force. Devotion happens when you have the experience." Then, I asked her whether Maa can be qualified as a universal force, and her answer emphasized Devī's ineffable nature as follows:

That's a good way to put it. I would say Maa is a reality that is experienced in different ways through different mind-body configurations. Whether She's an energy, a force, a field of consciousness, the matrix that we're all swimming in. You could try to bring in concepts from physics or quantum physics but they would all fall short.

Thus, as these testimonies of some of Amazzone's students who have been in the *kula* the longest will continue to demonstrate throughout this article, the way the practices and their effects can be flexibly approached through practitioners' individual beliefs, intentions, and needs renders them accessible and efficacious even to those who hold a more secular or agnostic view of what Devī is.

2.5. Devī as Mantra, Wisdom, and Ādiguru

Following from these understandings of Devī as the absolute source of creation that is omnipresent throughout the phenomenal world is the concept that She is the *Ādiguru* of the world: the very first preceptor of spiritual teachings. Whereas mainstream Hinduism⁶ considers Devī to be "[...] a doer of miracles rather than a speaker/teacher" (Mukhopadhyay 2020, p. 82), scriptures that are Śākta in nature and prescriptive with regards to how to worship Devī or her different forms tend to ascribe both functions to her. As this *kula* identifies as descending from lineages that were heavily based on oral, rather than textual transmission, scriptures accompany their *sādhana* only to a limited extent. The exception is the *Devī Māhātmyam* ("Glory of the Goddess"), which is also known as the *Chandīpāṭha* ("Chandi Path") or *Durgā Śaptasati* ("The 700 Verses to Durgā"). This was written sometime between the third to fourth century and it is the earliest known text "[...] in which the object of worship is conceptualized as Goddess, with a capital G" (Coburn 1991, p. 16) and therefore not only consists of "the single most important Sanskrit source on goddess worship" (Humes 2009, p. 304) but has also been said to contain the "earliest systemic statement of Śākta philosophy" (Coburn 1991, p. 109). It has been interpreted by certain exegetes to present Devī as both *Parama Vidyā* (highest wisdom or ultimate knowledge) and its purveyor, upon which our *mukti* (liberation) depends (Coburn 1991, pp. 166–7; Mukhopadhyay 2020, pp. 42–43). In other words,

She is the speech, the content of the speech, and the speaker at once [...] Devī's words are, as it were, not just words producing knowledge, but Knowledge/Wisdom transmitting itself through words [...] they are not knowledge-producing, but knowledge-bearing. (Mukhopadhyay 2020, p. 42)

Therefore, what is recited from the *Devī Māhātmyam* are not mere verses but "[...] mantras, verbal manifestations of the Goddess herself" (Coburn 1991, p. 133) that are immediately revelatory and bring "[...] the reciter [to] participate [in] the very reality of the Goddess" (ibid., p. 117). This stems from the concept found within Vedic literature that speech (*vāc*) is the earliest form of the manifest world as energy and personified as a goddess, while transcendental or sacred sound (*śabda-brahman*/the Absolute as Sound) is a primordial substance that can exert physical effects. This substance is sometimes likened to an earlier notion of *rasa* as a liquid essence, or bound with *prāṇa*, a vital wind or breath of a vibratory nature, both of which are thought to pervade the cosmos and sustain life, while enabling the individual through contact to experience their innate consciousness and immortality (Padoux 2010, pp. 166–7, 173–4; Timalisina 2015, p. 51; Wilke 2014b, p. 134). Since the form that speech takes as the very first expression of the world is said to be the Sanskrit language, the latter is referred to as *Mātṛkāś* or Mother, the power of which is spread across its fifty phonemes (*varga*), which thus become conceived of as *Mātṛkāś* in the plural sense of being embodiments of mother deities who are divided into eight different groups according to their cosmic functions. Tantra took this a step further with the concept of *bīja* (seed) mantras, which are series of monosyllabic sound patterns posited to contain the heart of their own respective deities. In addition, the phonemes came to represent the limbs of deities. As formulaic arrangements constituted of Sanskrit syllables and phonemes, mantras (also

referred to as *vidyā* when respective to female deities) are therefore the very embodiment of deities that are birthed from the *Mātṛkā*s. Altogether, these tantric concepts brought a complex visual dimension to *japa* (mantra recitation), enabling an identification between the practitioner's body, that of the deity, and the cosmos, which will be further touched upon in Section 3.2 (Timalsina 2015, pp. 51–52; Timalsina 2016, pp. 7–8; Wilke 2014b, pp. 134–5).

In summary, the very sound and speech act through which Devī expresses Herself is the corporeal manifestation of Her essence as self-reflexive Consciousness, which reveals and imparts knowledge and wisdom of the highest sense, thereby dispelling ignorance of the nature of reality and self. As the practitioner engages in identification with a form of Devī through mantra and its accompanying ritual practices, they come to have a lived experience of these truths and thus of the nature of Devī as residing within themselves, which demonstrates how Devī is both external *Ādiguru* and inner guru. The following section will focus precisely upon how my participants encounter Devī in this sonic form.

3. Encountering and Merging with Devī

3.1. Sensuous Meaning-Making: Mantra

One of the primary and most accessible or direct ways through which my participants have encountered Devī in their practice is through mantra recitation. Although we did also discuss it in terms of its *manasika* or mental/internal form, this article will only address *vachaka* mantra *japa*, meaning its recitation aloud, for the sake of brevity. What is essential to take away from the previous sub-section is that as the energetic body of the deity, mantra constitutes a use of speech as evocative bodily act, the form of which does not function as a descriptive sign pointing to a referent beyond itself or absent but rather consists in itself of immanent presence (Biernacki 2012, pp. 222–3). Phrased differently, mantra consists of a use of language that is constructive and not representative (Timalsina 2016, p. 10)—as a means of bringing a given deity into presence and directly engaging with them, the reciter's use of mantra is intended to obtain the grace of the deity and its powers to immediately act upon and transform the self, world, and others, including one's state of affairs, instead of conveying meaning (Biernacki 2012, p. 221; Timalsina 2016, pp. 9–10). In this sense, mantra may be considered a “technology of the self”, which is to say, a method that is used to act upon the mind and body, with the intention of bringing about a particular transformation (Samuel 2008, p. 339; Wilke 2014b, p. 137). Although mantra, depending on its kind, often does not carry semantic meaning in the traditional sense, its meaningfulness is nevertheless actively realized in a continuously evolving way through its performance and the impact that it has, especially at an embodied level (Timalsina 2015, p. 15; Wilke 2014b, pp. 136, 138). As Sadie explained, “the intellectual teachings will not give you the experience” that reveals meaning—first, stated Cheryl, there is “is the responsiveness of the body, and then the knowing.” Indeed, the manner and force with which mantra in its external form is recited renders the experience of sound as being one of visceral collision—it is immersive and stimulates a reaction in both the reciter and others who may be present to hear it, rendering the latter inevitably into participants (Wilke 2014b, pp. 132, 141). As Csordas (2008) has put it, “[s]peaking is a form of sonorous touching” (p. 118). When Audrey hears a mantra, she feels it imprint itself on her. According to Sabrina, not only are *bīja* mantras “Her *par excellence*—a type of DNA” that possesses “conscious wisdom in its vibration”, but they also “act as a radio dial” that aligns the frequency of one's body and being with that of the deity. This analogy was also used by Sallie, when she explained that while reciting *bīja* mantras,

[...] you're trying to align with the deity sonically, and so you're trying to turn the station from static to pure sound. So, a lot of these sounds that are included in mantras, they're there for a specific reason, to calibrate your energy in that aligned way.

Prior to being in Amazzone's *kula*, Sadie experienced this “attunement” when her teacher of Trika Śaivism whispered her first transmission of a tantric mantra into her ear—her entire

body began shaking, and the more she worked with the mantra and her body's physical response to it, the more she felt her own vibration "kind of shift to accommodate the mantra" and became cognizant of other frequencies over time. This, she states, paved the way for her being sufficiently attuned and receptive to that of Goddess later on. Elena believes that there is a science behind this capacity of mantra to change "our little cell-body-wardrobe" that Western medicine has yet to catch onto, and Cheryl similarly referred to its capacity to "shift the chemistry of the cells and blood [...] and heal the patterns contained in the body and through our actual DNA." Such statements are consonant with how Śākta practitioners also refer to mantra as "[...] *vidyā*, literally meaning both knowledge and science" (Brooks 1990, p. 62). Another interesting analogy of mantra as "[...] the technological software of Tantric *sādhana*" (ibid.), like that of the radio, was made by Margaret, who said that "meaning [...] gets revealed as it needs to be" because mantras are

[...] like keys to a Lamborghini, to a car. They're all very different and have different effects. They have power. Let's just say, they work when they need to and they teach you what they're doing [...] the energy is formed and the presence is invoked and the effects are made or the knowledge and the download is given. But mantra is like a vibration, and it locks onto whatever is in my unconscious, where it needs to go, or my psyche. And then, as if by an encryption [sic], pulls up that unconscious part of me to resonate at exactly the same vibration as the mantra and then poof, the work is done, and it floods the system.

