

INTERVIEW OF SARAH TOMLINSON

By Colette Park



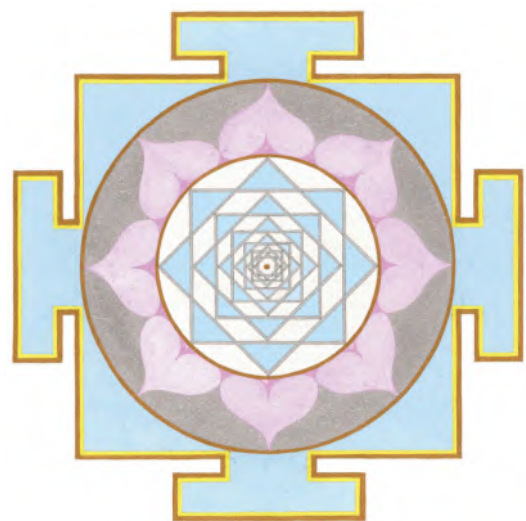
Sarah Tomlinson is an internationally acclaimed Yantrika (Yantra teacher and practitioner), yoga teacher and artist, with renowned fans across the globe including Elena Brower and Sharon Gannon, co-founder of Jivamukti Yoga. Sarah is

the author of *Coloring Yantras*, (Shambhala Publications, 2017), *Nine Designs for Inner Peace*, (Destiny Publishing, 2008) and creator of the *Yantra Oracle Deck*, (2017). Sarah kindly agreed to an interview about her inspiring work.

Tell us about your background and what led you to start working with Yantras.

I've always loved the healing benefits of asana yoga practice: shoulder stand to regulate hormones, bow pose to increase digestion, tree pose for balance and mental equanimity. When this healing focus expanded to include a devotional practice, and the mythical stories and chants found their way into my practice, I wondered how my life as an artist and my passion for all things yoga would align. At that time I came across Harish Johari's book *TOOLS FOR TANTRA* which contains the Mahavidya Goddess Yantras, and I started to trace the images. I had just graduated with my MFA from Hunter College in NYC and was feeling a little restless with my creativity. My gallery had just closed and I thought my focus would be 100% yoga teaching until I found this book but something was missing. A few weeks later I saw a flyer for a workshop with the author! Harish used to travel to the US once a year to see his

publisher in Vermont. On his way he would stop in at Ananda Ashram in Upstate NY affiliated with my New York City yoga centre and teach a workshop as he was good friends with the guru, Sri Brahmananda Saraswati there. People from all over the US would travel to spend this time with Harish Johari during these visits. In my first class I learned how to construct the Yantras (not trace them) while Harish had me put my compass here and pencil there over and over again. I had no idea what I was doing other than enjoying the process immensely. When we got to the painting I took to it immediately and the Yantra came to life. I still have that first Yantra, a Venus Yantra with the Mantra written underneath in Harish's handwriting. Apparently I needed "to learn patience" by choosing this intricate design to start with. Venus creates such a pleasing effect when you work with it. Not only patience but a feeling of harmony, bliss and love arises within you. To date I also note that those who work with Venus start to look more and more beautiful too.



Venus Yantra

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What is the significance of Yantras, how did they originate and what is their purpose?

Yantras are sacred geometric symbols that are instruments for meditation. Spirit itself is formless and so without a container (the Yantra) it is hard to get to know it - by meditating on a Yantra you get to know the specific quality of spirit within yourself. A Yantra is generated by its companion, the sound vibration known as a Mantra. As the sound is struck, the image appears. Sound = Form. Yantras are from the ancient teachings from the rishis, the North Indian mystics who had one foot in the earthly realms, and one foot in the celestial realms. It is said that they manifested in the first and second centuries B.C. We can find Yantras' descriptions and prescriptions for use in the Tantric Scriptures. Each Yantra is used as a form of worship to a particular deity or planet. By capturing the essence of that deity in the Yantra you have a tangible container to worship. Each Yantra brings an opening within your mental/emotional body which influences your spiritual and practical world. As you draw and colour the Yantra you get absorbed in the activity. Once the Yantra is complete you can gaze at it in open-eyed meditation while reciting the corresponding Mantra. Then you can close your eyes and integrate the experience. To bring more energy to a certain area of your life you can place the finished Yantra in that room. It will elevate the energy there. For example to give your career a boost you can place a chosen Yantra in your office.

You spent a lot of time with your teacher, Harish Johari, a name many of us associate with a variety of wonderful books on Ayurveda and Indian spirituality. Can you tell us more about your time with him?

I met Harish Johari towards the end of his life, I felt the immediacy to spend as much time as I could with him and bought a plane ticket to India a couple of months after meeting him. As a yogini and an artist I felt everything coming together in that moment. I had found my thing, my teacher and my calling. The time I spent with him was an intensive initiation to

the Yantras I work with now and a teaching about their function within Ayurveda. I worked through the Yantras I still focus primarily on, as I went through my own healing journey in India. Each new emotion or situation drew me towards a specific Yantra. As I worked with the Yantra I felt the different chapters of my life clearing. One took me through the tears of an imminent break up, another through the joy of finding my Spiritual Teacher, and so it went. Out of all of the Yantras it was always clear to me that there was only ONE Yantra I could be working on at the time. I would absorb myself with it.

