

Tantra

THE PATH OF ECSTASY



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Mantra

THE POTENCY OF SOUND

The mind is transfixed by the beautiful inner sound (*nāda*),
as a snake in a hole is [caught] because of the scent [of a
decoy]
and drops its fickleness. Completely forgetting the world,
where could it run to?

—*Nāda-Bindu-Upanishad* (43)

THE SONIC UNIVERSE

Modern science and ancient Tantra agree: the universe is an ocean of energy. Where they differ is in how this fact should be understood. The Tantric approach affirms that this finding has very personal implications. If matter can indeed be resolved to energy, then the human body, as a product of the material cosmos, is likewise energy at a more primary level. As the *Tantras* further insist, energy

and consciousness are ultimately conjoined as the two poles of the same Reality, Shiva-Shakti. Therefore the human body is, in the final analysis, not merely unconscious matter but a stepped-down version of superconscious Energy. This insight has far-reaching practical ramifications for each person. For if the body is not merely the sarcophagus of an immaterial soul but a vibrant, living reality suffused with the same Consciousness that also animates the mind, then we must cease to regard the body as an external object radically distinct from our conscious selves. The habitual split between body and mind is not only unwarranted but detrimental to the wholeness to which spiritual seekers aspire. To put it in traditional terms, the body is a temple of the Divine. It is the foundation for realizing the essential oneness of everything; it is the springboard from which we can attain enlightenment—an enlightenment that for it to be true must necessarily include each of the physical body's thirty billion billion billion cells.

The Tantric position is clear: existence is One, and we are it. All division and divisiveness is a subsequent mental construct (*vikalpa*). However, the *Tantras* do not deny differentiation as such. The Many appears within the One but without ever becoming isolated from it. The Tantric adepts merely reject the notion of duality and the accompanying ego-driven attitude of separateness. Existence is continuity “stretching from the Radical Potential to its actualisation as the crust of matter.”¹

All this is beautifully contained in the concept of the serpent power (*kundalinī-shakti*), which is the ultimate Energy, or Shakti, as it manifests at a suitably stepped-down degree in the human body. The *kundalinī* is the power of Consciousness (*cit-shakti*), and as such is the superintelligent force sustaining the body and the mind through the agency of the life energy (*prāṇa*). Upon full awakening, the *kundalinī*'s fundamental role in the maintenance of our physical and mental structures and functions is witnessed directly. Gopi Krishna has expressed this vividly as follows:

I searched my brain for an explanation and revolved every possibility in my mind to account for the surprising develop-

ment as I watched attentively the incredible movement of this intelligent radiation from hour to hour and day to day. At times I was amazed at the uncanny knowledge it displayed of the complicated nervous mechanism and the masterly way in which it darted here and there as if aware of every twist and turn in the body.²

That the *kundalinī* is a cosmic—even a supracosmic—intelligent energy is borne out by its traditional name *sarasvatī*, meaning “she who flows.” Originally, this was the name of North India’s mightiest river, which flowed through the heartland of the Vedic civilization, now lying buried under the sand dunes of the Thar Desert. A memory of the former cultural greatness of that region has survived in the figure of *Sarasvatī*, the goddess of learning, who is typically portrayed holding a lute (*vīṇā*). *Shakti* is indeed the source of all knowledge and wisdom, for in the absence of the Goddess power, neither the mind nor the brain would exist.

Moreover, in the Tantric scriptures, *vīṇā-danda* or “fiddlestick” is an esoteric designation for the spinal column and, by extension, the central channel. When the central channel is activated through the ascent of the life force (*prāṇa*) followed by the serpent power itself, all kinds of subtle sounds can be heard inwardly. Connected with this is the idea that the body of the divine serpent is composed of the fifty basic letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, which corresponds to the fifty skulls worn by the goddess *Kālī* as a garland (*mālā*). The alphabet is called “garland of letters” (*varṇa-mālā*), suggesting the higher purpose envisioned for human language by the Vedic sages, namely, to appropriately honor and express divine Reality.

Sanskrit, as the word itself indicates, is a purposely constructed (*samskrita*) language. According to tradition, it is the language of the gods—*deva-vāṇī*.³ The script itself is known as *deva-nāgarī* (city of the gods), which hints at the Tantric (and Vedic) notion that each letter of the alphabet represents a particular type of fundamental energy, or deity power. Together these matrix energies weave the web of cosmic and hence also bodily existence. Here we have again the idea, quintessential to Tantra, that the microcosm mirrors the macrocosm. The

body and the universe at large are produced by the same energy equations that the Tantrics have expressed in the form of the fifty principal sounds of the Sanskrit alphabet, which was developed in the context of spiritual practice and sacred vision.

