

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.

The Ecliptic Highway: Hares, Tortoises, and Contrarians

We are not the only ones that have “moves like Jagger.” If you are a keen (and patient) observer of the skies, you might find that the *grahas* (planets) also have their dance moves, which can clue us in as to what kind of karmic script they might be indicating in a particular chart.

The Sanskrit word describing how the *grahas* move is *gati*. The ancient texts outline eight overarching descriptions of planetary movement, ranging from breakneck speed to stuck in one place for a day or more.

Truth be told, none of this is really true. What?!? Yes, it is all an artifact of observation because we are looking from Earth, and we too are moving. You have probably been on an express train, and as you pull up to the slow-moving local train, the local train seems to be slowing down, even stopping, and then going backward! What's up with that? Physics.

However, I am an astrologer, not a physicist, and none of us has the luxury of observing our solar system and its shenanigans from outer space. We can only observe from our fixed point on Earth, and what we see is what we get.

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This is an age-old issue, starting with the “blasphemy” that the Earth is round and orbits the Sun. Not our daily experience, is it?

A broad-stroke definition of the *gatis* are the hares — the times when the *grahas* move quickly or very quickly; the tortoises — the times when the *grahas* move slowly or very slowly; and the contrarians — the times when the *grahas* move backward (retrograde) slowly, then quickly. And there are two other *gatis*: One is when the *grahas* don't move at all, and the other is when there are periods of time when they move along at their average daily speed.

The first *gati* we will consider is the last one mentioned above; it is known as *sama gati*. *Sama* means steady, regular, and smooth. It sounds a lot like the English word “same.” The Sun is the epitome of *sama gati*. As we



observe it from Earth, it is absolutely reliable. Not only do we know when it rises and sets from our own observation, it also moves along the zodiac with a smooth, even, and constant speed of about 1° per day. If you do the actual daily calculations, you will find that the variation is 61' (arc minutes) on the high side and 57' on the low side. Is it any wonder, then, that the Sun is an indicator of reliability, consistency, straightforwardness, imperturbability, balance, and so on?

Our other luminary, the Moon, is the fastest moving in terms of the distance it covers in ecliptic longitude each day, but it is also sama gati in that it travels a relatively consistent span of degrees each day, ranging from a low of just under 12° to a high of about 15°. Other qualities of the Moon — such as its waxing and waning cycles and its differences in ecliptical latitude — give interpretations that are different from the Sun's. The Moon is always changing, but there is also a quality of regularity and straightness from the point of view of gati, as it is not subject to the more extreme changes in speed and even direction.

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and Ketu are not planets. However, it distinguishes the five true planets by the term *tara graha*. It is the tara grahas that have the most interesting gati, as we will soon see.

Each graha has its sama gati (average daily speed). For some, they will be sama for a long period of time, but for a graha like Mercury, the period is very fleeting, as Mercury's gati is constantly changing from hare to tortoise to contrarian — speeding, moving slowly, and then even going backward (the infamous retrogression cycle).

Although Venus is sama gati at around 1° per day like the Sun, it covers a rashi (sign) on an average of 26 days rather than 30 days, since there are times it will be moving faster (maximum speed around 1°20'), and as a tara graha, it will also slow down and go retrograde. However, unlike Mercury, the retrograde cycle happens only once every 18 months or so. The similarity to the Sun's gati is why combustion of Venus lasts so long: It takes a while for the Sun and Venus to separate when they travel close to the same speed.

Mars has the most irregular cycle of all the grahas. Orbital eccentricity refers to how much the orbit of a graha deviates from a perfect circle. It was Johannes Kepler who first put forward the idea that none of the grahas had circular orbits, but he arrived at that conclusion by observing the most “eccentric” of all grahas — Mars. This carries over to the gati of Mars, wherein Mars can be “contrary” (retrograde) for as long as six months, creating a huge impact for natal charts and transit studies. When all this is taken into account, it can be said that Mars has an average daily motion of about 32' (its sama gati), with a maximum forward movement of around 45', and it moves through a rashi in about 57 days.

Jupiter has sama gati of 5' per day. It takes Jupiter about a year to go through a rashi, and it can be quite the hare when it moves at its maximum speed of 14' per day.

And then there is the ultimate tortoise. Saturn has sama gati of 2' a day, covering one rashi in about 2.5 years. It becomes a speed demon at 8' a day.

In the next column, we will examine the tortoise and the hare gatis and what they mean for horoscope interpretation.

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Penny Farrow has an M.S. degree from Cornell University and an extensive career as a teacher, researcher, and businesswoman. Involved in the Vedic tradition since 1971, she has studied Jyotisha intensively since 1991, primarily under the personal tutelage of Hart deFouw. She taught Jyotisha and Sanskrit at Vedic Vidya Institute in San Rafael, California for eight years. Now residing in Florida, Penny teaches Jyotisha and Sanskrit full-time, including a new online option. Please visit her newly launched Cosmic Kaleidoscope Journal at <https://vedicchart.com/cosmic-kaleidoscope-journal>. Her email is: info@vedicchart.com; website: <http://www.vedicchart.com>