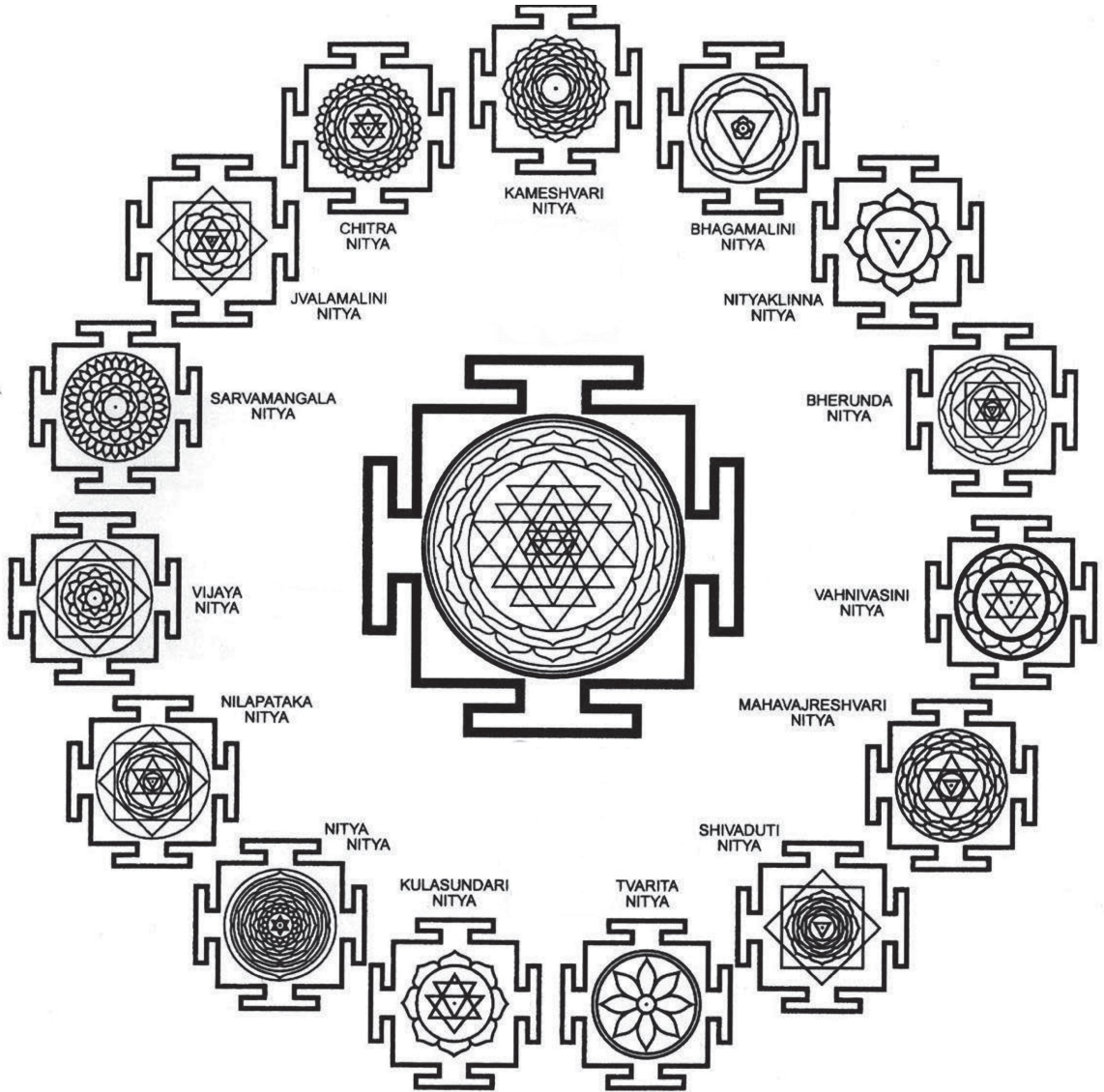


Sri Vidya Mantra: Unravelling the Cosmos

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THE VISIBLE WORLD IS only a small part of reality, which again is relative to an observer. Human beings experience only a sliver—20 Hz to 20,000 Hz—of the vast world of sounds. For bats and some other creatures it is

a different sonic universe. Recent explorations in some branches of theoretical physics have led to the formulation of the idea of a multiverse. Moreover, many astrophysicists suggest that only about five per cent of our universe comprises of visible

matter. The rest is composed of dark energy and dark matter, whose properties are elusive.

