

# The Eastern Window

by Penny Farrow

**Editor's Note:** Cross ventilation produces a breath of fresh air. It is desirable in a house and even in a magazine! In this spirit, we are featuring a series of short articles designed to make some of the basic building blocks and ideas of Vedic astrology more accessible to all. We anticipate that opening the Eastern Window can clarify the complementarity between great astrological traditions.

## A Heavenly Toolbox: The Panchanga

What is time? How was that concept cognized? A general definition is surprisingly elusive, and the nature of time remains one of the mysteries of physics. Technology, economics, philosophy, and medicine all have their own spin on the subject of time.

For ancient astronomers and astrologers, the nature of time must have seemed rather obvious; the heavens cause time because time is defined as the human perception of objects (the Sun, Moon, etc.) moving through space against the fixed reference of the star field. This idea is embedded in the oldest artifacts and inscriptions known to man.<sup>1</sup>

Observing the cyclical dance of the Sun, Moon, and other celestial bodies led to a deeper relationship between humans and the dazzling variety of cosmic patterns. Codifying these observations made it possible for man to align to the forces of the natural world through the concept of time. Planning a stable future using timing devices such as calendars, sundials, and monumental observatories like Stonehenge established humankind as a dominant force and was essential to the development of settled villages and towns.

Depending on how one dates ancient civilizations, calendar making in Vedic India could be one of the earliest examples of a culture that emphasized the ordering of time. Ever since the Vedic era or perhaps even before, the chief function of Jyotisha had been to construct and maintain the calendar — the schedule that enabled prediction of cyclical celestial phenomena for ritual purposes. Calendric material, including especially the five measurements known as the *Panchanga*, has for ages been compiled into a type of Indian astrological almanac.

*Pancha* means “five” and *anga* means “limb.” The five limbs of the Panchanga are essentially a database of the interactions between the Sun and the Moon. These five daily calculations establish the right timing for all the important functions within a society.

Jyotisha is a *Vedanga* — one of the limbs of the Vedas. The Vedas are said to be cognitions of the laws of nature by ancient seers. Vedic society was aligned

to these forces of nature through prescribed rituals. Performing rituals at the proper time was considered critical. Therefore, Jyotisha — as the composite of astronomy and astrology — was known as “the eyes of the Veda.” Jyotisha was thus not primarily about natal horoscopy but rather about event timing. Consequently, the Panchanga was vital for religious and ritual life as other calendar systems were in various ancient cultures.

Also, like the calendars of other early civilizations, the Panchanga emphasizes the cycles of the Moon. Because of this emphasis, a common misconception spills over to astrological considerations; Jyotisha is considered a lunar-based astrology, whereas Western astrology is a solar-based astrology. It would be more accurate to say that Jyotisha is a soli-lunar astrology based on a calendar of calculations involving the dance between the Sun and Moon.

Implicit in the five limbs of the Panchanga is the knowledge of where the Sun and the Moon are with respect to the Earth and to the star fields. The first limb concerns the Sun's movements and treats one day (*vara*) as a primary unit of time.<sup>2</sup> Unlike our current description of a day, the solar day of the Panchanga starts at sunrise, not midnight. Many cultures differentiate the kinds of activities that are most appropriate on certain days of the week, and this is also true of the Panchanga and Vedic culture in general.

The second and third limbs of the Panchanga involve lunar days — *nakshatras* and *tithis*, respectively. The 27 *nakshatras* (the second limb) are smaller asterisms within the larger solar constellations and therefore oc-

