



# THE SHAKTI COLORING BOOK

**Goddesses, Mandalas, and the  
Power of Sacred Geometry**

*Illustrations & Text by*  
**Ekabhumi Charles Elik**

*Foreword by*  
**Sally Kempton**

 **SOUNDS TRUE**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

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# INTRODUCTION

I live on Earth at present, and I don't know what I am. I know that I am not a category.  
I am not a thing — a noun. I seem to be a verb, an evolutionary process —  
an integral function of the universe.

Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983)

Years ago, while teaching youth yoga, I drew pictures of the monkey deity Hanuman in various yoga postures for my young students. Coloring the pictures made study fun for the kids, and it helped them with memorization. As my own studies progressed, deity practice became part of my daily routine. Illustrating deities evolved from an aspect of instruction to the hub of my spiritual life. I found that meditating on the deities and the rich symbolism of their depictions as I worked deepened my internal practice immeasurably. Though my young students and I both enjoyed this creative activity, it did not occur to me to provide adult practitioners with images for coloring until I was asked. After seeing the illustrations of deities I'd done for books by scholars, readers wrote to me requesting copies of the artworks.

Many readers, especially yoga students, also wanted to know more about these images, including the meaning of visual devices like multiple arms and the symbolism of geometric shapes. Most of all, they wanted to know about the practice of making sacred art. While there are many books explaining Hindu iconography, and a few that cover painting, there are precious few books that actually explain how to make art as a yogic practice. So I typed up handouts to give to students; the information in these handouts was later refined by hands-on, practical experience. Collecting these images and lessons into a book was the logical next step.

In those years as an instructor, I taught in yoga studios filled with beautiful but nonyogic art. Even in studios filled with Hindu imagery, people did not know what the images symbolized. This is problematic because mixing and matching artworks from different traditions with different methodologies can create confusion and subtle impediments to yogic spiritual practice. Most yoga students know that what we eat and how we eat it affects our health and spiritual development. What we put in our eyes is just as influential as what we put in our belly. When our artworks are in alignment with our spiritual goals, they shape our values in a way that complements our spiritual practice. Mystic artworks give us accurate models for our meditations, acting as guides for our internal journey.

My first intention with *The Shakti Coloring Book*, therefore, is to introduce you to these glorious goddesses. You will learn how beneficial it is to recognize the symbolism in their depictions and how it relates to yogic practice. Just as it is helpful for a beginner to get to know the yoga postures (*āsanas*) before joining an advanced class, so too it is helpful to get to know the goddesses in general before choosing to invite one into your home or practice. Only widely revered goddesses are included, none whitewashed or candy coated. These images are all originals, though they are inspired by famous examples from different regions and historical periods. These are playful depictions, not definitive icons.

Diversity is a characteristic of Shakti, so this collection is diverse as well.

Part 1, “Recognizing Shakti,” gives you an explanation of what a goddess is and the keys to understanding the many layers of meaning in these images. Readers who want to know more about the hidden symbolism, such as why artists include all the extra arms, will enjoy this section.

Once we know what we’re looking at, we can learn what to do with it. In part 2, “Embodying Shakti,” we explore spiritual practices associated with the creation of mystic artworks. This is an introduction to making sacred art as a spiritual practice.

Part 3, “Coloring Shakti,” is our reward: images of stunning goddesses and their scintillating mystic diagrams. The brief descriptions on the back of each image are for anyone who has ever looked at a Hindu goddess and wondered, “Who is *that*?”

Part 4, “Manifesting Shakti,” is a step-by-step manual for creating a yantra, a specific type of mystic diagram composed of

elemental shapes—what we call “sacred geometry” in the West. It is also a guided meditation that will help spiritual seekers purify their energetic body and recognize the inherent unity of all things.

It is not necessary to read or understand all the information in this book to enjoy coloring in these images. It is said that just catching a glimpse of these goddesses is a blessing. The information in this book is intended to help beginners get started on the spiritual path, to enrich the practice of those who have already begun their journey toward self-realization, and to help anyone enjoy these goddesses and the wisdom they hold. This is the book I wished for when I began making devotional art: a practical guide for creative, art-loving people who want to spiritualize their craft and begin making art as a method of self-realization.



