

Shri Yantra

by Maria Strutz, based on a talk at Treadwells
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I first became interested in Yantras a few years ago when a friend of mine asked me to do a painting of the shaktis relating to the central triangle of the Sri Yantra - *Jnanna*, *Ichha* and *Kriya*. Whenever he'd talked previously about Yantras, I was unable to relate to what he said, as I found it too abstract. What I needed was artistic involvement, action and interpretation in order to transform my understanding of Yantras.

The root of the word yantra means to 'sustain'. Originally the term *yantra* referred to a kind of machine or mechanical device; the meaning of the term then expanded to religious practices. Yantra in that context is an abstract geometrical design intended as a tool or aid for meditation and increased awareness.

It refers to the Devi (or Goddess) in her linear or geometrical form.

Elements of a Yantra

the Bindu

The Bindu is the centre of the yantra, a radiating source of energy, origin of the supreme consciousness from which everything issues and to which everything returns and that generates all forms. It is a:

- tool for harnessing concentration
- symbol for the source of consciousness
- in a 3D yantra it is the axis of the meru, joining together the levels of the yantra.

the Earth square

On the periphery of yantra you find a square, the earth city with four gateways. Outside of the gateways lie four oceans, the sugarcane ocean of *dharma* (duty), the salt ocean of *artha* (wealth), the ghee ocean of *kama* (bliss) and the milk or wine ocean of *moksha* (Liberation); this is only one small example of what I like about tantra, its sensual evocative images, goddesses floating in oceans of wine, you becoming the goddess and the goddess becoming you.

So if you view a yantra like a city you've got the four oceans on the outside of the city walls; you enter the city by passing the guardians of the gateways and moving inwards, you encounter lotus petals, each petal inhabited by a shakti (who each has her own yantra

in turn!).

You can imagine every intersection of geometrical figures, each corner of a triangle being occupied by a shakti or shakti-shiva, each shakti being a vibrant manifestation of another quality of the devi or deva, the queen or king reigning over their city, the yantra. Looking at yantras this way they are a lot more exciting than just viewing them as geometrical images.

Yantras may be drawn on paper, in coloured sand, spices or rice paste, drawn on floors or walls, engraved on metal, wood or rock crystal. Temporary yantras are destroyed after puja or meditation (paper yantras are burnt; yantras made of sand and spices are brushed together and disposed of in a river, or offered to *Shoshika* - the Goddess of leftovers).

There are also 3D yantras; these are called merus referring to Mount Meru, the mythical world mountain on whose summit the gods live. These 3D yantras can take the form of small scale sculptures or expand to the size of architectural buildings, where a temple is built on the yantra of the deity whose temple it is, using the yantra as a blueprint, where you have the core energy pattern emanating from the foundations and walls throughout the entirety of the temple.

Each element of the Yantra has many levels of meanings and can be approached from different angles.

They can be seen as internal yantras of the subtle body, used in temple plans as sacred geometrical patterns or used in practical magic, where you might want to choose the yantra of a goddess appropriate to your intent. Whichever form yantras take, they encourage the practitioner to self-transcendence. However, you need a map to the layers of meaning of a yantra, otherwise the complexities remain hidden and it remains a flat image rather than unfolding into layers of intricacy and beauty. This opening up process may happen through meditation and insights gained therein or by the aid of a guru's guidance.

What attracted me to the Sri Yantra?

I first started being interested in the Sri Yantra when a friend asked me whether I had ever attempted to draw the Sri Yantra. I hadn't but was immediately interested as I had painted other yantras previously and I love geometry. And I was convinced that I could do it easily.

It wasn't. Just looking at the Yantra made me dizzy, the multitude of triangles dancing and whizzing in front of my eyes, trying to work out how the yantra was actually formed.

Once I sort of figured out that it consisted of 5 downward facing triangles and 4 upwards facing ones I started on the angles. And I was confused to find that there was no western type of numerology involved. No 45, 60, 90 degrees anywhere. But really awkward angles that I had never come across previously in geometric designs, like 71.5 degrees and similar.

I finally came up with a construction method that I then attempted to teach to the London Tantra discussion group and failed miserably because it was far too complicated and people gave up in frustration after only a few steps. At the time I was fixated upon and obsessed with the perfection of Sri Yantra, the intermingling of triangles and the exact intersection of lines to form new triangles.