The human mind is unaware of many things outside and inside the body. However, to an introspective person, the universe appears to be a graded existence from the gross to the subtle. Sri Vidya is a subtle conception of tracing the relationship between various levels of existence. This *vidya*, science, structurally correlates the microcosm and the macrocosm and establishes a connection between the human body, the cosmic body, and the geographical body.

The Science of Vibration

Indian philosophers posited the primacy of *vāk* or *śabda*, sound, in their conception regarding both inner and outer worlds. *Vāk* is the creative force of the universe. As the universe is in constant flux, each movement, big or small, produces sound. This *vāk* evolves in stages in the universe, which is also reflected in the human body. The sages observed internal sounds through deep meditation and discovered the nature and place of their origin. In its principal stage *vāk* is called *parā*, absolute, and rests in the *mūlādhāra*, root receptacle. The second stage is *madhyama*, middle, when it is still nebulous and unperceived. The third is *paśyanti*, perceived, as thought, and finally to the *vaikharī*, audible words we utter and listen. The sadhaka has to follow the audible sound to its root in thought, from there one has to plunge into its nebulous stage and then to the *parā*. One thus travels from the relative and gross to the subtle and to the causal to reach the *nāda*, primordial vibration, which is the path towards the Godhead.

The *nāda* corresponds to the *ākāśa*, space, the primordial element among the five *mahā-bhūtas*, great elements. This is the vibration of 'emptiness'. Any *mātra*, phoneme, gets charged with a *bindu*, point, which the tantras view as the

fusion of Shiva and Shakti—the *spandana*, vibratory, principle. Ordinarily, a *bindu* takes half the time taken for uttering a phoneme. But the *bindu* also tapers into the subtler sound of *nāda*, which is equivalent to 1/16th of a phoneme. The further subtle division of sound ends at the level of *unmanā*, mind in extremely low vibration, which corresponds to 1/512th of the time taken to utter a *mātra*.

Since *sparsā*, touch, always produces sound, the sages developed a paradigm for phonemic emanation. The *bīja*, seed, as vowels, are equated with Shiva, and the *vyañjanas*, consonants, as *yoni*, womb, with Shakti. The vowels are *bījas* since no compound word can be formed without them. The world evolves from a phonemic emanation through a grosser condensation of sound, and created through the three powers of *icchā*, desire, *krīya*, action, and *jnana*, knowledge.

The great Kashmiri philosopher-mystic Abhinavagupta gives a meticulous description of phonemic emanation in his works *Tantrasara* and *Paratrishika-vivarana*. In the infinite *ākāśa* operates the *bimba*, mirror-principle. The first letter that emerges due to the inherent power of *svātantrya*, freedom, from the *prakāśa*—Shiva—is the vowel 'a'. This is the *anuttara*, silent one. When 'a' sees its reflection, it is filled with *ānanda*, joy, and 'ā' emerges. It desires more and then the third vowel 'e/i' emerges. This inheres as the *icchā-śakti*. Similarly, 'u' emerges with the inherent power of *kriyā-śakti*. Now, the first three short vowels—'a', 'e', 'u'—have the Sun principle and their corresponding longer vowels—'ā', 'ee', 'ū'—have the Soma, lunar, principle, as the latter three rest on the former. When *anuttara* and *ānanda* vowels fuse through *saṁghāta*, friction, 'ae', 'ai', 'ao', 'au' emanate. These also correspond to *kriyā-śakti*. When *kriyā-śakti* dissipates, all the vowels enter back into *anuttara* as a *bindu*

and form the vowel ‘*aṅg*’. The *anuttara* dissipates, *visarga*, into the *bindu*, and the vowel ‘*ab*’, ends the cycle. While the *anusvara* ‘*ṁ*’ as the *bindu* represents the unity of Shiva and Shakti, the *visarga*, represented as two dots ‘:’, signifies the division of the ultimate Consciousness into two—Shiva and Shakti. This starts the emanation of the manifest universe in the form of consonants, *vyañjanas*.