PART 1

# RECOGNIZING SHAKTI

I am the Sovereign Queen; the treasury of all treasures; the chief of all objects of worship;  
whose all-pervading Self manifests all gods and goddesses; whose birthplace is in the midst of  
the causal waters; who in breathing forth gives birth to all created worlds,  
and yet extends beyond them, so vast am I in greatness.

Rigveda, Devī Sukta, Maṇḍala X, Sukta 125





## RECOGNIZING SHAKTI

### What Is Shakti? Or Who?

*Shakti* is power, both manifest power and the power within all experiences. The root, *shak*, means “to be able,” and the term *Shakti* describes divine creative power and the hypnotic beauty of appearances as well as the power to transform and destroy. It is not power over others in a hierarchical sense; it is the electric juice of life. Women in particular exemplify this principle and therefore may also be called shaktis. Even deadly weapons are given this name, indicating this power must be treated with care.

While *shakti* may be used as a general term for any goddess, it is not so much a name as an epithet, carrying with it the implication of spiritual might. All that can be seen, felt, smelled, or tasted is shakti. When we use the word *Shakti* as a proper name, however, we are speaking of the Great Goddess (Mahādevī) who takes birth as all beings, whose body is all reality. To make the distinction clear, she is sometimes called Parāśakti (or Parāshakti, “the Supreme Power”). She cannot be described, exactly, and therefore cannot be portrayed in figurative form. This primordial being is analogous to what is known as Brahman (“Expansive Spirit”) by followers of Vedanta, or Śiva (“Ultimate Consciousness”) to Śaivites. If we are to describe Her as being like the ocean, then all of us, even deities, are like waves—temporary appearances that seem distinctive and independent, yet are not separate from the whole.

Some modern philosophers have tried to explain this unfamiliar truth to Western readers by claiming that Hinduism is monotheistic—that all Hindus know their diverse goddesses and gods as mere faces or symbols of the one supreme being. This is not a wrong view, but some say it is incomplete. The nondual view must also include diversity as an essential component of unity. As the goddesses of

this book demonstrate so colorfully, embracing the principle of diversity allows for different expressions of the whole. With this understanding, we can recognize how the practice (*sadhana*) of any one goddess can be a complete path. Complete union (*yoga*) necessarily and spontaneously includes all the others. This principle remains true whether we think of the goddesses as people or as virtues. A yogin (*yogin* is a gender-neutral version of the word *yogi*) who completely embodies one virtue will naturally express all the others as well. The individual self (and thus diversity) is not a means to an end, nor is it the end. It just is.

There are different ways sacred art points toward this truth of nondualism: Goddesses are portrayed taking birth as different avatars, or living inside the heart of other goddesses, or displaying multiple heads. Goddesses are often portrayed in groups, such as the ten Wisdom Goddesses, the seven (or eight) Mothers, the sixty-four Yoginīs, and the nine Durgās. Each group is a mandala (sacred circle), yet each goddess also sits at the center of her own mandala in a bewildering kaleidoscope of beauty and power.

Western readers are accustomed to logical hierarchies, order, clearly defined symbols, and philosophical models of reality that validate our own human biases. But the universe doesn’t always conform to human reason, and as uncomfortable as it may be to admit, the human brain just doesn’t have the capacity to grasp the universe in its entirety. This is why yogins speak of calming the mind and relying on intuition. We can still be aligned, act harmoniously, and *know* without grasping all the details. This is when we rely on the wisdom mind, located at the heart, rather than depending only upon the thinking machine inside our head. Meditation, ritual, and creative activities (like making sacred art)

help us to cultivate our intuitive wisdom. This is why the heart is always at the center of a sacred art composition.

