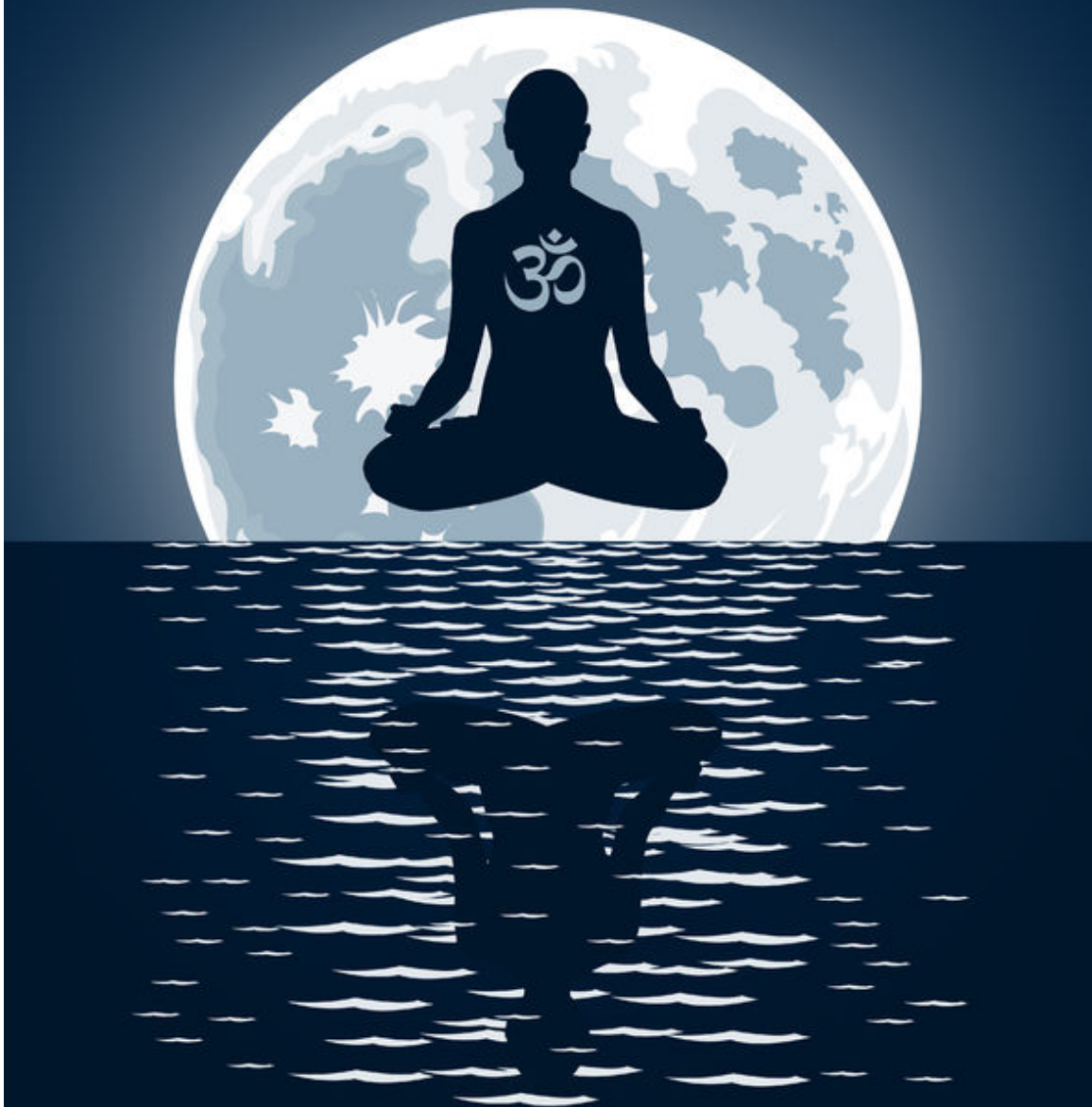


The Soma Tantra



The Soma Tantra

- A Cosmic Tragedy -

Authored on Earth by ItzQuauhtli (Obsidian Eagle)

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For Tara

$\sim \approx \sim$

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I – Three Planes of Existence

By most accounts of Hindu cosmology our universe is divided into three major planes, delineated here as follows:

Bhuloka – The physical plane, which is where humans dwell.