Alphabets Corresponding to Creation

The consonants evolve in a pattern from the *kaṅṭha*, guttural, to *osthya*, labials. These are the five series of five alphabets, each forming a separate group of *sparsā vyañjanas*. These 25 consonants also represent the 25 *tattvās*, realities, of the Samkhya philosophy. The five letters of the *ka-varga* class—*ka, kha, ga, gha, ṅa*—represent the five *mahā-bhūtas*: *prthivī*, earth; *āp*, water; *tejas*, fire; *vāyu*, wind; and *ākāśa*, space, respectively. The next series *ca-varga*—*ca, cha, ja, jha, ṅa*—stand for the five *tanmātrās*, subtle elements, of *gandha*, smell; *rasa*, taste; *rūpa*, sight; *sparsā*, touch; and *śabda*, sound. The next pentad of *ṭa-varga*—*ṭa, ṭha, ḍa, ḍha, ṅa*—corresponds to the five *karmendriyas*, instruments of action—speech, hands, legs, and organs of evacuation and generation. Thence comes the *ta-varga*—*ta, tha, da, dha, ṅa*—series corresponding to the five *jñanendriyas*, organs of knowledge—eyes, ears, skin, tongue, and nose. In the last *pa-varga*—*pa, pha, ba, bha, ma*—the series stands for Purusha; Prakriti; *buddhi*, intellect; *ahamkāra*, ego; and *manas*, mind. Even within a series, the letters are arranged according to condensation. The fifth element in the series corresponds to the *ākāśa* element and the first one to the *prthivī* element, the second to water, the third to fire, and the fourth to wind. Therefore, all the five series end with nasal sounds—*ṅa, ṅa, ṅa, na, ma*—and are termed as *anunāsikas*.

One can find another pattern in how *sparsā* consonants get subtler and subtler as they emanate both laterally and vertically. The last *sparsā* consonant is *ma*, and here ends the manifest universe of touch. By employing Panini’s *pratyābhāra* technique¹, the combination of the first *sparsā* consonant *ka* and the last *ma* forms the word *kama*. The touch produces *ānanda*. The addition of the vowel ‘*ā*’ forms the word *kāma*, meaning thereby the desire for touch in the material universe. It is this word that lies at the heart of the Sri Chakra, or Sri Yantra, which is the diagram representing Shiva and Shakti centred as the primordial desire, the primal seed of mind.

The next series of consonants are *antahstha*, comprising semivowels of the *ya-varga* series—*ya, ra, la, va*. Here the order of materiality is reversed. *La* is the *prthivī* element, and thence come the three alphabets and elements: *va, āp*, water; *ra, agni*, fire; and *ya, vāyu*, wind. The alphabets *ya, ra, la, va* also correspond to *rāga*, attachment; *vidya*, knowledge; *kalā*, division; and *maya* respectively. The last series of fricatives, *uṣma*, are produced by friction. After the three *śa, ṣa, sa*, the *ha* is the *visarga*. Here the emanation of consonants ends. *Ha* is akin to the two vowel *visargas* of ‘*ā*’ and ‘*ab*’. These three kinds of *visarga* produce *ānanda*. In *visarga*, the *mātrikā*, syllable, rests, *viśrāma*. *Ha* has space as element, and this conjoins with the *ya-varga* series to complete the pentad of letters.

