



*Meet Dennis Harness
Ph.D., the force behind
the SVAConference -
Shoba Mohan*



Dennis, it is my honor to conduct this interview for ACVA's Comet Newsletter. I feel a kinship with you, as we both share the Seva principle – 'to help, as many as we can, gain knowledge of Vedic Astrology'. We also want to recognize you as one of the founders of the American College of Vedic Astrology.

You have been conducting these Sedona Vedic Astrology Conferences (SVAC) in Sedona for many years. The atmosphere is amazing, mainly because you give it your all, and you make everyone feel so welcome. I have had the privilege of attending many and continue to learn from every one of them. Thank you!

Dennis, what propels you to offer this year after year? Tell us more about the 2021 Program.

I think it's just my good fortune to have the Dharma of putting on these conferences. They started actually back in 1992, I can't believe it's been 29 years - It's been a Saturn return since I first started the conferences, and so I'm completing the whole Saturn cycle!

It is my joy and pleasure to be able to bring all these great jyotishis together, it was amazing to see how many thirsty souls there were in terms of students as well, that really wanted to learn this ancient science of wisdom from India. So that was what propelled me at the beginning, to start putting on the conferences and to be able to tap into the spirituality and the deeper truths coming from India. The first keynote speaker we had, was Dr. B.V. Raman who is probably the most famous jyotishi of the 20th century. Dr. Raman came and initiated our first conference back in 1992 in San Rafael CA.

I've been putting them on, not every year, but I'm trying to put them on every year, so

this has been, again, kind of a labor of love.

I wanted to give the dates of the conference for those of you aren't aware of it. It's going to be held in Sedona AZ, November 18th – 22nd of this year 2021. It will be an in-person conference although we're taking great measures to try to make the conference as safe as possible in the midst of COVID challenges that we're all facing, but we're hoping, and we should know soon, that we may be able to do a hybrid conference this year and offer it through zoom as well. We should be able to announce that, if not sooner, by the end of the month. That would be great, because then it would allow people anywhere in the world to partake of the knowledge is being shared.

Our keynote speaker this year is Dr. David Frawley, who's coming with Shambhavi Chopra his wife, and they're going to be co-teaching an intensive all day on Friday, and then he'll be giving the keynote address on Friday evening. He will be teaching on Ayurveda and Jyotish on the weekend as well. We're so fortunate to have Dr. David Frawley back again. I think it's been over a decade since he's spoken at one of our conferences so we would feel really graced by his presence. The numerous other jyotishis from Komilla Sutton, Sam Geppi to Joni Patry, Mas Vidal – Simon Chokoisky is going to be with this this year and numerous teachers.

Bill Sinclair and Charlotte Benson are going to be teaching a 2 ½ hour lecture on 'Introduction to Jyotish' on Thursday, Nov.18th. That's actually a complimentary class, so anybody that's attending the conference does not need to sign up for that, it's an extra bonus. I'm sure Charlotte and Bill are going to do a great job again this year, they taught last year as well, when we had the conference through Zoom.

Jeffrey Armstrong's going to be hopefully teaching through zoom because he's in Canada and he's facing some Canadian restrictions in terms of travel restrictions so will hopefully be teaching through zoom, so we have a quite a great number of teachers.

I think there's about 18 different faculty this year sharing their Vedic wisdom at the conference. The website is 'www.SedonaVedicAstrology.com'.

I've always wondered - how long does it take you to recover after these amazing conferences?

You can talk to my wife, she'll let you know! It's a divine recovery process. It's only a couple of months before actually, to be honest, we start in on the next year. Even at the end of the conference, we're trying to get people to sign up for the subsequent year.

Whom do you consider to be your major influencers, both books and people, in your life as an astrologer? Tell us about your own spiritual path and teachers who influenced you.

I would say that again, as I mentioned, Dr. Raman kind of initiated me into Vedic astrology, when we had him speak in 1992, in terms of his great teaching and his great writings, but my first experience though, with Vedic Astrology, was in 1980 with

Chakrapani Ullal, who is a famous Jyotishi from the North Kerala area. He lived in Los Angeles, and he was Swami Muktananda's Vedic astrologer. It was a very amazing session I had with him when at one point during the session, he said to me 'I know your mind very well, perhaps better than you'; and by the end of the session, he had convinced me that there was truth to that statement! That was probably really my first initiation into Vedic Astrology with Chakrapani Ullal.

