

Yantras

Yantras are diagrams that are composed of geometrical patterns that are used to visualize *mantras* and are claimed to be encapsulations of a deity or power in tantric ritual (Sastri 628, Khanna 11, 21). Practitioners of *yantra* believe the diagrams create a religious energy field in which the sacred powers can be invoked (Khanna 30). They are typically drawn on paper, metal, or rock surfaces. Three-dimensional *yantras* also exist; they can be as small as an object that fits in your hand or may be as large as a building. Because of the complexity of composition, any rearrangement of the shapes or *mantras* used in the *yantra* creates a completely new *yantra* (Khanna 22-23, Buhemann 30).

The word *yantra* stems from the word 'yam,' meaning to hold or control the energy of an object or element, which is often used in the building of something. The term has been extended into religious tradition as tools of ritual and meditation (Khanna 11, Buhemann 28). *Mantras* and *yantras* are used together as tools in *tantric* ritual to achieve liberation (Khanna 37).

Today, *yantra* use is found in *tantric* practices but according to Khanna in *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*, *yantra* origin can be traced back to the Harappan culture about c. 3000 BCE. Seals have been found at Harappan sites that have *yantra*-like symbols engraved onto them. A thousand years later (c. 2000 BCE), Vedic altars have been found with *yantra*-like diagrams constructed on them. The *yantra* ritual wasn't brought back into practice until *tantric* practices became popular around 700-1200 CE. The use of *yantras* is widespread throughout Hinduism but the tantric ritual power of a *yantra* is a

guarded secret that is only orally passed down from *guru* to student (Khanna 10-11).

Tantra followers believe the symbols composing a *yantra* diagram hold little meaning by themselves, as the *yantra* must be understood in its entirety. Through ritual and meditation the cosmos, deity, and mantra are all inseparably joined to one in yantra (Khanna 21-22). Fusion of three principles: form, function, and power, is thought to compose a yantra. The shapes that often compose a yantra (triangle, square, circle, etc.) are the most basic forms that the universe deduced to. To understand the composition of the universe it is believed one must use a *yantra* to map together the basic shapes of the universe. The function principle is the process of interpreting the symbols as cosmic truths that metaphysically guide one to a spiritual realm of existence. Each symbol or shape in the *yantra* is used to achieve a psychological state needed to reach liberation. Our psychological states are a function of the symbols in yantras. The power principle is the true meaning of the *yantra* and can only be achieved by transcending form and function. It is the power principle, that *tantric* Hindus believe to be contained in a *yantra*, only emerges when it is no longer perceived as shapes and symbols (Khanna 11-12). Only transmitting the true meaning orally from guru to student it is protected from misuse.

A mantra must be said to understand the inner nature of a yantra. Mantras are believed to be the metaphysical forms of deities or cosmic power in the *tantra* tradition. It is thought that the vibrations of sound paired with the physical yantra that unites space, and the written and spoken word embodies this meaning.

Script on paper has only limited meaning as does the vibration of sound but when you pair the two they contain a conceptual meaning that separately they don't have (Khanna 34-37, Buhnemann 40). The Om *mantra* is regarded as a yantra of its own. When Om is said it begins with silence then manifests sound vibrations and ends with silence. Yantra practice starts with empty physical space then a physical form manifests and ends in transcendence past the physical to a true meaning. Om is thought to embody the perfect vibration and is associated with the center (*bindu*) of a yantra (Khanna 37).

When multiple deities are believed to be encapsulated in a yantra the deity associated with the *bindu* is thought to be the most important (Buhnemann 40). The *bindu* is often depicted as an infinite point (a dot) symbolizing the pure energy of creation and existence. The *bindu* is where *atman* (true self) and Brahman (reality) is found. A triangle is the primary sign that encloses space because no fewer lines can create a bounded area. An Inverted triangle represents the *yoni* or the sakti female principle. A triangle with an apex pointing upward represents the *linga*. A circle often represents the cyclic nature of life: creation, preservation, and destruction. The *bindu* is the innermost regression of the cycle and also the source of expansion. The square is the depiction of the manifest world that must be transcended to reach to true meaning of the *yantra* and life. (Khanna 32-33, Buhnemann 41, Sastri 628)

The *bindu* is sometimes called the seed of fertility when it is inside an inverted triangle and an inverted triangle represents the womb (*yoni*) in yantras that depict the union of male and female as it is in the Sri Yantra (Khanna 67,72).

In tantra, Siva the ultimate male principle (*purusa*) is the principle of consciousness and Sakti the ultimate female principle (*prakrti*) is the opposite and is the principle of energy and action. Siva oversees action while Sakti is the matter and nature. They are inseparable as the union allows each to fully manifest (Sastri 630-631, Khanna 67).



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Hindus revere the Sri Yantra as the greatest of all *yantras* (Khanna 70, Bunce 44). The most common interpretation of the Sri Yantra is of nine interconnected triangles, four represent Siva with the apex facing upward, five inverted triangles represent Sakti and there is a dot in the center (Sastri 632). From the center *bindu* to the outer square there are nine containments representing the three phases of the cosmos and time: creation, preservation, and dissolution. The outermost phase (square field, 16 pedal lotus, and 8 pedal lotus) represents creation. The middle phase (14 outer triangles, 10 triangles inside the 14, and another ten triangles inside the previous ten) represents preservation. The innermost phase (the *bindu*, the inner-most triangle, and the 8

triangles that surround it) represents destruction of the world. Within each phase includes a dynamic cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction/dissolution but the cosmic cycle is only complete with the assimilation of all three phases. (Sastri 632, Khanna 78, Bunce 44-50)

The Sri Yantra is also represented as a mythical mountain or pyramid. At the apex of the pyramid is the union of Siva and Sakti. As the pyramid unfolds purity decreases as differentiation occurs and more cosmic categories are created. When the base reaches its maximum size the process must reverse and the pyramid must regress back to the pure unity at the apex. (Sastri 628, Khanna 79)

This cycle is symbolically the same as the cycle of life. In *tantric* philosophy it is believed that before coming into existence we are pure consciousness, Atman. Unfortunately one mistakes the physical existence for reality and thinks it is Atman. This illusion of *maya* causes one to not see the inner wholeness. Through ritual and meditation *maya* can be overcome and Atman can be re-attained (Khanna 79-80). Like the journey from the base of the pyramid to the apex, Sri Yantra acts as a 9 - step map for the return to enlightenment. Each of the nine stages corresponds with one of the nine containments in the Sri Yantra. Starting from the outer square, one must work inwards conquering obstacles, each one harder than the next. The last stage arriving at the *bindu* is liberation and attainment of Atman (Khanna 109-118).

In the Tantra tradition, ritual is an outer form of spiritual discipline that gives away to inner form of contemplation needed to meditate. Yantra meditation

is often combined with classical techniques of classical Yoga meditation by gaining perfect control of one's mind to control all thought processes. A *yantra* provides a powerful tool to focus one's consciousness. It is only after complete control over conscious thought that the *yantra* meditations lead on to symbolic revelation (Khanna 107).

References And Further Recommended Readings

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http://www.awmmp.org/sri_yantra.jpg

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yantra>

http://www.sanatansociety.org/yoga_and_meditation/yantra_meditation.htm

<http://www.tantra-kundalini.com/yantras.htm>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tantra>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mantra>

<http://www.mahavidya.ca/tantra/>

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