

SEX & SPIRIT IN MAGICAL YANTRA

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Photographs by Chadri Chinalai

Yantra are magical drawings and sacred symbols and writing created to invoke the blessings of protection, good luck, prosperity, support, love and compassion from the cosmic universe. The word *yantra* is derived from the Sanskrit root *yam*, meaning to hold, support or sustain energy inherent in a particular element, object or concept. The meaning is similar to that of *mandala*, but *yantra* are found in India and in the countries of mainland Southeast Asia where Theravada Buddhism is practiced - Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Kampuchea. While the *mandala* is usually represented in circular style, the patterns of Southeast Asian *yantra* vary greatly. *Yantra* are inscribed on a variety of materials, including paper, cloth, metal, bone, clay, stone and skin and in a variety of forms: paper and cloth talismans and hangings and cloth undervestments; charms, amulets and statues of Buddha; and tattoos.

Drawings include diagrams, representative and abstract symbols, animals, fierce and mythical beasts (sometimes appearing anthropomorphic and sometimes amalgamations of several animals), Burmese spirits (*nats*), legendary figures, *thevada* (loosely, angels), *deva* (angels or spirits), giants, guardians, offerings, hands and feet, Buddhas, monks and famous disciples. A number of diagrams are comprised of Mt. Meru and the Hindu-Buddhist-based cosmic universe. Others appear to be based on the architecture of ancient temples.

Most *yantra* employ cabalistic squares filled with sacred letters or numbers, *gatha*, a Pali

Figure 1
Detail of a piya yantra
on cloth, Burma,
circa 1900,
2'11 1/2" x 2'11 1/2".
Men and women
embrace, partially
encircled by nagas.





word for magical chant or *mantra*. Sacred numbers, letters, words and phrases added to the drawings and diagrams are believed to help “activate” the *yantra*. Within the cabalistic squares, the layout of letters and syllables is palindromic: that is, they can be read or chanted from any direction - left to right, right to left, up, down or diagonally, thus forming a progression of holy incantations. Vocalized they are in the ancient religious languages of *khom*, ancient Khmer, more likely to be employed by monks than laymen, or Pali, even though the sounds frequently are written phonetically in the modern local language.

The use of symbolic and figurative diagramming as a means to harness energy from nature goes back to prehistoric times and mankind’s belief in animism. Early human beings, identifying heavenly bodies like the sun, moon and stars, and the elements - earth, water, fire, metal and wind - as sources of power, invented, developed and began to rely on divination, alchemy, necromancy, astrology, numerology, sorcery and emblems to utilize and protect themselves from the unpredictable forces of nature. *Yantra* are therefore just one example of a symbolic effort by human beings to call upon the supernatural for physical and spiritual

Figure 2
Piya yantra on cloth, Lanna,
circa 1900, 2'3" x 2'2 1/2".

Filled with charms and
full of charm, probably for
a man who intended to win
the affection of a woman.

It features double-tailed
geckos, a half-horse deva,
saliga and an earth goddess
at the center of the cosmos.

The eight circles represent
the eight major and minor
compass points, assuring
that the magic will travel
in all directions.



Figure 3
 Yantra on cloth,
 Burma, early 1900s,
 1'5" x 1'4 1/2".
 Two mynah birds,
 sometimes called the
 Golden-tongued Mynah
 in Thailand – an
 epithet that means
 silver-tongued – hover
 above the hybrid
 goat-man and symbolize
 compassion and support.

although toying with black magic is always a tricky business for both the creator of the *yantra* and its recipient.

Whether monk or secular master, the *saya* should live a moral life or the supernatural power he possesses could dissipate or disappear entirely, or turn against him. When his concentration is so strong that he is able to charge the work with energy to produce the projected outcome, he is ready to begin. He prepares himself by meditating until he is in a trance-like state, then begins drawing and chanting simultaneously. He draws each configuration in one continuous line without lifting the instrument until the section is complete, and ends the chant at the same time. His meditative state and incantations increase the efficacy and potency of the drawings and inscriptions. The results incorporate a varying combination of Buddhism, Hinduism, animism, astrology, numerology and cosmology through the use of an also varying combination of powerful drawings and inscriptions.

Sacred writing may also appear outside of the squares in other geometric forms or in continuous writing throughout the *yantra*. Sometimes the writing frames the squares or drawings; other times it is written inside the figures, or underneath like a caption to explain the figure or add power to its presence. The *gatha* may also be written in such a way that they actually form a figure or part of a figure, often Buddhist in nature. (See the monkeys in Figure 12)

In *yantra* drawings, the master also may frame certain areas in red to further augment their power. This is probably done selectively as the sacred writing and drawings are chosen

protection and survival. In their assorted forms all *yantra* have similar characteristics and objectives: their anticipated intrinsic power provides a way of controlling both the apparent and the unseen.

