



Ekabhumi Charles Elik

# THE BHAKTI COLORING BOOK

Deities, Mandalas, and the Art of Playful Meditation

BOOK EXCERPT



## INTRODUCTION

# BHAKTI AND SACRED ART

Art is at the center of most of the world's religions and mystic traditions. It is incredibly useful for a variety of practical and spiritual reasons, including education, inspiration, transformation, meditation, connection, and protection. Sacred art is a way for mystics to make their visions manifest and for institutions to encode their teachings into icons imbued with symbolism. Yet I believe the most powerful quality of sacred art is its ability to bypass the mind and open the heart directly. Whether it is a painting, a piece of music, a poem, a dance, or any other creative expression, every great work of art holds your attention, making you forget your worries for a moment. Your breath is taken away, and you are immersed in awe. Great sacred art directs that awe toward devotion.

In traditional Indian society, the ability to play music, dance, paint, or write poetry was considered fundamental to building good character and becoming a well-rounded human being. The spiritual traditions of India are suffused with poetry, music, dance, and painting. All the main

deities are venerated in elaborate temples covered in intricate ornamentation and carvings of voluptuous celestial beings, flowers, fruit, and magical creatures. Legends of gods, goddesses, and saints, recounted in epic poems, are filled with references to the arts. Most of the deities of Hinduism are praised for being skillful in the arts, and some, like Kṛṣṇa and Sarasvatī, actually carry musical instruments. Many great saints, most notably wandering minstrels like Mīrābāī, were artists. For members of the Sikh religion, repeating the name of God in call-and-response group singing (popularly known as *kirtan*) is one of three core practices. Devotional art is not just a spiritual device; it is an intrinsic part of human culture that gives meaning and direction to daily life.

The Sanskrit word for “devotion” is *bhakti*. Most of the visual art of India was created for what today is known as *Bhakti Yoga*, the spiritual path of divine love, faith, devotion, surrender, and liberation. Definitions in dictionaries cannot convey the immersive full-body experience of

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bhakti, but the arts can, especially when they are all combined together, as they often are in Indian holiday celebrations. A visitor to such celebrations is immersed in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and motion. Uplifting songs filled with inspirational poetry mingle with the scents of incense, flowers, perfume, and the musky sweat of devotees dancing. Vivid flower petals and pigments of every hue are arranged in intricate geometric patterns upon the ground. Everyone is dressed colorfully, bells are clanging, and delicious sweets from the temple altar are passed around. Perhaps you catch a glimpse of the spectacular icon wrapped in flowers and dripping with jewels as it glides by on the street, carried on the shoulders of ecstatic devotees. Perhaps you sing along, or dance, or throw flowers. The beauty and sensuality of the whole art-filled experience sweeps up everyone in its path.

Creating a visual representation of a Hindu deity is one way to cultivate and express bhakti. This book opens with images of deities and saints for you to color. You may notice that the images are quite different stylistically. Most of the images in this book are inspired by exemplary sources from different regions and periods of what is now known as Hindu culture. Through these regional styles you can enjoy the many flavors of bhakti art from across the Hindu diaspora.

Scientific studies have shown that coloring is relaxing, helps us focus, and can alleviate negative states of mind. When you concentrate upon the images of deities, you take the calming activity of coloring to an entirely higher level. Just

witnessing these divine beings is beneficial, and spending meditative time with them, as we do when coloring, elevates the soul. If you wish to transform your coloring activity into an enlightening spiritual meditation, then consider reading the entire book before you begin. Hindu sacred art is saturated with meaning, and virtually every detail of an icon carries layers of symbolism. Understanding the meaning of these images helps you align your consciousness with the virtues they illustrate. Devotion is not a passive practice; you must actively involve all aspects of your being—body (coloring), mind (learning), and soul (devotion). Call these virtuous qualities into your awareness and invite them to stay, just as you would a dear friend.

In part 1, the descriptions of the images will help to deepen your experience of the deities and the divine principles they exemplify. These descriptions include suggestions for which colors to use for each image. Part 2 delves more into the symbolism of the way deities are depicted and how their attributes relate to the daily life of a spiritual aspirant. It also explores the meanings of colors, geometric shapes, and the postures the deities sit or stand in. We'll dive more deeply into what bhakti is, and I'll introduce you to some of the basic practices of the Bhakti Yoga tradition. Ways to use sacred art in ceremony and in meditation are touched on here as well.

My heartfelt hope is that this book will help you bring these icons to life. It is important to me, as your guide to the sacred art of devotion, that you

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*feel* the divinity in each of these icons as well as get a sense of the rich culture from which they sprang. This understanding starts in the mind and expands into the heart. As the lessons you learn from the deities fully mature, you can apply them to your daily life and share the blessings with others.