When I asked Sallie if it was possible to articulate more precisely how she responds to chanting mantra at an embodied level, she struggled to describe it in words:

[...] I have a very specific experience, like when I'm chanting the Sanskrit alphabet with precision in a very specific pattern, I can feel ... it's kind of likened to ... the only way that I can express it, is that it feels like little windmills kind of going off and lighting up in different directions. But I've also experienced a kind of mapping of light with the different sounds and the activation of those sounds in a specific way, in a specific pattern. I can feel ... I mean, feel isn't even the right word, it doesn't do it justice, the word 'feel', but like I can "feel" pulsations, vibrations, a mapping of light, little windmills, certain things activated in my physical and subtle body very poignantly.

In many cases, such embodied experiences enable practitioners to overcome the questioning mind, which demonstrates how the body is related to as a medium for the authentication of the experience of the real (Meyer 2012, pp. 28–29). Rachel discussed how the unexpected physicality of her experiences during the practice repeatedly challenged her tendency of always wanting explanations and cemented her faith in the unknown. As an example of this, she recounted one of her first experiences of learning the mantra of a goddess in the *kula*: "That night, I slept with a fever, sweating, and I had a crazy rash that was traveling all over my body." The next day, when Amazzone asked the *kula* how their night had gone, Rachel was amazed to hear one woman after another recounting similar symptoms. In response to this, Amazzone reassured them that these are typical effects of the practice that are associated with the *bhāva* induced by the *rasa* of the goddess it was focused upon, and signs that it is working. Indeed, the latter are what Abhinavagupta, the late tenth to early eleventh century exegete of Trika Śaivism, qualified as *vyabhicaribhāvas*—secondary emotions or signs that in this case, the practitioner or devotee shifted into an empathetic, single-pointed state of resonance or immersion with the deity that allowed them to savor its *rasa* or emotional essence, which, depending on the specific kind of the latter, can manifest as sweating, trembling, hairs standing on end, or tears of joy, among many others (Biernacki 2011, p. 265; McDaniel 2018b, p. 122). This highlights the active and felt dimension that is attributed to the act of listening in Indian culture, with the recipient of the *rasa* conveyed by the mantra being qualified as *sahṛdaya* or "one of the same heart" with it (Mukhopadhyay 2020, p. 154). The transformative and liberating potential of attaining such a state lies in how it involves a transcendence of the egoic self and the dichotomy

between self and other (or subject and object) that moves the individual toward universality and enables an expansion of their subjectivity (Biernacki 2011, pp. 267–9). This in turn calms the *vyrttis*, which Tantra defines as “the activities of mind that produce bondage and suffering” (Fields 2001, p. 165). Rachel emphasized that she had not been given any indication that this was possible beforehand and did not associate her symptoms with the practice until Amazzone framed them in this way. She further explained that these types of experiences made her

[...] more conscious of the physical things as perhaps having a meaning, whereas before I wasn't living that consciousness. I want to almost say that I didn't have enough respect for myself to pay attention to my body or think that my body could be related to my overall Being [...] so now I make a point of mentioning them and then Laura or other people in the *kula* will give feedback. And it's been fascinating in doing different practices, it's so beautiful that women all over the world, doing a variation on a similar practice, are having similar experiences, it's just wild. And even having similar symptoms, spiritual experiences, daydreams—just across the spectrum, where you're like: “what the fuck just happened to me?” So, that's been reassuring and also very reinforcing, let's say to be like: “Okay, I had this wild experience, I don't know what's going on.” And to hear that five or ten other people had a similar type of thing—it's like “wow, thank you, I can keep going forward with renewed assurance.”

Although Brenda had a similar experience, unlike Rachel, she was already aware of this possibility and anticipated it as a sign of her progress. She explained that when she first started learning mantra recitation, she felt something during choir practice (a hobby apart from the *kula* and practice) and humorously asked herself: “What is that? I have a rash! The stigmata have arrived! I'm somebody now!”

Thus, even when a mantra that does read like a regular use of language, such as the verses of the *Devī Māhātmyam*, is recited, it is important to recognize that an understanding of what it intends to convey or effect may be reached via means that do not necessarily involve a cognitive grasping of it and may be more unconscious (Coburn 1991, pp. 156, 173–4). For example, mantra can be said to connect the body and the mind or both interior and exterior spaces of the self and to create new forms of bodily awareness (Wilke 2012, pp. 63, 73; Wilke 2014a, p. 108; Wilke 2014b, p. 137) because it involves a host of physical skills, including the use of breath and bodily gestures, that orient perception and can only be adequately replicated by first attending to the body of another performing it, with one's own body. The latter process consists of what Csordas has termed a “somatic mode of attention”, which is a culturally elaborated and transmitted stance with which one attends through the body to other bodies in a specific situation or surrounding. This highlights how attention is not merely enacted through the mind and gaze but involves the entire body (Csordas 1993, pp. 138–49; Hüskens 2011, pp. 196–7, 205, 207). Through this process of allowing oneself to be affected (meaning disposed or “attuned” in a certain way) by difference (something unlike one's default state), one's subjectivity becomes effected (meaning changed), which generates meaning (Latour 2004, p. 210). This was demonstrated by Rachel's testimony in terms of the new awareness that she gained toward her body. In the course of the guru-initiate relationship, such a relational mode will have been learned so that by the time the initiate is deemed ready to obtain the secret transmission of mantras and use them on their own, they will be attuned to the full breadth of uses of the body that constitute the technique they wish to acquire; by taking full notice of what is occurring with another's body, with one's own body, one gains a poignant awareness of the state of similar processes within oneself and how to control them. An intersubjective basis, the possibility for shared experience despite inhabiting separate subjectivities, will thereby have been established, enabling mimesis, which is learning how to replicate or become the other through the faculty to mimic (Csordas 2008, pp. 117–9; Ishii 2013, pp. 796, 802) and constitutes an important step for being able to embody the deity. While this way that mantra and its transmission disposes bodies to encounter itself may explain how, as Rachel pointed out,

so many different people can have similar experiences, there is always the possibility for the unforeseen or differences to emerge owing to the contingency that is inherent to the dynamic underlying the interaction between people, things, and settings (Ishii 2012, pp. 373–4, 380–1; Latour 2004, pp. 212–3). What’s more, since the prescribed nature of ritual practice positions itself as being external to the practitioner, it can be apprehended and readjusted to their intentions or beliefs (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, p. 89), allowing for a “[...] palimpsest of new perspectives on the mantra” (Rao 2019, p. 98) to emerge over time that extends its longevity and maintains its relevance.

However, it is insufficient for this process to be enacted purely in terms of bodily disposition, behavior, or appearance—it must be accompanied by an entry into the perspective of the divine, akin to the example of becoming *sahṛdaya* as described above. According to the theory of perspectivity, this is possible by taking on a “double perspective”, meaning that upon encountering a different perspective, we allow it to *enter* and play itself *through* us, while our subjectivity becomes temporarily decentralized. This allows us, upon emerging from that state, to recognize that the self has been altered, and to modify our manner of relating to the other (the divine in this case) to become a more fully realized version of whatever the relational position consists of (be that a devotee responding to Devī or embodying Devī oneself) (Ishii 2013, pp. 798–800). In other words, “[a] new self-image is achieved by the dislocation and relocation of attention and shifting agency from human to divine self” (Wilke 2018, p. 34). This vacillation in perspectives was mentioned by Rachel as follows:

I think there are many moments, I’m sure you’ve heard this too, where people say that the mantra becomes you. And if we believe, which I do, that the mantra is just an embodiment of the deity, there are these moments where it’s almost like a slip stream or something—you’re coming in and out, you’re melding. So, my experiences have been that sort of slip stream [...] you get to a place where the mantra becomes you or the mantra takes over.