One thing a friend said to me at the time was: the Sri Yantra does not have to be perfect, it is about being human, so it can be imperfect and still beautiful. And that struck a chord within me and still is one of the themes I keep coming back to. Although I have to admit that I am still quite intolerant of badly or lazily drawn Sri Yantras.

The Three Shaktis of the triangle

The shaktis of the central triangle only started being meaningful to me once I painted them. I used the descriptions of the three shaktis in *Tantra Magick* as the basis:



Jnanna, embodiment of knowledge, a lithe woman with skin the colour of freshly fallen snow, straddling her Shiva, on an island, surrounded by trees, the trees being made up of the letters of all the alphabets in the world. The trees' seed is awake-awareness, their roots pure sound.



Iccha, the embodiment of free independent will, naked as space, golden red like the setting of ten million suns and ten million fires of dissolution;



Kriya the embodiment of action, black as jet, her radiance and aura the colour of shimmering darkness. Both she and her Shiva are smeared with the ashes from the cremation ground and they are surrounded by corpses and skulls.

By painting these three images I realised connections and meanings I had not previously understood and that I only was able to get via the creative process as that is my medium of understanding and self-expression; and I began to grasp the complexity of yantra. As every corner of the central triangle is inhabited by a shakti, so is every petal, every triangle, every intersection.

By painting the images of the shaktis with their shivas I also realised that they are not about male female duality, about heterosexist iconography, but about union, the mingling of influences and powers, about bliss and pure consciousness.

Sri Yantra as a whole



Looking at the Sri Yantra as a whole you have five downwards pointing triangles (shakti) and four upwards pointing ones (Shiva), creating a predominance of Shakti. Shiva and Shakti representing potentiality and actuality. They represent the interaction, mingling and mutual influence of two forces.

There are nine layers of the Sri Yantra - quite easy to discern on the painted yantra as they are done in different colours and in the 3D yantra they are the levels of the pyramid - so: there are 9 levels, 9 mandalas, each occupied by a different manifestation or aspect of Lalita, with different attributes, and each layer has a separate mantra. 9 is a key number in tantra.

'Close examination of the details relating to the nine mandalas of the Sri Yantra reveals that the shaktis of the whole circle represent the human being, who, in potential, is Shakti-Shiva united. The aim is for a person to realise that all powers, energies and manifestations are shaktis of consciousness, pure awareness.'

Mike Magee

Earth Square

The Earth city, or Earth square, is made up of three layers and is painted in yellow on this yantra.

I went on an intensive Karate summer course on Mersey island in 2002. The camp was directly by the sea. I got up at four one morning to see the sunrise. The tide was fully in, waves crashing at the seawall.

I did a mediation and visualised Tripura, goddess of the Earthsquare. As she is made of pure rock crystal I was able to see the sea through her, the waves breaking around her,

glittering in the smoky pink twilight, gently lapping against her. Mersey Island from that point onward has in my mind been linked with Paradise Island, abode of Sri Tripurasundari and the image has stayed with me.

The three layers of the Earth square

On the **Outer layer** are the eight gods, the Obvious Ones, the Lokapalas. I visualized myself sitting in the bindu and the gods unfolding around me; *Indra* (West) with his thunderbolt, cloaked in a rainbow, *Agni* (Southwest) riding a ram surrounded by seven flames, *Yama* (South) as a black crystal skull sitting on a buffalo, *Nirriti* (Southeast), mistress of witchcraft, as a hag and a young woman, clad in green, riding a horse and laughing manically, *Varuna* (East), riding a fish-monster in the middle of an ocean, a cobra rising behind him, *Vayu* (Northeast), engulfing me in wind stirring on my skin, *Soma* (North), a very small man, sitting on a lotus, shimmering from within like a lightbulb suspended in a glass of milk, and *Ishana* (Northwest), having five faces, a manifestation of Mahadeva Shiva.

'They have the function of promoting confidence because I know they protect... I just thought of them literally as the skin-shield which keeps me in and infection and danger out.'

Vishvanath on the Lokapalas

The **Middle layer** of the Earthsquare is the *Siddhi* layer. Again one places them at the eight corners, starting from the West, going anti-clockwise; Siddhis are often described as supernatural attributes like flying through the air, weightlessness, becoming invisible, etc.