Then I met James Braha back around 1988 and James Braha wrote a book called *Ancient Hindu Astrology for the Modern Western Astrologer*. I had been studying Western Astrology before I got into Jyotish, and James' book and his teachings made it really clear. He really taught the core fundamentals of Planets, Signs, Houses. He didn't really go into Nakshatras much, but he really covered the Planets, Signs, Houses in depth. So James had a strong influence on me.

And then in 1991, I met Dr. David Frawley and his book, *The Astrology of the Seers*, was I consider to be (besides James Braha's book that it just mentioned) another major cornerstone book in the library of any good Jyotishi. So Dr. Frawley and I helped to organize the first conference back in 1992.

Another teacher that really strongly influenced me was Hart De Fouw and Hart's book, written with Robert Svoboda, titled *Light on Life* is again a classic text that I usually tell any students that are starting out, or even intermediate students for that matter, if they haven't read it, to read that book. It's probably one of the greatest books written on Jyotish in my estimation. So those were some of the main influences I had early on.

Many of our students are women. Tell us more about women Vedic Astrologers.

Just a number of teachers over the years I thought was kind of interesting - was in the 90s how there were so many women jyotishis that started to blossom during the mid to late 90s. Komilla Sutton and Joni Patry are two of the women astrologers that I had connection with. Starting in the mid-90s, it just blossomed into more and more female jyotishis. I find probably 80% of my clients are women, so again some of the information that needs to be shared, needs to be woman to woman in my estimation. So, there was such a strong need for great female astrologers, that it was great that Joni, Komilla, Charlotte Benson and others filled that that place.

What role do you think meditation, spiritual practices and consciousness plays in the development of an astrologer?

Well, Chakrapani once said during one of his lectures that Vedic Astrology comes down to 25% technique, where 100% is the best you can learn, the different techniques of Jyotish. But then he went on to say that 25% of it was the development of one's intuition, which to me, comes through connection with meditation, spiritual practices, and consciousness. So his idea there, is 25% is connected with one's development of intuition. and then he said that 50% of the equation was the grace of God, or we could say, 'the grace of God and Goddess'. So, I would say 75% of Jyotish is really involved

with spiritual practices and consciousness.

In your personal life, what experience originally convinced you of the validity of Vedic astrology? What is it in your chart that compelled you to become a Vedic astrologer?

I think any good Vedic Astrologer, generally speaking, needs to have a strong Mercury in their chart, because Mercury is the ability to calculate but it's also the ability to communicate. I happen to have Mercury in Virgo in my chart which helps me. But I would say the other aspect in my chart that compelled me to be an Astrologer is the counseling aspect in my chart which is my Moon - Jupiter in Cancer. It gives me kind of a sensitivity to the emotional and psychological aspects of Jyotish, so I would say those are two factors in my chart that I think propelled me into becoming a Vedic Astrologer.

From knowing you and your book on Nakshatras, I know you to be a wonderful teacher. What is a word of advice would you give to students of Vedic Astrology?

I think my main advice would be get in a good program, like the program that's put on by the American College of Vedic Astrology (ACVA).

Also, some of the different teachers have their own their own programs like Komilla Sutton, Joni Patry, Sam Geppi and different teachers have their have their own programs, but I think it's good to study with a bona fide teacher so that, to me, means you need to get the foundations down first and that's why I really love ACVA's online program, because it really covers the fundamentals in detail.

Also, after you learn the fundamentals, is the importance of really doing charts. Chakrapani often emphasized that that you just really need to do charts, but he's also said to stay humble as you are working, and to tell the client that you're, maybe, just a budding astrologer, that you are not an expert yet. To me, that is the way that you're going to learn - through actually seeing clients and doing charts for people. Astrology is a vast ocean of knowledge and I would say we have a thimbleful of the truth! It is a very humbling science to study, that's for sure. It's so vast!

We at ACVA are fortunate to have all the people that you just mentioned, and more, be well-wishers of ACVA, always stepping up to see how they can help ACVA grow. ACVA now has Bill Levacy's 'Beneath a Vedic Sky' available in its store.

I did meet Bill Levacy a few years later, his books are real foundational books too - *Beneath a Vedic Sky*, *Vedic Astrology Simply Put*. Actually, I often recommend that to beginning students as one of the foundational books to study.

Could you talk a bit about the relationship between the Client and the astrologer and the responsibility the astrologer has to the Client.

How do you 'know' that the native understands what you tell him – how much

detail of the chart do you share with your clients?