Antarloka – The subtle ‘astral’ plane where the lesser gods and demons war.

Sivaloka – The unfathomable ‘causal’ plane where only the greater gods (*Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva* along with their female counterparts) abide.

This threefold configuration corresponds to other important trios such as the ***Gunas*** (*Rajas*, *Sattvas* & *Tamas*), which represent the active, balanced and inert qualities of all conditioned phenomena as well as the respective roles that the three main deities play, namely: creation, preservation and destruction. Past, present, future, etc.

Putting all that aside, suffice it to say that most of this epic tale takes places within Antarloka. The geography here corresponds only loosely to that of Bhuloka since its edifices and landscapes are upheld by tradition, will-power and a social consensus. It is an ideal plane in every sense of the word.

II – Mythic Overview: The Denizens of Antarloka

Like Earth, the psycho-spiritual sphere of Antarloka is home to a variety of races. Most of these have their own monarchs and are distinguishable by virtue of appearance or special abilities. This is a brief description of their hierarchy:

Devatas – The lesser gods (as opposed to ‘Devas’ like Shiva or Vishnu). Nonetheless, their pantheon constitutes the dominant caste of Antarloka and has ruled over the others with an admirable degree of prosperity, meeting resistance only occasionally. Mostly humanoid in aspect they are: *Indra* (king of gods), *Agni* (god of fire), *Varuna* (god of water), *Vayu* (god of wind), *Yama* (god of death), *Surya* (the sun god), *Soma Chandra* (the moon god), *Kama* (god of desire), *Karttikeya* (a young war god) and *Guru Brihaspati* (priest of the Devatas).

Ashuras – Often referred to as ‘jealous demigods’. Legend tells that they were once rightful rulers on this plane. As such they comprise the most formidable opposition against the Devatas and are considered demonic. They’re also divided into three notable tribes: *Daityas* (often having multiple heads or limbs), *Danavas* (towering giants) and *Rakshas* (vampiric ghouls). Yet although Ashuras are powerful warriors they tend to have trouble getting along with one another, which means that these three tribes are rarely on good terms.

Ghandharvas & Apsaras – The Ghandharvas are heaven’s musicians. Like angels in Christianity except with avian heads to match their wings. They are usually accompanied by Apsaras who are their wives but also talented performers in their own right. The Apsaras dance and sing while the Ghandharvas play instruments wherever their presence is requested by the Devatas. Vayu, god of wind, is the chieftain appointed to them by King Indra.

Yoginis – Personal attendants of the high goddess *Kali* (*Parvati*’s shadow side). As female combatants trained by the goddess of destruction herself, they are a force to be reckoned with.

Maruts – The sons of Vayu. These air-elementals compose Indra’s personal guard and accompany him during any major confrontation. They are at odds with the Ghandharvas left in their father’s custody.

Kinnaras – Essentially ‘reverse centaurs’ – Kinnaras are tall, lanky beings possessing humanoid bodies but with equine heads growing up from their shoulders. Once pages in the court of King Indra, they now reside in the netherworld domains serving as minions under Yama.

Pisachas & Ganas – These shape-shifters are distant cousins of the Rakshas. Pisachas are soul-eating wraiths whereas Ganas are deformed and mischievous little dwarves. Ironically, they have sworn service to Shiva, which is why they inhabit the graveyards and charnels of Antarloka (his preferred meditation grounds away from Mount Kailash).

