

The Lunation Cycle: East and West

by Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The lunar cycle has been observed for ages. The moon, from a Sanskrit term for measure, is the primary means by which the majority of the people in the world (even in this 20th century!) measure time and their own lives. This article takes a look at what astrologers (and ordinary people) have come to understand about the lunation cycle -- the phases of the Moon. In particular, we will contrast methods of using the lunar cycle in the East and West.

Eastern and Western astrology use the lunar cycle in the same and different ways. In the West, the lunar cycle is seen as a key to the personality and the birth chart. Although books like Rudhyar's *The Lunation Cycle*, Yeat's *A Vision*, and many others describe the cycle as a dynamic process that unfolds each month, their focus is more with individual snapshots (the various lunar types) taken from the overall process. The emphasis in the West has been individual birth charts that represent the various lunar phase types.

In contrast, the East seldom mentions the individual birth chart. Their primary interest is in the dynamics of the lunation cycle itself which they divide and analyze in great detail in order to make use of the opportunities it offers for day-to-day decision-making. In other words, in the East the lunar cycle is used as a means to determine the kind of activity appropriate for each successive lunar day. This amounts to a form of electional astrology.

In the West, electional astrology is thought of as a means to pick an appropriate time in the future for a particular ceremony or happening. Eastern astrology does the same thing, but it also uses electional astrology as a guide to day-to-day personal living and practice. In India and Tibet, it is the lunation cycle rather than the yearly sun or solar cycle that is the primary indicator used for planning activities and for personal guidance. In other words, in the East they live by and follow the cycle of the Moon.

A very clear illustration of this idea is the fact that, in most Eastern countries, birthdays are observed according to the particular day of the moon cycle (lunar phase angle) during which a person was born, rather according to the solar return as here in the West. Moreover, due to the fact that lunar months do not fit nicely within the solar year, a birthday in the East for any given individual can be up to a month away (during some years) from the solar return -- our Western birthday. This simple fact makes it clear how important the moon and the lunar cycle are in these countries. A study of the existing literature on the meaning and use of the moon in astrology (East and West) shows much similarity but also considerable difference.

There is general agreement (East and West) about the nature of the lunation cycle, in that it somehow proceeds from some sort of seed time at the new moon to a fruition at the full and so on. This is the archetype of a cycle and can be compared to any other cycle such as the circle of the astrological houses or the zodiac itself. If this is done, then the new moon is made equivalent to Capricorn (and the 10th house), while the full moon is similar in cycle phase to Cancer (4th house).

The Moon receives more attention in Eastern astrology. And it is not just a matter of increased emphasis; there are major qualitative differences in approach. The emphasis is seldom on the type of individual that typifies a given lunar phase. Instead, it is on analyzing the entire lunar cycle in order to take advantage of its ongoing opportunities -- using the moon cycle for living. This Eastern approach is very practical.

What interests Eastern astrologers are the opportunities available to them in the monthly lunar cycle. They use the lunar cycle as a way to gauge and measure their life. They have learned how to take advantage of opportunities they have discovered within the lunation cycle. This is an important concept to grasp. These lunar opportunities are sometimes referred to as gaps or openings in the otherwise continuous stream of our lives -- windows. They conceive of these gaps as articulation points, much like an elbow is where the arm is articulated. They are natural joints or gaps in time/space upon which time and space turn and through which it is sometimes possible to gain access to information about the larger, dynamic life process that already encapsulates us.

From a reading of the Eastern literature on this subject, one gets the sense that life is perceived as (on the average) being filled with the noise of our problems (obscurations), making clear insight often difficult. These obscurations can be many and their accumulation amounts to the sum total of our ignorance -- that which we ignore.

Therefore, in Eastern astrology, these articulation points or windows in time/space are very much to be valued. In fact, Eastern astrologers analyze the lunar cycle, in minute detail, in order to isolate these moments (gaps in time/space) where insight into our larger situation can be gained. Much of so-called Eastern religion amounts to a scheduling of precise times for personal practice or activity built around the natural series of gaps that can be found in the continuous lunar cycle. In its own way, it is a very scientific approach. In the East, they have been astute observers for many centuries.

In India and Tibet, the 29.5-day lunar synodic cycle is divided into 30 parts, called tithis. A tithi or lunar day is the time it takes for the aspect between the sun and Moon (elongation, angular separation) to reach a multiple of 12 degrees. Thus each tithi is 12 degrees of solunar angular separation.

