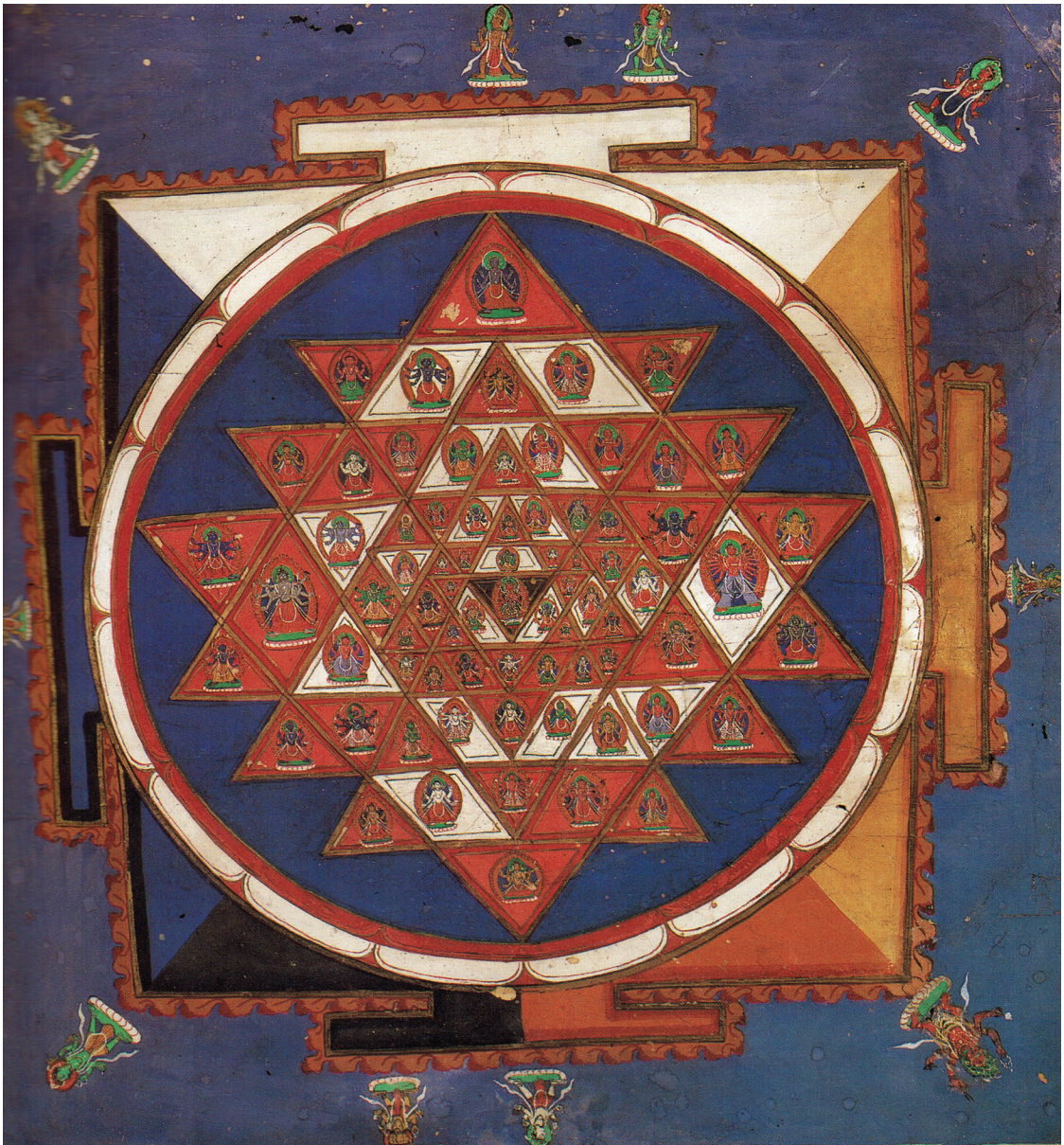




Shrichakra Yantra, c. 1900 CE

*Picture Courtesy: Hugo E. Kreijger, Kathmandu Valley Painting: The Jucker Collection
Published by Serindia Publications, London, 1999*