Rudras – Close cousins of the Maruts, Rudras (howlers) are air-elementals too except that they are considered sons of *Bhairava* (Shiva's wrath personified). Because of this they are more ferocious and prefer to strike by cover of night. It's not so strange then that they also keep company with Ganas and Pisachas.

Nagas – A secretive race of serpent people that has been relegated to a remote corner of *Patala* (the netherworld). There are those who believe that they harbor close ties to the numina of Sivaloka. While their physical forms can vary they remain quintessentially reptilian in character.

III – Prologue: The Nectar of Immortality

Many eons ago, before planets could take shape within the galaxies of Bhuloka, the transcendental plains of Antarloka were already overflowing with life. It was during those early halcyon days that a mendicant by the name of Durvasas undertook a long walk through the uncharted wilderness of this dimension most sublime.

Soon enough a heavenly muse separated herself from an overhanging cloud formation and presented Durvasas with a fragrant garland of field-flowers. She smirked enigmatically prior to evaporating completely.

At that moment the wandering pilgrim was struck by a profound sense of euphoria mixed with nostalgia for something ineffable and eternal. He became so ecstatic that he burst into song while kicking up his feet in a dance of devotion! He continued along the foothills praising the skies and spinning on his heels as he flung his arms about. It was not long before he crossed paths with Indra – King of the Devatas – riding upon an elephant. The storm god regarded this ragged sage with curiosity. Then, without hesitation the strange little man quietly offered Lord Indra the lei that he wore around his neck. The king accepted this gift with a polite nod, placing it on the head of his mount.

However, to the surprise of both and the chagrin of Durvasas that hulking beast was affected by the scent of the flowers in such a negative way that it began stomping about, nearly crushing him beneath its rowdy stride. The pachyderm went on to grab the wreath using his trunk and slammed it into the dirt – flattening it under heel. Understandably incensed, Durvasas proclaimed a potent curse against King Indra:

“Hark ye well king of the Devatas, I hereby condemn you and your kin to suffer defeat at the hands of your hated foes: the Ashuras! So long as the Daityas, Danavas and Rakshas exist, your sovereignty within Antarloka shall never be absolute. And though it may take eons to culminate, the Devatas will eventually grow so weak because of their own corruption that Dharmic law will demand nothing short of their obliteration . . .”

The wandering ascetic stalked off while uttering random profanities until he was no longer visible or within earshot.

Still stunned despite his elephant's renewed calmness, Indra mulled over the bitter words of the departed stranger for a few moments. Nevertheless he thought of them as little more than the crazed inanities of a derelict. He merely shrugged and sighed deeply before starting back for Mount Meru, the site of his royal palace.

No sooner had he arrived there than he was greeted with pressing news of another skirmish between one of his people's patrols and their enemies, the dreaded Ashuras. According to their reports, Shukra, a spiritual guru of the Daityas had recently completed a thousand years of austerity. He had hung upside-down above the reach of a fierce bonfire and withstood its effects for extended periods. Due to this Shiva himself had seen fit to grant Guru Shukra whatever boon he might desire. Therefore the wily Daitya requested an occult mantra from the Lord (one that could raise the dead whenever it was chanted). Indra's scouts claimed they had witnessed Shukra perform this miracle shortly after their own forces had slain several Danava giants among the enemy's ranks. Apparently these were successfully brought back to life and rejoined the struggle, leaving their small contingent of Maruts no choice but to flee.

Disconcerted by the details of this latest incident, Indra wasted no time in convening his war council. Within a few days Antarloka's broad expanse became a raging battleground.

Unfortunately for the Devatas their scouts had not exaggerated with respect to the Ashura's newfound advantage. As their own numbers dwindled steadily, those of their rivals were reinforced constantly by the very casualties that Indra's troops inflicted. The situation worsened and the Devatas despaired.

Again King Indra consulted the other gods and they all agreed that there wasn't any recourse other than to seek out Lord Brahma: grandfather to all beings and an inexhaustible reservoir of obscure wisdom. Hence they entered into a meditative trance together even as a battering ram thumped against the castle gates.