All art delights, but sacred art changes you. When you participate in the creation of sacred art, your experience is more intense than when you are creating art merely for entertainment. Understanding the ancient symbolism of sacred art makes your experience even more profound. And recognizing how those principles relate to your inner reality helps your experience last

longer. Sacred art helps shift your consciousness to induce an ecstatic state of overflowing love for all beings. Art brings us together in celebration, fostering fraternity and community. It reminds us of the beauty of our world and the values that make life meaningful.

As you read this book, please soak up the information, try the suggestions, and apply the philosophy when possible. But don't get bogged down by data or swamped by the details. At some point you must be able to turn off the analytical mind and be swept up in the art. Allow this ancient alchemy to work its magic on you subliminally as you play and enjoy your time coloring.



# Gaṇeśa

## Remover of Obstacles

**Gaṇeśa** (*Gah-neh-shah*) is one of the best known, most revered, and most widely worshiped of Hindu deities, honored even by some Jains and Buddhists. We revere him as the remover of obstacles, lord of beginnings, master of categories, guardian of thresholds, and patron of arts and sciences. He embodies the joyful wisdom born of the union of Śiva and Śakti, of a human heart permanently connected to the natural mind. He epitomizes the ability to be cheerful regardless of circumstances—he is the embodiment of bliss.

His distinctive appearance is the result of a profound transformation: he was created by his mother, Pārvatī, to guard her private chambers (the objective mind), but the boy was unable to recognize his father, Śiva (universal awareness), when Dad arrived at the threshold (of consciousness). This state of mind is the quintessence of ignorance; it is the suffering that arises from feeling separate and incomplete. In an act of profound compassion, Dad removed his son's human head (personal ego) and replaced it with the head of a wise elephant (natural, unconditioned mind). The reborn child inherited the elephant's gentle wisdom, friendliness, and voracious appetite. He received the best of both worlds, so to speak.

Gaṇeśa's name is from two roots: the words *gaṇa*, meaning “group, category, or association,” and *īśa*, meaning “lord or master.” So he is “the Lord of Things” who knows how it all fits together. Yogins who invoke him understand that

all things in the universe are aspects of their own most expansive and divine self. So the first step in removing obstacles to realization is to remember that there *are* no obstacles—only the confusion and misunderstanding that arise when we are too identified with our physical body and unable to recognize our part in the grand play of life. Among the “things” that Gaṇeśa helps us to control are all the many thoughts, beliefs, and emotions in our mind. Consequently, he is invoked at the beginning of rituals throughout Asia in a wide variety of forms.

**COLORS:** In the eighteenth-century image from South India that inspired this artwork, Gaṇeśa's skin is bright ruby red. He wears golden yellow pants, and the mouse he rides upon is dark blue.

