

Prasna and other Divination Methods

Shyamasundara Dasa, 1996

Prasna Marga is an ingenious method that employs both planets and shakuna (oracle based omens). Most of the divinatory systems known in the modern Western world fall into the classification of shakuna sastra. They are: Tarot Cards and all their variations, Russian Gypsy Fortune Telling Cards, Runes, I Ching (which of course, is originally from China but has become popular in the West), reading tea leaves, etc. These systems are used for short term answers and based on the same principle as prasna. In ancient and modern India there are similar systems. These other systems like the Tarot and I Ching are an organized coded language system that are used as an oracle for communicating with God or one of His representatives. (Of course this depends on the consciousness of the diviner, he may be very spiritually advanced or into black magic - that will determine who he is trying to communicate with.)

Garga Muni has created what I call the Oracle of Radha, it is based on his observations of the dice playing of Radha and Krsna. There is another very similar system known as Ramal which is extant in India today which also uses dice and like Radha-Krsna's dice it is only four sided, not six sided. We will talk about Ramal later.

Reverting back to Prasna Marga. In this system of Prasna everything is not based simply on the planetary position at the time of the question. One of the steps that must be done is finding the Arudha Lagna which is different from the "normal" lagna based on the rising sign (called Udaya Lagna). To find the Arudha Lagna one first needs to have 108 cowrie shells which have been cleaned and sanctified by, for example, being soaked in Ganges water.

Of course it is assumed that the planetary position has been accurately charted. Then after chanting appropriate mantras to guru and Krsna and manipulating the cowrie shells the diviner asks the question and simultaneously takes a handful of the shells, leaving some behind. He puts the shells in his hand down on the table and counts out multiples

of 12, the remainder indicates which is the Arudha Lagna. 1-Aries, 5-Leo, etc. If it is 0 then it is Mina (Pisces). Having thus ascertained the Arudha Lagna he answers the Prasna.

There are many ways of attaining the Arudha Lagna - the method I have just describe is the most common. Another method that is sometimes used is to get a person innocent of astrology (usually a child) to take a gold coin with akshata and flowers in their hands, then they are asked to place this in one of the 12 squares that represent the zodiac. Another way is for the astrologer to visualize himself at the center of the zodiac with Aries and Taurus directly in front of him, Libra and Scorpio behind, Capricorn and Aquarius to the left, and Cancer and Leo to the right, and the other signs in the appropriate corners. With this method the Arudha Lagna is chosen according to which direction the questioner approaches the astrologer. This is only effective if there is equal access to all directions. But in village life the astrologer often sits under a tree in some open place observing all around him and can see who is approaching. Another way this is used is if someone asks a question and then all of a sudden there is a noise from some direction, the direction of the sound origin will determine the Arudha Lagna.

An example of how this was used in the past was told to me by an old astrologer in South India. There was a well known astrologer who kept his court-yard spotlessly clean and covered with white sand. He had previously divided (in his mind) the court yard in such a way that each of the signs was represented. People who would come to see him would stand in the court yard and wait on him. Once a man came to see him, while he was waiting he spit on to the sand a mouthful of red betel nut juice from the pan he was chewing. Noting what sign it represented, and the nature of the act and color red the astrologer told the man the following: "Your daughter has had her first period and now you are concerned about getting her married." (This is a traditional system in India). To which the astounded man answered in the affirmative.

Now suppose a person wants a "yes" or "no" answer for some question such as "Will giving a donation to a chaste widow help cure my daughter of her skin disease?" Using the method previously described (praying to guru etc.) grab a handful of cowries, count them off in multiples of 12, the remainder is the Arudha Lagna. If Guru (Jupiter) is in kendra (quadrant) or kona (trinal) from Arudha Lagna then the answer is "yes"; if not, the answer is "no." This method can be repeated asking a whole series of questions that have yes/no answers. If the astrologer doesn't have shells at his disposal he could ask the questioner to pick a

number between 1 and 108, with this number he can fix the Arudha and answer the question.