Oneness of the Self and the Other in Visual Arts

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Abstract

The concept of the oneness of the self and the other is the complex philosophical thought of Vedas, Upaniṣads and other oriental mythologies in South Asian regions. Generally, philosophical thoughts are presented in verbal form along with arguments involving propositions and inference. Some philosophical statements are the core contents of visual arts. In some cases, philosophy is clarified through the visual presentation. The statements that assert the union of Prakriti and Puruṣa, male and female, Shiva and Shakti, Radha and Krishna, Uma and Maheshar, individual Sadhaka and cosmos, the self and the other, I and you have been presented in visual arts like sculpture and painting. While providing aesthetic pleasure, such artworks also imprint the valuable philosophical senses in the mind of the viewers. They teach moral lessons while providing aesthetic delight. The understanding and communication are simplified in the visuals. The sculpture of Shivalinga, Nritesvara paubāhāḥ, mandala, Shree Yantra and picture of Kundalini present the theme of oneness of the self and the other and union of Prakriti and Puruṣa, in visual form.

Keywords: Prakriti and Puruṣa, Shivalinga, Vajra, mandala, Shree Yantra, Kundalini, enlightenment

Introduction

Some visual arts present the union of Prakriti and Puruṣa, the self and the other. The artworks clarify the deep philosophical values. It would be worth throwing light on some key philosophical statements of Upaniṣads before discussing the visual arts. One of the important statements of Upaniṣads is that everything in the universe is Brahma (Sarvam khalavidam Brahma). There is variation in the world but the

essence is the same. Similarly, the statement ‘Aham Brahmasmi’ in Brihadaranyaka Upaniṣads (1. 4. 10) means ‘I am Brahma; I am the universe.’ Furthermore, the statement ‘Tattvamasi’ means ‘That is you’ (Bhatt 2003). In other words, the thing that you are seeking and searching; the thing you are in the quest is you yourself. The explorer (traveler) himself is the goal (destination) of the exploration. You are in the quest of Brahma, and that Brahma is you yourself. Next statement is ‘Ayam atma Brahma’,

which means this soul (consciousness) is Brahma (Sharma, 2026). As we put the above statements together, we find, ‘I am the universe (Brahma), you are the universe, the consciousness is the universe, and everything is Brahma (universe).’ The next expression, ‘Satchitananda (sat-chit-ananda)’ means that the recognition (awareness) of the truth (Brahma) provides us absolute bliss (Ananda). Some drawings, pictures, paintings and sculptures demonstrate the union of the self and the cosmos. They explore the theme of enlightenment and absolute bliss. Some paubāhāḥ and mandala paintings present these themes in aesthetic manner. Shree Yantra and Shivalinga also depict these philosophical concepts. The visual representation of Kundalini meditation also shows the union of individual sadhaka and the cosmic consciousness. This research paper takes some visual arts and interprets them in terms of these philosophical statements.

Research Methodology

The research area includes the visual arts like mandala, paubāhāḥ, sculpture of Shivalinga and concept of Kundalini. The area has been explored from the perspective of Upaniṣads. The artworks are primary sources. Research papers, books and articles on Upaniṣads and visual arts are secondary sources. The thesis statement has been supported through the interpretation of visual arts, and the interpretation, to some extent, depends on the perception and outlook of the researcher and interpreter. Thus, this is qualitative research.

Analysis, Interpretation and Discussion

Some works of visual art aesthetically express the philosophical idea of the oneness of the individual self and the universe. Shree Yantra presents the union of Prakriti

and Puruṣa, the female principal and the male principal, the self and the other. The creation results from the interaction of nature and consciousness. There is overlapping combination of five downward pointing triangles and four upward pointing triangles. The visual composition also suggests the union of Radha and Krishna, Shiva and Shakti, Lakshmi and Vishnu. Shree Yantra is an instrument to aid in meditation (Martins, 2021). It is expected to bring prosperity, good health, happiness and blissful experiences.