As the *Shāradā-Tilaka-Tantra* (1.108) states, the *kundalinī* is the sonic Absolute (*śabda-brahman*). The sonic Absolute is the soundless Absolute (*aśabda-brahman*) stepped down to the level of cosmic sound (*śabda*), corresponding to the hermetic “harmony of the spheres” and the gnostic *logos*: “In the beginning was the Word.” The *Mantra-Yoga-Samhitā* (3) offers this explanation:

Wherever there is activity, it is inevitably connected with vibration. Similarly, wherever there is vibration witnessed in the world it is invariably associated with [audible or inaudible] sound.

Owing to the differentiation occurring at the initial moment, creation is vibratory as well. The sound produced then is the *pranava*, which has the form of the auspicious *om-kāra*.

The *Shāradā-Tilaka-Tantra* (1.108) describes the cosmogonic process in terms of the production of sound as follows: From the supreme *Shakti*—pure Consciousness combined with the factor of lucidity (*sattva*)—comes the most subtle sound (*dhvani*), which is marked by a preeminence of the factors of lucidity and dynamism (*rajas*). Out of the *dhvani* develops the subtle sound (*nāda*), characterized by a mixture of the factors of lucidity, dynamism, and inertia (*tamas*). This subtle sound, in turn, gives rise to the energy of restriction (*nirodhikā*), which has an excess of the factor of inertia. This ontic principle emanates the “half-moon” (*ardha-indu*, written *ardhendu*), which at this lower level again shows a predominance of the factor of lucidity. Out of it comes the vibratory source point (*bindu*), the immediate source of all letters and words. These form *mantras*, which are thus manifestations or vehicles of *Shakti*. This scripture (1.8) further explains that the *bindu* is itself composed of three parts: *nāda*, *bindu*, and *bīja* (seed). The first part has a predominance of Consciousness (i.e., *Shiva*), the second a preponderance of Energy (i.e., *Shakti*), and

the third an equal presence of Consciousness and Energy. Such esoteric accounts of the evolution of sound remain relatively unintelligible outside of Tantric practice. However, they become increasingly meaningful as the practitioner makes progress on the path of *mantra-vidyā*, or “mantric science.”

Unlike the sounds we can hear with our ears, the cosmic sound is uncaused. It is an infinite vibration (*spanda*) that is coextensive with the universe itself and is realizable only in deep meditation when the senses and the mind have been deactivated. The primordial sound is symbolically represented by the sacred syllable *om*. Although not mentioned directly in the *Rig-Veda*, the *om* sound—also called *pranava*⁴ and *udgītha*—is hinted at in various hymns. It is first mentioned by name in the *Shukla-Yajur-Veda* (1.1). Later on, in the era of the *Upanishads*, it came to be explained as consisting of the three constituent sounds *a*, *u*, and *m*. According to the *Māndūkya-Upanishad* (9–12), these represent the three states of waking, dreaming, and sleeping respectively. Beyond these is the “fourth” (*turiya*), which is the condition of utter wakefulness throughout all states of consciousness. It is the ultimate Being-Consciousness itself. Subsequent scriptures have elaborated on this symbolism, adding the elements of *nāda* (subtle sound) and *bindu* (zero-dimensional seed point).⁵ I will address these and other metapsychological refinements in the next section.

The Tantric speculations about sound and transcendence are extremely ancient and were foreshadowed by the Vedic notion of *vāc*, divine speech. In the *Rig-Veda* (10.125.3–5), *vāc* is personified as the Goddess by that name, who utters the following sacred words:

I am the queen, gatherer of riches, the wise one, chief among those worthy of sacrifice. The deities have placed me in many places, and so I abide in many stations and enter into many [forms].

Through Me alone, he who eats food sees, breathes, and hears what is said. Dwelling in Me, they perish [ignorant of this fact]. Listen who can hear, I tell you that in which you should have faith.

Verily, I declare of myself that which is congenial to deities and humans. Whomsoever I desire I render him formidable (*ugra*), a seer, a sage, a brahmin.