Once the repeated work of mimesis allows integration to happen, a “habitus”⁷ becomes formed, meaning that these dispositions and uses of the body that are patterned in a specific way gradually become like second nature (Csordas 1990, p. 11; Csordas 2011, pp. 140–1), constituting a “knowing” how without thinking, or performative thinking (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, p. 136). April referred to all of this in her own way, explaining that *sādhana* constructs “a different visceral memory in your body that becomes more automatic” over time, allowing one to turn to a specific practice for its intended effect without needing to make a conscious effort to reach it. Margaret described the immediacy of this shift as being like “getting into a Tardis”, while Sallie explained that the different kinds of “feeling tones” that her body has become attuned to experiencing in a very vivid and palpable way upon encountering a deity in practice create pathways that enable her to directly re-establish that connection with the deity upon recollecting them.

Returning to the tantric concept that humans are reflections of Devī in microcosmic form, they too, like the manifest world of Her creation, are thought to depend on speech as the basis of their existence; gaining self-awareness and an ability to relate to the world and orient oneself within it—to be fully present—are all thought to depend initially on speech (Brooks 1996, p. 129; Padoux 2010, pp. 170–1, 173). As the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty argued, speech can be understood as being primarily an “[...] act or phonetic gesture in which one takes up an existential position in the world” (Csordas 1990, p. 25). In this sense, speech as a bodily act alone has immanent meaning, which is later followed by articulate thoughts and ideas (Csordas 1990, p. 25; Padoux 2010, p. 173). Thus, by engaging in *japa*, particularly that of *bīja* mantras, which consist more of a pure expression of sounds deemed primeval, the practitioner re-enacts Devī’s eternal act of self-revelation and creation, thereby positioning themselves as being existentially related to the divine and participating in its reality (Csordas 1990, pp. 24–28, 31). In doing so, they experience a pre-objective or non-discursive form of speech that is experienced as a deep presence of the body unfolding itself toward the world, through which sound is not interpreted,

but felt. This is perfectly exemplified by an experience that Sabrina had just had during the same week of our interview, which consisted of an unprecedented level of merging with the object of her meditative practice. Although she would not specify what *sādhana* she had been doing or which goddess it involved due to her vows of secrecy, she was about one quarter into performing 108 *japa* on her *mala* (rosary), when the mantra turned into her, which is a shift that she qualified as being huge. As I tried to understand what distinguished this experience from others in terms of the level of separation or identification that normally characterizes her practice-related experiences, she provided the following detailed explanation, while diving back into the felt dimension of this memory with her eyes closed, punctuating her speech with strong gestures:

I've had experiences with chanting where the mind has become very quiet and absorbed into the mantra, but this was the first shift I had where the mantra actually was my voice. Like I'm talking to you in these words, the mantra was actually MY voice, MY language, my real song, versus me somehow outside chanting a mantra, or getting absorbed into the vibration and floating on the vibration. It actually became me singing a song, but they were my words, this is who I was. It became my voice, it was my song, my language, it was me singing this out to the world: "HEAR ME, HEAR THIS, I AM SPEAKING TO YOU!" Versus me chanting and visualizing and being absorbed and having beautiful experiences. I became this presence where this was my song and I was speaking it out into the world for others to hear.

Since we had previously been discussing spontaneous experiences of non-dual expansiveness and oneness with everything that she has had, I asked how this experience of mantra compared to those moments, as well as when she normally tries to identify with the deity, to which she responded:

I was sound itself, vibrating this love, almost like the difference for me I guess with the mantra and when this happened, I could compare it to feeling like you are the sun and shining on all, whereas the other experience, the sun was just part of me—it was larger than being the sun, but the sun was within it. With this mantra experience for me, I felt like it would be being the sun and just singing forth this vibration of love that is beaming in all directions. So, in that sense, definitely more expansive, zillions of times more than when it was just me speaking the mantra as Sabrina, bringing in a sense, awakening Her in as a concept, knowing She lives within me, but still a concept, even though I might embody overwhelming qualities of love, compassion, curiosity. This was definitely a full embodiment of being-as, but still not the same as the other experience.

When I asked her how long this lasted, she explained:

Once I finished the *mala*, I just remained in silence with that sort of feeling and it just kind of faded, very gently, to where I was just sitting there and tears began to flow because it was kind of like "oh my gosh, wow." And this deep knowing of "this is what I want to be, I want to be the conduit, the beacon for others that are thirsty, that can come and drink of this because it's such a treasure, such a jewel."

When taking her trajectory into consideration, this experience is all the more remarkable: having always struggled with languages and then suffered a mini stroke during her late 40's that impaired her ability to articulate as easily as before, Sabrina was intimidated by the idea of reciting the seven hundred verses of the *Devī Māhātmyam* when she joined the *kula* and felt overwhelmed with sadness, convinced that it would not be possible for her. Yet, she found herself amazed at how practicing chanting the Sanskrit alphabet "blew open" her pronunciation and enabled her to "make leaps and bounds" in overcoming her limitations. This has convinced her that "the sacred Sanskrit alphabet, the phonemes, are portals—they are energies that will open up and make the impossible possible", unlocking their meaning within oneself as part of the process. She also believes that *japa* may have transformed a potentially cancerous, rare, and fast-growing tumor that she was initially diagnosed with

into a harmless fibroadenoma. After her first examination, she began intensely directing healing mantras associated with Kālī's nurturing aspect as Bhadrakālī into her breast, in addition to befriending the tumor and having fellow practitioners do energetic work on her. Following the biopsy report that came after the surgery, the surgeon, whom she qualifies as being very good, was surprised by the change in diagnosis. Although she cannot be sure that the *japa* caused this and acknowledges that it may have been a misdiagnosis, she said that she would do it again, just in case.

In summary, since mantra, as such, is a form of the divine, the divine is brought into immanent presence by its recitation, the reality of which is confirmed in practitioners' experience through the physical response that it evokes. This is interpreted as being meaningful, as it is taken to signal a shift whereby one's subjectivity is momentarily resonating with the essence of the deity and being changed by it. Through repeated *sādhana*, the practitioner learns to make their body and being more "attuned" to tapping into that connection with the deity at will, until it becomes possible to merge with and embody it oneself. By actualizing new forms of awareness within the practitioner, this habitus comes to permeate their experience of reality even outside the practice. As a technology of the self, mantra is both the means to an end and that very end itself—its revelation paves an instructive pathway through the body back to itself. In the tantric view, the range of sensuous experiences afforded by the body and the techniques through which to incite them are the very keys that Devī has provided humans with to reach an expedient and direct experience of their true nature as being identical to that of Hers (Timalsina 2012, pp. 63–64, 74, 77, 81). Thus, the knowledge that is attained through mantra is not perceived as an intellectual gain, but as direct, experiential knowledge (*bhāvanajñāna*) that is reached performatively. By engaging in mantra, one also participates in Devī's primordial and creative speech act and assumes the power of transforming reality for oneself.

3.2. Sensuous Meaning-Making: Nyāsa and Mudra

Generally performed at the beginning of tantric rituals, *nyāsa* is the act of installing, absorbing, and containing the power of *bīja* mantras and phonemes within various parts of the practitioner's physical and subtle body through touch. This is accompanied by mudra ("seals"), which are symbolic physical gestures, expressions, or attitudes that are adopted with the intent of summoning the deity and mimicking and acquiring its appearance and disposition, thereby identifying the practitioner with it, obtaining its power, and sealing their relationship. As mudra are performed while the mantras are recited (either verbally or mentally), *nyāsa* is joined by a visualization of the form of the divine that is respective to the mantra being imposed. As the *bīja* mantras and phonemes, as previously discussed, constitute the heart and limbs of the deity's sonic, energetic form, and each deity fulfills a cosmic function, this act of mapping the deity's body onto one's own creates a sense of homology that collapses distinctions between the practitioner's body and that of the universe at large. By directly engaging the body of the participant, these acts complement visualization, as they have the effect of confirming the process of self-deification in a more tangible or expressive format, externalizing, and thus bringing into manifestation the inner presences they imagine and feel to be within themselves. In other words, *nyāsa* and mudra make the transcendent more immanent. Not only believing, but *feeling* oneself to have become the deity, the practitioner thenceforth becomes apt to worship it and take on its abilities (Brooks 1990, pp. 59–60, 111–2; Brooks 1996, p. 144; Padoux 1999, pp. 141–2; Padoux 2010, pp. 135–6, 138, 141; Timalsina 2012, p. 66; Timalsina 2015, pp. 19, 52; Timalsina 2016, pp. 3–4).

