

108: A Symbol-Laden Number

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

In India, the number 108 is a sacred number, suggesting completeness or wholeness. It is widely used in different contexts. Thus there are 108 cow girls (*gopî*) devoted to Lord Krishna, 108 holy places of the Vaishnavas, 108 beads on the Hindu and Buddhist rosary, and there also are said to be 108 *Upanishads*, even though the actual number of these esoteric scriptures exceeds 200. The Buddhists know of 108 *arhats* or "worthy ones."

According to the Tantric heritage, there are 108 pilgrimage centers (*pîtha*) that are dedicated to the feminine (lunar) principle, or Shakti. There is a marvelous myth that explains the existence of these centers.

The Golden Age (known as the *krita-yuga* in Sanskrit) had passed, and a less perfect age was in motion. God Shiva, heavenly prototype of ascetics and yogis, was constantly absorbed in deepest meditation. His austerities caused such heat that the universe was threatened with extinction. Brahma, the Creator, was understandably worried. He begged the Great Goddess to distract Shiva from his yogic efforts and engage him in love play, so that creation could continue to exist. The Mother of the Universe agreed to take human form in order to entrance Shiva, her beloved. She entered the womb of Vîrinî, Daksha's wife, to be born as Satî ("She who is").

Satî was the first-born of the sixty daughters of Daksha. With the power of the Goddess within her, she succeeded in arousing Shiva's interest not only by her exquisite beauty but also by her asceticism. He asked her to be his wife and even assumed human form by her sake. When her father, Daksha, insulted Shiva at a feast, she entered into deep meditation and immolated herself.

Shiva, grief-stricken, recovered her partially consumed body from the flames of the sacrificial fire and bore it away into heaven. Fragments of her body fell to earth in 108 different places over the Indian subcontinent, filling each site with her holy presence. In time, these locations became places of Goddess worship (*devî-pîtha*).

The three best known sites are the *pîthas* near Calcutta, Kâmâkhyâ in Assam, and Jâlandhara, which are said to be the locations of Satî's big toe, womb, and breast respectively. The womb (*yoni*), or female generative organ, has special significance in Tantrism, or Shaktism. It is the primary symbol of Shakti, the feminine power of the cosmos, which is responsible for all creativity.

Historically, the earliest Tantric scriptures mention only four *pîthas*. Over time, these seem to have grown to first 51 (said to actually contain the relics of Satî) and later 108. Satî's self-immolation is the mythological core of the Hindu custom of suttee (from *satî*), where the widow enters the funeral pyre of her husband. This tradition was banned during the British rule in India.

The symbol-laden number 108 is thought by some scholars to have astronomical origins, it being the average distance of the Moon from the earth in terms of the Moon's

diameter. The same ratio applies to the Sun. However, in symbolism, the number 108 more specifically refers to the lunar principle. Curiously enough, the mineral silver, which traditionally represents the moon, has the atomic weight of 108. Not surprisingly, this number also has played an important role in the Chinese martial arts, the Kabbalah, and the Western hermetic tradition.

Addendum: My own sense is that the number 108 is connected with 18, which, in Hindu symbolism, is said to represent completeness or wholeness. This number is prominent in the *Mahâbhârata* epic, which consists of 18 books, just as the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* (embedded in the epic) consists of 18 chapters. The Bharata war was waged for 18 days, and the armies (*akshauhini*) on the opposing sides numbered 18 as well. An *akshauhini* consists of 21,870 chariots, 21,870 elephants, 65,610 horses, and 109,350 footsoldiers, which makes a total of 218,700 units. The total of the digits of each number adds up to 18! The epic has many more instances of this kind relating to the number 18, and it is also found in other Indian works. The *Mahâbhârata* (12.267.28) itself provides a key to this symbolic number as follows:

The [fourteen] "instruments" and the [three] "states" are considered the seventeen qualities [of the embodied human being]. [In addition to] these there is, as eighteenth [part] the Self, which dwells in the body [and] is eternal.

According to one commentator, the fourteen "instruments" (*indriya*) are the five cognitive senses, five conative senses, strength (*bala*), lower mind (*manas*), memory (*citta*), and higher mind (*buddhi*). The three "states" (*bhâva*) are the primary qualities of Nature—the *gunas*. These eighteen "parts" constitute the totality of the human being. The essence of humanness, however, is self-transcendence, which can be paraphrased as "sacrifice." Indeed, the *Chândogya-Upanishad* (3.16.1) states: "The human being, verily, is sacrifice." Thus sacrifice—or self-transcendence—is at the heart of wholeness. That is to say, our human life becomes whole only when we engage it from the perspective of self-transcendence, which is exactly the purpose of Yoga.

The number 108 may well be an expansion of 18. As is little known, zero was the invention not of the Arabs but the Indians. When we look at the macrocosm, the idea of sacrifice can be found in the self-repeating cycles of solar and lunar eclipses. Remarkably, the so-called "saros cycle" of eclipses repeats itself every 6585.32 days, which is every 18.003 years! (This is based on the year being 365.2422 days.) The term *saros* stems from the Babylonian language from which Edmund Halley borrowed it to name this astronomical cycle.

Subhash Kak relates 108 to the distance between Earth and Sun and also between Earth and Moon, saying that it is c. 108 times the diameter of Sun and Moon respectively. However, the distance between Earth and Moon is more accurately 110 times the lunar diameter, while the mean distance between Earth and Sun (150 million kilometers) comes out at c. 107.8 times the solar diameter (1.391 million kilometers)—close enough! Measurements of their respective distance from Earth with simple equipment (such as a stick) do indeed yield a value of around 108 in both cases. Equally astonishing is the related astronomical fact that the Sun's diameter is c. 108 times that of the Earth, which is why, remarkably, the two orbs appear of roughly equal size in the sky.

The connection between 18 and 108 can be found also in an important microcosmic cycle, namely the 21,600 daily breaths we take. According to Tantra, 10,800 breaths are lunar, 10,800 breaths are solar. They alternate in us in the form of the alternating nasal cycle, which medicine has confirmed, so that the body has its microcosmic reflection of the macrocosmic eclipses. The microcosmic/macrocosmic parallelism was of the utmost significance to the Indian sages. They saw it as demonstrating the flawless harmony (*rita*) at work in the cosmos.

Now, $21,600 = 18 \times 1200$ or 108×200 . 21,600 yields other important numerical derivations:

$21,600 : 60 = 360$ (the ideal Vedic year)

$21,600 : 800 = 27$ (number of lunar houses in Vedic astrology)

$21,600 : 108 = 200$ (number of arcseconds defining a *navâmsâ* in Vedic astrology)

Looking at a larger cosmic cycle—the *yugas* (or world ages)—we find that each is age calculated as multiples of 21,600.

krita-yuga —1,728,000 solar years = $21,600 \times 80$

tretâ-yuga —1,296,000 solar years = $21,600 \times 60$

dvâpara-yuga —864,000 solar years = $21,600 \times 40$

kali-yuga — 432,000 solar years = $21,600 \times 20$

The sum total of these four world ages makes:

kalpa — 4,320,000 solar years = $21,600 \times 200$ or $108 \times 40,000$ or $18 \times 240,000$

Thus the number 18 is fundamental to Indian psychocosmology.

(Expanded from Georg Feuerstein, *Spirituality by the Numbers*. New York: J. P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1994, pp. 227-229.)

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