

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.

Passwords for Unlocking Codes of Ancient Texts

The ancient texts of India are not easily accessible for those seeking transactional information logically laid out in a well-sequenced format. Not at all. Approaching these works as you would a biology textbook might be an unproductive and frustrating experience. Worse yet, it might discourage sincerely interested students from reaping the benefits of the deep wisdom cognized by the ancient seers.

The first obstacle is that the texts are sets of verses that were chanted by the teacher and repeated by the student until they were memorized. Miraculously, passing knowledge along in this way over untold generations maintained sufficient integrity that the verses could eventually be preserved by the more familiar means of scribing them on palm leaves or other suitable materials.

What was written down was what was spoken. The writing would have been in one of many regional scripts, the most ubiquitous of which is the *Devanagari* script of the Sanskrit language. When confronted with this script, one finds that the usual cues we have about how to read it are absent. For example, there are no exclamation points or underlining or italics. Not even all caps. How does anyone know what to prioritize? Enter the passwords.

Academic traditions tell us that complex religious and philosophical works

can be better understood by exegesis, a formidable word that really boils down to “critical explanation or interpretation of a text, especially of scripture.” For example, allegory may be a principle of exegesis in interpreting the Bible.

The ancient Indian texts have their own unique set of principles, enumerated in the texts themselves, which are internally consistent across the various works comprising the traditional canon, whether it be texts on Classical Indian astrology, commentary on the Vedas themselves, the *darshana* (viewpoint) on yoga, etc. There are six such principles that we can consider passwords, each of which unlocks a tool that is primary in understanding the intent of the text. We will consider the first two in this column and the rest next time.

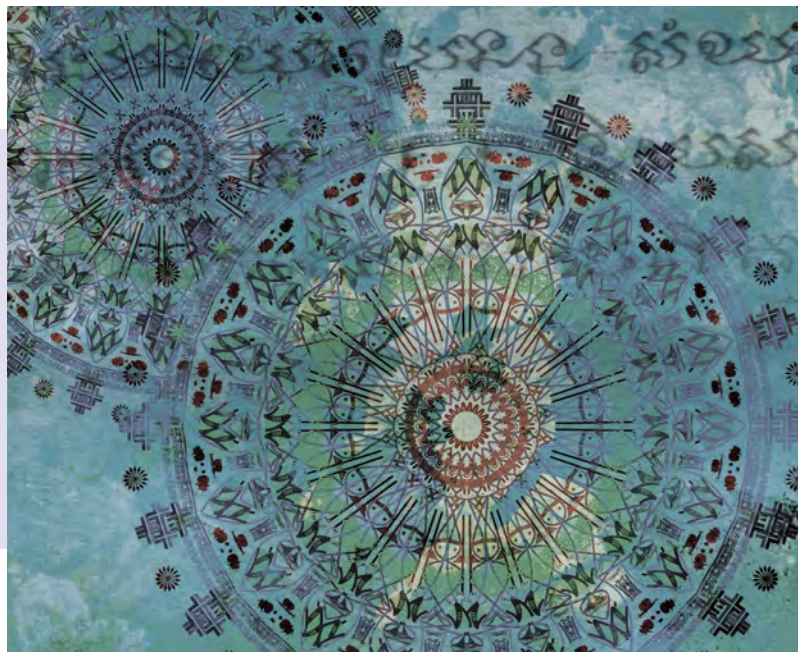
Upakramopasamharaikhya

Wow! This word is far more formidable than exegesis! It is composed of two words, *upakrama* (that which

is first) and *upasamhara* (that which is last). Actually, the concept is very accessible. It can be rendered as: that which is stated at the very beginning and at the very end of a work, chapter, or even subset of principles within a chapter, is of primary importance.

My favorite analogy is the opening of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. We all know it — a jagged theme in the unsettling key of C minor, with the foreboding of a storm cloud. We are on red alert as to the composer's intention. His vision is woven throughout the whole work until the sun rises at the end of the symphony with a dramatic shift to C major and the hope that all will be well. As listeners, our journey from beginning to end is consistent with the dramatic theme of the opening and closing bars.