The Sanskrit word for “goddess” is *devī*, which can be roughly translated as “shining” or “playful.” There are different classes of *devīs*, from local geographic deities to great enlightened devīs who exemplify cosmic principles. Historically, goddesses associated with forces of nature and significant landmarks were worshiped as local deities and village protectors. Like people, goddesses grow and change over time. Some of these tribal goddesses became preeminent divinities (such as Durgā) or came together in groups encompassing a spectrum of universal principles (such as the ten Wisdom Goddesses). *Devī* is a more specific word than *Shakti*. All beings are forms of Shakti, but not all shaktis are devīs.

It is of utmost importance to choose an enlightened goddess as our tutelary deity. There are unenlightened goddesses, just as there are unenlightened people. It is said that these goddesses are not completely realized due to their identification with a feeling of ultimate bliss without impermanence or pain. Hidden beneath the glory of such beings is a sense of incompleteness that eventually leads to spiritual destitution. It is important for us as spiritual seekers to understand this, as it helps us to recognize the value of a human birth. Our physical body, along with all the pleasant and unpleasant experiences it affords, is said to be the supreme vehicle for realization. Humans have a great deal of freedom to experiment with different ways of being, and the difficulties we experience provide great motivation to seek out spiritual practices. We are not rejecting our humanity when we do deity practice; we are working with these powerful enlightened beings to expand our notion of self to include the cosmos. Full realization necessarily includes the “bad” stuff, which is why some of the goddesses may appear frightening. They have an important role to play in our spiritual journey: they show us how to cultivate equanimity amidst impermanence and pain. We must embrace their lessons if we are to be complete; the wondrous path of the Goddess encompasses all phenomena. When we embrace Her totality without aversion, we may then relax into the blissful, expansive state that is our true nature.

## Symbolic Animals

Many goddesses are depicted sitting on a characteristic animal, known as their vehicle (*vāhana*). Animals also appear frequently as apparel and decorative motifs. Animals help both to identify a goddess and to give insight into how her power is expressed.

**Antelope or deer:** longevity, faithfulness, tranquility, peace, harmony

*When held:* regent of animals, control of natural forces

*Antelope skin:* mastery over the flitting mind

**Boar or sow:** loyalty, perseverance, courage, hunger

**Bull:** strength, discipline, endurance, wealth, sexual power

**Centipede:** poison, hatred, fear, darkness

**Cow:** generosity, abundance, patience, fertility

**Crocodile, fish, or makara** (a mythical beast with the tail and feet of a bird and trunk of an elephant): water, fertility, fearsomeness, wealth

**Crane:** patience, focus, grace, longevity

**Crow:** intelligence, karma, death

**Dog:** guardianship, loyalty, impurity

**Eagle:** speed, wind, righteousness, the sun

**Elephant:** strength, intelligence, equanimity, self-control, wealth

*Elephant skin:* mastery over ignorance

**Fish:** water, fertility, nourishment

**Horse:** courage, speed, power

**Human:** devotion, intelligence, freedom, sensuality, desire

*Human skin:* mastery over desire

*Human corpse:* mastery over death and unseen forces

**Lion:** power, protection, dignity, fearsomeness

**Monkey:** curiosity, playfulness, mind, devotion

**Owl:** wisdom (or ignorance!), night, mystery

**Parrot:** speech, intelligence, immortality, love

**Peacock:** beauty, dignity, romance, digestive power, immortality

**Ram:** force, vigor, fire, perseverance

**Rat:** greed, cleverness, activity

**Snake:** immortality, *kundalinī-shakti*, water, danger, sexual power

**Swan or goose:** discernment, breath of life, boundlessness

**Tiger:** power, destruction, beauty, fearlessness, passion

*Tiger skin:* mastery over passion or anger



## Swords, Books, and Lotuses: The Goddesses' Attributes

How do we know which goddess to approach for guidance or what type of commitment we might get ourselves into if we do? An easy way to begin is by considering what the goddesses hold in their depictions. Usually, a goddess's two key distinguishing attributes are represented by what she holds in her foremost pair of hands. The symbols or gestures of her other hands modify or expand upon her basic attributes, helping to give a more nuanced understanding of her nature. The objects a goddess holds (referred to as attributes) or the gestures she makes (known as *mudras*) represent virtues, qualities, and/or characteristic powers. She is not *defined* by these attributes; she is *described*.