Following what seemed a prolonged silence – Agni, Vayu, Varuna, Indra and Guru Brihaspati found themselves in a psychic clearing devoid of any discernable qualities. It was then that a gleaming presence made itself known. Their inner eyes beheld a

snow-bearded individual seated on a lotus-throne. His countenance and crown shimmered with golden light as if indicating an unmatched degree of insight. Recognizing his visitors that ancient one spoke:

“Dearest sons of sons, it doth mine heart good to see thee here before me. However I can feel great tension coming from ye. Tell me swiftly what circumstances weigh so heavily upon thine otherwise capable shoulders?”

“Oh thou eldest of gods,” Indra replied, “an unprecedented calamity hath befallen us. We now stand on the brink of annihilation and it is in this our darkest hour that we seek thy unfailing advice!”

The young king continued to explain everything that had transpired throughout his domain over the last while. Brahma listened attentively and smiled knowingly as Indra finished briefing him.

“Hast any among thee heard tell of Amrita?” Brahma questioned.

The Devatas looked around at one another but ended by collectively shaking their heads in bewilderment.

“Amrita,” Brahma proceeded, “is the nectar of immortality. In every universe it hath been responsible for sustaining the virtuous so that they may uphold blessed Dharma: the perennial law born here in Sivaloka. Only by obtaining Amrita canst ye hope to conquer these powerful Ashuras.”

“But where grandfather or how are we to find this legendary nectar?” Brihaspati ventured to ask.

“Abandon Antarloka temporarily and enter Bhuloka, the coarsest plane of reality. There from amongst infinitesimal galaxies thou art to choose one that is suitable to be churned as if 'twere an ocean of milk. Choose wisely for this deed can be carried out a single time and no more. I wouldst be happy to accompany thee since I am certain that churning said ocean shouldst yield amazing results as always.”

“An excellent idea no doubt,” commented Indra, “but let us not forget that our enemies close in as we speak. How, honored progenitor of Dharma, dost thou suggest we handle the problem at hand?”

“Strike thee a truce with yon foes noble king. After all, their assistance wilt be quite indispensable for the task that lies ahead. Go now and do as I have instructed. In the meantime I shalt speak to Lord Vishnu concerning this matter. Thou may summon us both when everyone is prepared to depart for Bhuloka.”

Having said that, Brahma vanished and the Devatas found themselves back amid the chaos enveloping their celestial palace. Nonetheless, over the course of that next fight they were able to negotiate an armistice with the Ashuras (who were equally intrigued by the prospect of extracting Amrita from a fabled ocean of milk).

When the gods and their demonic counterparts gathered and burned oblations by dint of Agni’s incendiary hands, Brahma and Vishnu appeared as promised. The former was seated on an enormous swan whereas the latter stood astride his immense eagle Garuda (who some believe spawned the race of Ghandharvas).

After formalities were exchanged Brahma went on to produce a resounding: “A-U-M!”

They had the distinct impression that all three planes vibrated within and without their assembly. It was an overwhelming sensation to be sure – gripping at one’s core – although it took place in the blink of an eye. Suddenly the complete host of Antarloka was surrounded by a myriad of swirling galactic bodies. Some much larger or denser than others.

At first the various members of that celestial company drifted freely throughout the unlimited reaches of this vast physical field. Fortunately, selecting an exceptional candidate didn’t turn out to be as difficult as the creator had predicted. And so those tenuous allies congregated at an agglomeration of tightly-packed star clusters. The plasmic gas of nebulae flashed periodically, releasing pure energy into this promising maelstrom.

Brahma flew his swan up to its summit and by his alchemy its center was transmuted into a lofty mountain whilst Vishnu and Garuda soared within the void to trace out a widespread figure eight from which Vasuki (King of Nagas) materialized. The cosmic serpent flowed toward the Devatas and Ashuras like a violet river of light.

“Ussse me asss rope,” Vasuki hissed.