The term ‘Shree’ in Sanskrit means prosperity, good fortune, wealth, and well-being. It also suggests honor and dignity. It creates harmony and creates a blissful state in our experience and consciousness (Kulshreshtha 2023). Yantra is the instrument that leads us to the goal or destination. Downward-pointing triangle represents the mother goddess or female principal. Intersection of four upward-pointing and five downward-pointing triangles forms forty-three small triangles in five layers. An eight-petaled lotus surrounds the inner core. Then, sixteen-petaled lotus encompasses the structure further. The four gates in four directions enclose the whole geometry. The universe is consists of two realities - Puruṣa (consciousness) and Prakriti (matter or nature). The realization of the union of the self and the other enables liberation from sufferings.

The five downward-pointing and four upward-pointing interlacing triangles make the innermost five layers of the Shree Yantra. These five layers represent the five layers of human existence, as mentioned in the Taittiriya Upaniṣads. They are Annmaya-kosh, Pranmaya-kosh, Manomaya-kosh, Vijyanmaya-kosh and Anandmaya-kosh. Five downward-pointing triangles correspond to the five principal elements of the manifested world. They are earth, water,

gas, sky and fire. The four upward-pointing triangles correspond to the four states of the consciousness (Kulshreshtha 2023). The innermost layer consists of a small triangle that encloses a point. The point is the symbol of the Anandamaya-kosh, the region of absolute bliss. This suggests the union of Prakriti and Puruṣa.

The next layer is Vigyanmaya-kosh, the representation of knowledge. It is made of eight small triangles representing eight types of knowledge as the ability to distinguish perishable from imperishable, to give up passion and desires, to differentiate between the doer and the witness, stable response to joy and sadness, control emotions, realizing non-duality, awareness of one's duty, and to give up pride.

The next layer in the structure is related to Manamaya-kosh. It has ten small triangles corresponding to the ten elements of the human beings like five senses of perception (touching, hearing, tasting, seeing and smelling) and five organs for activities (Karmendriya) like speaking, moving, holding, procreating, and excretion.

The next layer is Pranamaya-kosh. It has five main Pranas like Prana, Apana, Udana, Vyana and Samana, and five upapranas like Naga, Kurma, Devdatta, Kirkala and Dhananjay (Kulshreshtha, 2023). Pranamaya-kosh is related to various movements of the body. The last layer of existence is Annamaya-kosh. It has fourteen small triangles corresponding to fourteen important Nadis. They transmit the vital energy to various parts of the body.

Downward-pointing triangles in Shree Yantra represent Prakriti, the nature, the female principal or the Goddess. They interact with upward-pointing triangles representing the Purusa, the consciousness or the individual sadhaka (Nath 2019). The union symbolizes

the oneness of the individual self and the universe, the union of the self and the other. A point at the center of Shree Yantra symbolizes the source of all creation. The central dot represents the timeless and space-less entity, the Brahma from where matter, time and space have emerged.

The four upward-pointing triangles in Shree Yantra correspond to the four states of the self. In waking state, consciousness perceives the signals from sense organs. In dreaming state, the consciousness still acquires the stimulations but not through the sense organs. In deep sleep state, the consciousness is undistracted, for the individual does not receive any external sensations. The fourth state of the consciousness is the Turiya state which transcends the above three states. Turiya state is the pure state of the experience in which duality of the self and the other, subject and object, the witness and the witnessed vanishes. There is the oneness of entire existence.

Shree Yantra includes triangles and circles. The triangles symbolize natural elements in space and time having three attributes like Satva, Rajas, and Tamas. A circle has no beginning and no end. It is the symbol of the infinity and eternity. The eight-petalled lotus, which encircles the five layers of the triangular geometry, symbolizes eight basic emotions like anger, hope, pleasure, trust, fear, surprise, sadness and disgust. They connect the individual with the external world through the emotions. The sixteen-petalled lotus encircles the eight-petalled lotus in the Shree Yantra. It represents communication with the outer world through speech and art forms. It also symbolizes the Vishuddhi Chakra in Kundalini positioned at the throat that has sixteen lotus petals.