There are even methods to determine if it is an auspicious time to ask a question. This is generally done when it is the diviner himself who is going to ask himself questions. Take two flat objects, I use 2 silver coins specially for this purpose. I calm myself down then I pray to God and ask if this is a good time to ask the question in mind. Then I toss the coins onto a silk cloth. If the coins come up odd (that is one head, the other tail) then it is a good time, if even then it is not. If it is not a good time, I slowly go over the question and analyze it carefully, this of course should always be done and by so doing you may find the answer without going further. It may be that my mind was not focussed enough and serious.

Divination is not a game, we are approaching God so we should have a respectful attitude and manner. For very serious questions you should take a bath, light incense, etc., to really focus seriously on your question. By doing so you will find that you seldom ask frivolous questions. (By charging money to people I find that few ask me frivolous questions.) I again ask if it is the right to ask the question if odd I go ahead, if even I try to focus more. Am I clear headed, or too emotional now? I try to find out the root of the problem why this is not a good time to ask the question. When I think I am done I again toss the coins if odd I go ahead with the divination if even I do one of two things: 1) I pack up everything and try at a different time or 2) I realize that I am asking the wrong question, this often happens if something else is bothering me and this overshadows the original question. So I meditate on this new question and ask if it is a good time to inquire into it. Invariably the coins when tossed come out odd--my mind is really focused on this subject and not on the other--so this is the question I should ask.

Another method to determine if it is possible to answer a question at this time or if the person should ask later is as follows. Suppose the person wants to know if it is auspicious to ask a question - if the Arudha Lagna falls in a trik-stan (6, 8 or 12th) from the Udaya Lagna the question should be asked at a later time as no clear answer will come out--it is undecidable at this time.

This method I generally use when I do my own readings but you may want to use this with other people also. You will have to judge when it is appropriate. I find that when a person is ready to come to me they are already pretty focused and have their question in mind. If I feel

that they aren't then I instruct them how to ask questions (clear your mind of all other thoughts, write down your question in one or at most 2 sentences--no long stories please--then give me a call when you are ready) and have them call me later. However if they are in a long session you may wish them to use the two coin method or the Arudha Lagna method.

Recently I have come across a very interesting book called "African Oracles in 10 Minutes" by R.T. Kaser, published 1996 by Avon Books, New York. African Divination systems kept alive traditions that the ancient Greeks and Romans used. This particular book which describes a simplified method of divination of the Yoruba people of Nigeria and the Santaria religion of the Caribbean (descendants of the slaves), is especially good at answering yes/no questions. Like Tarot, I Ching, Runes, etc., it requires no knowledge of astrology or astronomy, or to be especially adept at mathematics so it has this non-mathematical simplicity. It is also sattvik and doesn't require us to read entrails or kill chickens, or examine sheep's livers.

I was surprised when I read through the book that it looked a lot like Ramal. My suspicions were vindicated when the author himself stated that these methods of divination were based on Ramal and brought to Nigeria by the Arabs over 1300 years ago in their search for slaves and other trading ventures. I have seen scholarly texts describing Arab methods of using these tetragrams which were quite complex but not very enlightening because the author was not interested in divining but in pedantry. Thus this was the first Ramal text I had seen in English except for the Oracle of Radha (which is much simpler than what this book holds). I have several Ramal texts in Sanskrit and Hindi but that doesn't do much good.

It is difficult to say if the system of Ramal was brought to India by the Arabs or if it was found by them there? The tetragrams of the Ramal system are extremely similar to that of the I Ching except that the I Ching is based on hexagrams (6 marks) whereas the Ramal is a tetragram (4 marks). My supposition is that these different systems of divination (they are called geomancy because they were thrown on the ground and calculated from the positions they landed in) are a legacy of the world wide Vedic culture. Not necessarily that they spread from India to the West or vice versa. But rather that in former, more enlightened times in other yugas, Vedic culture was spread all over the world and different rishis lived in various geographical locations--for instance Srila Prabhupada

said that the Caspian Sea was named after Kasyapa Rishi. They lived all over Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Australia and Oceania. These rishis and the people in general were all in touch with the Supreme Godhead, Sri Krsna, so it is not surprising if we find fragments of Vedic culture all over the world.