Another hymn of the *Rig-Veda* (10.71.4) states that “one who looks does not see *Vāc*, and another who listens does not hear her.” She reveals herself, the text continues, as a loving wife reveals her body to her husband. In other words, *Vāc* is extremely subtle and self-revealing—an agent of grace. As the opening verse declares, it was through affection that *Vāc* first revealed herself to the Vedic seers. Then, continues verse 3, wise bards traced *Vāc*’s path through their sacrifices and found her hidden within the sages. There can be no question that this Vedic goddess stands for the same divine Power that in later times came to be venerated as *Shakti* and evoked as the serpent power.

What the various models describing the evolution of sound or vibration have in common is the idea that there are at least three levels at which sound exists. The Tantric scriptures distinguish between the following:

1. *Pashyantī-vāc* (visible speech)—the most subtle form of sound visible only to intuition
2. *Madhyamā-vāc* (intermediate speech)—sound at the subtle level of existence, which is the voice of thought
3. *Vaikhari-vāc* (manifest speech)—audible sound transmitted through vibration of the air

Beyond these three is the transcendental level called *parā-vāc*, or “supreme speech,” which is *Shakti* in perfect union with *Shiva*. It is soundless sound, hinted at in the *Rig-Veda* (10.129) in the phrase “the One breathed breathlessly.”

The three levels of sound correspond to the three forms or levels of the serpent power:

1. *Ūrdhva-kundalinī* (upper serpent), the *kundalinī* primarily active in the *ājñā-cakra* and tending to ascend toward the thousand-petaled lotus at the crown of the head⁶

2. *Madhya-kundalinī* (middle serpent), the Goddess power active in the region of the heart and capable of ascending or descending
3. *Adhah-kundalinī* (lower serpent), the psychospiritual energy primarily associated with the three lower *cakras*

In its divine aspect, the serpent power is known as *parā-kundalinī*, or Shakti per se. From the perspective of Tantric philosophy, every single form or aspect of the universe is a manifestation of that ultimate Power and a symbol for it. In light of contemporary quantum physics, the “energy language” of Tantra makes more sense than perhaps it did to outsiders at the time of its creation two thousand and more years ago.

In its upward passage through the body’s axial pathway, the Goddess power dissolves the *cakras* step by step. This can also be understood in sonic terms. According to almost identical descriptions found in various *Tantras*, when the *kundalinī* leaves the bottom *cakra*, it gathers in the fundamental energies captured in the four letters inscribed in the four petals of the *mūlādhāra* lotus. It then proceeds to the second *cakra*, where it gathers the six letter energies from there, and so on. Finally, the letter energies of the *ājñā-cakra* are dissolved into the transcendental seed point together with the *cakra* itself. When all fifty letters of the alphabet, or basic vibrations, are thus dissolved, enlightenment occurs. The *Shāradā-Tilaka-Tantra* (5.121–132) describes a form of initiation (*dīkshā*) in which the teacher enters the disciple’s body and performs this process himself or herself. This has been described in chapter 7 as *vedha-dīkshā*, or “initiation by penetration.”

THE NATURE OF MANTRAS

The fifty letters (*varṇa*) of the Sanskrit alphabet, which in a way represent the body of the *kundalinī*, are called “matrices” (*mātrikā*), a term that can also mean “little mothers.” They are the wombs of all

sounds that make up language and are embedded in the subtle sound (*nāda*). These letters produce not only secular words but also the sacred sounds called *mantras*. A *mantra* can consist of a single letter, a syllable, a word, or even an entire phrase. Thus the vowel *a*, the syllable *āh*, the word *aham* (“I”), or the phrase *shivo’ham* (“I am Shiva,” consisting of *shivah* and *aham*) can serve in a mantric capacity. In addition, the four Vedic hymnodies (*Rig-Veda*, *Yajur-Veda*, *Sāma-Veda*, and *Atharva-Veda*) have traditionally been held to consist of *mantras* only, because the hymns have all been revealed by seers (*rishi*).

The word *mantra* is composed of the verbal root *man* (to think) and the suffix *tra*, indicating instrumentality. Thus a *mantra* is literally an instrument of thought. In his *Vimarśinī* commentary on the *Shiva-Sūtra* (1.1.), Kshemarāja explains that a *mantra* is “that by which one secretly considers or inwardly reflects on one’s identity with the nature of the supreme Lord.” This interpretation focuses on the connection between *mantra* and *manana* (thinking, considering, reflecting). According to another traditional etymology, *mantra* gets its name from providing protection (*trāna*) for the mind (*manas*).