I think it's really important to assess the level of the Client's knowledge of Jyotish before doing a consultation. So, what I do is, when I ask for their birth information, I often ask him also, any areas that they want me to focus on during the session. One of the questions I also ask is 'have you had any experience with astrology in general?', and specifically 'any experience with Vedic Astrology', because I'm trying to understand to what level that their knowledge is of Jyotish. Maybe it's nothing whatsoever, minimal, or maybe they are an intermediate student already, or even an advanced student. So I try to assess that, I think, first of all. That's really important for me to do because, sometimes you can talk over the head of a client and you're using a lot of Sanskrit terms and things like that, that really have no meaning to them so you have to meet the client on the level that they are on, which I think is really important.

I find again, to have a client send questions in advance, the areas of focus that they would like you to focus on, is very important for me to do my work, rather than just doing a cold reading without any information. I'm more interested in helping the client rather than just to impress them.

Do you feel that your responsibility to tell him bad news?

I think the importance of that is to be able to reframe things in a positive way. I'll give you an example, let's just say somebody has Saturn-Mars-Rahu in the second house and they may have a poor diet. Sometimes, rather than say they eat junk food, or have a terrible diet, to the client I'll say 'It shows in your chart that one of the lessons that you're learning this lifetime is to spiritualize your diet. Not that you have to become vegan or vegetarian, but you may want to move towards a plant-based diet or a diet that's full of prana and life force. So, it's turning a negative into an opportunity for growth for the client because I think good astrology is really to help the client take discriminative action in their life.

As far as responsibility to tell one bad news, I like what Bill Levacy would often say - 'You know that you don't want to cheerlead a client off a cliff either!' It's how to word things in a way that can be empowering rather than imprisoning. Part of that comes from learning really basic counseling skills which I think any good astrologer needs to take classes in counseling skills. The online program course (ACVA's Vedic Astrology Course) has the 'program of a spiritual life coach', that is the way I would describe it. I think it's essential and I'm so happy that that was added as the third level of the online program.

Have you had to compromise Vedic Astrology rules – written and unwritten – while doing a reading? Please talk about using the Outer planets.

I am what is called a Neo-Vedic Astrologer. I'm not a purist, the fact is that the spirit of the Vedas is to be open to all forms of truth. For example, from the very start, because I was trained in Western Astrology initially, I'd always used the outer planets. To be honest, back in the 90s, I used to be given a lot of flak over that, because I wasn't a purist, and they would actually label me a Western astrologer!

It was one of those things, I knew that they (the outer planets) had influence. Even Chakrapani when asked, said he never used the outer planets and he was often asked about them. He just said that he couldn't comment because he didn't use them, it wasn't part of his training or wasn't part of his research. So I think that's one way that I've, maybe 'used things that were unwritten in the shastras' in terms of my work.

Perhaps 'extension or a different perspective' rather than 'compromise', then? What is your proudest achievement as a Vedic astrologer?

I think it really has been to have the good fortune of being of service in helping to bring Vedic Astrology and Vedic culture to the western world. That seems to be, when I look back over my life, the work that I feel the best about, in terms of what I've done this lifetime; just to bring the sangha together. To help bring the community together has been so rewarding for me. To meet all these great jyotishis and students - they are amazing, the quality of their learning and their knowledge and how they're surpassing a lot of us because they kind of stand on our shoulders so speak - and some of these students, to me, are so brilliant. And I'm so happy to see the development of Jyotish over the last three decades since I've really been involved.

We're on looking forward to the next conference that's coming up in November and hope to see you there!

Dennis, we are fortunate to have you be such a force in the Vedic Astrology world. Thank you for the amazing work you continue to do. Thank you!

Shoba Mohan



Shoba Mohan

Upon retirement as a banker, Shoba Mohan, MBA, joined the ACVA family. She believes that Vedic Astrology links Cosmic energies with humans. Her inspiration was her mother, who was an extremely well-read palmist and numerologist, one who had a chance to study many famous palms in her time. Shoba enjoys teaching, coaching, and contributing as the CEO of ACVA.

Shoba received ACVA's Jyotish Seva Award in 2015 and Jyotish Navaratna Award in 2019.

Most of her work in Astrology has been via in-person lectures and instructional

videos. She has spoken at various seminars, including the International United Astrology Conference at Chicago, 2018, where she spoke on Nakshatras, noteworthy to Western and other astrologers. ^[1]_{SEP} *Shoba is a mother of 2 girls and a grandmother of 4, she spends her spare time traveling around the globe with her husband Krishna. They live in Redmond, WA. As the current CEO of ACVA, Shoba would love to hear from you at shoba.mohan@acvaonline.org.*