It is not important if it originated in India or Africa--Vedic culture doesn't originate in India--it originates from Krsna. Thus wherever there is a God Conscious person we find Vedic culture. However now with the impact of Kali-yuga Vedic culture only survives in India since the Indian culture is the only surviving ancient culture from antiquity. There are no more Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, etc., from the past, only India; and that is quickly dying. In fact we might say that Prabhupada exported Vedic culture to the West to preserve it so that it could be re-exported from the West to India. Which then is the origin of Vedic culture, India or America? From our short time-line we could say India, but from a longer time-line of millions of years it would be difficult to say. If we read Drutakarma's work we see that very advanced cultures existed in the Americas that we know practically nothing about. There is the Olmec culture of Central America that was already a long lost legend by the time of the Incas and Aztecs.

In any case from the point of view of divination we can see that this is an art that has been of interest to humans all over the world. And that humans have attempted to talk to God through this method for a very long time. It has only been with the advance of a mechanistic-atheistic culture of modern science that has seen divination driven out. The reason being that divination, by definition, means the intrinsic belief in the existence of God because that is ultimately who we are trying to communicate with.

In reference to this book "African Oracles in 10 Minutes" it is practically the only popular book on the subject though he does give some scholarly references in the back, some of which I have read previously. This book is good simply because it is the only book of its kind in print today. However it does suffer from some weak points (in an attempt to make it popular he tries to be humorous and doesn't do a good job in the humor department; it comes off as being to glib). I would have preferred that he gone the route of the Wilhelm/Baynes edition of the I Ching. This is an eminently scholarly book published by Princeton University but highly acclaimed by practitioners of the I Ching. It has been in continuous print since 1950, probably Princeton's best seller.

When it come to divination it doesn't hurt to be serious. Another point that I found annoying is that he needlessly introduced sexism and indulged in gratuitous gender bashing--this is the 90's. There is no place for this kind of thing in astrology or any type of divination. I just tried to ignore these foibles and went for the essence.

African Oracles can easily be adapted to Vaisnavism by anyone wishing to use it. It is important that the practitioner adapt the method, any method, to Vaisnavism as opposed to being influenced by the system. He should accept what is consistent with Vedic philosophy and reject what isn't. This principle applies to divination as well as philosophy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

There are not so many texts in English on the subject of Prasna, here are few that I have:

**Prasna Marga (two different editions, BV Raman's is much better. It is over 1100 pages. Though Bhasin's work is generally good, his edition of this book is practically useless for the uninitiated.) This is a very good book for both Prasna and other aspects of astrology such as natal, omens etc. But it is very advanced and will take some study but is well worth it.

**Daivajna Vallabha--supposedly by Varaha Mihira; similar to the next text

**Satpancasikha (65 lessons) by Prithuyasas, the son of Varaha Mihira. A very foundational text quoted by others.

**Prasnagnana of Bhattotpala (70 slokas); similar to the above by the famous commentator of all of Mihira's works

*Gnana Pradipika of Jaimini (2 editions; Kannan's better than K.N. Saraswati's); a different approach

**Jinendramala by Upendracarya--a unique approach with much added information

**Essentials of Horary Astrology or Prasnapadavi by M.R Bhatt. A very good text on Prasna that is a modern rendition of the Prasna Marga tradition by a very learned scholar in the field of astrology.

**Sivasvarodaya & Swara Cintamani are two books that deal with predicting based on the breath coming from your nose. It is used a lot in Prasna Marga.

Prasna Dipika by L.R. Chawdri. I was not impressed by this book and would not recommend it.

Prasna Tantra by BV Raman. A work on Tajika style of Prasna. I don't recommend it as it is at odds with the Parasara's style of astrology. His other book Prasna Marga is much much better.

Practical Horary Astrology by Gayatri Devi Raman. A simple book incorporating some classical features but also Tajika features--I don't use it much.

(Code: ** essential, * good, no star--not worth it)