Far from being nonsense syllables, as an earlier generation of scholars has claimed, *mantras* are creative forces that act directly upon consciousness. But for a sound to have mantric potency it must have been transmitted by an initiate. In other words, the famous *om* sound on its own is no more a *mantra* than the word *dog*. It acquires mantric value only when it has been empowered by an adept and transmitted to a disciple. This is a vitally important point that is generally unknown to Western seekers. The reason why *mantras* can be thus potentized at all is that they have the Goddess power for their essence. “Without Her,” declares the *Tantra-Sadbhāva*, “they are as unproductive as clouds in autumn.”⁷ But only an adept in whom the *kundalinī* is awake can empower a sound—any sound—so that it is transmuted into a *mantra*. As Shiva tells his divine spouse in the *Mahānirvāṇa-Tantra* (5.18a), “O Beloved, your *mantras* are countless.”

Successful *mantra* practice depends not only on proper initiation but also on realizing the essence behind the sound. This is made clear

in the *Shrī-Kanthīya-Samhitā* (as quoted in the *Vimarshinī* 2.1.), which states:

So long as the *mantrin*⁸ is distinct from the *mantra*, he cannot be successful. Wisdom alone must be the root of all this; otherwise he is not successful.

A *mantra* must be awakened (*prabuddha*) in order to unleash its inherent power. This is also known as “mantric consciousness” (*mantra-caitanya*), which goes beyond the audible sound to the level of psychospiritual power itself. As the Western adept Swami Chetana-nanda explains:

Ultimately, our practice of any mantra is intended to refine our awareness to the point where we experience that pulsation going on within us all the time. When we can do that, we forget about the mantra itself because we are now aware, instead, of the dynamic event going on within and around us. As a result, the total vibration of what we are is changed. In the process, we transform ourselves.⁹

A *mantra* lacking in “consciousness” is just like any other sound. As the *Kula-Arnava-Tantra* (15.61–64) states:

Mantras without consciousness are said to be mere letters. They yield no result even after a trillion recitations.

The state that manifests promptly when the *mantra* is recited [with “consciousness”], that result is not [to be gained] from a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand, or ten million recitations.

Kuleshvarī, the knots at the heart and throat are pierced, all the limbs are invigorated, tears of joy, gooseflesh, bodily ecstasy, and tremulous speech suddenly occur for sure . . .

. . . when a *mantra* endowed with consciousness is uttered even once. Where such signs are seen, the [*mantra*] is said to be according to tradition.

To charge up or “strengthen” a *mantra*, one should repeat it thousands of times—a technique called *purashcarana* (preliminary practice). As the *Shrī-Tattva-Cintāmani* (20.3–4) states:

Just as the body is incapable of action without the psyche, so also is said to be a *mantra* without the preliminary practice.

Therefore the foremost of practitioners should first undertake the preliminary practice. Only through such application can the deity [of a *mantra*] be brought under control.

The last stanza contains an explanation for the difference between a *mantra* and an ordinary sound. While all sounds are ultimately manifestations of the divine Power, *mantras* are especially concentrated expressions of Shakti. This gives them their particular potency and usefulness on the spiritual path. The idea of bringing a deity under control may sound strange or even offensive to Western ears, but according to Tantra these deities (*devatā*) are in the final analysis simply higher types of psychospiritual energy. Because they are intelligent forces and appear to have a personal center, the Tantric practitioners are mindful to relate to them with appropriate respect and devotion. They understand, however, that these deity-energies are their own true nature, the Self. To bring a deity under control means to be able to use his or her specific energy for the spiritual process or even for worldly ends. The Tantric practitioners must constantly juggle the twofold recognition that there is only the One and that this Singularity (*ekatva*) appears differentiated at the level of phenomenal existence. Thus they know that they are both devotee and the ultimate object of devotion.

The *Mantra-Yoga-Samhitā* contains detailed information about selecting a *mantra* for a disciple, auspicious and inauspicious days for imparting a *mantra*, and the various fruits of mantric practice. *Mantras* can be employed both for liberation and other secondary purposes, such as combating illness or evil influences, or gaining wealth and power. Most high-minded practitioners are reluctant to use *mantras* for anything other than the greatest human goal (*purusha-artha*, written *purushārtha*), which is liberation. In Tantric rituals, *mantras* are used to purify the altar, one’s seat, implements such as vessels and offering spoons, or the offerings themselves (e.g., flowers, water, food), or to invoke deities and protectors, and so on. Yet the science

of sacred sound (*mantra-shāstra*) has since ancient times been widely put to secular use as well. In this case, *mantras* assume the character of magical spells rather than sacred vibrations in the service of self-transformation and self-transcendence.