With that, he coiled 'round the solid central mass of the young megacosc and stretched either half of himself across its entire breadth. The Devatas were quick to grab a hold of his tail-end, leaving that Naga's big head to their adversaries. Now Vishnu leapt off Garuda's back and transformed into a gargantuan tortoise, making his way to the mountain's bottom in order to stabilize it. Brahma floated above its peak and signaled for the tug-of-war to commence.

Under his direction the Ashuras went first, pulling with their combined strength, followed by a vigorous response from the gods. They continued like this for a fleeting period that was interrupted when Vasuki (agitated by such monumental strain) began coughing out a rancid miasma that engulfed the whole area. This noxious Halahala poison wouldn't stop spreading and the heavenly hosts scattered, driven by fear. Even both supreme Devas were at a loss; the skin of Vishnu's human form turned onyx as it came into contact with that venom.

During this crucial juncture a general clamor rang throughout space, crying for Lord Shiva's help. Ever gracious and merciful Mahadeva (greatest among gods) proved the truth of his namesake by arriving in Bhuloka. The universal destroyer had only to cup his hands and inhale, drawing the murky vapor into his throat. Parvati, Shiva's faithful wife manifested then too. She clasped her hands around his neck to stem the Halahala poison from circulating. All those present sang their praises for this marvelous feat and nicknamed him Nilakantha (Lord Blue Neck).

Thus the churning was taken up anew and this time Vishnu lent both sides half of his phenomenal stamina. Soon the luminous surface of that galactic ocean was covered by seething froth. Incredible archetypes started emerging from its waves: a white horse followed by a white elephant, which were claimed by Bali (King of Ashuras) and Indra respectively. Next came Surabhi, the primeval cow. And then a paradisiacal tree accompanied by many Apsaras who would later become wives of Ghandharvas. These Apsaras circled the tree while dancing elegantly and were led by Queen Varuni, goddess of wine.

To delight Ashura and Devata alike, two more gorgeous goddesses arose from the depths: Lakshmi and Alakshmi – benevolence and malevolence incarnate. It is told that this was when Brahma sprouted three more heads solely to view those comely females from every possible angle! The first was to be Vishnu's future bride and the second joined Bali's Daityas. It wasn't until after the

birth of Surya (the sun god) and Soma Chandra (the moon god) that Amrita finally issued forth, carried in an urn by a beaming male youth.

The Devas and Devatas were so engrossed in welcoming their new members that the Ashuras seized this opportunity to make off with the urn. Through Shukra's wizardry they returned to Antarloka, thinking to seal their victory. When the gods realized what had happened, Vishnu put their minds at ease by morphing into Mohini, a voluptuous enchantress. She gave them all a suggestive wink before disappearing as well.

Mohini found the Daityas, Danavas and Rakshas arguing amongst one another about who should be allowed to drink the Amrita first. Although her swaying hips and ample breasts became the cynosure of all eyes in mere seconds. King Bali, a mighty Daitya and general of the Ashuras bowed down at her feet, asking how he might be of service. The girl smiled sweetly and said:

"Venerable lords, permit me to aid you in distributing this gift. For in accordance with Dharmic law it is only proper that you exhibit magnanimity toward your challengers by letting them drink before yourselves."

"Your sharp mind matches your lovely physique darling girl," Bali passingly mentioned as he took her hand and pressed his lips to it, "but I pray you render me your name, oh admirable maiden."

"Sri Mohini," she answered with a curtsy. Her luscious eyes pierced his heart.

Unbeguiled by feminine wiles Guru Shukra attempted to intercede: "My king, I must advise against this dubious course of action -"

"Nonsense!" Bali exclaimed before Shukra could finish. "It shall be done as Mohini has proposed and any who oppose her will have to cross swords with me personally."

Once that was settled Mohini fetched the Devatas and had both groups organize themselves into two separate lines. As had been agreed, she herself carried the urn to the trailing line of Devatas and made sure that it was passed when each god had taken his fill.