The three letters *śa, ṣa, sa* also correspond to *śuddha vidya*, pure knowledge, Ishvara, and Sadashiva in Abhinavagupta’s scheme. Apart from the eight series, there is the ninth series that comprises a single compound letter: *kṣa*. This is formed by the conjunction of two consonants: *ka*, the first one, and *ṣa*, the last one. By employing the *pratyābhāra* technique, *kṣa* is the manifestation of all the consonants from *ka* to *ṣa*, or the world of manifestation. The seed syllables of

the mantras are derived from the proper understanding of the *mātrikā*.

Finally, the sages pinned the source of life to *prāṇa*. Breath is the carrier of *prāṇa*. The sound of breath was observed to open up a simple path to the *parā-vāk*, supreme sound. The sound of inhalation and exhalation, as *sa* and *ha* respectively, unlocked the secret of this phonemic path. Sages eulogized the combination of the two letters along with the nasal *ṇa*, or *ṅga*, last of the *ka-varga*, as the *haṁsa*, the swan of wisdom, and its anadrome *soham*, I am That, postulating the non-duality of jiva and Brahman, the individual and cosmos. The tantras also emphasize the conception of *prāṇa-śakti* circulating through the mechanism of the *sa* and *ha* sounds. *Sa* is the *śṛṣṭi*, creation, *bīja*, and *ha* is the *saṁhāra*, dissolution, *bīja*. *Sa* represents the state of the manifested universe, where balance and harmony is established. This is also known as the *amṛta bīja*, seed of elixir. In *ha* the manifest phonemic universe finally dissolves. This is the ultimate *visarga*. Hence *ha* is the seed of dissolution. If *sa* is jiva, *ha* is Shiva, the ultimate destroyer. The inhalation and exhalation cycle produces the continuous sound of *soham-haṁsa*, That I am-I am That, or jiva is Shiva. The Sri Vidya conceptualized a sequence of the *akṣaras*, alphabets, employing these seed syllables as the powerful Sri Mantra.

Fifteen-lettered Mantra

The *pañcadaśī*, fifteen-lettered, mantra has been revealed by Acharya Shankara in the *Saundaryalahari*: ‘O Mother! The parts that combine to form thy name (Mantra) are three groups of syllables—first, the group *ka, e, ī, and la* indicated by the words Shiva, Shakti, Kama, and Kshiti; second, the group *ha, sa, ka, ha, and la* denoted by Ravi, Sitakirana, Smara, Hamsa, and Shakra; and, third, the group *sa, ka, and la*, denoted by

Para, Mara, and Hari, together with Hrillekha (syllable Hrim) added at the end of each of the three groups of syllables.²

The mantra has three *kūṭas*, divisions: (i) *ka, e, ī, la*; (ii) *ha, sa, ka, ha, la*; and (iii) *sa, ka, la*. *Hṛīm* is added at the end of each *kūṭa*. The first division is the *vāg-bhāva*, the second is the *kāma-rāja*, and the last one is Shakti. These *kūṭas* correspond to the process of dissolution, maintenance, and creation. Since the phoneme *e*, represents the knowledge principle, the *vāg-bhāva* has predominance of the subtle intellect and stands for Maha Sarasvati, great goddess of wisdom. The second division has the first letter *sa*, meaning thereby wealth, and *ka*, for women and other objects of desire, while *ha* means to go or the attainment of these. According to Bhaskara Raya’s *Varivasya-rahasya*, the second division has the preponderance of valour, wealth, women, and fame, and hence the *kāma-rāja* also signifies Maha Lakshmi, great goddess of wealth. The third division does not have any vowel or the letter *ha*, Shiva; hence it is known as the *śakti-kūṭa* and signifies Maha Kali. The seed syllable *hṛīm*, or *hrillekha*, is attached in all three *kūṭas*. *Hṛīm* is derived from the root *hr̥*, which signifies destruction of the entire universe. A subtle *nāda*, sound, emanates when *r* and *ī* are pronounced along with the *bindu* and its *nava-nāda*, nine sounds. *Hṛīm* is also known as the *nava-nāda* in the *Lalita Sahasranama*.³

