

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.

Enter the Dragon: The Story of Rahu and Ketu

Our world is enlivened and justified by the recounting of myths. Robert Svoboda, in his brilliant work *The Greatness of Saturn: A Therapeutic Myth*, speaks of the potency of a living myth that nourishes us and in turn, gets rejuvenated through its retelling.¹ Storytellers typically vary the details but the myth remains a prism for focusing eternal realities. Such a tale is the great creation myth called *The Churning of the Ocean*, humbly rendered below.

For untold eternities the enmity between the *devatas* (gods, also known as *suras*) and the *asuras* (anti-gods, enemies of the *suras*) rages on. The *devatas* are blessed with immortality, a status that the *asuras* covet above all else. One particular asura, Rahu, is totally obsessed with this desire and his pursuit of that forbidden fruit is a pivotal factor in the story's intrigue.

As with many other myths, our tale begins with a flawed hero — the glorious Indra, leader of the *devatas*. Powerful and renowned, Indra is also prone to pride and arrogance. On a fateful day, Indra rides down a road on his favorite mount, the magnificent Airavata, king of elephants. Approaching him is the irascible sage, Durvasa, who has just been given a heavenly wreath of flowers. On impulse, Durvasa throws the magical garland to Indra who catches it and

thoughtlessly places it on the head of his elephant.

Airavata is intoxicated with the fragrance and picks it up with his trunk, throws it around and, inevitably, it lands on the ground — a significant transgression. Durvasa is enraged by the disrespect shown to him and to his gift. Indra, realizing this might not end well, does what he should have done immediately upon encountering the *rishi*. He slides off the elephant and prostrates himself before the sage, begging for forgiveness. Durvasa is unrelenting and pronounces a curse; Indra and all the *devatas* will suffer the same fate as his gift — a great fall from their high position.

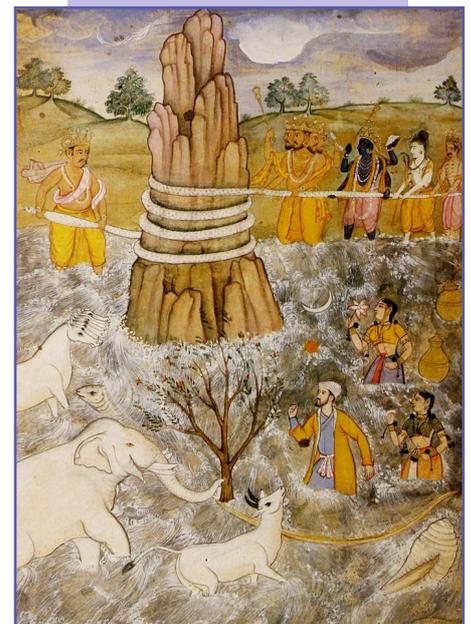
The curse quickly takes effect and the *devatas* lose their vigor, luster, and youth. Ripples widen and *dharma* (actions in accordance with natural law or universal values) retreats from the world. Priests cease performing their rituals, crops fail, and the forces of *adharma* (actions that violate natural law) strengthen. Weakened, vulnerable, and badly frightened, Indra and the *devatas* apply to Lord Brahma, the creator, for relief. He directs them to Lord Vishnu, the maintainer of creation, who comes up with a tricky and ingenious plan.

Vishnu advocates enlisting the aid of the *asuras*, traditional enemies of the *devatas*, to help restore the creation by the arduous task of churning the Ocean of Milk, which will ultimately manifest *amrita*, the nectar of immortality. Vishnu will promise the *asuras* and their king Vasuki — an enormous serpent-dragon — a portion of the nectar. Naturally, the *devatas* are horrified by the thought that the enemy would gain immortality, but Vishnu assures them that the *asuras*, in the end, will not partake in the drinking of the precious *amrita*. Indra proposes the bargain to Vasuki and the *asuras* gleefully accept. True to their nature, they

intend to do whatever they can to steal the *amrita* and thus gain mastery over the *devatas*.

A flurry of activity ensues. Milk, ghee, herbs, and offerings turn the ocean into a magic concoction. Mt. Meru, an enormous mythical mountain, is balanced on the back of Lord Vishnu in his turtle incarnation (Korma Avatar). Vasuki serves as a rope and wraps himself around Mt. Meru. Vishnu tells the *devatas* to stand at Vasuki's tail, thus avoiding the noxious breath, smoke, and fire belched from the dragon's mouth. The *asuras* station themselves at Vasuki's head. Working together, they begin churning the ocean, just as though they were churning butter.