These attributes also allude to the mystic practices of the deity and of the likely benefits of engaging in her practices. They are also a warning: playing with sharp weapons may lead to painful experiences. Scholars say these attributes represent magical powers that are the fruit of worshipping a goddess in that form. Those who use icons of goddesses for self-realization also understand a goddess's attributes as a specific set of virtues. Be aware that the interpretations of what these attributes represent depend on many factors, including regional variations and lineage-specific teachings. The orientation of this book is toward invoking the goddess's virtue-blessing power, so they have been listed accordingly.

Where the attributes are held usually corresponds with two of the three main energetic channels (*nāḍīs*) of the subtle body. These channels are represented by the symbols of sun, moon, and fire, which appear frequently together in mystic artworks. The main central channel, *Sushumnā Nāḍī*, is "the cool fire" and is balanced in nature. Symbols related to this channel are usually not held in the hands, but worn as ornaments. On the right side is *Pingalā Nāḍī*, which is active, solar, and masculine in nature. Usually, objects, like weapons, that require some kind of motion or activity to put them into use are held the right hands. These symbolic objects represent skillful means or ways in which enlightenment is actively expressed, which is why they are known as "method"

attributes. On the left side is *Idā Nāḍī*, which is passive, lunar, and feminine in nature. Objects that contain, bind, pour, or radiate are held in the left hands. These symbolic objects represent the discriminating awareness from which activity arises or ways in which enlightenment is passively expressed, which is why they are known as "wisdom" attributes.

The attributes a goddess holds in her hands are usually depicted in complimentary pairs, corresponding with the right and left channels. For example:

Her Right Hand (Method)	Her Left Hand (Wisdom)
<i>Abhaya</i> gesture (palm turned upward) fearlessness	<i>Varada</i> gesture (palm turned downward) generosity
Thunderbolt: revelation, vigor	Bell: emptiness, clarity
Prayer beads: devotion, mantra	Book: knowledge
Skinning knife: renunciation, honesty	Skull cup: nectar of realization
Goad: guidance, perseverance, power	Noose: connection, stillness, restraint
Sword: discernment, worship	Shield: duty, dharma
Head chopper sword: nonattachment	Head: personal ego, conditioned mind
Discus: revolving time, illumination	Conch: resonant presence, fearlessness
Trident: will, knowledge, and action	Drum: pulse of creation
Lotus: purity, cosmic womb, radiance	Jar or pot: effulgence, fertility
Club or mace: truth	Staff: discipline, authority, justice
Arrow: love, focus, perception	Bow: release, discipline, concentration

When attributes are joined together in a single hand, or shown in groups, their meaning is modified. Most commonly seen together are five arrows. They can represent five methods (generosity, discipline, patience, effort, and concentration), five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch), five passions (ecstasy, burning, unconsciousness, bewitchery, paralysis), or five poisons (ignorance, desire, aversion, pride, jealousy).

The meaning of an attribute is modified by how it is depicted and the presence of other attributes. For example, a bow made of sugarcane (sweetness) and five arrows made of flowers (five senses) carry a different implication (sensory pleasure) from those made of wood and iron and designed for warfare (focused action). A single arrow (love) and ornamental bow (release) may carry a different interpretation altogether (liberation). All these examples of bows and arrows relate to the piercing quality of sensory perception, but differ markedly in the associated principle. The first example relates most closely to pleasure (*kāma*), the second to intentional activity (*dharma* or *artha*), and the last to liberation (*moksha*). An elegant benevolent goddess carrying a sword (discernment) and a shield (duty) is interpreted differently from a blood-spattered wrathful goddess carrying a head-chopper sword (nonattachment) and a head (conditioned mind). In both cases, the sharp blade symbolizes the power to separate real from unreal, but the different depictions allude to how we may experience and express that same power when it is invoked through the lens of a particular goddess's personality display.

Some items may be held in either hand; in these cases, the placement indicates whether the attribute represented by the object is expressed actively (right side) or passively (left side). So a sword held in the right hand indicates that a deity has an active, cutting attribute of discernment that may be felt intensely by the practitioner. A sword held in the left hand indicates that the same attribute is present, but is more subtle and gentle in nature. By carefully studying what attributes a goddess carries, and what side they are carried on, we gain insight to how her influence is likely to be experienced.