The master, or *hmaw-saya* ("spirit doctor"), who creates the *yantra* gains strength of mind through long study and meditation, and through apprenticeship learns the written and verbal language and art of *yantra*. The *saya* may be a spiritually-empowered and trained individual or a monk, although the Buddhist Sangha frowns upon its monks practicing magic.

For this reason the highly desirable monk-executed *yantra* generally are limited to beneficial and protective themes involving reverence to Buddha and the Dhamma. They invoke compassion and support and try to avoid magic spells that could be used to do evil. Other types of *yantra* may use white or black magic to help achieve their goals,



to be appropriate to the recipient, who also must have goodness and an ability to withstand the inherent forces within. The subject also bears responsibility for the outcome of using magic. Conducting himself with evil intent, using black magic or taking advantage of the power of the *yantra* to perform bad deeds could result in dilution or complete loss of power for him, and create a karmic debt for the *yantra* master as well.

In a sense, therefore, *yantra* are “custom made” to reflect the style, specialty and power of the master and the needs and strengths of his “client”. As a result, *yantra* fall into certain categories and sub-categories, each incorporating the most efficacious structure and content for quite specific to widely encompassing purposes. Some pieces are also astrologically personalized. With varying emphases, religious *yantra* remind us to be good, to have compassion and to respect and live by the tenets of Buddhism, while at the same time they

Figure 4
Detail of an early 1900s
yantra on cloth
from Burma,
1'5" x 1'5".

Only one goat is peering
upward, lending interest
and charm to a
traditionally repetitive
piece.



Figure 5
Detail of a yantra
on paper, Burma,
circa 1900,
2'5 1/2" x 1'11".
Typically 30 goats
in boxes reiterate
the power of the
cabalistic squares
while multiplying
one's chances for a
better love-life.

attract goodness, compassion and the blessings of Buddha to enhance and protect us. Secular *yantra* are also believed to give strength and invulnerability and to invite love, support and compassion, but they may seek additionally to imbue one with the kind of charm and attractiveness that leads to sexual desirability. It is *yantra* drawn on cloth or paper and that mostly serve this latter function that are of interest to this article and exhibit.

This is not to say that a drawing or amulet with *yantra* that makes a man or woman sexually attractive won't by default attract other blessings and overall good luck as well. After all, an appealing, charming person is a person others will want to be with, buy from, promote and protect. Thus nearly all *yantra* have some overlap in presentation and intent and even a drawing that clearly stresses sexuality will probably still tap into abundance, prosperity, overall popularity and good fortune. Certain *yantra*, however, have obviously dominant themes. In



general, drawings and writing that emphasize sexual charm, affection and performance depend on a fairly wide but limited range of symbols and fall into two main categories, designated in Pali as *piya* and *sineha* with only subtle differences between the two. *Piya* leans slightly more toward compassionate affection, whereas *sineha* has a stronger element of sexual desire.

Piya means beloved, a word whose content can run the gamut from Buddhist compassion or brotherly love to affectionate support and sexual attraction. (Figures 12 and 13) A *piya yantra* is slightly less likely to focus on lust, although sometimes its graphics appear to contradict this statement. *Sineha* means affection, a word whose content sounds tamer than might be its intent. Most *sineha yantra* aim to help charm a person of the opposite sex and this concept also is subject to all degrees of interpretation, from fondness to seduction.

Nagas, double-tailed geckos, birds, snails, goats and horses are some of the symbols one

Figure 6
Detail of a *sineha yantra* on cloth, Burma, circa 1900. 13 1/4" x 17 1/2", featuring a large half-goat (or possibly buffalo), surrounded by women and men. Not shown at bottom is a mythical lion for protection and male and female peacocks representing affectionate compassion.



Figure 7
Sincha yantra on cloth,
Burma, circa 1900,
1'9" x 2'2 1/2".
Laden with symbols
and a mixed variety of
couples, some showing
affection, some copulating.
The presence of two
Buddhist monks in the
unlikely, and in fact
forbidden, position of
touching women, provides
a religious balance that
seems to indicate a wish
for compassion along
with sexual attraction,
but is also confusing.

example - slang for the female genitalia, it provides some yantra with both purpose and an element of humor. (Figures 7 and 12)

Goats, buffaloes and horses signify sexual attraction. The "randy" goat especially is known for its sex drive, and almost certainly that plays into the goat's ubiquitous presence. According to the Thai Book of Planets, *Daksa*, the goat is also the emblem for Friday and the planet Venus which in turn represent love and family.

