

# The Great Goddess Lalitā and the Śrī Cakra

Subhash Kak सुभाष काक

## Introduction

Here we speak of the great Goddess Lalitā, who is also known as Tripurasundarī, Mahārājñī and Rājarājeśvarī amongst other names. She is the presiding deity of the most esoteric yogic practices associated with the Śrī Cakra (also called Śrī Yantra) that are collectively called Śrī Vidyā.

According to the Vedic view, reality, which is unitary at the transcendental level, is projected into experience that is characterized by duality and paradox. We thus have duality associated with body and consciousness, being and becoming, greed and altruism, fate and freedom. The Gods bridge such duality in the field of imagination and also collectively in society (Kak, 2002): Viṣṇu is the deity of moral law, whereas Śiva is Universal Consciousness. Conversely, the projection into processes of time and change is through the agency of the Goddess. Consciousness (*Puruṣa*) and Nature (*Prakṛti*) are opposite sides of the same coin.

The mystery of reality may be seen through the perspectives of language (because at its deepest level it embodies structures of consciousness) and logic (*nyāya*), physical categories (*vaiśeṣika*), creation at the personal or the psychological level (*sāṅkhya*), synthesis of experience (*yoga*), analysis of tradition (*mīmāṃsā*), and cosmology (*vedānta*). These are the six *darśanas* of Indian philosophy. More particularly, sages have argued that the yogic journey into the deepest point of our being, a practice that is popularly called Tantra, is the quickest way to understanding.

As our ordinary conception of who we are is determined by name and form (*nāmarūpa*), this journey requires challenging our most basic beliefs related to our personal and social selves. One needs to travel to the deepest layers of our being wherein spring our desires, some of which are primal and others that are shaped by culture and experience. Since name and form belong to the realm of time and change, this path is that of the Goddess. The path of the Goddess is quick, but it is filled with danger since it involves deconstructing one's self and then arriving at a new synthesis. This path has been popular with warriors, intellectuals and aesthetes and its practitioners include India's greatest philosophers.

We explore first the question of the antiquity of the Śrī Cakra by showing that it figures in a very early text, the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad (SU). The deity of the Śrī Cakra is known to us from the Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa as Lalitā Tripurasundarī, the playful transcendent beauty of the three cities. The meaning of the Cakra and its nine circuits will be explained.

## Śvetāśvatara's Yantra

The sage Śvetāśvatara, who belonged to the late Vedic period, asks in his Upaniṣad whether time (*kāla*) or nature (*svabhāva*), or necessity (*niyati*) or chance (*yādṛcchā*), or *Puruṣa* is the primary cause of this reality. He answers in a riddle that goes:

*tamekanemi trivṛtaṃ ṣoḍaśāntaṃ  
śatārdhāraṃ viṃśatipratyarābhīḥ  
aṣṭakāḥ ṣaḍbhirviśvarūpaikapāśaṃ  
trimārgabhedam dvinitaitaikamoham .1.4*

Who (like a wheel) has one felly with three tires, sixteen ends,  
fifty spokes, twenty counter-spokes,  
six sets of eight, one universal rope,  
with three paths and illusion arising from two views. SU 1.4

This looks like the description of a Yantra, but we don't have enough information on how to proceed to draw it. An interpretation of these numbers as different categories of Sāṅkhya was provided by Śaṅkara (788-820) although he did not specifically address its graphical design.

We argue that this describes the Śrī Cakra. This might appear surprising at first because the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad extols Rudra-Śiva and the Śrī Cakra is associated with the Goddess. But since Śiva does reside at the innermost point (*bindu*) of the Cakra along with the Goddess, it is not inconsistent with the focus of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad. Furthermore, SU 4.9 proclaims: *māyāṃ tu prakṛti vidyānmāyinaṃ tu maheśvaram*, consider Nature to be magical (*māyā*) and the Great Lord (*Maheśvara*) to be the one who has cast the spell (*māyin*). The Goddess is another name by which Nature is known, therefore the mystery of the Lord in the launching of the Universe can only be known through the Goddess. The identification of the Śrī Cakra in SU goes against the scholarly view that the Śrī Cakra is a post-major-Upaniṣadic innovation, and, if accepted, this calls for a revision of the history of the development of Tantra.