I feel that the Sri Yantra is linked to human-ness not super-humanness or overcoming human limitations. I rather see these siddhis as attributes that are inherent in the human body. Something to be remembered, strengths that we all have at all times but that we can only find if we are in our centre. So it's nothing to strive for on the outside but on the inside. Not to be attained by austerity, asceticism, or self-denial but by delving deeply within.

The siddhis are smallness, bigness, heaviness, lightness, quickness-or-efficacy in obtaining objective, wilfulness, creativity and subjugation. *Smallness* for me is linked to feeling small, feeling vulnerable but also allowing that rather than subjugating it. Allowing that little girl in me to be heard rather than shouting at myself for feeling small, vulnerable, fearful, not knowing what I want. I'm very good at neglecting that 'small' personality in me and pretending to be grown up yet not having a clue how to behave in this world. And actually by doing that cutting myself off from a real power, because if I truly listen to that part, she knows exactly what she wants. And by cutting off that link I end up sad, angry and joyless; feeling flat and defeated. And truly small and powerless. A vicious circle that has no end unless I am honest with myself.

Bigness to me is linked to bigness of heart, allowing others to be with their insecurity and anger, vanity and ego. Bigness is allowing myself to feel small, paying attention to my

sadness and needs. Bigness is about being grown-up, not in a 'Brazil' kind of way, being overwhelmed by bureaucracy, rules and fear but in a joyful, active way, taking responsibility for carving out the life that I want for myself, paying homage to the dreams I had as a child and that are still available if only I listen.

Heaviness, not moving from my position, being firm, solid yet not pugnacious.

Lightness, moving lightly, with a spring to my step. Walking in beauty and moving in harmony. Lightness of touch vs. heavy-handedness.

Quickness/efficacy in obtaining objective: I want something, once I've made up my mind, I move for it swiftly, by the quickest, most direct route.

Wilfulness - linked to the former, moving quickly, with absolute focus.

Creativeness: no censorship or intervention, direct flow; playing around with different media, enjoying the process and riding the wave.

Subjugation: For me this is linked to a Karate technique called 'ossai uke' or 'suppressing block', subjugating a punch or an attack, stepping aside and deferring. On a broader level this to me refers to subjugating influences that negate any action, process or activity; these might be my own ideas or they might originate in others or my interpretation of what I think others expect of me. It's about allowing myself to follow my instincts and being true to myself.

The **Inner layer**, the mudras, placed at the corners of the earthsquare, anti-clockwise, starting in the West:

These are named as desire, anger, greed, delusion, euphoria/smugness, jealousy, merit and demerit.

I didn't really know how to view merit and demerit, until I asked my friend Vishvanath about it and his answer was:

'In day to day life our activities can either confuse the hell out of us (demerit) or not (merit). Perhaps merit in the earth square is self compassion/self-understanding? Could liberation (as in enjoyment and liberation) perhaps be our awareness of our own humanity and the ability not to be too attached or hard on ourselves about human weaknesses? Is this why the Goddess is described as conquering the demon called Tripura (Three Cities - head, heart and genitals)?'

The challenge I repeatedly faced was not to be judgemental about my emotions, not to see them as the 'negative' but as a by-product of being alive when interacting with the world, as part of the metabolism like eating or excreting.

Sixteen Petals

Moving on to the Shaktis of the sixteen petalled lotus, again starting in the West and moving anti-clockwise): they are earth, air, fire, water, aether(or spirit/space), ear, skin, eye, tongue, nose, speaking, hands, feet, anus, clitoris-or-penis, wavering mind. They are the elements that we swim in, breathe, exhale, that make up the earth we walk on and that at the same time make up our bodies. This brings to mind a quote from Ambassador DeLenn, Babylon 5:

'The molecules of your body are the same molecules that make up this station and the nebula outside, that burn in the stars themselves. We are star stuff! We are the universe, made manifest, trying to figure itself out.'

So the sixteen petals are the shaktis through which we experience and explore the world around us, our bodies, our senses, the means through which we experience and connect to the world; hands, feet and genitals, the means through which we explore our surroundings and express ourselves.