Interestingly, although the literal sense of *nyāsa* means "setting upon, placing down, imposition" (Smith 2006, p. 376) in the way that I have described above, Amazzone explained that her Śrīvidyā guru defines it primarily as "to anoint or to renounce." In alignment with the view that Devī is already within themselves, she specified that they are not putting something into themselves through *nyāsa* but rather reverently caressing and calling forth the deity to awaken and manifest itself from within. In doing so, they

renounce their limited identities. This perspective emphasizes the act of *nyāsa* as being a loving gesture that reflects the emotional quality of their relationship with Devī. When the deity is visualized as being the one who is doing the touching, she stated that one can feel Devī's love being transmitted to oneself.

Those within the *kula* who identified as being particularly kinesthetic spoke eagerly of how effective *nyāsa* was for enabling their experience of encountering and embodying the divine, whether that be in a theistic sense or not. While discussing how her practice-related experiences are most readily enabled through touch and sound, as opposed to visualization, due to how she was trained as a professional ballet dancer from the age of four, Elena spoke of her fondness for *nyāsa* and how it leads one to enact one's gestures more mindfully and intentionally in everyday life:

[...] I love *nyāsas* so much, they are like little mantras living in your hands. I love that because it makes everything feel sacred and special. And suddenly, you're conscious of what you are doing with your hands: are you flipping somebody off? Are you putting all of this love and whatever into an *Excel* sheet? Are you cooking for somebody that you love? What are you doing with these mantras that are living in your hands?

When I asked what it is about doing these gestures that brings sacredness into presence for her as an atheist, she related it to how it alleviates her depression:

That's a really good question [...] I want to feel love in the small ways that I can [...] when you put love into your fingertips, it makes them a little bit sweeter. It's entirely just to do with being a little bit happier—not happy, I hate the word happy—joy, experiencing more joy because joy comes from the inside and doesn't always look like happiness [...] if you put loving mantra into your fingertips, you're going to be less inclined to like flip somebody off or punch somebody in the face. If you put love in your fingertips, you *are* going to act differently. If you put mantra into your tongue, you're going to be a little bit kinder toward others. So, I think it almost just sensitizes you to the energy you're putting out into the world, is how it should be simplified.

Sadie, who also qualifies herself as being very kinesthetic, described her experience through the following striking metaphor:

I find *nyāsa* to be a very powerful practice [...] mantra with *nyāsa* to me, is like pouring gasoline on the fire. The mantra is the fire, and the *nyāsa* is the gasoline. And it just makes it that much more felt, embodied, and physically tangible. All of my experiences of kundalini have been the result of either asana [postural] practice or *nyāsa*—that physical, tangible energy that I'm able to feel has needed that practice.

When I asked her if it can be articulated as assisting her in entering the right mental state as well, she responded:

Yeah, and it's funny, when you said 'mental state', I was like: "It's not really mental." The barrier between the mental and physical definitely collapses in these practices [...] It's like you enter into a completely different field and the consciousness becomes shifted.

Similarly, while attempting to explain how her consciousness momentarily melds in and out with the mantra/deity, Rachel stated with regards to *nyāsa* that:

[...] depending on the technique—sometimes you install them on yourself, sometimes the deity installs it on you, sometimes you install it on the deity—I think that interchange helps you sort of shift those boundaries.

Besides those who identify as being highly responsive to touch, others, like April, who qualify themselves as being not very embodied, also find *nyāsa* to be a useful technique:

They are a helpful reminder that this [*sādhana*] is not a mental process. It's a way of switching states, of telling my mind "Right now, I am here in my body, in my

mortality, I'm only here because of this visceral body and I'm paying attention to a different way of experiencing the world", which I think to me is really important because I'm so mental. So, it's like pulling back into the body.

Thus, while *nyāsa*, like mantra, does not convey meaning in the conventional sense, its meaningfulness to the practitioner also unfolds from the change in perspective and disposition that its performance effects. Moreover, as Sabrina pointed out, it is "hugely powerful in preparing the body/mind to be even more receptive" to the state of absorption that is involved in *japa* and what can potentially emerge from it.

4. Transformative Impact

4.1. Self-Acceptance, Compassion, and Resilience

This first category represents the changes that were most frequently reported by my participants when I asked them how deity yoga has transformed their manner of relating to self, others, and the world. As this article is focused on providing an overview of practitioners' interpretations of their experiences and how they attribute their causality to the practice and their relationship with Devī, it is not within its scope to relate this data to existing scientific findings on the neurological and physiological impact of contemplative practice. Nevertheless, in order to facilitate such a comparison for the reader, the findings of every section will be briefly summarized in etic terms, according to the domains and categories that are suggested and defined in Lindahl et al.'s (2017) article and appended to the latter under the *Phenomenology Codebook*. This act of translation is deemed important, as it contributes to current efforts that are being made to build a bridge of dialogue across disciplinary fields and between researchers and their participants that will hopefully cultivate a more humble, open, and trusting approach toward others' claims about experience and reality, thereby facilitating intercultural dialogue on the mind and its potential. By taking practitioners' claims seriously, rather than dismissing or ascribing them merely to belief, it becomes possible to acknowledge how and why such traditions and their significance have endured for centuries—namely, due to genuinely producing results as they claim to, at least to a certain degree. Furthermore, as self-appointed gurus and derivations of meditative, yogic, and tantric traditions continue to proliferate worldwide and foster settings in which practitioners lack the necessary qualified guidance to effectively navigate their experiences, it behooves us to understand the effects that the application of these practices can have, and their causes, in order to determine how practitioners' potential needs of assistance might be resourcefully met through various frameworks.

April, who is forty years old, struggled with issues of self-esteem since her childhood and no matter how many Western psychology books and systems she explored, nothing was successful at ridding herself of this core belief and habit, as she qualifies it. Over time, she found that the practice completely restructured that in both a top-down and bottom-up way that was very valuable and unique. She attributes the success of this approach to both its philosophical and embodied dimension. As someone who is highly critical and prone to overthinking, the fact that the concepts put forward by the practice not only made sense to her but could be integrated and experienced directly at a visceral level, enabled her to gradually go beyond intellectualization and to replace that habit with a less judgmental way of relating and reacting to herself. More specifically, the practice's emphasis that, despite the differentiation of external reality, everything, and everyone, including liberated and obstructed emotions, are of the same source—which as seen in Section 2.4, April defines as the unconditional (Devī to others)—allowed her to soften her perspective. She explained that when connecting to this wider sense of self that is the unconditional, a level of surrender and alignment to it occurs, which allows one to sit with and observe one's emotions and reactions without judgment, and to understand where they stem from and what triggers them. She stressed that *sādhana* is not a purely mental process but involves having "a more visceral experience of what that emotion feels like in your body", the approach of which "becomes more embodied and more intuitive", forming "more of a real living habit" over time. The awareness that is gained through this process

allows one to accept, rather than blame or vilify oneself, which in turn fosters trust in one's capacities. The more one can do this for oneself, the easier she said it becomes to interpret others' emotions and reactions in a given moment, with the same level of compassion and relaxation. As she stated:

You learn that what is happening right now is not about you, it's not about them, it's about the way the two of you are meeting right now because of past experiences.

Sadie admitted that it is not always possible to accomplish this, but that when someone does trigger her anger and she experiences it, instead of allowing herself to get caught up in it, she will ask herself what it is teaching her. This is part of cultivating the view that, as Amazzone put it, "everything in life is *sādhana* [...] everything's an opportunity for transformation, for empowerment, for upliftment and merging." Besides, when Sadie finds herself faced with situations that would have formerly plunged her into months of depression and she is able to absorb and digest them instead, and then move on with her day, she realizes the extent to which the practices have really made her more resilient. Likewise, Rachel, who is forty-eight years old, reported how the practice has brought her more equipoise, inner peace, and courage, all of which have allowed her to deal and be fully present with negative emotions that she normally avoided confronting, like anger, for the first time in her life. Along similar lines, Margaret commented that the range of emotions have become less frightening to her, and that she finds herself feeling okay with whatever state she is in. This was also expressed by Kaylah, who is fifty-four years old and joined the *kula* six years ago, as follows:

When the outer world affects your inner world, you go to Maa, to the Mother, to your practice [...] I feel like it's preventative. I feel like when I do my practice, that it protects and that I have a certain "okay, something just happened, I can deal with this, I'm strong." It gives me that confidence within and that's probably why I've stuck with it for so long.