The square with four gates (Bhupura) in the outermost layer symbolizes the universe

with four directions. Shree Yantra is the microcosm of the universe. It suggests the creation of the fully blossomed universe from the bindu (point) at the center (Kulshreshtha, 2023). The universe is condensed to a point. The point expands as the universe. This is like breathing in and breathing out as the respiration in the human body. The pattern of consciousness resembles to the pattern of cosmos. It has been used as a tool for mediation. Our eyes move from periphery of the visual composition to the center and then move from center to periphery. The individual viewer or sadhaka in meditation experiences a sense of oneness with the cosmos. This is the divine dance (raas leela) of the Radha and Lord Krishna, and Shiva and Shakti. Shree Yantra is a complex visual composition of philosophical concepts. It presents the relationship between an individual and the cosmos.

The philosophy of the union of the self and the cosmos has been also presented in the visual structure of mandala. Sharma (2009: 17) writes: "Mandala is a well-ordered geometric structure which is used as a yantra (instrument) for a visual support to assimilate oneself with the divine beings. The visual images in the periphery of the mandala lead the viewer toward the center where the principal deity resides." Similarly, about mandala, Kramrisch (1964:44) mentions: "Mandalas are visual support of concentration and meditation, ritual aids on the way toward the center of the cosmos and self. Cosmos and self-coincide in the image of central and main divinity of the mandala". The duality between the self and the other disappears as individual self becomes one with the universe. Kramrisch further writes: "The principal deity resides at the centre within circles and the circles are surrounded by squares with four gates in four directions. Then the squares are again surrounded by

other circles. Subsidiary deities are within and outside the circles and squares around the principal deity. The structure and the images lead the individual self toward the centre where one is supposed to be coincided with the central divinity". The divinity resides in an eight-petaled lotus within a circle. The circle is surrounded by a square which is further enclosed by circles. "The square is divided by diagonals into four triangles whose colors white, yellow, red, and blue represent the four directions. Entry and exit into the magically fortified square are marked in the middle of each side by a symbolic gate structure stations on the way are marked by small images of subsidiary divinities in their appointed places, in the eight directions of space within the square" (Kramrisch 1964: 44). In Chandramandala (dated 1425), the central deity is moon. Grahas (planets) on the lotus petals are around the central figure. The planets are surrounded by twenty-four nakshatras (stars) on the lotus petals. The elements and structure of the mandala draw the viewer's eyes toward the center from the periphery. On the process of meditation, the sadhaka is supposed to unite oneself with the central divinity.

Nritesvara paubha painting (dated 1659) presents the rhythmic union of Lord Shiva and his Shakti. The union of divinities symbolizes the union of male and female principles, individual self and cosmic being, you and I. Other images and symbols reinforce the principal motif of the union. The head of Shiva resembles the shape of Shivalinga, the union of Prakriti and Purusa. "The lotus and the vajra in the hands of deities also symbolize the union, for vajra symbolizes male principle and lotus female" (Sharma, 2009, p.18). The painting presents the "tantric manifestations of Shiva and Parvati" (Subedi 1992). In the rhythmic cosmic dance, "Shiva, in white complexion

is embarrassing his Shakti in red complexion with his two arms” (Sharma 2009: 73). The painting depicts one of the important aspects of tantric philosophy. Tantra states that individual self unifies oneself with universal consciousness through the union between male and female (Aran 1978: 53). All the things in the world are the manifestations of the same entity, the Brahma. Khadka (1995:31) mentions: “It is the self that is supreme, self has a double aspect to it: the individual and the universal self, and they can be expressed diversely: the individual self can be regarded as one’s smaller self, the universal self as one’s larger self, though essentially, there are no smaller or larger selves. They are one self. Recognition of the unity and universality of the self is one of the major metaphysical ends of Hinduism. There is no duality of subject/object”. The painting presents the union of the self and the cosmos, the major statement of Tantra and Upaniṣads.

Vajra, the symbol in Vajrayana Buddhism, presents the union of Prakriti and Purusa.