The *bindu* or dot in the innermost triangle of the Śrī Cakra represents the potential of the non-dual Śiva-Śakti. When this potential separates into *prakāśa* (the *aham* or I-consciousness, Śiva) and *vimarśa* (the *idam* or this-consciousness, Śakti) it is embodied into *nāda*, *kalā* and *bindu*. *Nāda* is the primal, unexpressed sound (interpreted by human ear as *oṃkāra*) and *kalā* is the “*kāma kalā*,” the desire to create, which the Vedas tell us is the desire “May I be many” (Chāndogya Up. 6.2.1.3). *Bindu*, as the potential universe ready to separate into various categories is Mahātripurasundarī. Śiva as *Prakāśa* (luminosity or consciousness) has realized himself as “I am”, through her, the *Vimarśa Śakti* (Nature as the reflector).

It must be stated that within the Yogic tradition, it has always been believed that Tantra is a part of the Vedas itself. In the Devī Sūkta (Ṛgveda 10.125), the Goddess describes herself as supreme. In the Śrī Sūkta of the Ṛgvedic hymns (appendices), the goddess Śrī is associated with prosperity, wealth, and fortune, and she is spoken of as deriving joy

from trumpeting elephants. The Śrī Sūkta, addressed to Jātavedas of Fire, was invoked at the fire ritual. In Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra (14.117.1) there is reference to the goddess being invoked for the protection of a fort. In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 7.4 there is a reference to the goddess Vāc.

The Vedic triads, together with the dyadic male and female components, enlarge through expansion (*prapañca*) so the universe is a projection (*vimarśa*) of the Absolute's self-illumination (*prakāśa*).

The supreme deity in the form of Śakti (*parāśakti*), Śrī as the great goddess (*mahādevī*) is one of the aspects of Lalitā Tripurasundarī. Lalitā Tripurasundarī has three manifestations: *sthūla*, or descriptive as image; *sūkṣma*, or subtle as mantra; and *parā*, or transcendent as *yantra* or *cakra*. Lalitā Tripurasundarī is also called Rājarājeśvarī or just Śrīdevī. Those who see the three representations as interrelated are called the followers of the *kaula* tradition, as has been the case with the Kashmiris.

In the South, the *Tirumantiram* (*Śrīmantra* in Sanskrit) of the seventh century *siddha* Tirumular knows Śrīvidyā. In the *Lalitāsahasranāma*, Lalitā is described in terms similar to those of Durgā. Lalitā is worshiped as the srividya mantra and as the Śrī Yantra.

The Śrīvidyā mantra is known in three forms: *kādi* (starting with *ka*), *hādi* (starting with *ha*), and *sādi* associated with Śrī Manmatha, Lopāmudrā, and Durvāsā respectively. The mantra is divided into three parts, which represent three sections (*kūṭa* or *khaṇḍa*) of the image of the Goddess: *vāgbhvakūṭa*, *kāmarājakūṭa*, and *śaktikūṭa*.

The *kādividyā* of Śrī Manmatha:

*ka e ī la hrīm* (vāgbhvakūṭa)  
*ha sa ka ha la hrīm* (kāmarājakūṭa)  
*sa ka la hrīm* (śaktikūṭa)

The *hādividyā* of Lopāmudrā:

*ha sa ka la hrīm* (vāgbhvakūṭa)  
*ha sa ja ha la hrīm* (kāmarājakūṭa)  
*sa ka la hrīm* (śaktikūṭa)

The *sādividyā* of Durvāsā:

*sa e ī la hrīm* (vāgbhvakūṭa)  
*sa ha ka ha la hrīm* (kāmarājakūṭa)  
*sa ka la hrīm* (śaktikūṭa)

The 18<sup>th</sup> century scholar Bhāskarāya maintained that the Śrīvidyā mantra is meant in Rgveda 5.47.4 where it is said: *catvāra īṃ bibharti kṣemayantaḥ*, “that with four *īṃs*

confers benefit". The *kādi* mantra (*pañcadaśākṣarī*) has four long ī vowels. According to some, the 16-syllable mantra (*ṣoḍaśākṣarī*) is obtained by adding the seed-syllable (*bījākṣara*) *śrīṃ* to the 15-syllable mantra.

