

Sri Saundarya Lahari:

Sadhana



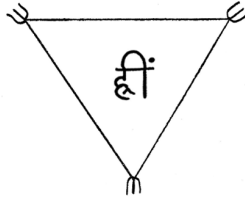
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Sri Saundarya Lahari: Sadhana

*A way to peace, plenty and prosperity
through Devi worship*



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Sadhana

Sri Swami Satyananda introduced the *Saundarya Lahari* sadhana to his sannyasins before leaving Ganga Darshan for the next stage of his life. It was a parting gift of immense value and is practised to this day. The Bihar School of Yoga tradition has, therefore, preserved a detailed description of how to use the mantras of *Saundarya Lahari*, and the benefits that can be derived from chanting each sloka.

In 1988, Sri Swamiji gave many inspiring talks on these mantras, the Devi and spiritual life. The following excerpt is an example of this:

“It becomes necessary for all to understand that yoga does not mean hatha yoga. The word ‘yoga’ has been used in the past to denote a process, a practice, a system through which one can become aware of one’s *atma*, the self. The ultimate purpose of yoga is to become aware of one’s spiritual consciousness. In the course of evolution, you become aware of your mind, intellect, emotions and memories, which is an ability that is not found in many creatures. In the same way, in this system of evolution through yoga, you should realize and experience a higher type of consciousness that is much more infinite, and which is one with the cosmic consciousness. Therefore, we are trying to use all the possible instruments we have in order to realize that *adhyatmic chetana*, the spiritual awareness.

“You must utilize the instrument of *bhavana*, emotion or sentiment, as through this instrument of *bhavana*, you can attain a glimpse of that spiritual consciousness. Through experience, we find that *bhavana* is the common property of each and every creature, including animals. It is *bhavana* that is responsible for passion, it is *bhavana* that is responsible for jealousy; anger is *bhavana*, hatred is *bhavana*, and you all experience these feelings. If you did not have *bhavana*, perhaps you would never be passionate, perhaps you would never get angry, perhaps you would never be jealous; the very fact that you experience all these proves that you are rich in *bhavana*.

“The only thing that you have to learn is to turn the coin upside down. One side of the coin is *maya*; the other side of the coin is *Brahman*. *Maya* and *Brahman* are not separate; the world and the spirit are not separate. This turn can be achieved by channelizing the *bhavana*. The emotion that flows through both the auspicious and the inauspicious path should merely be recognized and channelized.

“From time to time, the ultimate reality manifests in different forms: in the form of compassion, in the form of benediction, in the form of support, and in the form of knowledge, and in many other forms. In this prayer we ask, ‘Let us be at your feet.’

“For the practice of *Saundarya Lahari*, the position is *vajrasana*, with the hands in *avahani mudra*. You should remember that *avahani mudra* means the gesture of invocation, the *mudra* that invokes the presence of *Devi*. First, you chant the twenty-fifth mantra, followed by the set mantras for the day, and then conclude with the repetition of the twenty-fifth mantra and the prayer *Namaste, Namaste . . .*

“In the *Saundarya Lahari* *sadhana*, one invokes the *Shakti* aspect. It is not possible to sustain life or the universe without *Shakti*. The *Shakti* may be in the form of primal instincts, natural passions, or any form whatsoever, yet the *Shakti* aspect is essential for the sustenance of life and the evolution of the human being.



“The human body functions due to Shakti, the mind becomes activated due to Shakti, and until and unless Shakti helps us, we cannot progress on the path of spirituality. Without this energy one cannot move the body, one cannot breathe. This is the gross manifest energy known as *apara shakti*.

“Similarly, the divine energy that bestows blessings is known as Tripura Sundari. Through the ages, the shakti of Tripura Sundari has been worshipped in the form of Sri Yantra. This Sri Yantra is the symbol, the manifest form of Tripura Sundari. The various forms of meditation on Sri Yantra or Sri Chakra are presented in *Saundarya Lahari*. When Adi Shankaracharya was subjected to *abhichara mantras*, which cast a spell or charm and can cause disease or death, he invoked Devi with *Saundarya Lahari* on the banks of the Narmada river.

“*Saundarya Lahari* is considered to be the sixty-fifth tantra. In India, within the agama and nigama traditions, there are believed to be sixty-four tantras. The sixty-fifth tantra is the *sarva* or complete tantra, and it is *Saundarya Lahari*.”