At the house he lived in there were many extended family members who could offer stories and painting tips as they walked by. I processed a lot on each trip! When I started teaching Yantra Painting I saw the same healing journeys unfold. I enjoyed observing why someone was drawn to a particular Yantra, what they were going through and then how long before a tangible result would reveal itself. There is no set timeline; you create a Yantra because you are drawn to it. It might be supporting you through a move, a break up, a new job, to become a parent for example, for me the process was linear, one Yantra led me to the next one and the next one until as I looked back I could see how I had got from point A to point Z, not just with one Yantra but by the ripples of healing that brought me from one Yantra to the next.

Harish was succinct in his instruction, he only gave Yantra teachings when asked for and gave other suggestions (life ones) when not asked for. He had a great sense of humour and mischief, he was short in stature but he was a force. If we walked through the town (Haridwar) the crowd would part to let him walk. He would often bring food and money to distribute to those in need. He loved gemstones, cooking, and all the children in his family. He was very much a part of the household and instructed those in the kitchen on the appropriate dishes for the day. Each morning he made an outdoor fire to welcome the day, and he spent long quiet hours in

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the early morning in prayer. Dadaji, as we affectionately called him, always included me in the household chores and food preparation so that I could learn about the ways and whys of daily life in India. This helped me to feel the whole rhythm of the day. In India there is somehow more to do always; the lentils need cleaning (which meant taking out the stones that may be in with them), the cilantro or methi (fenugreek) leaves needed plucking from their stems, the floors needed sweeping with twig brooms daily as the dust from the dirt roads is on everything without this daily vigilance. There were festive holidays so often that I got to witness how many times things stopped and the shops closed to honour this! Daily during Sunrise and Sunset Harish would have us pause, just a suggestion, 'it is better not to paint during the transitions; Sunrise and Sunset'. There were so many things to notice and pause for, the ekadashi, the 11th day after the new and full Moons, there was hanuman day, ganesha day, navaratri, the new Moon the full Moon, so many days when special dishes were prepared for the breaking of fasts. The household members all seemed to be fasting on different days to propitiate the reigning deity for that day, Mars or Hanuman on Tuesday, Ganesha on Thursday, and so it went. By fasting this meant chai was consumed and fruits but the main evening meal was the break-fast. With all this activity in the household I am pretty sure this is why Harish barely slept; the middle of the night was the only quiet time he had to himself to focus on his prolific book writing and his lengthy pujas. During the day he would meditate deeply as he sat outside in the communal courtyard, aware of all that was going on, he would sometimes open his eyes and tell us something then go back into a seemingly DEEP space of meditation. His early life was filled with the company of Saints, sages, astrologers and artisans (after his engineering career took a detour), and by the time I met him his very presence taught me what I needed to know. He very astutely would tell me things at the most interesting times. Not always pleasant! But to this day the lessons have brought me to such a good place that without someone pointing out my blindspots, I would have had a miserable time discovering them by myself. Such is a guru. On

my last visit with him he was in deep meditation most of the time, as I left he gave me two bits of advice; the first was to treat everyone with the respect I would want to be treated with, 'do unto others as you would have them do to you', which I took to mean "don't dis anyone and don't look up or down at anyone". Which was good advice as I was heading into some intrepid explorations in India and I think he feared I was going to walk into trouble out of my innate curiosity for spiritual weirdness! For the second, he placed his hand on my shoulder (he never touched people), and asked me to teach the Yantras now. Less than a month later he left his body; I had his blessings to teach. What a miracle that I could be with such a great human being. I hope in some small way through offerings like the Yantra Oracle Deck and my ongoing relationship with my students and clients that I can impart some of the mystery and beauty of the world he shared with me. Tantra means 'to weave' and as Yantra + Mantra = Tantra, this is a path where spirituality and the subtle patterns that create our life journey, weave their way through the mundane world.



Photo permission from Seema Johari

As an Ayurvedic community, we would love to hear more about the Ayurvedic Astrology that you practise. What does it involve and is it related to Vedic (Jyotish) Astrology?

Harish Johari was a proponent of working with the planets through daily sadhanas, spiritual practices and rituals. He taught me all about the planetary Yantras and Mantras and the practices and foods

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best for each day. Working with the planets connects you strongly to the rhythm of the days of the week.