The depiction of multiple limbs is a relatively recent innovation in the vast scope of Indic art history. This visual device is useful for combining a deity's many attributes in one image. It also conveys a quality of multiplicity and motion inherent in most deities and is a clear indication of omnipotence and omnipresence. For centuries, Indic deities were depicted with only two arms, even though they had multiple forms, attributes, and powers. A great, enlightened deity exists across time and space, manifesting many locations simultaneously. In this sense, extra arms on deities are like overlapping photographs of a body in motion, or a Cubist painting showing multiple points of view. We are seeing many realities all at once. It is *not* true that a deity with ten arms is more powerful than a deity with only two, but it may be that the rituals associated with a deity holding many attributes feel more intense than rituals associated with a deity having only two.

### Ornamentation: The Power of Beauty

*Europe is merely powerful; India is beautiful.*

— Savitri Devi (1905–1982)

Ornamentation (*alankara*) is an expression of character, status, and power, as well as love, devotion, and piety. In traditional Indic culture, no work of architecture or art is complete until it is ornamented. The layers of embellishment seen on temples and statues are an expression of authority as much as aesthetic fancy.

On a personal level, an ability to attract was understood as power on par with brute strength, so both kings and queens were praised by poets as being beautiful and alluring. Beauty was considered the physical manifestation of fecundity, authority, and power, so ornamentation was both a delight and a political necessity. Adorning oneself and one's environment was fundamental to one's dignity, self-possession, and propriety. What's more, ritual jewelry, scented oils, even one's posture and confident gait give spiritual protection. To venture outdoors unornamented was to invite misfortune.

Some basic ornaments remain remarkably consistent in depictions of deities: crowns, earrings, necklaces, garlands, belts, armlets,

and anklets are worn by males and females alike. All are highly symbolic, and most relate directly to esoteric anatomy. Metal ornaments are positioned on energetic nodes to hold and direct energy within the body. Metal jewelry is said to have the quality of Shiva: cold and unmoving, it envelops and directs the warm, living energy of Shakti. These ornaments also serve a visual function in the image, making the figure both easier to draw and more visually captivating. This may explain why they remain popular among artists. Many goddesses are portrayed heavily ornamented, even when the ancient scriptures and tales that the artworks are based upon explicitly state that they wear none!

Both the male and the female deities are frequently portrayed topless in ancient Hindu art. Most are *not* nude; they are simply well dressed according to a standard unfamiliar to modern viewers. As scholar Vidya Dehejia explains, “[T]he human body of the Indian artistic tradition is neither naked nor nude; it is invariably the body adorned.” Goddesses are sumptuously garbed in translucent silk scarves, leggings, belts, jewelry, crowns, and elaborate hair wrappings befitting royalty. Making images of deities sexy and scantily clad conveys the potency and attractive power of the teachings they exemplify. One who embodies truth and fearlessness has nothing to hide!

Lavish ornamentation is so ubiquitous on images of deities that any lack thereof is significant. In ancient times, a woman with unbound hair and no jewelry was much more scandalous than one who was simply topless. No ancient viewer would miss the significance of an unadorned goddess. A notable example is Dhūmāvātī. She wears only rags, as she is completely unconcerned with appearances and status. Much like the renunciate Buddha, she has earlobes that remain stretched from the heavy gold earrings she wore in her youth and now dangle empty to symbolize her complete disregard for social status. Images of Tapasvinī depict her engaged in great austerities to win her husband Shiva’s heart. She wears little more than flowers and seeds, marking her as an ascetic. Rare indeed is the “sky-clad,” or completely nude, deity, like fearless Kālī, but even she is depicted with a garland of human heads

and a skirt of arms. Deities with no ornament are beyond worldly cares, so close to absolute truth they can hardly even be said to have a body, much less jewelry!