Thus, it is seen how the number nine emerges as the predominant number in the cosmogony and other formulations of the Sri Vidya. Three *kūṭas* also represent the three fires of time, sun, and moon respectively. The first *kūṭa* begins from the *mūlādhāra* and touches the *anāhata*, the second *kūṭa* extends with the brilliance of the sun from the *anāhata* to the *ājña* chakra, and the third *kūṭa* touches the *lalāta-madhya*, middle of the forehead, from the *ājña* chakra. Thus

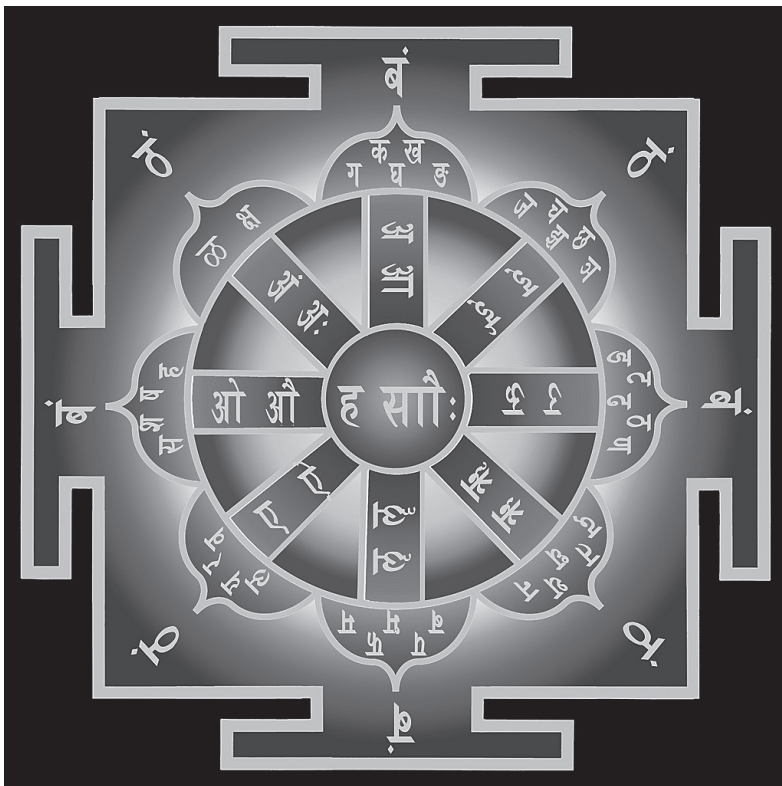
a homologous relationship is drawn between the subtle chakras within the human body and the three divisions of the mantra.

The *Varivasya-rahasya* explains the mantra's first division in the following way:⁴ *Ka* signifies *kameśvara*, one who desires, and here it is Brahman; the second letter *e*, signifies the genital organ as it is triangular in shape; the third letter *ī* is Shiva, who is immanent and all-sustaining. *La* signifies the Earth, and *hṛīm* is *maya*. In the second division, *ha-sa-ka* means smiling face, since *ka* signifies the face and *ha-sa* is *hāsya*, laughter. The other half of the second division is *ka-ha-la*. *Ka* is also the sun, *ha* is the moon, and *la* is the eye. One who has the sun and the moon as eyes is the *ka-ha-la*. The second division would mean that Brahman is bliss with its *cid-rūpa*, form of Consciousness (verses 137–9). The third division *sa-ka-la* refers to *jiva*, as the *jiva* has three states of consciousness—waking, dream, and deep sleep—and *hṛīm* is the

śakti-bīja. Therefore, the third *kūta* will imply that all is Brahman. This is the *mahā-vākya* *rtha*, meaning of the great saying, as per Bhaskara Raya (verses 143–7).