The *Kula-Arnava-Tantra* (15.65–70) mentions sixty defects that can render *mantra* practice futile. To list only some of these: a *mantra* can be “blocked” (by duplicating a syllable), “wrongly syllabled,” “broken,” “lifeless,” “defiled,” “unstable,” “fear-instilling,” “powerless,” and “deluded.” In order to remedy these shortcomings, the *Shāradā-Tilaka-Tantra* (2.111) recommends the practice of *yonī-mudrā*.¹⁰ This technique, which is well known from Hatha Yoga scriptures, is performed by contracting the muscles of the perineum, which causes the vital energy to rise. In addition, however, the Tantric practitioner should visualize the fifty letters of the alphabet ascending from the psychospiritual center at the base of the spine to the *cakra* at the crown of the head. This text (2.112ff.) also gives an alternative to this practice, which can be found in the *Kula-Arnava-Tantra* (15.71–72) as well. These are the following ten remedial practices (*samskāra*):

1. Creating (*janana*)—extracting a *mantra*’s constituent syllables from the alphabet
2. Enlivening (*jīvana*)—reciting each syllable separately with the *om* sound prefixed to it
3. Hammering (*tādana*)—sprinkling each written syllable of a *mantra* with water while reciting the seed syllable *yam* (for the air element)
4. Awakening (*bodhana*)—touching each written syllable with a red oleander flower while reciting the seed syllable *ram* (for the fire element); the number of flowers should correspond to the number of syllables
5. Consecrating (*abhisheka*)—sprinkling each written syllable with water containing the twigs of the *ashvattha* tree (the sacred fig tree); the number of twigs should correspond to the number of syllables

6. Cleansing (*vimalī-karana*)—visualizing a *mantra*’s impurities being burned by reciting *om hraum*, which is the *mantra* for light
7. Strengthening (*āpyāyana*)—sprinkling each written syllable with water containing *kusha* grass
8. Offering water (*tarpana*)—offering water to the *mantra* while saying, “I satiate *mantra* so-and-so”
9. Offering light (*dīpana*)—prefixing the seed syllables *om hrīm shrīm* to a *mantra*
10. Concealing (*gupti*)—keeping one’s *mantra* secret

Mantras of concentrated potency are known as “seed syllables” (*bīja*). *Om* is the original seed syllable, the source of all others. The *Mantra-Yoga-Samhitā* (71) calls it the “best of all *mantras*,” adding that all other *mantras* receive their power from it. Thus *om* is prefixed or suffixed to numerous *mantras*:

Om namah shivāya. “Om. Obeisance to Shiva.”

Om namo bhagavate. “Om. Obeisance to the Lord [Krishna or Vishnu].”

Om namo ganeshāya. “Om. Obeisance to [the elephant-headed] Ganesha.”

Om namo nārāyaṇāya. “Om. Obeisance to Nārāyaṇa [Vishnu].”

Om bhūr bhuvah svah tat savitur varenyam bhargo devasya dhīmahi dhiyo yo nah pracodayāt. “Om. Earth. Mid-region. Heaven. Let us contemplate the most excellent splendor of Savitri, that he may inspire our visions.” (This is the famous Vedic *gāyatrī-mantra*.)

Om shānte prashānte sarva-krodha-upashamani svāhā. “Om. At peace! Pacifying! All anger be subdued! Hail!” (Note pronunciation: *sarva-krodhopashamani*)

Om sac-cid-ekam brahma. “Om. The singular Being-Consciousness, the Absolute.” (The word *sac* is a euphonic variant of *sat*, meaning “being.”)

The *Mahānirvāna-Tantra* (3.13) calls the last-mentioned *brahma-mantra* the most excellent of all *mantras*, which promptly bestows not only liberation but also virtue, wealth, and pleasure. It is suitable for all practitioners and does not require careful computations before it is given. “Merely by receiving the *mantra*,” this scripture (3.24) claims, “the person is filled with the Absolute.” And, this *Tantra* (3.26) continues, “guarded by the *brahma-mantra* and surrounded with the splendor of the Absolute, he becomes radiant like another sun for all the planets, etc.”