As Amazzone explained, the more a practitioner can be a witness to their own pain and allow it to run its course without judgment, spiritual bypassing, or denial, and then modify their behavior accordingly, the more they come to realize that they are in fact able to be in control or to choose how and who they want to be. She specified that this is something that her male Kaula Śākta guru emphasized twenty years ago, namely: that to be a *yoginī*, one must learn to respond, rather than to react. With this acceptance and realization of one's ability comes a relaxation that further enables trust and confidence in oneself to develop. As Sallie put it, with Tantra "there's a fundamental realization and understanding that as a human being, we're fine just the way we are, and if we do these practices, then it's doing the work." This was elaborated upon by Sabrina, who explained that

[...] at any moment, one is perfectly being as only one can be [...] In the Absolute view, every moment is just as it should be—an ever-flowing immersion into a multitude of experiences for the One [...] the more I can relax into that, and trust that it's all just streaming perfectly as it is, whether that's painful or pleasant or happy or constricted, it helps release the suffering, being those stories that we attach to the pain or the joy, whether we're trying to push something away or cling to it. And the more that I can relax into the stream, the more I trust that the coming and going, my not knowing, is all okay and I don't have to figure it out.

According to April, a common misconception is to equate becoming less reactive in this way with becoming less emotional overall, which may be perceived as being merely an act of dissociation or escapism; she argued, as Amazzone does, that on the contrary, the practices can make one even more emotional because they make the exchange or boundary between oneself and the outside more fluid and less restricted. Cheryl provided another example of a narrowing of the felt gap between self, others, and the external world. She is fifty-three years old and has been part of the *kula* for about five years, and a yoga practitioner for about eighteen years. She said:

I've gone from a place of being almost unable to be in my own skin, to coming into a place of "I'm okay", and into now a really authentic place of self-love. And I feel over the years that is because of Her and the practices. You know, through the mythology stories and the mantra and devotion, Her many forms are my many forms. And Her many forms are the infinite forms of expression that we see in all people through our relationships. And it's brought the polarity or duality closer to the center of all that is, as is.

Cheryl further explained that this dissipation of self-judgment and shift into self-acceptance and love has given way to an unconditional source of compassion within herself that has stopped her from judging others and led people to react differently in her presence, feeling seemingly safer to open up about themselves in a deeper way. What's more, it has increased her desire and attempt to assist the planet. In her words:

It's beyond the individual and into the collective that the practices open me up to. I would attribute it to the practices themselves and just that devotional action of consistency and opening to be of service.

She specified that this 'opening to be of service' is gradually achieved by becoming the deity in practice. When I asked her what the shift into the state of being the deity is like, she answered:

It becomes an "I am Her" and I see through Her eyes. And I can be of service for Her. It's not the same, but in a similar way where I connect to my ancestors who aren't in a body, and I am that for them, I am in a body right now, and if not me, then who? And I think that that is really the essence that makes me feel purposeful, that it's not just about paying the bills.

Besides, by embodying the qualities and natures of different deities or simply bringing oneself into their presence for different purposes, one is enabled to explore and engage different facets of oneself, which Audrey explained can bring one a sense of being

[...] centered and balanced and better able to interact with the many pieces that are your life [...] Like you can go and be with Kālī and cry or rage or scream or ask or hug or laugh or dance, you know, whatever it is [...] But it's like you come out on the other side of whatever engagement you do with whichever field of energy with a deeper knowing and trust in yourself and in the universe, and yeah, the experience is healing and it is transformational. Like if you're going in with pain, you can come out on the other side with a change, there's a shift. And it's also very empowering to feel like you can do something and that there's so many ways that one can interact with the world, like doing a ritual.

This integrative impact of the practice was also touched upon by Sadie in the following manner:

When you are doing these *sādhana*s, there starts to become a point where there's not a separation between life on the cushion and everything else that's happening outside [...] the *sādhana*s start to integrate all the different parts of yourself, so you're not splitting in all these different places and you're not compartmentalizing, you're not putting like "oh, this is this part of my life and that is that part of my life, and these are two things never to meet." It's just like everything is everything, and everything is part of a cohesive whole.

Thus far, these accounts appear to indicate that in the first place, deity practice and its metaphysical framework shift practitioners' worldview on account of how they enable a process of meta-cognition or meta-awareness to arise by simultaneously engaging the cognitive and somatic domains, while relating them holistically to one another. This alters practitioners' narrative self and sense of self-other or self-world boundaries, allowing for a release of pressure or tension which, by extension, decreases self-conscious emotions like guilt or shame and effort or striving, and increases positive affect and self-confidence or trust. These outcomes, in turn, seem to gradually lead to empathic or affiliative changes

that may result in changes in motivation or goals that are prosocial in nature, in addition to potentially increasing both affective lability (in terms of the range of emotions that are experienced) and affective flattening (in the sense of an “absence of a typical affective response to an experience that usually evokes one” (Lindahl et al. 2017) in a manner that is deemed beneficial and in the case of affective flattening, reduces negative affective reactivity.

4.2. Improved Interpersonal Relationships and Interactions

While the above touched upon this category in passing, namely in terms of an increase in empathy, compassion, and prosocial behavior, the following will provide more direct examples of how deity practice can affect one’s interpersonal relationships and manner of interacting with both others and the world.

To begin with, Sadie commented how the practice has not only significantly improved her marriage and relationship with her son in particular but also brought a balance to her relationships with males more generally, by enabling her to appreciate masculine embodiment in a way that she could not prior to cultivating her sense of the divine feminine and purpose of being in a female body. During her time as a practitioner of Trika Śaivism, the *sādhana* led her to confront her “deepest places of wounding” that were related to a “feeling of irreconcilable separation between the two polarities” of masculine and feminine. Although she recognizes in hindsight that she would have overcome this difficulty if she had remained on that path, partially because it also emphasizes the complementarity of both Śiva (male) and Śakti’s (female) energies within oneself, it felt more natural and resonant for her as a female-bodied person to relate to Devī, and her struggles as a woman and mother could be “addressed more directly through a Śākta lens.” Besides, the non-hierarchical, non-elitist, and feminist nature of the *kula* gave her a sense of feeling freed from the conditioning “to function and survive in our society” in a masculine way. As Amazzone explained, even though Śrīvidyā perceives the masculine and gods that represent it like Śiva to ultimately be just another manifestation of Tripura Sundarī (the highest manifestation of Devī’s power in the form of a goddess), it does regard the masculine as the field, ground, or space that allows the multiplicity of Śakti to unfold and express itself at a relative level. Regarding myths about this, such as Śiva’s relationship with the goddess Parvatī, and engaging in such unitive practices, Margaret, who is in her 40’s, stated that it

[...] has been incredibly healing. It’s such a perfect state of union with opposites. To have that brought to my own consciousness, what that looks like, in this ridiculous consumerist world with failed marriages and domestic violence and problems with gender. That was a gift to have that brought to my own mind and heart as realizable within my own self, it has been extraordinarily valuable. Particularly his and her devotion, the perfection of that union, no matter what is going down: pain and darkness. It’s a love that can’t be damaged by anything and it’s not idealistic, ‘cause it faces and sees all. It’s quite profound. I don’t want to be too Goddess-focused, but I am, only for me because it’s an enigma, men and women’s dynamics, let’s get this right. And that’s coming forward.

As an extension of this, Margaret also elaborated upon how focusing on a particular goddess that is associated with devotion and surrender to love in her practice improved her interpersonal relationships as follows:

So, it has COMPLETELY addressed some stubborn grief that I had which really made me quite nervous about the world, distrusting of others, in a lot of pain, but not conscious of it. So, I’ve experienced a lot of catharsis. And I’ve seen therapy and worked therapeutically with people for many years. But the difference here was the insights that I was given at the same time as the capacity to love again stronger than before or in a much larger way. I have a deeper love that’s growing for humanity as a collective, and for all life, very different to before [...] it’s an expansive process and that’s been beautiful. And I’m noticing that I don’t see others as enemies, even if they’re behaving badly. There’s more of a trust of the wisdom it has brought, which is that every single situation is Her and if

I'm in tune with that, She uses it to create something beautiful [...] actually this consciousness is revolutionary, it's beyond the mind and it really allowed me to open my heart again bigger. And know that I'm gonna be okay in a stronger way than I've ever known in my soul. Genuinely, I know that any circumstance that I'm given, I'll be just fine. It's priceless, it is! And it brings a lovely confidence.

In Sallie's case, she attributes what she calls "deeply embedded transformations" in her relationships with her husband, family, students, and others, to how working with the goddess Durgā in her practice the past five years has taught her how to have the fortitude to establish, maintain, and guard boundaries for herself. Having been the child of two alcoholics, this was something that she struggled with her entire life and that left her feeling depleted on multiple levels. It is by continuously embodying Durgā's warrior and gatekeeper-like qualities in her practice that she has discovered the necessary strength within herself to, as she put it, "flex this muscle" in her 40's. She explained that now,

I can't even imagine living the way that I was living before with no boundaries or very limited boundaries, or boundaries that would just get steamrolled and I would allow that to happen over, and over, and over again.