The Śrī Vidyā mantra is viewed as 37 syllables, representing the 36 *tattvas* of reality of Śaivism and the 37<sup>th</sup> transcendent Parāśiva state. These are divided into 11 for the *vāgbhvakūṭa*, 15 for the *kāmarājakūṭa*, and 11 for the *śaktikūṭa*.

### The Śrī Cakra and Lalitā Tripurasundarī

The three cities in the name of Lalitā Tripurasundarī are that of the body, the mind, and the spirit, or that of will (*icchā*), knowledge (*jñāna*) and action (*kriyā*). They may also be seen as the knower, the means of knowledge, and the object of knowledge; the three *gunas* of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*; *agni* (fire), *sūrya* (sun) and *candra* (moon); *sr̥ṣṭi* (creation), *sthiti* (preservation) and *laya* (dissolution); intellect, feelings, and sensation; subject (*mātā*), instrument (*māna*), and object (*meya*) of all things; waking (*jāgrat*), dreaming (*svapna*) and dreamless sleep (*suṣupti*) states; as *ātma* (individual self), *antarātma* (inner being) and *paramātma* (supreme self) and also as past, present and future.

Her five triangles represent the *pañca bhūtas* (five elements). She holds five flowery arrows, noose, goad and bow. The noose is attachment, the goad is revulsion, the bow is the mind and the flowery arrows are the five sense objects. Their union is harmony or *samarasa*.

Śaṅkara (788-820) spoke of the Śrī Cakra in the *Saundaryalaharī* (SL) (Subramaniam, 1977). In SL11, the Śrī Cakra is described in terms of its 4 *Śrikanṭha* (upward pointing) and 5 *Śivayuvatī* (downward pointing) triangles, which create its 43 triangles. If we look Śrī Cakra's structure as consisting of three basic triangles, then within each triangle are lower hierarchical levels of two other triangles, of alternating polarity. The 42 outer triangles are arranged in four circles around the middle triangle, with counts of 8, 10, 10, and 14 in the four arrays. The Śrī Cakra is also associated with the cakras of the yogi's body. According to SL 14:

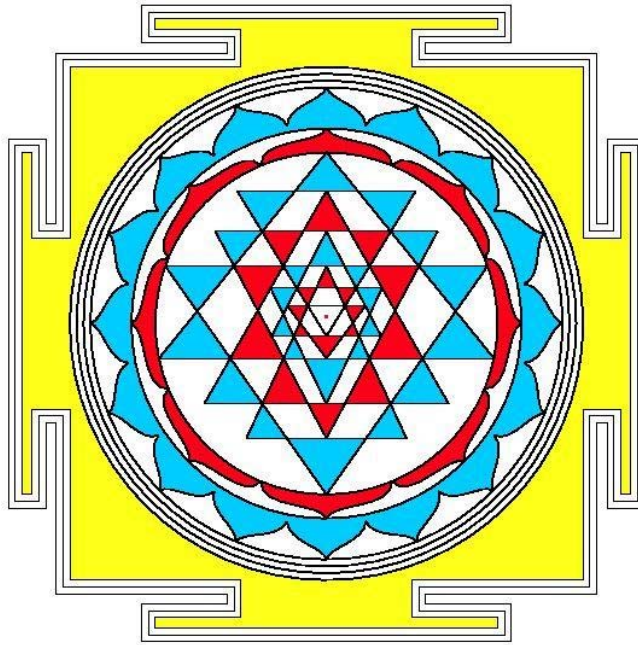
*Fifty-six for earth (mūlādhāra); for water fifty-two (maṇi-pūraka),  
sixty-two for fire (svādhiṣṭhāna); for air fifty-four (anāhata),  
seventy-two for ether (viśuddhi); for mind sixty-four (ājñā cakra)  
are the rays; even beyond these are your twin feet.*