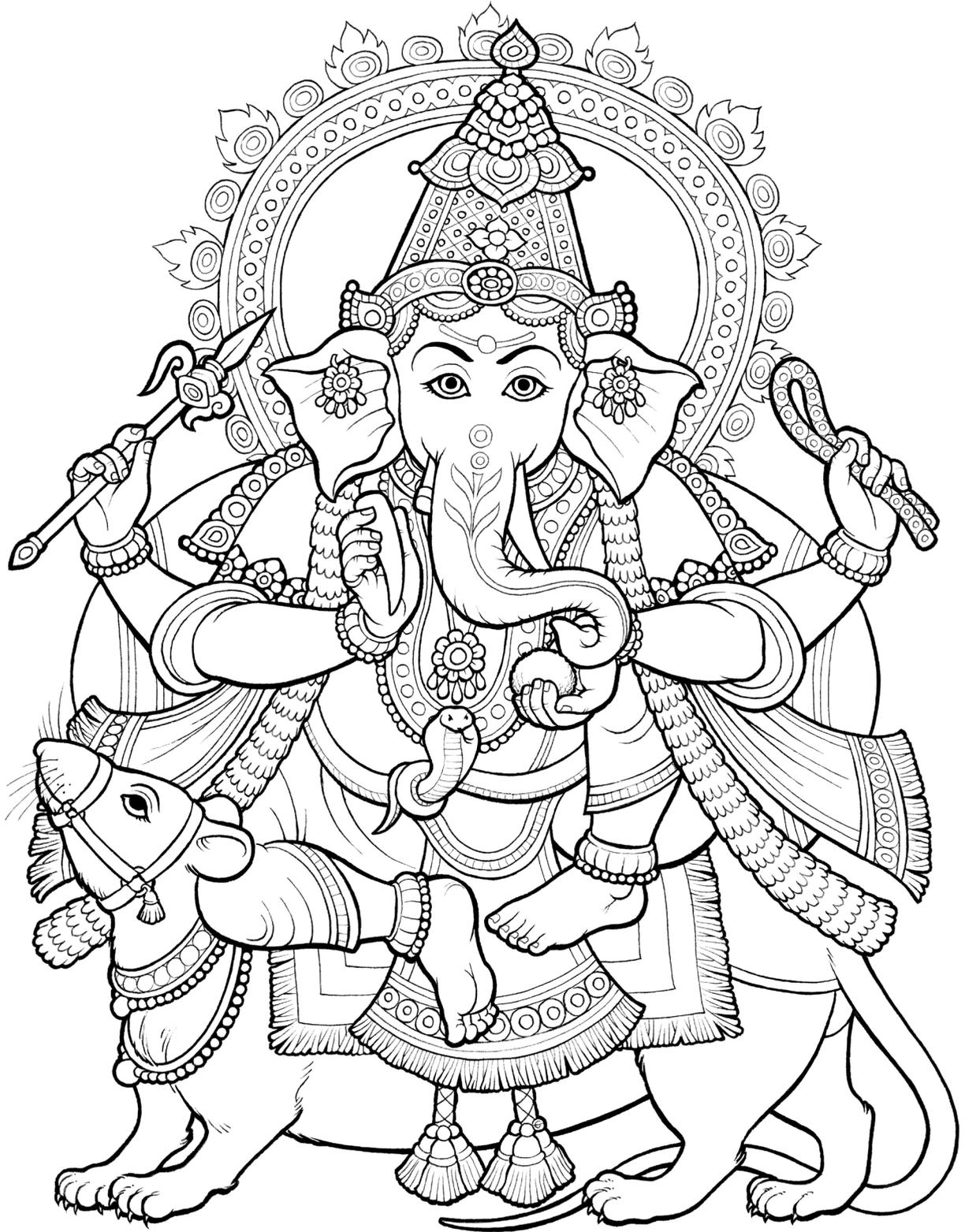
**INVOCATION:** *Om Gaṇ Gaṇapataye Namaḥ*  
(*Ohm Gahm Gahn-ah-pah-tah-yeh Nah-mah-hah*)  
“I honor the Lord of the Multitudes”

**SEAT:** Gaṇeśa is depicted sitting in the playful posture, indicating a friendly disposition. He sits upon on a mouse, named Mūsika, which represents his ability to conquer and direct the impulses of cleverness and greed to benefit all beings.

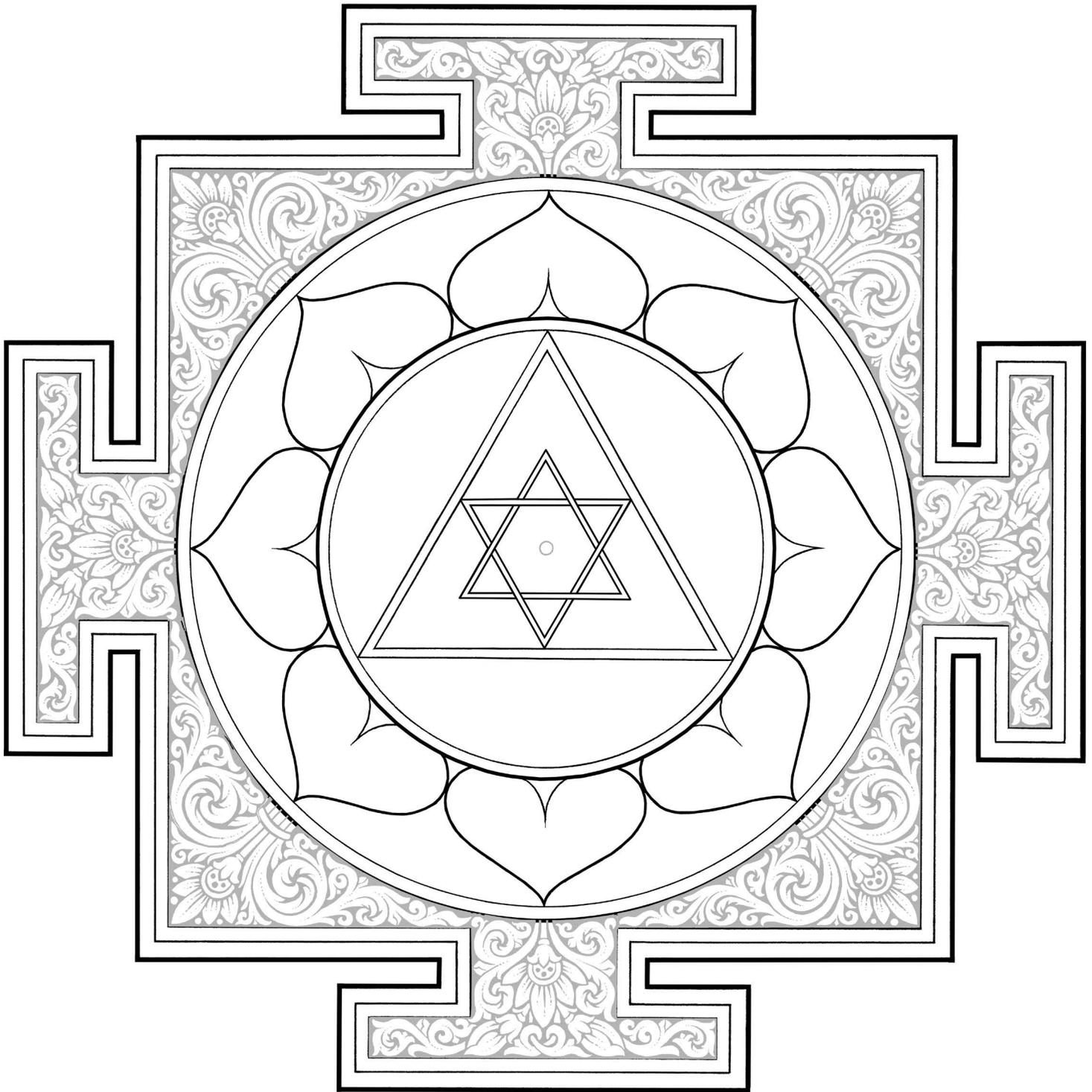
**ATTRIBUTES:** Rosary: devotion. Bowl of sweets: generosity. Ax: discernment. Lotus: purity.