Vajra is the “emblem held by Buddhist divinities such as Vajradhara, Vajrasattava and Vajrapani” (Shakya 2000: 25). In the middle of Vajra, there is eight-petalled lotus (symbol of female) which is penetrated by straight shape (symbol of male) suggesting the union of male and female principles. The union suggests the oneness of the self and the cosmic energy. Ernst and Waldschmidt (1967: 35) further write: “The phallus is called Vajra, ‘Thunderbolt’ or Mani, ‘Jewel’, and the female organ in Padma, i.e. lotus. In this sense, Vajrayana can become a way to salvation by means of the sacred enjoyment of love . . . Nirvana became equated with the orgasm (mahasukha)”. The parts of vajra and lotus are related to male and female, the self and the other respectively.

Shivalinga is also a visual representation of

philosophical concept. About Shivalinga, Aran (1978:78) mentions: “Shiva cult in Nepal comes in the form of Lingam (Phallus), which was the early form of Shiva Icon. [T]he Lingam is roughly cylindrical in Shape, standing upright on its narrow end and rounded at the top. It usually stands on a flat rimmed disc called yoni being possibly the female symbol. There is an indentation on one side of the yoni, the purpose of which is to drain off the water poured over the Lingam as offering”. Shivalinga is the symbol of the union of Prakriti and Purusa, the self and the universe, and the oneness of you and I.

The visual representation of Kundalini also presents the union of the self and the cosmos. The word ‘Kundalini’ means coiled like a serpent. It is supposed that the dormant energy of an individual remains at the base of the spine in the form of Kudalini (Saraswati & Nikolić 1984). It is the metaphysical concept, for we cannot find the physical snake there. It has symbolic meaning associated with myths and scriptures. It is believed that the dormant energy can be awakened through meditation step by step by opening seven chakras (energy centres). This is the arousal of Kundalini Shakti (power) in our body.

Muladhar Chakra is at the base of the spine where there is tremendous source of energy in hidden form. Kundalini meditation is practice of awakening the latent energy that results in moksha or enlightenment (Silburn 1988). The subtle energy arises from Muladhar Chakra, the base of the spine and goes through several chakras along the spinal cord and reaches to Sahasrara Chakra (lotus blossom of a thousand petals) on the top of the head.

Methods of Kundalini meditation include designated Yogic postures, Pranayama, breathing practice and chanting Mantras.

The lotus blossom symbolizes the state of enlightenment. Sharma (2009: 245) states: “Through pranayam, kundalini, the coiled and dormant cosmic power which lies asleep in muladhara, the base of the spinal column, can be aroused. The arousal of kundalini activates the vast dormant areas of the brain. As the sadhaka, the individual self-practices pranayam properly, the kundalini shakti ascends step by step from muladhara through various charkas, the psychic centres of energy situated in human body, and reaches the highest point sahasrara, the psychic centre above the head.” Human beings have a vital life force with their body. Seven chakras are seven centers of energy in the designated parts of the human body. The energy in our body moves up in spinning form or moves down depending on the state of spiritual awareness and purity.

Sharma (2009: 246) further writes: “Seven charkas - muladhara, svadhisthana, manipura, anahata, visuddhi, ajna and sahasrara are situated in human body in ascending order. Coiled and asleep kundalini ascends from muladhara, through these other charkas with the degree of the transformation of consciousness on the process of pranayam and meditation, and finally reaches to sahasrara, the charka represented by thousand-petalled lotus. The number of lotus petals increase in the succeeding charkas as the kundalini ascends step by step symbolizing the development of the sadhaka's consciousness.” The spiritual journey begins from the muladhar chakra (base) and ends at sahasrara chakra, top of the head. Muladhar is the foundation and root of the life force. It is connected to the ground and basic human instinct.