The friction of the churning is intense and the smoke and flames unbearable but all labour to restore what was lost in the curse. All sorts of wondrous, as well as horrific, creations emerge as the churning continues, each with its own subset of stories. One of



the most famous and fearful emanations is a deadly poison that could potentially destroy all creatures. Lord Shiva, the destroyer, seeing the poison emerge, swallows it himself but blocks it from entering his stomach. So potent is the poison that his neck turns blue, his compassionate service earning him the name Nilakantha — the blue-throated one.

Finally, after years of churning — the great Dhanvantari, the god of Ayur Veda (who is actually another form of Lord Vishnu) — emerges with the golden pot of amrita. Immediately, a fierce fight breaks out as the asuras struggle to grasp the vessel. This quickly prompts Lord Vishnu to transform into the alluring enchantress Mohini who

The bifurcated creature, Rahu-Ketu, hides in the heavens, invisible, with his head (Rahu) and severed tail (Ketu) stretched across opposite sides of the zodiac.

dances for the combatants. Completely bewitched by her beauty, the asuras dance lustily along with her. But the devatas swiftly realize she is actually Lord Vishnu, so instead, they seat themselves respectfully in a silent row and watch Mohini hold aloft the amrita pot as she prepares to distribute it.

Among the drunken asuras, Rahu stands apart. His one-pointed devotion to gaining immortality had previously propelled him to practice rigorous austerities through which he obtained the boon of being able to disguise himself. Rahu, not as subject to stupefaction as the others, notices the devatas organizing themselves, and disguising himself as a devata, he sits between the Sun and the Moon while his asura cohorts dance under Mohini's spell. She speaks

honeyed words to them as she goes down the row of the seated devatas, distributing only to them the nectar of immortality.

When it is Rahu's turn to drink, he is so greedy and overwrought at the achievement of his heart's desire that he forgets to maintain his disguise. As he drinks a few drops of amrita, the Moon realizes he is an asura and cries out to the Sun. Together they shout to Mohini who instantly reverts back to Lord Vishnu and, throwing the deadly *sudarshana* discus, decapitates Rahu. Alas, Rahu is now immortal and does not die.

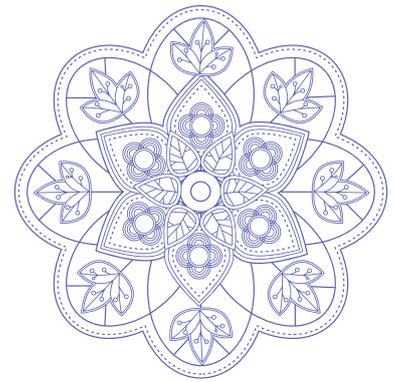
The newly bifurcated creature, Rahu-Ketu, hides in the heavens, invisible, with his head (Rahu) and severed tail (Ketu) stretched across opposite sides of the zodiac. Rahu swears eternal revenge on the Sun and Moon, and indeed, his vow is eternally enacted. Should an unwary luminary come too close to his mouth, it is snatched up and swallowed. But as Rahu-Ketu has no midsection, the Sun and Moon pass safely out of his body and recover.

And yes, this dance involving the Sun, Moon, Rahu, and Ketu is the teaching tale that accounts for the solar and lunar eclipses as told through the compelling voice of myth. It is a story awesome in its scope and moral magnificence. As with all great myths, much can be gleaned and inferred from its memorable instruction. In the next column, we will explore some of these implications as they apply to a chart.

1. Robert Svoboda, *The Greatness of Saturn: A Therapeutic Myth*, Lotus Press, 1997, pp. 18–21.

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Penny Farrow has an M.S. degree from Cornell University and has had an extensive career as a teacher, researcher, and businesswoman. She has been involved in the Vedic tradition since 1971. She has studied Jyotisha intensively since 1991, primarily under the personal tutelage of Hart deFouw and taught Jyotisha and Sanskrit at Vedic Vidya Institute in San Rafael, California for eight years. She now resides in Florida, practicing and teaching Jyotisha and Sanskrit full time, including a new online option. Telephone: (415) 497-2014; e-mail: info@vedicchart.com; website: <http://www.vedicchart.com>



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