—Swami Satyananda Saraswati



The mantras of *Saundarya Lahari* are a boon, a divine gift. They allow one to awaken an important source of strength within oneself. With the chanting of these mantras, one will observe that one becomes accomplished in yama and niyama as a natural outcome of the sadhana effortlessly. Pratyahara follows as a consequence.

Any number of hidden meanings may be revealed, according to one's perception and understanding. As the grace of Devi descends while chanting, and the sadhaka becomes immersed in the sacred mantras, many esoteric truths may emerge from this treasure trove of bhakti, jnana and upasana.

Shakti is endless, and so too are her explanations and descriptions, yet a time comes when experience should begin. While the meanings of the mantras of *Saundarya Lahari* are

sublime, beautiful and most inspiring, it is not at all necessary to understand them in order to experience Shakti. These sacred mantras can be recited daily, yet it is not required to chant the entire *Saundarya Lahari* every day. The sadhana of *Saundarya Lahari* can be commenced at any stage of life. The important thing is to begin the practice.

One should place the Sri Yantra, the yantra of Devi, before oneself, then sit in vajrasana, with the hands in avahani mudra, and begin to chant the mantras. At first, one will see the yantra with the eyes open; later, though the eyes are closed, the yantra will appear within the depths of one's consciousness.

When Sri Swamiji first introduced this sadhana to the sannyasins, the initial classes consisted of chanting. Sometimes the whole hymn was chanted, but usually it was a lesser number of verses, such as twenty, or even three, repeated again and again to acquire the right pronunciation and learn them by heart.

After some time, the sannyasins were instructed to begin writing the mantras carefully, in Devanagari script. The mantras were written in special notebooks, which Sri Swamiji provided. Later still, everyone was encouraged to draw the individual yantras that accompany each verse, and in this way they were encouraged to draw the Sri Yantra also. These notebooks of *likhita japa* and their accompanying yantras are still treasured. *Japa* means 'to repeat' and *likhita japa* usually means repeatedly writing a short mantra such as *Aum* or one's guru mantra; however, one can perform it as an *anushtana*, a special effort maintained for a specific period of time, with great benefits.

An important aspect to keep in mind is the *bhava*, or attitude, with which one practises. The mind should be soft, tender and fluid, not rigid and tense. This is possible only when faith and devotion to Devi are developed along with the practice. The chanting of *Saundarya Lahari* helps one to maintain the correct attitude of mind, as it develops the experience of divinity within. If the *bhava* is soft, loving and tender, one will become beautiful, *sundaram*, an embodiment of Devi herself.

Shakti has to be respected and revered if one is to experience her full benefits, and since she is present in everything, one has to inculcate an attitude of reverence for all that one is and all that one experiences. A culture that regards Shakti as an energy to exploit can never attain its full potential. From the day one is born, one has been surviving on her handouts in the form of nature's abundance. The air one breathes, the water one drinks, the food one eats, the home one lives in are all the gifts of nature or Shakti.

Shakti is abundant in prosperity and is always replenishing the creation she has given birth to. Yet, if one wishes to experience the full force of her benevolence, one will have to develop an attitude of reverence towards her, not arrogance. Therefore, the mantras of *Saundarya Lahari* should be chanted with reverence, as an act of worship. It is the attitude of reverence and respect that will unlock the closed door of inner experience and unleash its full force of magnanimity.

Shankara's invocation of Devi

Adi Guru Shankaracharya was born in Kerala in a period when the masses had turned away from the vedic lifestyle, denying many of its fundamental assertions. He is often described as a saviour of the vedic philosophy and way of life. Only an evolved soul can inculcate harmony between rival sects, philosophies and lifestyles. Sri Shankaracharya not only emerged triumphant from that challenge, but the institutions he founded to preserve the ancient wisdom are still thriving centuries later, and the sannyasins of the Bihar School of Yoga belong to that tradition.

Due to his strong appeal and influence, Shankara also made enemies among adherents of certain traditions who perceived him as a threat. In those days, there were sects that practised black magic and sorcery with the intention to destroy or annihilate others. Shankara fell victim to one such plan on account of the boldness of his ideas and beliefs, which were freeing the people's minds.

One of his rivals transmitted a deadly disease to Shankara. In response, Shankara invoked Devi, the Cosmic Shakti, to

avert the malefic influence. Where else can a child in deep distress turn but to his mother? No one is more loving, beautiful and powerful than a mother; therefore, Shankara turned to that divine power, the foundation of existence, before whom even the mightiest of the mighty are humbled. The outcome of this invocation are the rapturous mantras of *Saundarya Lahari*, which have astounded even modern scholars with the nature of their content.