It might interest readers to know that each tithi is further subdivided into two parts, called karanas, and that this additional subdivision finds wide use in India, Tibet, and other Eastern countries. However, for the purposes of this article, the division of the lunar cycle into 30 parts or lunar days will suffice.

The way tithis are measured is as follows. The moment of the new moon (0° angular solunar separation) marks the end of the 30th lunar day and the start of the first. The first lunar day, or tithi ends at 12° of solunar separation, and the 2nd lunar day begins. And so it goes, on and around. The only part of this that might be confusing is that the 30th lunar day (348° to 360°) is considered the new moon day, and the 15th lunar day (168° to 180°) is considered the full moon day; however, these days are celebrated the following day.

Just as in the West, much is made of the new and full moon days. In fact, in many countries they don't have Saturday and Sunday off. Instead, new and full moon days are considered holy days (holidays), and normal routines are suspended at these times.

It seems that, although East and West agree on the importance of new and full moons, there is less congruence when it comes to the quarter moons. Here in the West, the lunar quarters are next in importance after the new and full moon times. However, in the East there are other days that are considered of greater importance, such as the 10th and 25th lunar days.

In both traditions, there is agreement that the 2 or 3 days preceding the moment of the new moon are difficult ones, which require special observation. In the West these days have been called the dark of the Moon, or devil's days, days when the darker forces have power. Both traditions affirm that we sort of survive these final days each month. Check it out for yourself. The three days before new moon can be a hard time. The East is in total agreement on this point, and the days prior to new moon are set aside for invoking the fierce dharma protectors, those energies that ward off harm and protect us during the worst of times.

In particular, the 29th day (the day before new moon) is called dharma protector day. It is a time given over to purification and preparation for the moment of new moon. Ritual fasting, confession of errors, and the like are common practices. In a similar vein, the days just prior to the full moon (the 13th and 14th) are also days of purification, days in which the various guardian and protector deities are again invoked, but in a somewhat more restrained way. For example, the 14th day is often given over to fire puja -- a ritual purification. In summary, during days prior to full and new moon, there is some attempt at purification, both physical and mental, in preparation for those auspicious events.

It is clear from the literature that the times of the new and full moon are considered of great importance. These days are set aside for special rituals and worship. As pointed out, full and new moon (full more than new) are times of

collective worship and public confession. In many traditions, the monks and priests assemble for a day of special observance. In the East, the full moon celebration and the entire waxing lunar fortnight are oriented to the masculine element in consciousness, what are called the father-line deities. The new moon and the waning fortnight are given over to the mother-line deities and the feminine element. The full moon completes the masculine, or active, waxing phase of the cycle, and the new moon completes the feminine, waning phase of the month. To my knowledge, this kind of analysis does not exist in the West.

Aside from the new and full moon, the two most auspicious lunar days in the East are the 10th and the 25th. The 10th day (108° to 120°), called Daka Day, is considered auspicious for invoking the father-line deities -- the masculine. The 25th day (288° to 300°), called Dakini Day, is given over to the feminine principle and the mother line deities, in general. These two days, the 10th and the 25th, are formal feast days, days of observation when extra offerings are made and increased attention given to what is happening. There is some sense of celebration at these points in the month. In many respects, these two days even rival the new and full moon days in importance. The fact is that these four days (new, full, 10th, 25th) are the primary auspicious days as practiced in many Eastern rituals.

There are many other days of lesser importance, which might also interest Western astrologers. Health and healing are important in Eastern ritual, and the 8th and 23rd days of the lunar month are auspicious for this purpose. It is these days that straddle the first and last lunar quarters. The 8th day (84° to 96°) is often called Medicine Buddha Day. Again this occurs in the male, or father-line, half of the month. The 23rd day (264° to 276°), occurring in the feminine half of the month, is dedicated to Tara practice. Tara is the female deity connected to health, long life, and healing in general.

Earlier we mentioned the days given over to purification, most prominently the 13th and the 29th. In addition, on a lesser scale, the 9th and the 19th days are also noted as days when the protector deities should be invoked and kept in mind. These, too, are days of purification. And there are more, still finer subdivisions that are made. In this brief article, these major observance days are enough to give us the idea of how Eastern astrologers approach the lunar cycle. It should be kept in mind that, in the East, astrology is practiced by the general public. So it is not just astrologers who are using the lunar days; everyone observes these days.