When the muladhar chakra is in balanced state, the individual sadhaka (practitioner) becomes healthy and balanced in his personality. The kundalini is ready to ascend

toward higher energy center. Svadhisthana is the second chakra above muladhar and below the navel. This represents the recognition of the space of the self. The recognition of the self to facilitate to understand others and develop harmony with others. This results in emotional balance and well-being. Manipur chakra positioned in the middle of the abdomen means ‘city of pearl’ in literal sense. This chakra is associated with faith on the self. Anahata chakra at the center of chest is associated to kindness, compassion and love. Vishuddhi chakra at throat is associated to purity. Agya chakra in the middle of the eye brows is associated to intuitive knowledge. The realization comes from within. Sahasrara, the seventh chakra, is on the head like the crown having a thousand-petal lotus. The lotus blossom is the symbol of enlightenment. On the process of meditation, the energy from muladhar chakra gradually progresses upward and connects to the cosmic energy symbolized by the lotus. The access of Kundalini to sahasrara chakra provides the experience of unity between individual self and the universe. This is the oneness of the self and the other. You and I including all the living and nonliving beings along with visible and invisible things in nature and universe are the parts of single entity. This is the state of harmony and peace. In this state, one realizes the futility of selfishness, greed and violence.

In Tantric traditions, Kundalini, the coiled energy, can be released through spiritual awakening. Sometimes, arousal of kundalini is related to a sudden release of concentrated sexual energy. When it moves upward, it takes the spiral form. When “kundalini is aroused, it travels up through the sushumna energy-channel, located roughly in parallel with the spine” (Tylor 2015: 219). “If the energy can be permanently settled or established at the seventh chakra, the

individual will be in a permanent state of nirvikalpa samadhi, in union with Brahman, becoming a Brahma-vidya, with knowledge of Creator Brahman". When kundalini rises from the base towards the sahasrara chakra, all knots, chakras or energy centers represented by lotus are pierced through. Then, the consciousness becomes free from all mundane material connections. Sharma (2009: 246) mentions: "At this moment, the sadhaka experiences the radiating waves rise into the brain causing ecstatic transformation of consciousness. Individual self and the cosmic consciousness become one. Then the sadhaka does not find any obstacles and troubles in the world and remains in constant communion with cosmic being in absolute bliss. Without meditation and pranayam, the vast dormant areas of the brain remain untapped and unutilized, and kundalini shakti remains coiled and asleep in muladhara." The arousal of the Kundalini Shakti provides a sense of vibration in sushumna providing ecstasy and bliss.

Sitting in padmasana (lotus posture) appropriate regulation of the breath are necessary to open "saraswati nadi" so that "kundalini can flow through" (Tylor 2015: 220). The Khechari "vidya" states: "Kundalini can be raised by the khechari mudra where the tongue is placed above the soft palate towards the nasal cavity". The practice of brahmacharya (celibacy) is considered essential for this sort of meditation. The instinctive energy associated to the lower chakras moves upwards. Then, it is transformed into the higher "spiritual energy of ojas." The phenomenon occurs under the close supervision of guru. The effect of Kundalini arousal appears in the form of a ring of lightning, dazzling sparks and folds of flaming fire. When the energy moves back down through these chakras, one feels fatigue and depression. Thus, even

after the enlightenment, it is necessary to maintain the awakened state. There is always the possibility to slip down. We have seen the mythical narratives that many great sages have fallen down giving way to lust, temptation, greed and anger.

Kundalini awakening causes powerful ecstatic sensation, vibrations, hypersensitivity, a sense of unity, deep serenity and extrasensory experiences like hearing strange voices and visions of lights. The mystical state of consciousness gets awareness of energy discharges and flowing currents through the body. There is a flood of joy right through the body. The individual self becomes the witness that is observing oneself. One experiences oneself as larger than one's body. There is a sense of peace, love, joy and cosmic unity.

Conclusion

Upanishads, some mythologies and visual arts depict the oneness of the self and the universe. They assert that the realization of the union of Prakriti and Puruṣa, the male and the female, I and you provide a sense of enlightenment. Meditation and spiritual practice lead to the realization of this truth. The individual identifies with all the other individuals and things in the world. Some paintings and sculptures clarify the philosophical statements. The major theme of some artworks is the union of the consciousness and matter. The experience of this union provides a sense peace and enlightenment. These concepts have been aesthetically presented in paubāhāḥ and mandala paintings, Shivalinga, Vajra, Shree Yantra and Kundalini. The philosophy is depicted in visual forms.



*A key sketch of Mandala, a folio page from Thyaa-safoo, late 17th century
Picture Courtesy: Madan Chitrakar, Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany, 2012*

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