Saundarya Lahari designates specific mantras and yantras to cure the three different types of afflictions described in the scriptures: *adhibhautika*, physical disease; *adhidaivika*, afflictions caused by natural calamities; and *adhyatmika*, ailments that arise from within oneself. It also reveals the manner in which these mantras and yantras can be utilized to awaken the primal energy that resides in the form of kundalini within the framework of the body. In this way, one can generate a higher level of energy and awareness to influence the body, or any form of matter, and attain the aim one seeks.

Transcending distress

There are moments of crises in our lives when we need divine intervention, and in this lies the importance of *Saundarya Lahari*. Shankara's hymn has been preserved by the tradition and is most relevant for us today, as it can help to alleviate the crises that we face in our daily lives, whether we are poor, destitute and hungry, struck by disease, grief and loss, or seeking name, fame and good fortune.

Saundarya Lahari can also alleviate mental and emotional conflicts, such as worry, anxiety, fear, turmoil, insecurity, depression, disappointment, lack of self-confidence and despair. It can be used for the cure of diseases that are *adhidaivika* in nature that no medicines can heal.

The *Saundarya Lahari* sadhana provides a wonderful way to resolve the difficulties and distress faced in life, whether as a *grihastha*, a householder, or as a *sannyasin*, a renunciate. It is a sadhana of worship and prayer, which is the highest attitude that the mind can assume. This attitude arises when the mind

comes under the influence of the atma or soul. The same gross mind, which is subject to time, space and object, is refined to the highest degree and begins to act in conjunction with the heart and soul. Such a mind projects the higher traits of love, compassion, devotion, surrender, faith and belief, for these are the qualities of the soul.

Worship requires a one-pointed mind and a pure heart. It also requires a disciplined body and the constant, unbroken, attitude of surrender. In addition, the intellect must be balanced so that it does not disturb the mind with undue reasoning, which interrupts the worship. Therefore, by performing the *Saundarya Lahari* sadhana one is simultaneously practising hatha yoga, raja yoga, karma yoga, jnana yoga and bhakti yoga. Thus, the *Saundarya Lahari* sadhana is the culmination of yoga, intended to draw out one's highest potential.

Saundarya Lahari and the kundalini experience

The full *Saundarya Lahari* consists of 103 mantras. The first 41 form the first section, known as *Ananda Lahari*, and the following 62 are known as *Saundarya Lahari*. *Ananda Lahari* invokes the Devi by singing her praises with reverence. They also depict the subsequent awakening in the temple of the body, where she resides as *kundalini*, the evolutionary energy in human beings, and her ascent through the chakras up to sahasrara, where she unites with Shiva, the cosmic consciousness. Afterwards, drenched in *amrita*, the nectar of immortality, she descends down the pathway of sushumna nadi, irrigating, rejuvenating and awakening the entire structure of the body, mind and emotions, accompanied by Shiva and the experience of *ananda*, highest bliss and ecstasy. The descending of the awakened kundalini results in a state of total intoxication, in which the awareness is alert and alive to the divinity within. Each and every pore, cell, nerve, tissue and membrane is divinized.

This experience, involving the chakras, kundalini and the experience of bliss is described and created in *Ananda Lahari*. However, it is not the final experience, as when the Devi



manifests in her full splendour and glory, Shankara bursts into rapturous praise of her effulgent beauty, and this comprises the substance of the subsequent 62 verses of *Saundarya Lahari*. These mantras contain the power of kundalini energy that converged within him at that time.

Saundarya Lahari contains the most refined form of mantra energy, which he captured and concealed in the *shabda*, the words and sounds of the mantras. Shankara had complete knowledge of the science of mantra, yantra and mandala, and every stanza of *Saundarya Lahari* is a testament to this. Anyone who chants these mantras can awaken the healing energy of Shakti.

Today, poised on the threshold of a new era, humankind is playing with the idea and possibilities of mind over matter, yet the power to bring this about is rare. The pure force of Shakti makes things happen in a way that nothing else can.

When the refined awareness is developed or awakened, it does not depend on the senses for its source of experience; it can perceive in the absence of time, space and object. The refined awareness is able to experience the subtle states of form, sound, touch, taste and smell, which have their sources in higher dimensions of consciousness. In one's present state of mind, it is difficult to conceive of this idea, as it is beyond the range of normal day-to-day experience. Nevertheless, one can draw inspiration from illumined souls who have compiled their experiences over centuries.