Next, we might ask ourselves how this Eastern approach to the lunation cycle might be of value in the West? As mentioned earlier, a major fact is that the lunar cycle is perceived as having a variety of gaps, joints, or points of articulation that can be used. They can be seen as chinks in the armor of our particular obscurations. Many Western mystery traditions also observe the times of the full (and sometimes the new) moon. Full moon meditations are common. The quarter

moons are given less attention, and few Western rituals exist (to my knowledge) for these events.

It is an intuitive fact that moments of clarity and insight (gaps) do come in the course of living. We all benefit from this kind of insight. What Eastern astrology seems to suggest to us is that many of these gaps are not just random events that occur in our life, haphazardly. They are regular opportunities, joints in the nick of time, when insights are somehow more possible than at other times. Therefore, it is common practice to set aside some portion of these special days for observance, for meditation.

It is unfortunate that the concept of meditation entertained by the public here in the West amounts to some kind of relaxation therapy -- a quiet time. This is very far from the truth of what is considered meditation in India, Japan, Tibet, and other Eastern countries. In fact, meditation is a form of observation. It is observation of what is, and of what is happening in one's mind and environment. When the Eastern mind meditates on special lunar days, it sets aside a time to observe with great care the nature of that particular day. Meditation as taught in Tibet and Japan is a technique that increases our abilities to observe. The meditator is not lost in deep inner space; that is our Western take on the concept of meditation. In the East, the meditator is right here, now, observing the mind and life. This is why it is said that these special days are days set aside for observation.

Here in the West, we are beginning to learn these techniques of observation. By setting aside a time on these special lunar days for observation, we can be open and aware to the possibilities of insight. This kind of awareness appears to be what is required to pick up on these natural events. If we have an insight at one of these time, we might be more willing to give it credence, knowing that it is happening on such-and-such a lunar day. And so on.

It is quite clear from the Eastern teachings that the moments of full and new moon are times when the various channels in the psychophysical body are somehow aligned. This is not to say the new or full moon days are days of peace and quiet. It is taught in the East that, although a new or full moon day may tend to be wild or hectic. Any patience or forbearance we can muster at that time will be much rewarded. In other words, there can be deep insights available to us at these times. According to these same teachings, an eclipse at the full or new moon is even more auspicious. In the teachings it is said that, during these very special events, both male and female energies (channels) are in simultaneous alignment -- the ultimate opportunity. The lunar cycle and its effects and opportunities have been analyzed in great detail in the Eastern teaching.

In summary, the major difference between Eastern and Western astrology as related to the lunation cycle is that in the East any lunar theory is put to the test. It exists as a guide to practice. In other words, they practice what they preach. Here in the West, it would appear that we are somewhat more theoretical. We

read about and discuss ideas on the lunar cycle, but very few astrologers *that I have met* make use of the lunar-phase cycle as a guide to day-to-day practice. As a society, we don't even observe the full or new moon, much less the quarters or any of the other possible lunar days. It is true that most astrologers are aware of the zodiac sign the Moon is in, but here we are not examining that part of the tradition; we are looking at the cycle of the lunar phases. Or, here in the West we may know that it is new or full moon, but we do nothing out of the ordinary in response to that information. And, of course, the general public seldom even takes note of lunar events.

The Eastern approach to the lunar cycle is quite ancient and very detailed. East or West, I assume that both astrological traditions have been engaged in recording something rather than nothing all of these centuries. In other words, I assume that the existing lunar tradition, East and West, is a reflection of reality rather than something we have made up. After all, that is what astrology is all about and why we practice it.

Here we have concentrated on the synodic cycle of the sun, moon, and earth -- the lunation cycle. We have ignored the use by astrologers of the Moon in the signs and houses, something practiced both here and in the East.

On a personal note, my study of the lunation cycle has led me from Western to Eastern texts in an attempt to obtain more practical information for day-to-day living. When I ran out of new texts to study, I sought out some of the living Eastern meditators who observe the lunar cycle on a regular basis. For example, we have had a wide variety of Eastern astrologers living and working at our center in recent years. In addition, one individual skilled in Sanskrit and Tibetan astrology spent almost two years here, translating various Buddhist texts on the subject.

From my experience with these sources, the primary piece of information that stays with me is that reading about or listening to someone with experience in this area is, by definition, *preliminary*. Both text and teachers (however fine they may be) can but point beyond themselves to the lunar cycle itself. Through any differences that exist, all sources seem united in this one maxim: go and see for yourself. Check it out. The purpose of the teachings is the experience itself that waits to be known. They are telling us: Observe these days. Call it meditation or observation (whatever), but observe with care and attention if these insight gaps are there.

Comments to:
Michael Erlewine
Michael@Erlewine.net

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