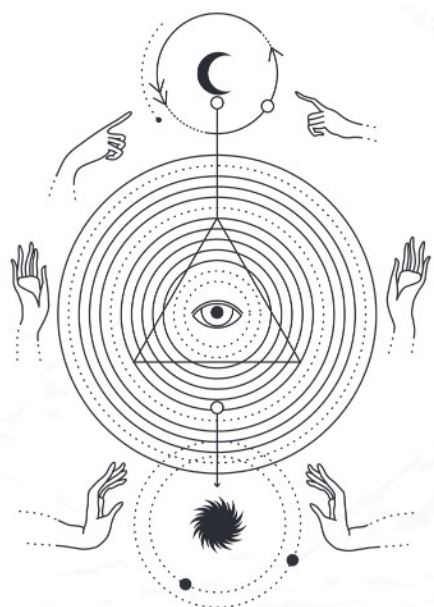
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cupy the same zodiacal wheel. The Moon moves through a nakshatra, often referred to as a lunar mansion, in approximately 24 hours. Understanding the many techniques and interpretations of the nakshatras is a vast study within Jyotisha.<sup>3</sup>

The third limb (tithi) is thought of as a different kind of lunar day based on 12° elongations of the Moon from the Sun. Therefore, a lunar day can be either the time it takes the Moon to move through one nakshatra, or it can be the time it takes the Moon to move through a tithi.

The waxing cycle of the Moon encompasses 15 tithis, culminating with the Full Moon (*Purnima*). There are also 15 tithis in the waning cycle, culminating with the New Moon (*Amavasya*). The tradition is replete with poetic descriptions. For example, the waxing and waning cycles are likened to the two wings of a bird. The

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waxing cycle is called *shukla paksha* ("the bright wing"), and the waning cycle is called *krishna paksha* ("the dark wing"). The tithis of the Moon are important in gauging the strength of the Moon based on its brightness (*paksha bala*). A very bright celestial object is easily seen and correlates with the manifestation of its significations within the native's life. Thus, a very bright Moon is extremely desirable.

The fourth limb of Panchanga deals with *karanas* — a time period corresponding to half of a tithi. Some of the karanas indicate a section of a day when the timing is decidedly inauspicious for initiating any activity.

The fifth and final limb of the Panchanga is a more elaborate calculation based on the longitudes of the Sun and the Moon each day, resulting in the 27 soli-lunar yogas known as the *nitya yogas*. These are indicators of time periods that are very auspicious for initiating significant activities such as marriage, purchasing a house, etc., as well as other time periods that should be avoided.

The prevailing scope of astrology today is narrow compared to how it was regarded in the past, especially the far distant past. The Panchanga empowers the Jyotishi who refers to it daily with the understanding of the endless kaleidoscope of sky patterns as they come and go in time. Such insights permeate all the limbs of Jyotisha. In birth charts, these patterns reveal the conditioning brought into this lifetime and help a native to self-examine and improve their lot in life. From a predictive standpoint, a person can be helped to "avert the danger that has not yet come."<sup>4</sup>

The Panchanga is invaluable when there is a very specific question that needs a quick resolution through the technique known as *prashna* (asking of a question), and of course the information in the Panchanga lights the way for the Jyotishi to discern an auspicious time to begin important endeavors — one of the six limbs of Jyotisha known as *muhurta*.<sup>5</sup>

The Panchanga is thus a unique and indispensable tool for unpacking the natal chart, for assessing how favorable the sky patterns are for current and future concerns, and, most profoundly,

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for timing activities that can mitigate what might be coming down the road.

Next time, we'll explore the techniques for surmounting obstacles and bolstering chart outcomes utilizing remedial measures.

## References and Notes

1. Richard Rudgley, *The Lost Civilizations of the Stone Age*, Simon & Schuster, 1999, pp. 86–105.
2. The Sun also gives us the twelve *rashis* (solar signs) and the twelve *bhavas* (houses).
3. Penny Farrow, "The Eastern Window: Meet the Fascinating Wives of the Moon," in *The Mountain Astrologer*, Dec. 2018/Jan. 2019, pp. 18–19.
4. Heyam *duhkham anagatam* is a well-known Sanskrit saying from *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, Chapter 2, Verse 16. This translation is by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi from class notes by the author.
5. Penny Farrow, "The Eastern Window: A Well-Appointed Sky," in *TMA*, Oct./Nov. 2018, pp. 16–17.

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