The background

During Shankara's time, spiritual culture was in decline. The sacred rites and rituals of tantra were popular, as they could be used to achieve whatever goal one desired: wealth, health, prosperity, power, revenge, virility, obtaining beautiful women, acquiring progeny or property, or warding off evil, disease and death. These rites and rituals were used to help others as well as to execute devious endeavours. A weapon can be used to protect as well as to kill; it depends entirely on whose hands it falls into. As a result, the use of black magic, occultism and sorcery was rampant in society. Shankara tried to restore the sanctity of these important rites and rituals.

As a philosopher and visionary, he understood the value of tantric practice, and how much it had degenerated; therefore, he tried to restore its true perspective by teaching its proper relevance, importance and utility in life. Thus, even though his tradition was Vedanta, in *Saundarya Lahari*, Shankara presented the mantras, yantras and mandalas that can be used to achieve all the *purusharthas* or worthwhile aims of human life, be it *dharma*, right living, *artha*, material fulfilment, *kama*, emotional fulfilment, or *moksha*, liberation.

The tools

While *Saundarya Lahari* is commended for its poetic excellence, its efficacy lies in the fact that each stanza is composed of powerful mantras, which have corresponding yantras and

mandalas. Together or singularly, these mantras, yantras and mandalas confer a vast array of benefits, which relate to one's daily life as well as spiritual aspirations. The heritage that Shankara left for humanity is a treasure trove of invaluable techniques to ward off the afflictions and obstructions faced in the course of human life.

Mantras are vibrational energy in seed form. They are sown in the depths of consciousness through repetition with the correct attitude. In these depths, they create a stir, bringing everything up to the surface. If one had to clean an abandoned house full of rubbish, first one would take everything out, then sweep, dust and clean away the cobwebs. After that, one would bring any useful items back inside and arrange them. In the same way, the practice of mantra is a means to clean up and rearrange the entire psyche at the causal level.

Yantras focus the mental energy of a sadhaka in such a way that it can align itself with the power of a mantra. Sounds produce waves of energy; when these waves condense and converge, they constitute lines, which form circles, triangles, and other geometrical shapes. This is how the sound vibration of a mantra is transformed into the visual geometric form of a yantra.

The root *yan*, means to stop, control, balance, contain or focus a powerful energy at one point or place. Yantra is the subtle visual form of mantra, which assists the sadhaka in awakening an uncontrolled power or energy in a beneficial way. Just as a focused awareness helps the sadhaka to perfect the mantra, in the same way, the yantra helps to generate the experience of inner illumination through mantra. Yantra and mantra are both tools for awakening the enlightened consciousness.

Mandalas expand or express this process in different dimensions, using pictorial rather than geometric form. According to the science of mantra, if one meditates on the meaning of a mantra, and simultaneously focuses or absorbs one's total awareness in the object on which one is meditating, that object manifests before one. This three-dimensional object



which manifests before one through the power of yantra is known as a mandala.

Sri Yantra

Yantras can be made of sand, clay, silver, copper, bronze, gold, crystal, or even drawn on paper: each medium has its own efficacy. The most versatile and powerful yantra is the Sri Yantra. This yantra is the abode of the entire manifest universe: its creation, sustenance and dissolution, and also contains the missing link back to the Source.

The Sri Yantra is constructed around the point or *bindu* at its centre, which is enclosed in forty-three triangles that are formed by the intersections of four upward facing triangles and five downward facing triangles. These intersecting triangles are further surrounded by three circles, the first of which has eight petals on its outer rim, the second has sixteen petals, and the third has three rims. The entire complex structure of bindu, triangles, circles and petals is surrounded by an armour or protective outer layer which has four gates, or points of entry.

The Sri Yantra represents the body of Shiva and Shakti. It is the place where they are eternally seated, a depiction of the totality of energy abounding in the universe in all its different forms, as well as its interrelation with consciousness.

The *Saundarya Lahari* sadhana is also known as Tripura Sundari sadhana, due to its perfection of *saundarya* or beauty. *Tripura* means three realms, and *Tripura Sundari* signifies the *sundara* or beautiful experience that lies beyond the three realms of *jagrat* or waking, *swapna* or dreaming, and *sushupti* or deep sleep, which correspond to the conscious, subconscious and unconscious states. Tripura Sundari embodies the fourth state of *turiya*, which is transcendental, self-luminous and effulgent.





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