This was similarly experienced by Sabrina, who is fifty-six years old and has been in Amazzone's *kula* for the past four years but maintains distant ties with a teacher of Trika Śaivism and a Śākta Kaula one in a Kālī *kula* of a *vāmamārga* lineage, both of whom initiated her in remote villages in India over two decades ago. She explained how working with Kālī as her *iṣṭa-devī* ("cherished/personal deity," the deity toward whom one feels the closest affinity and upon whom one's worship and practice is most centered) enabled her to change from being a very introverted and shy person who was sometimes a doormat, to being someone who is able to establish boundaries when necessary and speak up for herself, in a way that has benefitted her interactions with others. Referring to Kālī's tiger-like fierceness, she stated that

She taught me or is teaching me how to be more fearless and this may not be the correct definition of the two words, but I see courage as doing something when you're afraid, and I see fearlessness as getting over that fear and doing it.

However, she cautioned that this initially led her to taste aggression, in a way that made her feel empowered over others for the first time. This was to such an extent that people began commenting on how she can be scary at times, which was very much unlike her usual self. When I asked her "What specifically made you taste aggression in the practice, how did you cultivate that level of intensity?", she answered:

Kālī mantras and being initiated into them. They definitely can bring up our own anger, our own buried aggression. As an introvert or shy person, a lot of what you hold within, it becomes depression, it becomes internal bitterness. These energetic mantras can be very heating and can stimulate a lot of these unconscious things or consciously suppressed things that you're holding down—they start to bubble out. And with the guidance of a teacher, they help you sort through that.

Initially, she did not seek the guidance of her teacher, as she chose to relish in the power. But once she realized how this was negatively affecting others and making her into a person that she did not want to be, she asked her teacher and Maa to teach her how to be empowered and assertive without being aggressive, which eventually led to her reach a more balanced state. She explained that "the intent combined with the mantra, combined with the guidance of the guru, starts to change that, starts to tweak that." She also emphasized the importance of quieting the analytical mind and trusting that the practices will work, and gave the example of *tarpana* (libation), during which one imagines water and mantras being poured over a deity that is seated within a specific chakra in one's body (Rao 2019, p. 82):

[...] cooling and purifying, letting these emotions filter through like running the garden hose into the dirty bird bath, eventually the clean water is going to wash

it away. You don't have to sit there and think about it. The practice of holding the hose there will do it for you.

She added that learning to cultivate boundaries in this balanced way over time led certain relationships to dissolve abruptly and others more naturally, in addition to enabling her to experience and understand both sides of conversations "in this very chaotic time of the pandemic and here in the U.S., civil unrest" in a much more relaxed, fluid, and unperturbed way. The significant impact that this has had on her was further described toward the end of our interview in the following way:

One of the by-products or fruits of Tantra is that as we move along, the practices help cultivate our discernment for when to recognize that something is going to be digestible for someone else before we offer it [...] more and more, I see myself being able to understand when to act and not to act, when to step in or step back, and be more relaxed with however it unfolds. And even when I thought I discerned well, maybe I discover that my discernment was off, and I can be relaxed with that and not so harsh and judgmental toward myself [...] because I've tasted of this massiveness of consciousness ... it's gonna make me cry ... all are well, all are well. And I don't have to save anyone. All are well. But if I choose to act, I act. But I don't have to have the burden of figuring it all out—who to save, who not to save—because all are well. And if I act, it's a spontaneous quality of knowing here I act. Here I don't. There, maybe I should have, I didn't. All is still well.

Sadie also spoke of discernment in terms of how the practice has enhanced her sense of clarity toward others, thereby improving some relationships, while eliminating others. She explained that Devī is a housekeeper:

She cleans out, and anyone who isn't really aligned and is extra weight, they've kind of been jettisoned. And I don't want to be cruel, it's never without grief, it's never easy. But She does make it very clear, who is supportive of the path and who is in the way. And that's life, you know.

Like Sabrina, Audrey highlighted that deity practice enables one to respond to worldly affairs and others in a much less constricted way. By repeatedly experiencing and embodying the different *rasas* of the goddesses, she explained that one's sense of self and who one can be becomes expanded, while contracting back to a more limited state becomes undesirable. Although it is not always possible to maintain expansiveness and respond to external circumstances from that position, she stated that

[...] if you have a deeper and broader understanding and experience of connection, power, compassion, love, there's just so much of a bigger conversation for if you think about what you see on the news in politics, and you think about how small it is. It's like these things are just grinding things out, it's so tight.

When I asked Kaylah whether coming out of an immersive practice session changes the way that she experiences and interacts with the mundane or deals with situations and people afterwards, she also emphasized the impact of the positive outlook and flexibility that the practice brings:

It's amazing. It just improves everything. Like doing the dishes is beautiful, scooping up the dog poo is enjoyable. The mundane is not mundane anymore. You come out of this and then you look at the world with different eyes. That's the essence, that's the sweet spot, that's the liberation for me: to come out of practice and look at everything differently. I'm a gentler person for it—I don't think that I was too harsh to begin with, but I can deal with other people. I think even maybe we emit a calm presence that everyone around us feels calmer too, I found that before. The day-to-day grind as they call it seems to be immersive as well, it's like maybe you haven't taken off your, I don't want to say rose-shaded glasses, but it's a little bit like that. That you see the world differently. You do

sādhana so that you're able to be in the world more beautifully and view it and experience it as the comprehensively wild, fun, beautiful, intricate life that we are all living and enjoy that ride, enjoy that experience.

In response to the same question, Margaret stated that it differs daily, but that there are times when

I'll come out of a practice and actually the energy that I'm bringing to the "mundane" is beautiful and nothing then is mundane. Writing an e-mail or how I speak to somebody has energy in it and people pick up on that. So, there's that non-dualism again.

Overall, these accounts suggest that deity practice can enable desirable changes in one's interpersonal relationships and interactions by producing shifts as already described at the end of Section 4.1, with the extension of an increase in mental clarity and sociality. However, as cases like Sabrina's demonstrate, these positive changes may be preceded by more challenging ones, like aggression, which can be socially impairing and require guidance to be effectively dealt with.⁸

4.3. Improved Mental Health and an Acceptance and Re-framing of Death

Opening up about her own past of severe, chronic depression, Amazzone stated that Devī, the practice, and its resulting embodied experiences may not make one's anxiety and depression instantaneously or completely go away, but that sometimes they do. She specified that at the very least, they serve as a preventative refuge, the supportive quality of which she described as follows:

[...] there *is* something we have all felt, I believe my teachers referenced it [*sādhana*] as kind of like a safety net or a rope and you're hooked in; so, when you fall, you may fall, but you don't fall like you used to and you don't fall as long [...]. She keeps calling us back, She keeps pulling us back with her rope, like "Come on, come on, you're straying and getting caught up in these illusions of the mind."

This has been the case for Sabrina, who has derived a sense of empowerment, control, trust, surrender, and relaxation from the practices, which have not only rid her of depression but significantly decreased and made manageable the anxiety that she began to experience with perimenopause, in addition to stopping the panic attacks that were precipitated by the latter. Just as significantly, it also gradually released her from what she qualifies as being the bondage of addiction to drugs and alcohol. Although she sometimes wonders when certain unbeneficial habits will go away or fears that others might re-surface, she reminds herself to trust in the practice and to heed the advice that her Indian teacher of Trika Śaivism has given her, which is: "stop—when it's time, it will fall like the piece of fruit off the tree. Do your practice."

Elena, who is now twenty-eight years old, spent most of her life with an undiagnosed bipolar disorder. When she began practicing yoga and Zen meditation at the age of sixteen in search of a way to "stop hurting", she found herself confused as to why, rather than having a positive effect on her, it was making her even more sad than usual and leading her to cry more often. She came to realize that the detachment that was being emphasized by the Zen meditation that she was being taught was not helpful for someone who already felt so detached from the world, as it was increasing her suicidal ideation. Although the meditation taught her to release all desires, no one taught her

[...] what to do once the desires were gone, so I just lingered in the emptiness feeling like death itself, and without having the framework for a more mature relationship with death.

After she joined Amazzone's *kula* at the age of twenty, she found herself released of the existential guilt that she had always felt toward the volatility of her inner state. Growing up, the view that one's suffering and unfortunate turns of events are a divinely ordained form of punishment exasperated her, as she had not done anything wrong to deserve it.