The six *cakras* are classified in *granthis* (knots) of two. The lowest two cakras correspond to 108 rays, the middle two to 116, and highest two to 136 rays. I have argued elsewhere that this provides an explanation for the layout of the great Śiva temple at Prambanan in Indonesia (Kak, 2010)

The Śrī Cakra embodies the tripartite division of the cosmos into earth, atmosphere, and the sun, which is mirrored in the individual by the body, the breath, and the inner lamp of

consciousness; it also represents the three parts of the body: neck to head, neck to navel, and navel to the bottom of the trunk. It is within the wheel of time (*kālacakra*), and it is both the human body (microcosm) and the universe (macrocosm). Its middle 43 triangles are surrounded by a circle of 8 petals that, in turn, is surrounded by a 16-petalled circle. At the outermost are 3 lines, which are called the *bhūpura*. They are also categorized into 9 circuits or *āvaraṇas*, where the *bhūpura* is the outermost *āvaraṇa*. These 9 *āvaraṇas* have 108 presiding Devis. In the Śrī Cakra *pūjā* they are systematically worshipped one by one with their names and mantras. The nine circuits symbolically indicate the successive phases in the process of becoming.

The nine cakras are compared in the Tripura Upaniṣad to the nine yogas, namely the eight familiar ones of Patañjali and the additional one of *sahaja*.



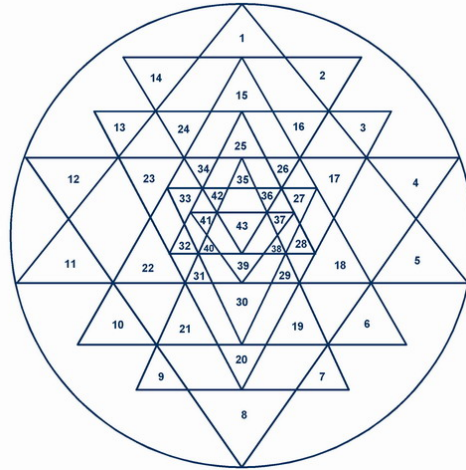
The Śrī Cakra

Lalitā Tripurasundarī's three śaktis, which are shown in the three corners of the inner triangle, are Bhagamālinī, Vajreśī, and Kāmeśvarī, who are associated with Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Rudra. The central *bindu* is where the Goddess is united with Śiva, the Universal Consciousness.

Cakra pūja or Yantra pūja is the worship of the deity. Devi, the cosmic female force, is the first step of creation. The counterpoint male principle has three emanations: Rudra from the left, Brahmā from the middle, and Viṣṇu from the right. At the centre of the Śrī Yantra is *kāmakalā*, which has three *bindus*. One is red, one is white and one is mixed. The red bindu is Kurukulla, the female form; the white *bindu* is Vārāhi the male form; and the mixed *bindu* is the union of Śiva and Śakti.



Lalitā Tripurasundarī



Forty-three triangles of the Śrī Cakra

Looking at the Śrī Cakra from outside in within the circular part of the Yantra, we thus have one felly with 3 tires, 16 ends of the petals in the outer circle, and a total of 50 (8 petals and 42 triangles outside of the central one) “spokes”, with 20 triangles in the middle two circuits that may be termed “counter-spokes”, a total of six circuits of petals and triangles have either 8 or more than 8 members, the universal rope is the *bhūpura*, the three paths are the paths ruled by *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva* embodied by the three Goddesses in the innermost triangle.

The Śrī Cakra maps the inner sky as one goes from outside to inside; it is also located in the body in terms of the 6 *cakras*. The count of 50 of the Śrī Cakra is mapped to 50 petals of the *cakras* as one goes from the base (*mūlādhāra*) to the *ājñā cakra*. The specific number of lotuses is 4, 6, 10, 12, 16, and 2. The *sahasrāra cakra*'s 1000 petals parallel the infinity associated with the innermost triangle of the Śrī Cakra.

