

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: Part 2

Are ancient texts just a different kind of fossil? Are those who reference the ancient writings fundamentalists? These are very reasonable questions when approaching wisdom traditions that draw their strength from the lineage of a teacher-to-student transmission based on knowledge literally passed down through the ages.

Among the six “passwords” introduced in my last column,¹ there are two important ones for unlocking the mechanism by which the *shastra* (authoritative texts) stays relevant even in our modern times. Accommodating a new way of looking at an established principle, while maintaining its core truth, ensures that a wisdom tradition continues to breathe. Indeed, it is said that knowledge is *sanatana* (eternally true) when it is applicable to any person in any culture at any time.

APURVATA AND PHALA

The two passwords that constitute a fresh look at the cognitions of the seers encoded in the verses are *apurvata* and *phala*. *Apurvata* can be rendered as not having existed before; unparalleled; and even wonderful or extraordinary. *Phala* directly translates as “fruit.” But in this context, it refers to results or that which manifests, as in *karma* (actions) and *karmaphala* (the results of one’s actions).

In the shastras themselves, there are statements that are enigmatic, provocative, and even contradictory. There are also one-offs as opposed to the time-honored way of establishing priority through repetition, either within a body of work or across several shastras. There might also be principles unique to just one shastra. All three serve as flashing red lights, saying, “Look at me. There is something to see here.”

Famous examples are verses in some shastras that say a *graha* (planet) that is retrograde and debilitated acts like an exalted *graha*, and an exalted *graha* that is retrograde acts like it is debilitated!² This is very startling and begs investigation into why the sages would put this forward. It causes debate. It spurs research. And ultimately, such dilemmas, when resolved, greatly further understanding.

Another way this password can work is when erudite Jyotishis put together diverse principles in a unique but insightful way. They develop accountable protocols and techniques that are not explicitly in the text, yet synthesize textual knowledge, oral tradition, and their own cognitive abilities. These ideas then become subject to *phala* through testing by many practitioners over long periods of time before they can eventually take their place as *agama* — principles that become part of the body of knowledge passed along as *shastra*.

Iyer published a series of articles in the 1960s introducing his unique techniques. His writings were later gathered

into three volumes; the first two outlined his innovative approaches.³ It is too new to be established tradition, but many Jyotishis have worked with his methods and found them very accountable.

ARTHAVADA

We inherently know that the way to make a story, joke, or instructions to our kids really memorable is to exaggerate. It can be very effective, and it can be off-putting. Either way, it sticks in the mind. The sages were masters at coming up with *phala* (results) of various combinations in charts, and signaling how auspicious or virulent they are through this device of effusive praise or alarming calamity.

But part of the difficulty of *arthavada* is that the results are described in archaic terms and seemingly irrelevant to us all these centuries later. A good example is this description from *Phaladeepika* for an auspicious *yoga* (combination of astrological factors) known as a *Jaladhi Yoga*:

The person will be rich in cattle, wealth and grains. He will own a beautifully constructed mansion full of relatives. He will have an excellent wife, gems, clothes, ornaments and will attain a high and respectable status. He will be blessed with everlasting happiness. He will own elephants, horses, palanquins, etc. and will be revered by the king. He will be devoted to Brahmins and



gods and construct wells and reservoirs by the roadside for the benefit of others.⁴

How do we deal with this in modern times? We modernize it! Horses, elephants, and palanquins become high horsepower luxury vehicles with plush interiors. “Revered by the king,” means that he will have the favor of government or people in powerful positions who might ask him for his

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advice (and his money). “Constructing wells and reservoirs for the benefit of others” might be creating parks and preserving lakes or wetlands, building hospitals, and contributing to other charitable institutions.

Here is an example of how the level of praise signals a value of combinations that might seem similar until they are more closely examined. If you look at the opening verse of a long chapter on yogas in a seminal text, you will read that a benefic in the Ascendant is a *Shubha* (auspicious) Yoga. It can make a person eloquent (if it is Mercury), charming and well-formed (if it is Venus), or endowed with virtue or good qualities (if it is Jupiter).⁵ It doesn’t specify much more than that.