Eight petals

The shaktis of the eight petals are speech, holding, walking, excreting, pleasure, abandoning-or-rejection, concentration-or-acceptance and detachment. They link in closely with the 16 petals; if you view the practitioner as the one who explores and experiences and the 16 petals as the means of exploration, the 8 petals could be viewed as that which is explored and experienced.

A notion I have come across not infrequently was that 'the 16 petals veil our existence, blind our spiritual sight and keep us spellbound in our infatuation with ourselves'. This defines our senses and sensual selves as something to be overcome and cast aside. I believe, rather, that via our senses our experience becomes true experience, being alive, awake and aware. Everything around us is connected through and with us.

This summer I went to Slovenia for a week on a Karate training holiday. In the mornings we would train and in the afternoons we were free to do whatever we wanted to do. I ended up exploring the landscape a lot. One day I came to a place in the forest where two mountain streams met, a crossroads of rivers, clear and icy cold water, the streams murmuring and gurgling, swirling and rushing - incredible shades of translucent turquoise. I stayed there for two hours, safely surrounded by mossy trees and painted the scene until the rain stopped me.

It was on my way back, climbing up a canyon through a short stretch of wood and coming out onto a meadow, the Julian Alps in the background that I suddenly was startled by the intensity of colours, the sharpness of every detail. Everything was clear, bright, a multitude of detail forming a complexity of sparkling beauty. Every sense in my body seemed to have awakened and I cherished details that previously I had not noticed and I thrilled in the totality of it.

Everything felt alive, significant, meaningful, connected and I suddenly understood that *this* was Sri Yantra, the totality of experience, the senses chiming together all at once into awake awareness. It wasn't the world that had changed but my perception of it.

So we have a somewhat puritan worldview on one side that the senses are something to be overcome vs. a tantric worldview that embraces the senses and relishes in them. 'Transcending limitations of physical self' vs. being alive in the physical body and living in it rather than fighting it.

Sri Yantra is about being human, not about stripping away our humanness and turning into elevated spiritual ascetic beings, about turning 'other' than who we are. It is about accepting who we are, seeing where we are in life, what limitations there are in terms of conditioning and body armouring, accepting ourselves with compassion and from that place change can occur if we truly so wish. Embracing the senses and embracing one's limitations and humanity.

Pulsating yantra, mantra, unblocking

The further you move into the layers of the Sri Yantra the more abstract they become. The 14 nadis, the ten breaths, the ten internal fires, etc. and finally the bindu, the centre of the yantra, the centre of the practitioner. Entering the Bindu means leaving behind the world of natural and ordinary mental images. Bindu; the centre of the heart, Pure Consciousness, the Ultimate Devata Lalita. I have mainly used mantra to explore the inner triangles.

Mantra and yantra complement and reinforce each other. Both used together are very powerful. Looking at the yantra for a while you can sense it vibrating and zigzagging in your vision.

Using the mantra, especially when spoken out loud this pulsating effect becomes very pronounced throughout your body. Pulsating, Yantra, Mantra within ones body. This is Nasika Shakti, the zigzag goddess.

Pulsating, unblocking. Awakening aspects of your body or being that are dead. Shut off due to past pain or trauma. Breaking through armouring and conditioning. Reawakening the senses. Nasika shakti, the zigzag shakti, awakening the practitioner to feeling alive again. Or making the practitioner aware of existing blocks and offering the opportunity to start the unblocking process, the process of letting go of armouring and conditioning.

The following quote is by Shihan Akio Minakami, a Japanese Karate master I have had the honour to train with and to me this summarises what Sri Yantra is about:

'When we come into this world we have one hundred percent strong and good feelings. Whether boy or girl, we don't cry half-heartedly. We are completely free and confident. We don't care what people think of us. We just do our own thing. We cry with all our might. Our first kiai is the loudest.

As we grow up, we change slowly according to our experience. By observing our surroundings and through our intelligence, we learn how to act. Don't be an actor. Don't act cool. Don't act tough. Be true to your original self. Be true to your heart.

Live like your baby-time kiai, with no hesitation, with all your might. Abandon small-minded images of who you want to be. Don't waste time pretending to be somebody that you're not. Just get on with your life NOW! This is genuine confidence. This is your true self. Like a baby, you are free.

When we first begin, our loudest kiai is far from when you were a baby. Be patient. It is a lifelong task. Our original confidence may take a few years to find.'