Most forms of deities have characteristic colors, which are seen in their skin tone, robes, and ornaments. Benevolent deities wear flowers, leaves, berries, seeds, precious metals, soft fabrics, and gems. They generally wear cheerful and harmonious colors. Wrathful deities also wear crowns and exuberant ornamentation, but theirs are made of bones, snakes, skins, intestines, and freshly severed heads! They generally wear harsh combinations of intense colors. The symbolism of various materials, such as *rudrāksha* beads (worn by Pārvatī/Shiva) or *tulsī* beads (worn by Lakshmi/Vishnu), and the numerous flowers and gems in Indic art is fascinating, wondrously complex, and far beyond the scope of this book.

**Suggestion:** Colors have been proven to influence our emotional disposition and blood pressure. The use of ritual jewelry and ornament is universal. Try wearing a meaningful ornament while you work on your sacred art to help create a reverent mood. It is especially powerful to wear the characteristic color of a goddess while coloring her image.

## Mandalas: Sacred Circles

*It is called mandala because the Dākinī who occupies it is auspicious, because it is the abode of the host of Yoginīs, and because of its beauty.*

— Kulārnavā-Tantra

A mandala is a circular enclosure or grouping of objects into which divine energies are invoked. Mandalas are usually created on a flat surface, and a mantra or ritual object (like a pot of water) is placed at the center to hold the energy of the deity. The term *mandala* has become so widely used that it is now listed in English-language dictionaries as a synonym for “sacred space.” Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains all use them as ritual diagrams.

Scholar Robert Thurman explains, “It is a blueprint of an individual’s ultimate liberation and supreme bliss . . . fully integrated with his or her environment and field of associates.” He goes on to say that, “It is the architecture of enlightenment in its bliss-and-compassion-generated emanations. It is a womb palace within which infinite wisdom and compassion can manifest as forms discernible to ordinary beings.”

Ceremonial mandalas tend to be large and visually complex—in many cases, big enough for practitioners to enter and walk around inside. The outer circles and lines represent protective barriers. Mandalas are often temporary constructions, made for specific ceremonies and symbolically destroyed afterward. They are constructed with areas of color and elaborate designs, often including figurative images of the deities who inhabit them. Mandalas usually describe a relationship between many beings or symbolize the entire cosmos. Unlike a yantra, the Hindu mandala has no intrinsic power until the deity is invoked into it. Esteemed scholar Gudrun Bühnemann wrote, “It is not possible to summarize all attempts at defining ‘Mandala,’ ‘Yantra,’ and ‘chakra’ in the literature. The use and function of these terms are complex, and it will be impossible to arrive at a universally valid definition.”

Hindu temples are architectural mandalas, a sacred space enclosing, protecting, and focusing the power of the enshrined central deity. In some meditation practices, the deity is visualized sitting at the center of the top floor of an enormous palace built in the shape of a mandala. We enter the imaginary palace just as we would a temple. As we pass through a gate and move toward the center, we move from the gross to the subtle, from diversity to unity. We are climbing a symbolic mountain, beginning with the densest element (earth) and moving upward toward the most subtle (space). For yogins, this symbolizes the subtle movement of our consciousness from the lowest energy center (chakra), at the base of the spine, up toward the highest, at the crown of the head. (We will learn a simplified version of this practice in part 4, “Manifesting Shakti.”)

## Yantras: Realization Devices

*If mantra is the soul of the initiate’s chosen deity,  
yantra is the deity’s body.*

— George Feuerstein, PhD (1947–2012)

Traditional yantras are revelations. When the great yogins of the ancient past were in deep states of meditation, what they heard were mantras (mystic sounds) and what they saw were yantras (mystic diagrams). These seers said that the energy bodies of goddesses resemble these mystic diagrams, and they passed this knowledge to their students through oral lineages. Most of this knowledge is still secret. It is only in the last century that some information has become public, though much is still not commonly known.

Scholars explain that a deity yantra represents an archetype, but yogins say it is more than a symbol. Yantras do not simply *describe* a being—they *are* the being in manifestation and are therefore potent. They have blessing power. When we meditate upon these mystic diagrams, we are repatterned into a more enlightened state.