However, if you look at the opening chapter on yogas in the text *Phaladeepika*, you find that, if Jupiter is in the Ascendant while in its own rashi or exalted, there is a *Hamsa Yoga*.⁶ The text goes on to extol this yoga by giving results — such as, the person will be a king, a high political or government dignitary respected by good people, and he will have auspicious markings in his

hands and feet indicating very high status. His body will be beautiful, he will eat delicious food, and will be virtuous.

The more effusive language is a clear signal to the reader that the second combination gives a much higher result in life than the first and most likely does not occur as often. As in most things, what is rare is given a greater value.

UPAPATTI

There is a great emphasis placed in the ancient texts on what comes first and last in a text, chapter, or even a list like the six passwords.⁷ Thus, we know that *upapatti*, the last of the six passwords, must be seriously considered. *Upapatti* is understood to be what is fit, reasonable, consistent, and proper. It is a rejection of something idiosyncratic and overly subjective that would vitiate the tradition.

Just as you would not expect to find a chapter on how to change a tire in a cookbook, you might want to question a declaration in a book or video on *Jyotisha* that puts forward something that has not been in the tradition in any form or, more problematic, contradicts basic tenets. For example, misunderstanding the password of *arthavada* and the wisdom it unlocks results in some *Jyotishis* actually dismissing, sometimes vociferously, core principles in the *shastra* if they do not literally conform to the stated results. They essentially ignore the fact that the context of the chart can radically modify how a combination will ultimately perform rather than understanding how important the entire ecosystem of an individual chart is for bringing forth the result that would be expected.⁸

The proliferation of online teaching via YouTube and other modalities is too often characterized by an absence of fact-checking both the principles being discussed, as well as the instructor’s qualifications. It can, therefore, be confusing for students to navigate through inconsistencies that inevitably exist. Indeed, it may be hard to discern what is actually *Jyotisha* as opposed to a hybrid of Western astrology and *Jyotisha* (which is not problematic if described as such), or even a novel approach marketed as authentic. Even more

problematic is a disrespect for the precepts of the tradition, possibly from a misunderstanding of the very passwords discussed in this column.

Understanding these passwords and applying them judiciously to material that students may encounter is a good start toward understanding how the *shastras* point out what is important, while also ensuring that the knowledge is preserved through the ages and stays relevant. “Time honored” is a good turn of phrase, but it should not imply stultification. One of my favorite expressions from a very wise guru sums it up well: “That which is closest to the truth lasts longest.”⁹

References and Note

1. Penny Farrow, “Passwords for Unlocking Codes of Ancient Texts,” in *The Mountain Astrologer*, December 2020/January 2021, p. 12.
2. Nikhil Sharma “Exploring the Enigma of a Retrograde Graha Through the Lens of Shastra,” in *Cosmic Kaleidoscope Journal*, Volume 1, article 9 at https://vedicchart.com/cosmic-kaleidoscope-journal/?journal_id=exploring-the-enigma-of-a-retrograde-graha-through-the-lens-of-sastra (link accessed November 2020).
3. H.R. Seshadri Iyer, *New Techniques of Prediction*, Janapriya Prakashana Publications, 1963.
4. K.S. Kapoor, *Phaladeepika*, Ranjan Publications, chapter 6, verse 48, p. 83.
5. *Brihat Parashara Hora Shastra*, ed. R. Santhanam, Ranjan Publications, chapter 36, verse 1, p. 366.
6. *Phaladeepika*, chapter 6, verse 3, p. 63.
7. Farrow, “Passwords,” p. 12.
8. Penny Farrow, “Lost in Translation” in *The Mountain Astrologer*, October/November 2020, p.12.
9. Notes taken by the author in a class with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1972.

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