The same text mentions about sixteen different meanings of Sri Vidya. The meaning of the three *kūtas* is that Brahman is Shiva and also Shakti, since the concordance exists between Shiva and Shakti (verse 120). There are three pairs of alphabets in the mantra if one counts the *hṛīm* syllable as the mere appendix. While *ka* and *ha* are the Shiva principles, *la* and *sa* are the Shakti principles. The two vowels are Shaktis. *Hyllekha* itself is the Para Brahman, as Shiva in form of *ha* and Shakti in form of *ra* fuse and vibrate unto the *nava-nāda* of *hṛīmkari-śakti*.

Another interpretation of the *pañcadaśī* mantra is to connect the five Shakti triangles downwards, which constitute the Sri Yantra with the form of the five *bhūtas*, elements. These *bhūtas* have a total of fifteen qualities: the earth element



has the five qualities of smell, taste, sight, touch, sound; the water element has the other four except the quality of smell; the fire element has the other three except the quality of smell and taste; the wind element has only touch and sound, and the space element has only sound. These fifteen *kalās*, divisions, transform into time factors known as *tithi*, days, which wax or wane along with the Moon and are in fact digits of the Moon. These fifteen form the fifteen-lettered mantra which is the sound body of Goddess Lalita of the Sri Vidya. But it is the sixteenth digit of the moon that is verily the moon. This *ṣoḍaśī*, sixteenth, syllable is very secret and not shared beyond the *kula*, lineage.

New Revelations of the Mantra's Import

While contemplating over the mantra for many months I had a sudden flash of revelation. The three divisions have a common pattern. *Hṛīm* is preceded by the *pṛthivī tattva*, earth element; *la* in phonetic correspondence. Once we separate *la* and *hṛīm* only nine letters are left, three in the first *kūṭa*, four in the second, and two in the third. This is a nine-fold code hidden beneath the fifteen-lettered *pañcadaśī*. We have already seen how *hṛīm* itself is a nine-fold sound, *nava-nāda*. If one infers the meaning from the combination of *la*—*pṛthivī bīja*—and *hṛīm*—*māya-bīja*—this should give us the following meaning: from the earth *la* to the *ākāśa ha* the *māya-bīja* pervades.

But what is this *māya-bīja*? *Ha* is the ultimate *visarga* of the phonemic emanation. *Ha* is the *ākāśa* principle. When the universe dissolves each grosser element dissolves into its subtler element. All *bhūtas* finally dissolve into *ākāśa*, which is represented by *ha*, the last consonant. *Ra* is the *rāhu* that swallows *ākāśa*. *Hṛ* is the dissolution of the manifest universe, which is nothing but a mere illusion, *maya*. But the same seed also contains the power of

creation in the form of *ī* topped with *spandana*, vibratory power, of the *bindu*. Thus in each dissolution the seed of creation remains intact and the cyclic movement goes on. *Hṛīm* is the condensed potency of Shakti. Only this can express itself in a new creation.

With this new interpretation we can decipher the elegant wisdom of the *pañcadaśī* mantra of the Sri Vidya. In the first *kūṭa*—*ka, e, ī, la, hṛīm*—the former three phonemes represent the primordial powers of will, knowledge, and action—*icchā-śakti* from *kāmarāja-bīja ka*; *jñāna-śakti* from *bīja e*; and *kriyā-śakti* from *bīja ī*. The meaning of the *kūṭa* will then be as follows: the three powers of will, knowledge, and action pervade everything from the earth to space and also dissolve *maya*. In the second *kūṭa*—*ha, sa, ka, ha, la, hṛīm*—*ha-sa* is for *hāsya*, the laughter or joy principle, *ānanda*. This *ānanda* pervades from *ka* to *ha* or across the manifest universe and ends the illusion of *maya*. In the third *kūṭa*—*sa, ka, la, hṛīm*—*sa* is the *jiva* and *ka* is *Shiva*. The verse will mean thereby that there is absolute non-duality between *jiva* and *Shiva*, microcosm and macrocosm, individual and cosmos, immanence and transcendence. The realization of this non-duality dissolves *maya*.

Though the sixteenth letter is secret and esoteric, the single phoneme appended with *bindu* and *ī-śakti*, will be the fourth or the *turīya* stage of the *ṣoḍaśa*, sixteenth, Sri Vidya mantra.