Another example from our own experience is listening to a gifted orator. Such a speaker engages us from the very first words. As the talk continues, and might even seem to meander,



we are riveted by the forceful, often inspiring conclusion that ties the main message expressed at the beginning to all that follows and is resolved or reaffirmed at the end.

How does this relate to the Jyotisha texts? Like all texts in this tradition, there is some kind of invocation that starts the whole work and another that ends it. This is a huge reminder that what happens in-between is to be understood as the workings of an intelligent order. So, if something is covered in the intervening chapters that predicts a difficult outcome, the practitioner should frame and communicate the underlying context of the message properly. Indeed, the opening and closing verses of every chapter should be carefully considered, unpacked, and meditated upon to catch the deeper intention and context of the teaching that unfolds within those verses.

The very first words that Sage Parashara speaks in Brihat Parashara Hora Shastra, a core work of Jyotisha, describes the study as something that promotes the welfare of the world. This is confirmed at the end of the work where Parashara describes the benefits of listening to, and studying, Jyotisha: long life blessed with strength, means, and a good reputation.

We can use this password in other contexts as well. It also establishes how we prioritize the very principles of the discipline. For example, the first mention of the *grahas* (planets) is in the third chapter of this text. The *grahas* are enumerated and immediately classified as natural benefics or malefics. Many chapters later, another classification of the *grahas* is mentioned, one which has gained great prominence in modern times. Though not named as such in the text itself, it is referred to as functional benefics and malefics. But this concept has often been emphasized at the expense of undervaluing the more primary principle announced so early in the text. This inversion of the order of importance is a misinterpretation of the intention of the verses.

Abhyasa

This word might be familiar to those who study yoga, echoed in the old adage “practice makes perfect.” It

is the principle of repetition. *Abhyasa* is also a powerful and easily understood concept — the primacy of a principle is established through the extent to which it is repeated. However, this is not just rote repetition. Returning again to Beethoven, his eight-chord opening theme

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ingeniously reverberates throughout the first movement: inverted, fragmented, ornamented, and modulated, but always recognizable and familiar.

Our gifted speakers also repeat. I think of Barack Obama and how he ended his stump speeches stating all the things needing change. After each was enumerated, he invoked the powerful refrain, “Yes we can!”

Careful consideration of the texts shows us that, in many chapters with diverse techniques for analysis, there is a steady repetition regarding the conditions that produce auspicious outcomes and the ones that might be problematic. This becomes ingrained when we realize and understand the device and what it is pointing out.

For example, the sheer number of chapters and verses on *dashas* establish how important it is to read a chart according to dynamic analysis rather than as a static document. The *graha* that takes center stage in a particular time period of a person’s life is critical to understanding which themes are topical for him or her.

Close behind in numbers of chapters and verses is the topic of *yogas*, establishing their importance in the landscape of someone’s life. Depending on the *yogas*, the person could be pre-eminent, prosperous, talented, etc. But when? When they are 80 years old or only five? Not many child stars like Shirley Temple populate our world. Thus, in weaving together the verses on both *dashas* and *yogas*, we see a huge priority for looking at when (*dashas*) these powerful combinations (*yogas*) fructify.

Combining these first two principles, we can see even more powerfully how the discerning reader can understand what to prioritize. For example, natural benefics and malefics are first mentioned in the very first chapter where the *grahas* and their characteristics are described. Auspicious outcomes resulting from the influence of natural benefics (subject, of course, to the ecosystem of an individual chart) are endlessly detailed in the texts. The chapters on conditions at birth, remedial measures, effects of the *bhavas* (houses), *yoga* analysis, *dashas*, all extol the effects of natural benefics. And the reverse is equally true for natural malefics. This does not exclude other roles the *grahas* might take up in individual charts primarily as a result of the *bhavas* they rule, but it would be a mistake to ignore the great emphasis given to their natural (*naisargika*) role in the analysis of a chart.

Just these two passwords take us a long way to establishing what to prioritize when we study a chart. And we have four more to go! Next time.

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