Inside the square are three concentric circles, girdles (*mekhalā*). The space between the square and three girdles is the *Trailokyamohana cakra*, or the cakra that enchants the three worlds; at this stage the adept sees himself as his social self completely immersed in the magic of life.

Next are two concentric rings of sixteen and eight lotus petals, respectively. The first of these is *Sarvāsāparipūraka cakra*, which is the cakra that fulfils all desires; the second is the *Sarvasānkṣobhaṇa cakra*, indicating dissolution of apartness and duality.

The fourth cakra, consisting of the fourteen triangles forming the outer rim of the complex interlocking of triangles, is the *Sarvasaubhāgyadāyaka*, giver of good fortune, which leads one to spiritual insight and success.

The next two cakras are each constructed of ten triangles. Called *Sarvārthasādhaka*, making all means effective, and *Sarvarakṣākara*, protecting the unifying thread in all experience, they indicate stages when inner realization begins to strengthen. The seventh cakra, consisting of eight triangles, is the *Sarvarogahara*, removing all attachment to duality, at which the sādḥaka is near deep transformation.

An inverted triangle is the eighth cakra of *Sarvasiddhaprada*, that provides all powers and validation. The last cakra, the *bindu*, is *Sarvaānandamaya*, full of bliss. It is the heart of one's self in which one witnesses the union of one's own nature and spirit, Śakti and Śiva.

The Śri Yantra and its worship encompass the deepest secrets of Vedic knowledge. Not only does it represent the inner cosmos, which has the framework of infinity and recursion across scale and time and a mirroring of the outer and the inner, the ritual associated with it is the heart of *yajña*.

The Cakra is a representation of Devī in many forms: Lalitā, Kātyāyāni, Kāmeśvarī, Kāmākṣī, Durgā, Caṇḍī, Kālī, Ambā, and so on, that is reality (*sat*), mind (*cit*) and bliss (*ānanda*). As Mahāvidyās, Devī has the forms Kālī, Tārā, Tripurasundarī, Bhuvaneśvarī, Chinnamastā, Bhairavī, Dhūmavatī, Bagalāmukhī, Mātāṅgī, and Kamalā (Lakṣmī).



Śārikā Devī (painting by Veer Munshi)

The Śri Yantra ritual infuses the yantra with mantra that represents the union of space and sound. Its closed, concentric circuits (maṇḍalas) correspond to the nine planes of consciousness of the sādḥaka. Each plane is a stage on the ascent of one's being toward the Inner Self.

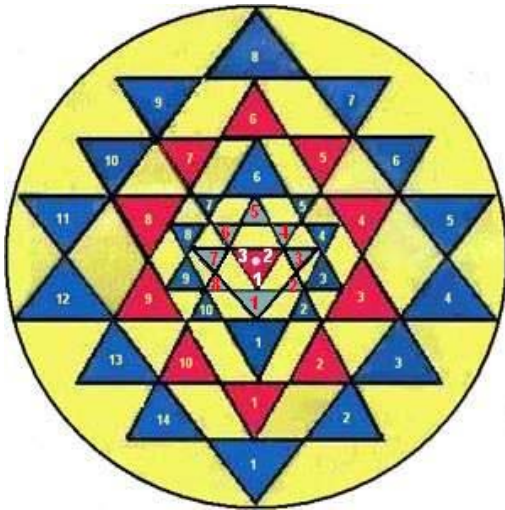
The vowels and consonants of Sanskrit are inscribed in the vertices of the Sri Yantra (Abhinavagupta, 2005). In each of the nine circuits (āvāraṇas) specific deities are



invoked. The deities are like veils concealing the deeper essence. After the sādḥaka has invoked all the devatas in the prescribed manner, he obtains an insight in which all the deities of the plane are fused to become the presiding deity of the circuit.

