

GORDON & WOBURN SQUARES

KIRTIMUKHA: THE FACE OF GLORY



The Hindu, Jain and Sikh Green Man

The story of Green Man 'Kirtimukha' is told by Hindus, Jains and Sikhs. It tells of what happened when the great Hindu god Shiva, whose dance creates and recreates the Universe, was made angry.

This is how Kirtimukha came to be.

The Giant king, Jalandhara, had conquered most of the world. He was now immensely powerful, and thought he could have anything he wanted. One of the things he wanted was the god Shiva's new bride, the beautiful goddess Parvati. So he sent the demon Rahu with a message to Shiva. Rahu was a demon with no body. Every now and then he would try to swallow the moon, but every time he swallowed her the moon escaped, because he had no stomach and could not digest her. Each time he tried to swallow the moon he caused an eclipse, because the moon disappeared for a while from the sky before she escaped from his throat.

Rahu now set off to do what Jalandhara had commanded. He approached Shiva and said: 'Jalandhara demands that you give him your bride, the beautiful Parvati.'

Shiva answered angrily: 'And why should I give my wife to Jalandhara?'

Rahu replied: 'Because Jalandhara now owns everything you gods used to own. Anyway, you live in a cemetery, so you can't look after Parvati properly, whereas Jalandhara can give her everything a beautiful goddess should have.'

'How dare he, and how dare you!' thundered Shiva. The god was so enraged by Rahu's cheek and by Jalandhara's greed for Parvati, that he exploded with pure fury. Shiva frowned a dreadful frown and out of his forehead burst a monster. It had the mouth of a lion and flaming eyes. The only thing the monster could do was eat - it was The Hunger. It chased Rahu, devouring everything that was in its way. Rahu tried to run away, but he knew he could not escape the terrible monster. In desperation he turned back to Shiva and begged the god for mercy.

What was Shiva to do? His anger had created the monster, and now Rahu wanted protection from it! Shiva had no choice. As a god, he *had* to grant his protection to anyone who asked for it. So he ordered the monster to stand back and leave Rahu alone.

The monster protested: 'But I'm hungry, Lord Shiva. What can I eat, for eat I must.'

Shiva thought quickly. Then he said to the ravenous creature: 'Eat your own hands and feet.' The monster began to gobble, starting with its toes, and working its way upwards. When it had eaten its feet and hands, it could not stop - it kept on eating itself until only its head was left. Shiva looked upon the head with the flaming eyes and lion's mouth and gave a great shout of laughter that shook the Earth. He said: 'This is my most splendid creation. It shall be known as Kirtimukha, the Face of Glory. It must always stay at my door. From now on, everyone who comes to my temple to worship me must bow to the Face of Glory before they enter.'

If you visit a temple in India you will find a carving of Kirtimukha, the Face of Glory, above the door or the gate. Kirtimukha is the guardian who protects the holy place. It is also known as Vanaspati – the Lord Spirit of the Woods, Patron of the Wilderness and King of Vegetation. It is the Greening Power that transforms life. Kirtimukha is another form of the Green Man.

Notes to teachers on themes

- The control and transformation of fierce and violent emotion.
- Creation and destruction/birth and death/life feeding on life – the eternal cycle.

We are grateful to Liz Guild of Leeds SACRE for advice and approval of this story.