The Nine-fold Pattern in the Human Perspective

There are various other nine-fold characterizations. The three Shaktis, composed of the three *gunas* and with three fires as her three eyes, is of nine aspects, the *graha-rūpa*, form of the nine planets (verse 84). Time is divided into nine parts ranging from *ghatika*, twenty-four minutes, to *abda*, a year. The body is an island

of nine gems, as per the *Bhavana Upanishad*, comprising *tvak*, touch; *roma*, hair; and seven *dhātus*, constituents.⁵ A body has nine orifices. Interestingly, the human foetus grows in the womb for nine months. Probably, the human being that grows under the constraints of non-awareness, with the power of consciousness slowly unfolding, explores the nine-fold patterns in the external and internal worlds. Indian sages have factorized alphabets into nine series, with *kṣa* as the last letter summing up all the fifty alphabets. Corresponding to these fifty-one letters are fifty-one *śakti-pīṭhas*, locations, in the Indian geo-body spread across the sub-continent, which create an idea of a common cultural space. The Sri Yantra, which generates forty-three triangles through three levels of furcation caused by intersection of nine triangles, has been held in awe by the sages and mystics across the religious spectrum of the subcontinent. The Sri Vidya mantra and the Sri Yantra have developed the most elaborate method to connect time and space in a nested hierarchy in an abstract diagram and code sequence. The methodical system reveals to a sadhaka how ultimately the whole universe throbs with the three powers of will, knowledge, and action and craves for more and more *ānanda*, attaining in the process the unity of all things. This scheme highlights the interrelation of each element with every other element and how division and fusion, creation and dissolution, potency and manifestation go together in the cosmos.

The powerful seed syllable *śṛṅg* in the *śodaśākṣari*, sixteen syllables, is derived from the word *śṛṅg*. This corresponds to the sixteenth digit of the moon also known as the digit of immortality. It is this connection of the number sixteen with the eternal power of renewal that the culture of the sixteen festivals; the sixteen kinds of *śṛṅgāra*, erotic love; the sixteen *kalās*,

arts, of proficiency; and so on became popular in Indian culture. The word *śṛṅga* also denotes two horns as well as a mountain peak. In Buddhist and Vedanta philosophies the concept of the 'hare's horns' is often given as an example of non-existence. The Sri Vidya is the highest peak of sadhana, which also makes us realize the fusion of existence and non-existence, creation and dissolution, symbolized in the seed syllable *hrīm*. In Indian mythology Yama, god of death, is represented with two horns. The Sri Vidya, with its hidden seed-sound *śṛṅg*, is the antidote against the fear of the horned Yama. The mantra is the ultimate code to further decipher the cosmic interrelationship. Sri Ramakrishna himself was a great adept in this science after his initiation by the Bhairavi Brahmani. He went through the entire process very quickly astounding his guru. It was his grounding in this *vidya* that allowed him to experience the bliss of various spiritual paths. After attaining the Advaita experience Sri Ramakrishna boldly declared: 'Jiva is Shiva'. This essential message of Sri Ramakrishna was preached by Swami Vivekananda all over the world. ❧

Note and References

1. The comprehension of several letters or affixes into one syllable are effected by combining the first letter of a sutra with the final indicatory letter. For instance, *a-na* is the *pratyāhāra* of the sutra *a, e, u, ṇa*.
2. *Saundarya Lahari of Śrī Śankarācārya*, 32; trans. Swami Tapasyananda (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1987), 83.
3. 'Nārāyaṇi nādarūpā nāmarūpa vivarjitā; hrīnkāri hrīmatī hr̥dyā heyopādeyavarjitā'—Acharya Shankara, *Lalita Sahasranama*, 70.
4. See Sri Bhaskara-Raya Makhin, *Varivasya-Rahasya, with his own commentary 'Prakasha'*, trans. Pandit S Subrahmanya Sastri (Adyar: Adyar Library, 1948), verses 60–1.
5. *Bhavana Upanishad*, 7.