As tantric teachings and practices emphasize that the self is a micro-level reflection of the macro-level of external reality, she came to accept that the world itself is unpredictable, ugly, and often without sense, which the notion of *līlā* allows for, rather than being “linear and directly cause-and-effect driven as Western society teaches us”. Once we realize this, she stated that “we can either decide to be thrown around by it or just lean into the chaos a little bit.” This acceptance of and surrender to the state of both herself and the world has brought her an unprecedented level of inner peace that has made her significantly more resilient. Related to this is also her understanding of karma and dharma, which she considers to be part of the natural world’s functioning. She explained that we are often surprised by how things do not go as we planned them because we tend to be unaware of how the way that we are acting and directing our energy is out of alignment with our true needs and dharma, our instinctive role. This interplay between our actions and their results constitutes our karma, which is something that can change daily, but the fact that one’s dharma remains intact despite this allows her to keep an open attitude that is curious toward what new possibilities might lie behind difficulties or unexpected outcomes. Kaylah humorously likes to phrase this as “shift happens.” Although Elena remains bipolar, the episodes that she experiences are now less severe, and when something difficult happens to her, she not only recovers significantly more quickly but also responds in healthier ways to it. This extends to the issue of death and the confusion that its randomness causes. As Elena explained:

That’s the real chaos these teachings prepare us for: people and circumstances are in a constant state of death [. . .] In this current path, I’ve learned that: 1) death doesn’t have to be sad; 2) the void of death is also the same void that is the ocean of awareness and that is the heart-space of the Mother; and 3) that is the same as love [. . .] I have experienced flashes of the unconditional love that comes from the void.

Indeed, for the Śākta devotee who “[. . .] is able to see beyond the finite world”, “[d]eath is the embrace of the Mother, so it can be valued, and not feared” (McDaniel 2018b, p. 126). When one has such realizations and experiences, disengaging from one’s solid, normative sense of self or ego during practice becomes less threatening—as Rachel described, the ‘larger sense of self’ that is gradually acquired through practice and

[. . .] the ecstasy shows that what your self is doesn’t even really matter [. . .] there’s less fear about moving to the absolute for those moments that you do [. . .] because [. . .] there seems to be some sense that you’re actually not losing anything, so it doesn’t have to be scary.

The latter has been equally helpful for Audrey, who is forty-four years old and after working as a yoga teacher and engaging in goddess-related practices of various traditions for many years, felt guided toward Amazzone’s teachings three years ago by her best friend who embodied Kālī in many ways and passed away prematurely due to cancer. One year later, her father was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and she began engaging in additional practices that were meant to facilitate his transition. She explained that the deity practices were

[. . .] so supportive to me during my time, losing two big pillars, that’s my true north for my chosen family and my birth family. It really helped me remember that it’s within me. It’s not an external thing, that I have what I need and that it is a choice in any moment to be that which I want to see in the world. It’s so hard to find the words to describe, but even with all the natural grief, processing that [. . .] it’s like there’s such a trust in the process of all of it, that has grounded in me. And that’s something that existed before this but has really grown. It doesn’t have to be the worst transition ever for someone to leave your life and it’s like you just really have to do the work of moving through the emotions and letting them flow [. . .] When you feel untethered, it is so valuable to be able to ground deeply into something that you know and trust, it just has this massively stabilizing effect. So, it doesn’t matter how much you feel like you’re falling apart,

you're still connected to something so much bigger and [...] [t]he deity practice helps with that. It is that grounding, stabilizing space [...] it helps you to still come back together again and/or stay together more than you would otherwise.

For Brenda, who is sixty-four years old and has been part of Amazzone's *kula* for the past three years, her experience of Devī's supportive motherliness has helped her to move beyond the central position that the impact of having an abusive mother had occupied throughout her life. Although she had dealt with it through therapy, the issues related to the abuse would always return. When I asked what it is about the practice that enabled her to process these difficult emotions, she stated that:

I have a sense of connection and a sense of being carried. So, the strength of the *sāadhanā* and the strength of the form of Devī, whichever one I'm working with, is lifting me. I can rest in it, I'm not alone. It's not my personal strength but the strength of Devī Herself that is carrying me forward [...] that was really, really, really important. It sort of restored my life to me, which was very helpful [...] just being able to have the sense that I have this container and can take it out and look at it and just basically give it to Devī and say: "This is yours, you put me here, help me move on" and have that happen, that was the 'how.'

This also applies to how she copes with her husband's deteriorating condition due to Lou Gehrig's disease. When I asked her if one form of practice is more effective for her than others, she expressed:

[...] my go-to is mantra, probably because I'm a singer and I think of the world in sound and because I can do it anywhere. I can be driving down the road and experience an intense emotion, like if something is going on with my husband, I can go to mantra right then. Where I can't really close my eyes and visualize while driving on the road. So, mantra would be my core I think and it is the power of the entity. It *IS* the power, so it immediately gets me there [...] Like the third time that I'm in the emergency room this week, I'm like "I'm just gonna drop and do some chanting right now!"

Like Audrey, she and her husband perform practices that are intended to prepare him for the moment of death together.

Finally, like Elena, Sadie, who is forty-four years old, spent a long part of her life feeling very suicidal, in addition to suffering from severe post-partum depression but found this transformed by the practice. Her *iṣṭa-devī* is Durgā because she feels as though her *bhāva*, which she qualified as being that of the spiritual warrior (courage), is the same as that of her own personal life journey. She explained how in the *Devī Māhātmyam*, Durgā repeatedly overcomes every battle that simultaneously presents itself to her and threatens to pull her out of the awareness of her true essence, while nonetheless maintaining her composure and serenity. Likewise, her life has been a continuous struggle to overcome adversity and fight to remember who she is. By calling upon Durgā in her practice, she feels as though she has backup. Besides, her profound direct experiences (which cannot be addressed within the scope of this article) of the reality of how Śakti manifests as creation to experience Her potential, the nature of which is shared and reflected by the female body's own generative processes, has given her a sense of purpose. Now, she feels as though she too is here to grow and have as many experiences as possible, and that challenging emotions can be used to fuel this evolution. In her words:

I feel that it's life itself operating through me. Life itself wants to evolve, get better, more beautiful, more coherent, more cohesive [...] I think what this path has done for me is it has made me want to be alive. It has made me embrace being in a human body and it has made me want to maximize my human life. To use the human life in the best way possible [...] They [the practices] allow me to be out in the world in a way that I feel is a productive and well-lived use of my life [...] Some pharmaceutical company would rather have me taking their medication for the rest of my life, you know. Doing these practices makes everything better

[...] They give me something to do with my mind. This is what it really boils down to. When I experience my mind as starting to go to the dark place, I offer it to Her and She takes it and transforms it. And it's powerful, it's immediate, it's effective. It shifts my state of consciousness in the moment as I'm doing the practice and when I open my eyes again and come out and go back into my life, I'm not burdened in the same way. It's a place to put my fear and my anger and my rage and my sadness and my grief. It's like She can hold it all. Maa is always there, whenever I want Her, Maa is there, and She can take it. She shifts my field [...] My day is completely different if I don't get a practice in the morning, I'm wearing the shit-colored glasses, you know?

Although her sense that Maa is everything/always present and her ability to respond to things accordingly is sometimes forgotten when she is involved with the circumstances of everyday life, she became able to “drop in at will” and bring herself back to it after about five years of daily practice.

Taken together, these testimonies appear to indicate that engaging in deity practice can potentially decrease the severity of the impact that neuroticism, mental disorders, substance use disorders, and negative affect can have on an individual's life, or even eliminate their presence, over time. Moreover, it has been found to effectively assist some in navigating and overcoming grief or accepting the inevitability of death. This seems to be related to how the practice enables a variety of shifts to occur across affective, cognitive, conative, sense of self, and somatic domains, respectively in terms of: increased positive affect and self-trust, and decreased self-conscious emotions like guilt or shame, as well as decreased scrupulosity; change in worldview; change in motivation or sense of purpose; change in narrative self and change in self-other or self-world boundaries; and release of pressure or tension (relaxation). However, it is important to note that while many participants emphasized how effective deity practice was toward these ends compared to previous attempts at seeking therapeutic relief, they were not asked what other strategies or health behaviors they may have used in conjunction with the practice, which constitute part of the influencing factors defined by [Lindahl et al. \(2017\)](#).

