

# 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.*

## Lost in Translation: The Western Mind and the Vedic Texts

Those of us who made their way through the required language classes in high school and college might recall moments when we were actually thinking in that language rather than translating to English in our heads. In fact, this is an ultimate goal of learning a language because it immerses us in a culture in a powerful way. Our neurophysiology vibrates in the pathways of someone who is French, Chinese, Brazilian, etc. Language molds thought, opening it to a range of potentialities and constraining it with various limitations.

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The growing interest in the traditional Indian subjects and texts—such as Jyotisha — has highlighted the problems that can arise, especially for Westerners, in this particular genre of translated texts. These subjects go beyond facts into the realms of transformation and are therefore less successfully translated than an article on biology. In fact, it could be said that one simply can't translate these verses, the cognitions of the ancient seers or wise sages; one can only render them.

If we couple this with the fact that the knowledge was always passed orally until relatively recent times, texts are inadequate to convey the subtleties em-

bedded in the verses of the seers. Instead, these revelations were unpacked by teachers in an oral tradition that remarkably sustained the integrity of the content through the ages. Compare this to what happens to a single sentence passed around a room in the party game of telephone. Even with a few participants, the sentence comes back to the originator distorted and laughable.

Where does this leave eager students from other parts of the world who wish to learn any of the subjects from the Indian wisdom traditions? The following parable (concocted by me to make a point) perhaps illustrates what not to do.



India's nuanced cultural tradition rests in the rich and multivalent Sanskrit language. Sanskrit is built on a series of fundamental spoken sounds called dhatus (roots).

A learned pharmacologist read an article that mentioned an obscure Amazonian herb said to have a dramatic effect on arthritic pain. There was a sketch of the herb and he decided to try to locate the plant, bring it back to his lab, and test its efficacy. Arriving in Brazil, he sets off with a guide, paddling down the river and swatting his way through the jungle to the area where this unique herb was reported to grow. Fortune was on his side. He found a plant matching the sketch, collected ample samples, and beat it back to his lab.

Indigenous tribal members, ever watchful of those entering their area, witnessed his very brief visit. They

surmised that since the stranger was very particular about picking only that plant, he must have been aware that long-standing wisdom held that the herb was a powerful medicine for pain. But myriad questions puzzled them. Did he know that it was only effective if the patient boiled the herb and inhaled its steam? Did he know that he picked it too early? Did he know that if he also picked a second herb, the combination of the two amplified the potency? Why didn't he make any attempt to communicate with them, stay with them for a while so they could teach him the most effective ways to heal with this herb?

Meanwhile, back at the lab, the professor analyzed the biochemical structure, synthesized it, and created a pill. His testing found that it was about as good as an aspirin. He tried to enhance the efficacy by adding other compounds to it but eventually concluded that the lore around this herb was hyperbolic and abandoned ship on the project.

Likewise, people outside the cultural context of India often want to have a simplified, efficient, modern version of an ornate, nuanced ancient body of knowledge. Yet, they don't realize what they have lost. It is like someone mistaking Pizza Hut for authentic homecooked Italian food, a legacy lovingly and proudly passed along to the next generations.

The basis of India's nuanced cultural tradition rests in the rich and multivalent Sanskrit language. Sanskrit is built on a series of fundamental spoken sounds called dhatus (roots). Dhatu can be defined as that which holds or potentiates. A dhatu is a kind of primal phoneme that proliferates through grammatical transformations into all the parts of speech — nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. Various words derived from a single dhatu have interrelated meanings with finely shaded differences and nuances depending on how they are combined with prefixes, suffixes, etc., and the context in which they are used.

It takes abundant patience and commitment to learn to think in this multivalent rishi-like way and be alert to the layers of meaning behind the literal word-for-word translations. Teaching and learning in this mode cultivates subjective pathways that enable pattern recognition and the capacity to hold and integrate multivalent possibilities. Thinking this way lifts these subjects from the level of information to the heights of revelation.

Learning to function in this mode is a challenging endeavor best left to a committed relationship between a teacher and student. However, if a student is curious about some of the primary Jyotisha texts, a practical approach to their understanding begins with the recognition that the texts themselves prioritize what is important. In my next column, we will explore this subject further.

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