Over many centuries, the Vedic and Tantric masters have conceived, or rather envisioned, numerous other primary power sounds besides *om*. These seed syllables (*bīja*), as they are called, can be used on their own or, more commonly, in conjunction with other power sounds, forming a mantric phrase. According to the *Mantra-Yoga-Samhitā* (71), there are eight primary *bīja-mantras*, which are helpful in all kinds of circumstances but which yield their deeper mystery only to the *yogin*:

1. *Aim* (pronounced “I’m”)—*guru-bīja* (seed syllable of the teacher), also called *vahni-jāyā* (Agni’s wife)
2. *Hrīm*—*shakti-bīja* (seed syllable of Shakti), also called *māyā-bīja*
3. *Klīm*—*kāma-bīja* (seed syllable of desire)
4. *Krīm*—*yoga-bīja* (seed syllable of union), also called *kālī-bīja*
5. *Shrīm*—*ramā-bīja* (seed syllable of delight); because *Ramā* is another name for *Lakshmī*, the goddess of fortune, this seed syllable is also known as *lakshmī-bīja*
6. *Trīm*—*teja-bīja* (seed syllable of fire)
7. *Strīm*—*shānti-bīja* (seed syllable of peace)
8. *Hlīm*—*rakshā-bīja* (seed syllable of protection)

Other schools or texts furnish different names for these eight primary *bījas* or even altogether different schemas. Some other well-known seed syllables are *lam*, *vam*, *ram*, *yam*, *ham* (all associated with the five

elements and the lower five *cakras*), *hum*, *hūm* (called *varman*, or “shield”), and *phat* (called *astra*, or “weapon”).

THE ART OF RECITATION

When a practitioner has received a *mantra* from the mouth of an initiate, he or she can be confident of success in mantric recitation (*japa*), providing of course all the instructions for proper recitation are followed as well. Mindfulness, regularity, and a large number of repetitions of the *mantra* are the three most important requirements. Also, there are certain sacred places where *mantra* practice is considered particularly auspicious. According to the *Kula-Arṇava-Tantra* (15.25), *japa* near one’s teacher, a brahmin, a cow, a tree, water, or a sacred fire is particularly promising. This text (15.46–47) additionally prescribes the practice of “infusion” (*nyāsa*) for mantric recitation, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Japa can be performed in three fundamental ways: verbalized (*vācika*), whispered (*upāṁshu*), and recited mentally (*mānasa*). The first style, audible recitation, is considered inferior to the other two styles. In whispered recitation only the lips move but no audible sound escapes them. Superior to this style is mental recitation, where attention is fixed exclusively on the inner meaning of the *mantra*.

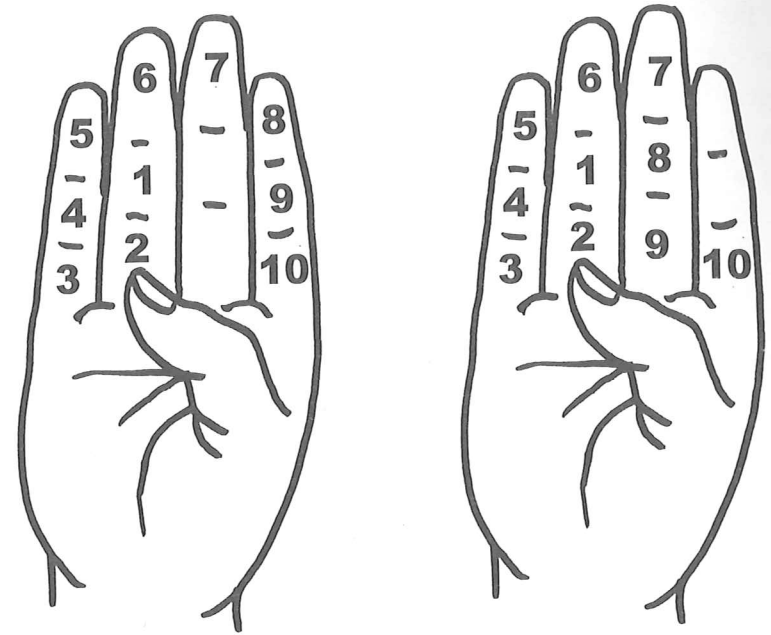
Twenty-one, 108, or 1,008 repetitions are considered auspicious. But for the *mantra* to unlock its potency (*vīrya*), hundreds of thousands of repetitions may be necessary. Once this has occurred, however, even a single pronunciation of the *mantra* will make its power available to the *mantrin* or *japin*, the reciter of *mantras*. In practice, after a while the *mantra* recites itself spontaneously, and its intrinsic power can be felt as a steady charge of energy present in one’s body. This is *ajapa-japa*, or “unrecited recitation”—also known as the *hamsa-mantra*—which is more than the mental “echo” that occurs when we repeat a word over and over again. It is not simply a mental groove caused by verbal repetition but a mind-transforming energetic state of being.