In Ayurveda you have dinacharya where you look at the practices best suited for different times of day, the lunar cycles, the seasons in each year and the seasons of life (age). Looking at the planets gives you a chance to connect with the days of the week and the supportive rhythm offered with that. A little later I came across the teachings of Edward Tarabilda, author of the book "AYURVEDA REVOLUTIONIZED". I became fascinated with his method of deducing the planetary archetypes that we have in the eight areas of our life: spiritual, emotional, dharma, physical, play, relationships, career, and vitality. Edward Tarabilda was a well-respected member of the Ayurvedic Community with comrades David Frawley and Dr. Vasant Lad. When he felt an awareness developing about the planets, he branched off to explore them. He has a system of astrology that combines the Vedic Navagraha (Nine Planets) and an early model of Western Astrology. It also synthesises Chinese and Indian healing systems. Once I came across this paradigm and applied it to my own life and well-being I finally felt like myself. I had the tools of ayurveda to work with and the psychological pieces of the puzzle answered that affirmed my life path, my dharma and my physical imbalance type.

Stress in any area of life will ultimately take its toll on your physical well-being. This system, which looks at the eight areas of life, can shed light on the stresses in any of the areas that typically come when we are not in alignment with what we are meant to be doing. We are perhaps living in someone else's shoes and not our own. We may have forgotten what our own impulses feel like. Tuning into the planetary energy in each area of life and naming it is incredibly powerful. The Yantras then can act as remedies; when someone is drawn to a specific Yantra in my sessions it informs me that the area related to the Yantra needs attention. Through dialogue, we see what is going on in their life currently and by the end of the session the client will have in place a Yantra Sadhana, spiritual practice, to clear the blockage or empower them in a specific way.

Traditionally Vedic astrology, which also works with the Navagraha, is more predictive, and complex, and it relies heavily on the astrologer's good or less good intuitive gifts and authority. I had studied this system for a few years before I came across Tarabilda's work. Ayurvedic Astrology lays out a simple model of the eight areas and the eight planets that come together in a unique way for you based on your birth time/date/place. You will be selecting the Yantra and guiding the healing process yourself. I am there to support you and reflect back to you your gifts and strengths and forgotten joys.

You have published the most beautiful Yantra Oracle Deck, would you like to tell us more about the inspiration behind it?

Thank-you Colette! It is really nice for people to get to spend time with the Yantras and the language of sacred geometry in their own homes. I initially created one copy of a mini Yantra Deck for myself of just the 24 Goddess and Planetary Yantras to allow participants at the beginning of Yantra Painting Workshops to select which Yantra they were drawn to. This selection process became a compelling part of the class and afterwards I would receive lots of requests to take the mini Yantra cards home with them. Finally I thought, mmm I could make copies of my Yantra Paintings and share some of the teachings of Sacred Geometry and Yantra Practice so that people see how their intuition, their mood and their life is reflected in and guided by the Yantras. After some searching I found a B-Corp Cert. Sustainable Printing company here in the UK in Brighton called Generation Press who have really produced a beautiful product. One of the fun side-notes is that the Yantra Oracle Deck gives amazingly accurate 'readings'. The Oracle aspect of the deck closely reflects what is going on with the individual in their life.

You can then keep out your chosen card(s) for the day to continue to receive the blessing of the teaching and message. It is good to see people working with the Yantras on a daily basis and be touched by their healing magic. Then it is their experience that informs them from the inside, rather

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than me 'explaining' to them everything about what the Yantra 'should' be doing. They speak for themselves and reveal the messages needed in the moment.



Yantra Oracle Deck

Is there a Yantra that you would like to tell us about?

Bhuvaneshvari Yantra

The light and space given by this Yantra is the panacea for our times. Have you ever felt like you cannot add one more thing to your day? Even a nice thing? With the saturation of time spent on the internet, feeling a little too plugged in, and the overwhelm of personal and professional obligations and everyday worries, it can feel hard to carve out a little time for yourself to play, get creative and have some fun. This is exactly what is required right now and this is the time to call on the Goddess Bhuvaneshvari, seen here:

Bhuvaneshvari is the Queen of the Universe. The Goddess who blesses you by showing you that the Earth is your playground. When Bhuvaneshvari shines her light on you, all that felt stressful, impossible and created shallow breathing in your body and mind, suddenly shifts. She creates the space for a deep breath, and space at the heart revealing the movability of the pieces on the chessboard of life. Nothing is absolutely fixed even though you might have been feeling completely stuck.

Sometimes you need to step back and gain a new perspective or see a different opportunity to move



Bhuvaneshvari Yantra

forwards. Bhuvaneshvari unearths a well of creativity and vision, she propels you to spend time with your community and foster the support and collaboration of those around you. She also grants the space needed for progeny to step in. Her placement in a family room will invite children and friends into your life.

Her Yantra is yellow, the colour of optimism and energy, imbued with the opposite colour on the spectrum: violet. This elevates her earthly blessing to one of meditative serenity, space and happiness.

Gaze at this Yantra while chanting the Mantra H R E E M to reconnect you with the whole of yourself and the space to discover even more. Playing is renewing. It can open you to new ideas, inspiration and spontaneous joy.

To learn more about Sarah's offerings & classes, or to get in touch

Contact info: <http://www.sarahyantra.com>
<https://www.instagram.com/sarahyantra/>

Upcoming workshop: Introduction to working with Yantra: Moon Yantra - on Sep 29th at 6pm:
<https://tinyurl.com/5dw43spa>