Drawings of goats generally fall into two styles: in one the drawing is divided into a grid with each box containing a small goat. Usually there is no writing within the boxes but they may be surrounded by writing. (Figures 4 and 5) In an open and more free-form yantra the goat is often large with a human body. He most often is surrounded by young women (or infrequently boys) or has his arms around them. (Figures 3 and 6) Sometimes in place of a half-goat is a half-buffalo or half-horse. (Figure 2)

Goats, horses, tigers, monkeys, serpents, elephants, dogs, rats, rabbits, human beings, spirits and anthropomorphic and mythical creatures may be presented singly or as couples in any combination, demonstrating affection or engaged in the sexual act. (Figures 1 and 7-11) Of course the representation of mating holds layers of meaning. The earliest and most obvious

encounters in either type. The *naga*, king of the serpents, liaison to the upper world, is also a symbol of one's mate. (Figure 1) The two-tailed gecko represents an animistic charm for good luck and attraction. With such an unusual animal symbol you should be able to charm others, win them over to your side and therefore advance socially and prosper in business. (Figure 2) Two birds together or near each other may represent *saliga*, a Thai word meaning charm through rhetoric, or in other words the ability to whisper sweet nothings, successfully, in his or her ear. (Figure 3)

There is a naïve charm to the *piya* and *sineha yantra*, which often were made in small remote villages, and this comes through in several ways: in the unsophisticated drawing; in the writing which read aloud might approximate ancient Pali or *khom* chants and invocations, but might also be filled with grammatical and spelling mistakes; and in the unpretentious and sometimes bawdy subject matter. The snail is a good



Figure 8
Detail of an early-mid 1900s popular style of yantra on cloth from Lanna, 1'7" x 1'8", designed to win over astrological forces by appealing to various animals of the zodiac.



Figure 9
Detail of a circa 1900 yantra cloth fragment, Lanna, 1'5 1/2" x 2'9". Two monkeys cavort and more.



Figure 10
Detail of a yantra drawing on cloth with elements of Buddhism and sineha, Burma, circa 1900, 2'0" x 2'9". Two of the monks are depicted in a specific style known as phra pidta, "covered eyes monks", signifying inner peace and protection; it appears as if they are shielding themselves from the sexual activity below.

significance is the transference of semen, the seed of life. Intercourse creates and is part of the cycle of life and lineage. The life cycle relates to fertility, fertility to abundance, abundance to prosperity, prosperity to power, power to sexual prowess, sexual prowess to intercourse....

Many of the animals, including the goat, are also signs of the zodiac and as such are believed to represent the astral powers that hold sway over our births and our lives. Subject to the whims of fate, one way to seek control of and from the elements and the cosmos is to copulate with the astrological purveyors of our fortune, good or bad. (Figures 7-11)

Every *yantra* is a unique and auspicious amalgamation of specifically selected materials, a meaningful combination of drawings and inscriptions, a union of the skills, experience and character of *yantra* master and recipient, a symbol and a charm; and a highly individualized work of art.

Figure 11
Detail of a circa 1900
yantra cloth fragment,
Lanna, 1'5¹/₂" x 2'9".
The tiger is a symbol
of the zodiac but also
a fierce jungle creature.
The figure is becoming
imbued with the tiger's
power and thus will
have nothing to fear
from beast or spirit.



Figure 12
An early 1900s yantra
with piya gatha, Burma
2'2¹/₂" x 1'5³/₄".
The man and woman
sit together atop a flower
(peony?) surrounded
by a peacock and a hare,
both in full circles,
symbolic of the sun and
the moon. Three monkeys
constructed of sacred
writing appear to pay
homage to the loving
couple.



Figure 13
A small yantra drawing
on cloth with a charming
prince flanked by two
royal elephants, Lanna,
early 1900s,
1'1" x 1'1¹/₄".





Unfortunately the number of *yantra* masters has diminished over the past several decades. Modernization and economic and political disruption have taken their toll on the creation of aesthetically important and spiritually significant *yantra* in mainland Southeast Asia, and therefore on *yantra* as a cultural phenomenon. Along with the decline in the number of *saya* and the number of pieces that still are produced free-hand, there has been a decreased ability among both the general population and scholars to read, interpret and understand the sacred letters, writing, numbers, drawings and symbols that provide the content and spirit of the *yantra*.

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Figure 14
It appears this bold drawing on paper is a strongly presented yantra in which the "Divine Seed" insures the success of auspicious invocations for longevity, prosperity and high social status. Lanna, early 1900s, 1'8" x 1'7 1/2".