Generosity notwithstanding the throng of Ashuras got upset rather fast and King Bali felt a sting of jealousy as he watched Sri Mohini caressing the cheeks of his opponents while sharing their laughter.

One of the Rakshas named Rahu (who could shape-shift) even disguised himself as a Devata and snuck into their line, sitting between Surya and Soma. Unfortunately for him those two gods of light could see right through that clever Raksha's façade. They discretely reported the infraction to Lord Brahma just as Rahu lifted the pot to his mouth. Being notified telepathically Mohini reverted to Vishnu and severed Rahu's head with the blazing edge of his discus weapon!

Seeing Rahu beheaded the Ashuras roared furiously and took up their arms again. A terrible battle ensued. However, the Devatas had regained the upper hand (because only an immortal can vanquish an immortal). Fueled by Amrita, Indra decimated the Danava ranks using lightning while Vayu and his Maruts rained arrows upon the Rakshas with their bows.

Clearly on the Devata's side, Vishnu unleashed a spiral of gamma rays from his Sudarshana Chakra. It whipped through the Daityas' front line, slicing torsos and limbs.

Comprehending that this confrontation would spell their untimely deaths, the Ashuras retreated en masse and were spared (if only momentarily). The gods of Antarloka expressed their profuse gratitude to the eminent Devas of Sivaloka, who bestowed their blessings on Lord Indra's kingdom and then retired to their respective abodes.

Yet ever since those days that proverbial conflict between the forces of light and darkness has resurfaced during every epoch. Now at long last, its dramatic conclusion draws near . . .

Act One – Soma Chandra's Hubris



[1] A Gathering of Gods

Lady Tara glanced back at Guru Brihaspati as she walked in the direction of the palatial gardens. He was still blathering on about the Vedic scriptures with his cohorts, debating some doctrinal moot point. She and he had been married for little over a month but she was already sick of it. *What a cruel fate to be married off to a Brahmin* she thought to herself. Luckily, social functions tied in with his priestly duties (such as this regal ball in the court of Indra) provided Tara with much-needed respite.

She didn't have any particular aim in mind as she meandered among the opulent shrubbery of the gods. It was sufficient to be alone and at peace instead of undergoing constant introductions as if she were some kind of trophy. That's why her interest peaked when she heard the sound of music in the distance, away from the audience hall. Tara headed further into the gardens and noticed that the silvery moon usually high above Antarloka seemed to nearly touch the horizon ahead. Presently she encountered a large group of Ghandharvas crowded around a princely Devata, who sprawled comfortably on an ornate couch placed in front of an equally elaborate water-fountain.

Plainly these Ghandharvas were responsible for the captivating melody that had lured her there as they all played musical instruments – Sitar, tamburas and tabla drums to name but a few. She also caught sight then of many Apsara nymphs cavorting on the ground and in the air alike with streamers in tow. It was a mesmerizing scene but it came to a halt when she entered their circle. All heads turned in her direction and even the youthful god on the couch sat up to get a better look.

“Well, well. What have we here?” He asked, voicing unanimous astonishment. “A beauty to rival even **your** wife, wouldn't you agree Viswava?”

A Ghandharva standing off to his right and whose feathers were midnight-blue squawked at the query but said nothing. Tara did not fail to observe that he was the only one of his kind without an instrument. A pair of sheathed scimitars hung from his belt. Opposite to him a huge rainbow parrot stepped into view, bearing an archer on its back. Tara recognized him from her wedding as Kama, the god of romance itself.

“Mind your words Soma Chandra,” Kama chided. “This is Lady Tara – Brihaspati's new wife.”

“Forgive me for intruding,” Tara stammered. “I wasn't aware that there was to be a performance tonight.”

“There isn't,” Soma put in with a laugh, “this here is my personal retinue. I don't know about you honorable lady but I cannot endure another of Indra's boring parties.”

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