5. Conclusions

By providing an abridged version of my participants' narratives, certain themes that would allow for an even deeper understanding of their experiences were only briefly touched upon here, such as their backgrounds, relationship to religion or spirituality prior to engaging in the practice, other forms of practice they engaged in prior to joining the *kula*, and challenges they may have encountered due to the practice itself or the sociocultural differences that it involves. At the same time, others, like the enabling role of their relationship with their teacher and *kula*, or that of the ritual setting and its objects, were not possible to address at all. This includes several other fascinating ways in which they have encountered Devī's presence, be that through meeting avatars like the Kumārī in Nepal and Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, or being possessed or simply overwhelmed by Her *śakti* (power) while visiting sacred sites or attending ceremonies that are dedicated to Her, among others.

Although it was also not possible in this article to assess in what ways these practitioners' individual aspirations in pursuing the practice or emphasis on its diverse therapeutic outcomes may diverge from the historical soteriological goals of the traditions in their native context, or how the metaphors they use to interpret and describe their experiences may reflect influences from within their own cultural contexts, it is worth keeping in mind that gaps between roles and levels of practical and formal knowledge have been found to open a space through which multiple vocalities or interpretations of ritual practices can emerge among lay practitioners and devotees—while not canonical per se, they are no less significant and impactful. This is especially the case in Tibetan Buddhist society, where Tantra serves a significant socio-political function and rituals formerly performed solely within the esoteric sphere have been brought into the exoteric domain. Such flex-

ibility and accessibility have ensured the survival of certain practices by enabling them to accommodate the contemporary needs of the laity and less advanced or specialized practitioners, thereby extending their perceived value and relevance (Gerke 2010). As the fieldwork of Dempsey (2006), Kachroo (2016, 2019), and Rao (2019) indicates, this is becoming increasingly common within Śrīvidyā communities as well, as gurus themselves negotiate between the multiple epistemological and sociocultural frameworks, as well as values, that modernity and globalization have brought.

As has been shown by the diverse ways in which my participants have interpreted, experienced, and integrated the concept of Devī and the *sādhana* respective to Her within their unique life stories, transformation cannot be achieved simply by passively following prescribed instructions and emulating what one is told to do; in order to understand the reported efficacy of deity yoga, we must examine how practitioners actively engage, appropriate, and even re-interpret the symbols, meanings, and purposes of ritual, meditative, and devotional practices, including the standards by which they are gauged as efficacious, on both a conscious, pre-reflective, and embodied level. As Sadie expressed, “there are as many paths, as there are people”—Devī’s abundant forms enable every person to encounter Her, in their own way. Finally, while this article did not explicitly touch upon the important role of imagination in actualizing certain experiences in tantric practice or how tantric traditions interpret it differently than it has been regarded in the West, the impact of direct experience and how it motivates practitioners’ ongoing commitment, regardless of its provenance or status, is strikingly punctuated by these final testimonies:

It doesn’t even really matter to me whether this is “real” objectively or not. What matters is that the experiences I’ve had were real enough for me that they healed a life-long struggle with depression. (Sadie)

What doesn’t matter is: “Well, what is it? Is it real?” I don’t know. It works. It feels real to me. “Can you prove it?” No, it works. “But if you can’t prove it . . . ” It works, and that’s all I need to know. As [my Indian teacher of Trika Śaivism] would say, “You ask the wrong question. It is not if it is real, but does it work?” Myth, science, magic, and art live and breathe as One. (Sabrina)

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Appendix A

Table A1. Participant Profiles.

Participants	Age	Occupation	Nationality	Years in <i>Kula</i>
Amazzone	50	Author, Scholar, Teacher, Spiritual Counsellor	American	Established~14 years ago
April	40	Graduate student in design, Mother	American	13
Audrey	44	Artist, Mother, Former yoga instructor, Transformational life coach and holistic healer	American	3
Brenda	64	Author, Retired from corporate technology	American	3
Cheryl	53	Yoga instructor, Holistic healer, Astrologer, Mother	American	5
Elena	28	Corporate finance	American	8
Kaylah	54	Yoga instructor, Mother, retired registered massage therapist	Canadian	6
Margaret	40's	Independent social worker/lawyer	British	2
Rachel	48	Jeweler/Goldsmith	American	3
Sabrina	56	Registered Nurse, Office manager	American	4
Sadie	44	Former research scientist, PhD student in clinical psychology, Mother	American	7
Sallie	43	Accountant, Mother	American	5

Notes

¹ See Appendix A Table A1 for the Participant Profiles.

² For an account of the challenges that the vows of secrecy undertaken within tantric traditions posed to this research, including how these were methodologically navigated, and what motivated my participants to negotiate the boundaries of secrecy and openly discuss their experiences, see Perkins (2021).

³ See Urban (2012) for his chapter on the Western commodification of Tantra.

⁴ My complete study will explore these theoretical perspectives in greater depth. For this paper, I include this as a framework or signpost pointing readers toward the broader theoretical questions of the entire study.

⁵ See also King (1999) for the development of these ideas.

⁶ One reviewer requested that I define my use of “mainstream Hinduism” here and specify whether it is relative to caste or class. They also asked that I clarify in what sense the *Devī Māhātmyam* can be distinguished from “mainstream Hinduism”, while suggesting that the description of Devī as a “performer of miracles” seems to exemplify “folk and village-inflected understandings of goddesses”. As I was paraphrasing from Dr. Anway Mukhopadhyay’s (2020) book, I contacted him via e-mail for the sake of accuracy and received the following response on 21 February 2022:

My view of mainstream Hinduism is that it is something that refuses to be reflexive and does not critically approach its texts, and hence tries to exclude from its understanding of the feminine divine even something that is obvious in the scriptures. The point is not that the *Devī Māhātmyam* is not a mainstream text, but that the “mainstream” readings of the text miss a lot of its nuances. When I speak of Devī as a miracle worker, I do not use this term in the sense it is spoken of in the Christian context or in the case of “folk” belief systems. Why should one think that only village or folk goddesses are supposed to perform miracles? In the context of both popular and “Sanskritic” Shaktism (these two categories often overlap in practice), we see a continuous and lively dialogue between folk and “classical” goddesses, both of these categories being dialogized and interconnected in terms of the goddess’ function as miracle-worker. Śaṅkarācārya, the shaper of the basic orthodox structure of ritualistic Hinduism that is still practiced, refers to such a miracle of the Goddess in the *Saundaryalaharī*. She is characterized in terms of her miraculous function—slaying mighty demons whom male deities cannot slay, bringing forth and destroying and regenerating the universe in miraculous ways, turning the Trinity into feminine entities as the *Devībhāgavata* narrates—and hence her main function seems to be solving practical problems and not teaching or imparting wisdom. This is the mainstream Hindu reading of Devī’s function that is most often common to both popular Hinduism and orthodox Hindu intellectualism, and which I criticize on account of its lack of inclusivity toward hermeneutic alterity. Hindu women and people from oppressed castes often also endorse the mainstream readings of the Hindu texts, rather than trying to decode them in alternative ways. But alternative readings *have* often emerged from within this “mainstream” matrix, as well as from the margins, and challenged the mainstream understanding of the Goddess as a problem solver, rather than a giver of wisdom. Ultimately, brahminocracy thrives more on the basis of a lack of open-ended approaches to the tradition, than on the privileged agency enjoyed by any specific caste. The gatekeepers of the “tradition” have come and keep coming from various groups and not any single group. Therefore, rather than relating the issue to caste and class, I suggest that Hindus, like any other religious community, are not to be studied exclusively in terms of their social structures but also in terms of their structures of feeling and thinking, though I admit that the latter and the former may often be closely connected as well. Even the “critical” readings of Hinduism are often reductionist because they conflate the mainstream readings of the scriptures with the scriptures themselves and thus ignore the potential for self-deconstruction involved in the scriptural texts of Hinduism.

⁷ A reviewer suggested that I refer to Bourdieu’s (1977) understanding of *habitus*; however, it is Csordas’ use of this concept that is foundational to my approach, as it is applied to the context of religious healing, ritual, and revelation, and combined with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological notions of embodiment, the pre-objective, intersubjectivity, and indeterminacy. As Csordas (1993, pp. 151–2) explains, Bourdieu (1977) and Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) approaches to a concept like indeterminacy are not complementary, and Bourdieu’s position cannot account for “change, creativity, innovation, transgression, and violation” (Csordas 1993, p. 152).

⁸ The topic of challenging practice-related and meditative experiences constitutes an important topic that will be further addressed by the complete version of this study, but readers are currently recommended to turn to the extensive research on it that can be found in Lindahl (2017), Lindahl et al. (2017, 2019, 2020), Schlosser et al. (2019), and Cooper et al. (2021).

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