It is thought important to keep a record of the number of repetitions. This is generally done by means of a rosary (*mālā*). Rosaries may consist of 15, 24, 27, 30, 50, or most commonly, 108 beads, plus one “master bead,” representing one’s *guru* or Mount Meru, a symbol for the central channel. The number 108 has been held sacred and auspicious in India since ancient times. Various interpretations have been offered for this highly symbolic number, but the most likely explanation lies in astronomy. Already in the Vedic era, the sages were aware that the moon’s and also the sun’s average distance from the earth is 108 times their respective diameters. As the American Vedic researcher Subhash Kak has shown, this number was crucial in the construction of the Vedic fire altar.¹¹ Symbolically speaking, 108 is the number signifying the midregion (*antariksha*), the space between heaven and earth. Thus the 108 beads can be taken to represent an equal number of steps from the material world to the luminous realm of the divine Reality—India’s version of Jacob’s ladder.

The rosary is often referred to as *aksha-mālā*, which corresponds to the *varna-mālā* or “garland of letters” of the Sanskrit language. The Sanskrit word *aksha* means “eye,” but in the present context refers to the letters *a* and *ksha*, the Sanskrit equivalents of the Greek *alpha* and *omega*. Thus the rosary (of fifty beads) represents the entire alphabet. The *Kula-Arnava-Tantra* (15.48) distinguishes between an actual and an imaginary rosary. The former is composed of the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. The beads of the latter can be made from sandalwood, crystal, shell, coral, or most commonly *rudra-aksha* (“Rudra’s eye,” written *rudrāksha*), which is the multifaced seed of the blue marble tree sacred to Shiva. The *Mantra-Yoga-Samhitā* (76) mentions all kinds of other materials that can profitably be used to make a rosary. Like any ritual object, the rosary too must be purified before use. The *Mahānirvāna-Tantra* (6.171b–172a) furnishes the following mantric utterance for this purpose:

O rosary! O rosary! O great calculator! You are the essence of all power.

In You are found the four goals [i.e., material prosperity, pleasure, morality, and liberation]. Therefore grant me all success.



The phalanxes of the fingers are used to count mantra recitations, sometimes in specific sequences.

Another traditional way of keeping track of the number of repetitions is by counting with one’s fingers. Various methods are known, and some are specific to certain *mantras*. It is considered inauspicious to count merely with the tip of one’s fingers, and instead one should, according to the *Mantra-Yoga-Samhitā* (75), use the other phalanxes as well, shown in the figure.

A *mantra* should be recited with the right intonation, as learned from one’s teacher, and also at the proper pace. If, as the *Kula-Arnava-Tantra* (15.55) makes clear, it is repeated too fast, there is the danger of disease. If it is recited too slowly, however, it will diminish one’s energy. In either case, *japa* will be “useless like water in a broken vessel.” This *Tantra* (15.57–58) furthermore points out the natural impurities at the onset and the closing of recitation, which must be countermanded by a special mantric practice, namely, by reciting the *mantra* 7 or 108 times with *om* at the beginning and the end.

Because *mantras* must be recited numerous times over many hours every day before they can bear fruit, it is easy for a practitioner to get tired. In that case the scriptures typically recommend shifting from *japa* to meditation. Then again, when the mind is exhausted from meditation, switching back to reciting one's *mantra* can bring renewed vigor and enthusiasm.

Mantras may not only be spoken or mentally recited but also written out on paper, metal, cloth, or other materials. This technique is known as *likhita-japa*, which, in the words of Swami Sivananda Radha, “brings peace, poise and strength within.”¹² The same is of course true of other forms of *japa* as well. As with all yogic practices, the success of *mantra* recitation depends to a large degree on the practitioner's motivation and dedication.