Roughly translated, *yantra* means “tool” or “device.” The term *yantra* is broad enough to also include hexes, charms, and talismans. The Sanskrit word can be broken into two parts: *yam*, meaning “to support” or “to hold,” and *tra*, meaning “to protect” or “to liberate.” So the spiritual yantra holds the energy of liberation; it is a realization device.

Often portable and small in size, yantras may be inscribed on metal plates or wood, painted on cloth or paper, and even be worn as ritual jewelry. Yantras are *written*; their power comes from the lines, mantras, and/or spells inscribed upon them. Their designs vary wildly, from curving symbols that almost look like handwriting to complex geometric patterns that resemble (and may also be) mandalas. For example, yantras made for mediation may lack text. Though scholars say these yantras are historically Tantric, it is difficult to say for certain where they originated because similar geometric shapes appear in mystic diagrams worldwide. The yantras we see today were refined over hundreds



or even thousands of years. Most are used to fulfill worldly desires, but deity yantras are gateways to the divine.

Yantras created for deity practice align the viewer with a specific form of divinity. We can intensify the experience by chanting the appropriate mantra for long periods of time while creating, coloring, or meditating on the yantra. Repeating a mantra while meditating on a yantra is a bit like rubbing a bit of steel against a magnet until the steel becomes magnetized; we are transformed by repeated exposure. Yantras are both a device and a vehicle of essence in the same way that a human body is both an organic machine and a seat of self-awareness. A deity yantra is simultaneously a living being, a map of reality, a base for ritual, and an aid for mediation. Harish Johari wrote, “No idol or picture of a deity is as powerful as a Yantra. An iconographic idol is a personal thing, whereas a Yantra is universal, because it is composed of archetypal forms that are common to all existing phenomena.”

### Geometry: Vocabulary of Reality

*Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.*

— Galileo Galilei (1564–1642)

A deity yantra is an energetic diagram of an enlightened being and may be used as a template for our own realization. These mystic diagrams also show how the five great elements (*mahābhūtas*)—earth, wind, fire, water, and space—may be invoked in an auspicious configuration. Mandalas and yantras can be read like a sentence; the geometric shapes within them are like words. A simple yantra may use only one symbol, invoking the energy of that element (or principle) to accomplish a specific task. A complex yantra may be

used to rectify imbalances among all the elements. The list below includes common shapes and symbols, from most simple to most complex, and explains how they are utilized in sacred art.

**Center dot:** The dot at the center of the yantra is called the *bindu* (“seed”). This primordial symbol is equated with the center of the universe, the place of cosmic stillness around which all creation revolves. This is not a physical location on a map; it is the “all-point” and the origin of all manifestation. It is where the male and female principles (or Shiva and Shakti) unite, where differences cannot exist. It is the summit of a symbolic mountain, from which the rest of the universe (and the yantra) flows. Though the element of space is sometimes portrayed as a dot (usually a circle), space also pervades the other four great elements and is inseparable from them. Meditating on the *bindu* makes the mind one-pointed and still. (Note: There are usually twenty-seven, and as many as thirty-six, elements in classical Tantra. Most are more subtle than space, like the “element” of time.)

**Line:** If we move away from unity in any direction, a line is formed. Two dots, symbolizing Shiva (consciousness) and Shakti (power), become separate discernible locations on the same line, connected yet apparently different. This line separates “this” from “that” and creates duality. All shapes in a yantra are understood to be radiating from the center, like rays of the sun, which is why lines are associated with the piercing quality of light. A vertical line is associated with the upward-moving nature of fire, while the horizontal line is associated with the spreading quality of water. Diagonal lines imply movement and are thus associated with the wind. Lines direct attention and energy.

**Circle:** It is the force of desire that causes us to expand outward from the center, and because this primordial desire moves in all directions, we draw it as a circle. The radius of desire creates space for all of existence; thus, the circle represents the space element, the wheel of life and death, and the eternal cycles of nature.

Many yantras have three concentric circles grouped together. Their meaning depends on where they are located. When they are located immediately around the central yantra, they usually represent the three primordial principles of reality (*tri-guna*): harmony