### The Nine Āvaranas

The *bhupura* is the first (outermost) āvaraṇa of the Sri Cakra. These lines have 10, 8, and 10 Devis, respectively. They include the eight Mātrkā Śaktis, which are the psychological forces that spring out of ego. The second āvaraṇa has 16 petals in which reside 16 Devis that rule over different aspects of physical well being. The third āvaraṇa is the 8 petal circle with eight Devis who represent various actions as well as non-action. The first three āvaraṇas represent *sr̥ṣṭi*, or extension of creation.



The fourth to the eighth āvaranas



Durgā vanquishing Mahiśasura (Orissa, 7<sup>th</sup> century)

The fourth āvaraṇa is the outer set of 14 blue triangles, which represent the 14 worlds and the 14 main Nāḍīs in the human body; the fifth āvaraṇa consists of 10 red triangles; the sixth has the inner 10 red triangles; these three āvaraṇas represent *sthiti*, or preservation. The seventh is the inner 8 green triangles; the eighth is the inner triangle. The three corners of this triangle are: Kāmeśvari, the Rudra Śakti or Pārvati; Vajreśi is the Visnu Śakti, Laksmī; and Bhagamālini is the Brahmā Śakti, or Sarasvatī. The ninth āvaraṇa is the *bindu*, which is the cosmic union of Śiva and Śakti. The deity, Mahā Tripurasundarī, is the personification of Parā Brahman. These three āvaraṇas represent *samhāra*, or absorption.

Do the nine sheaths stand up to scientific scrutiny? Modern neuroscience has not yet reached a level where the sheaths covering the innermost sense of self can be examined in the laboratory (Kak, 2004). But it does speak of centers that mediate different aspects of selfhood. The nine sheaths, in the Śri Cakra, are a consequence of the interplay between the realities of various kinds of triads that were mentioned before. To that extent,



the nine sheaths are a reasonable way of representing the inner space of our being which is validated by the experience of the sages.

The Devi-Māhātmya presents an account of what Mahākālī, Mahālakṣmī, and Mahāsarasvatī do to bring about the transformation of *prakṛti* from *tamas* to *rajas*, from *rajas* to *sattva* and from *sattva* to Supreme *Vijaya*, which is mastery in the Absolute. The Navarātri is a form of Śrī Cakra pūjā where the nine nights represent the nine āvaraṇas. The first three days are a worship of Mahākālī, Mahālakṣmī, and Mahāsarasvatī; on the subsequent days, their exploits are celebrated. The completion of the sādhanā is the marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī. The process is like overcoming the demonic materiality of one's own self that is represented elsewhere by Rāvaṇa. This victory is celebrated on the tenth day (Vijaya Daśamī) as that of Durgā over Mahiśāsura.

In Kashmir, the goddess Śārikā Devī subsumes in herself all the nine āvaranas, which is why she is shown with nine sets of arms.

### Concluding Remarks

We have seen much overlap between the numbers described in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad and those of the Śrī Yantra. In our opinion the case for the two Yantras being the same is compelling. The conception of the Goddess as the Supreme power out of which all the Gods emerged, encountered in the Durgā Saptaśatī, existed at the time of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad for it is also proclaimed in the Devī Sūkta of the Ṛgveda (10.125). Furthermore, we have evidence of yantric structures in India that go back to about 2000 BC (Kak, 2005) as well as representations of the Goddess killing the buffalo demon from the Harappan period, so we are speaking here of a very ancient tradition.

The Śrī Cakra is an iconic representation of the deepest intuitions of the Vedas. It represents both the recursive structure of reality and also expresses the fact that Nature and Consciousness are interpenetrating (Kak, 2007). It is relatively easy for the conditioned mind to question names and forms (*nāmarūpa*) as compared to turn the gaze of one's inner mind on one's consciousness. The Śrī Cakra looks at reality through the lens of beauty and felt experience. By helping one penetrate the various coverings of one's mind, it takes the seeker to Śiva, the fixed point of one's self.

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