**VIRTUES:** friendliness, divine knowledge, devotion, discernment, generosity, patience, perseverance

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Ekaḍanta, Gaṇapati, Heramba, Vigneśvara, Vināyaka



Gaṇeśa



Gaṇeśa Yantra

## *Gaṇeśa Yantra*

This is a standard deity yantra with four T-shaped gates, one on each side. They represent four primary ways that we may approach the deity through yogic practice: knowledge, discernment, attention, and self-awareness. The ring of eight heart-shaped lotus petals shows that his blessings flow outward in all directions. The large upward-pointing triangle indicates that this mystic diagram is generally oriented toward practices of dissolution (of the ego), but at the core, a six-sided star invokes Gaṇeśa's powers of manifestation (downward-pointing triangle) and dissolution (upward-pointing triangle) in a harmonious balance. The dot at the center represents the ultimate state of unity beyond form. This yantra is from the North Indian tradition as taught by Harish Johari.

**COLORS:** You may use any colors you wish if your only desire is to playfully offer your loving devotion. But if you wish to invoke the characteristics of Gaṇeśa in a more powerful and precise way, please consider using the traditional color scheme.

Starting from the outside border of the yantra, moving inward toward the center: the outer line represents the energy of the sun and is golden in color; this can be gold leaf, iridescent gold pigment, or even gold glitter! The next border-line inward is light yellow and represents the energy of the moon. The large square area inside these two lines represent the earth element and

is a dark leaf green. The biggest circle is golden. This circular area, and the lotus petals themselves, represent the water element. The areas inside this large circle and between the heart-shaped lotus petals are silver. The lotus petals themselves are red. The V shapes at the center of each petal are dark red. The tiny V shapes between the petals are very dark red, almost black. The inner circle is golden. The areas between the inner circle and the triangle are white. The triangle is outlined in red and filled with bright orange. The six-pointed star is also outlined in red and filled with bold lemon yellow. The center dot is golden.

**INVOCATION:** *Om Gaṃ Gaṇapataye Namaḥ*  
(*Ohm Gahm Gabn-ah-pah-tah-yeh Nah-mah-hah*)

**CONTEMPLATION:** Where do you make art? Is your work space as thoughtfully composed and are your tools as beautifully arranged as your artworks? As “the Lord of Things,” Gaṇeśa knows the proper place of objects and activities. Before coloring his yantra, consider invoking his energy by arranging your work space neatly. Put each tool back after you finish with it, even as you work. Clean up when you are done for the day. Creative people tend to be messy, so this act of tidying is likely to require you to wake up while you work. Do you find that conducting yourself in a more organized and precise manner than usual results in a more precise artwork?

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**EKABHUMI CHARLES ELLIK**

is an artist, poet, student, and teacher of classical Hatha Yoga who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. His diverse work includes *The Shakti Coloring Book*, as well as 20 original illustrations created for Sally Kempton's *Awakening Shakti*. For more, visit [ekabhumi.com](http://ekabhumi.com).

