

Chapter 2

The Vedas

As mentioned before, there are four Vedas: the Rg Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda and the Atharva Veda. Each of the Vedas contains four parts: the hymnal portion (*mantras*), the ritual portion (*brahmanas*), the forest teachings (*aranyakas*) and the philosophical portion (*upanishads*). It is generally believed that the composition of the Vedas dates back to around 1500 B.C. No one person can be said to have composed them. They are to be viewed as some form of encyclopedic account of the highest thoughts current at that time. This explains the diversity of thought contained in them.

The Rg Veda contains about a 1000 hymns and is divided into 10 books (or mandalas). These hymns embody a remarkable poetic tradition and reveal a development of thought which is both instructive and inspiring to trace out. One can see at this early period, a worship of personified natural forces, both dynamic and silent. In many early translations, scholars have used the word ‘god’ to describe these forces. The Sanskrit word is *deva* which translates as “shining one” or “luminous force”. For example, Indra is the god of thunder and rain, Mitra is the god who regulates the movement of the sun, Varuna is the god of moral order, Agni is the god of fire, Usha the goddess of dawn and Prithvi is the goddess of earth. Whether these hymns represent a worship of natural forces or they indicate a deeper impulse is not clear. There is substantial evidence, as we shall see below, in the writings themselves that it is the latter, as first suggested by Aurobindo. Viewed from this perspective then, they represent the preliminary thought and the stage for the philosophic inquiry of the Upanishads.

The opening verse (1.1.1) of the Rg Veda is worth looking at in some detail.

Agnimīle purohitam yajnasya devam rtvijam hotāram ratna dhātāmam. A faithful and literal translation of this verse is:

I adore the Fire, the sacrificial priest, luminous vibrations of Truth, the fierce warrior, the bestower of delight.

The Sanskrit word *agni* and the Latin word *ignis* both mean fire. Igneous rock refers to rock that is formed by intense volcanic action. Our English word, ignite, comes from the Sanskrit word *agni* meaning fire. The opening *agnimīle* can be translated as “I adore the Fire.” The word *purohita* is a combination of two words *pur* and *hitam*. *pur* originally meant¹ door, or gate and later came to mean a house, or more generally a city. The cognate Greek word, *polis* meaning city had the same Sanskrit origins. The word *hitam* is an adjective referring to that which has been put or placed before. Thus, *purohitam* indicates that Fire has been placed before us or planted before us, implying that there is something beyond the Fire. The idea of a sacrificial priest must therefore be taken as Fire being an intermediary between us and something deeper.

The word *yajna* is a word that recurs with periodicity in the Vedas and the Upanishads. It is also a prominent word in the Bhagavad Gita that occurs in the Mahabharata of the later Epic period. As a first approximation, it can be taken to mean “sacrifice.” According to Aurobindo, a more accurate meaning arises by considering the root word *yaj* from which *yajna* is formed. The root word refers to the act of applying oneself quietly and persistently, to master anything by focussed attention. Thus, *yajna* refers to the sacrifice that one must make in the mastery of any art. Psychologically speaking, we must invoke the inner fire, the fire of enthusiasm, in order to gain mastery or proficiency.

The word *deva* is derived from the root *div* which means to flash, gleam, or more precisely, to vibrate or sparkle. It later came to mean “a god”, or “one who plays with light”. It is interesting to note that the Latin word, *divus*, meaning ‘god’ and the English word *divine* are derived from the Sanskrit *deva*. From the Latin word, we get the more familiar *dios* or *dieu* meaning ‘god’ in Spanish and French respectively. The word *rtam* refers to cosmic order or universal Truth. The word *rtvijam* is a combination of *rtam* and *vijam*. The latter word is derived from *vij* meaning to vibrate, to be full of ecstatic energy. The Latin word *vigere* meaning ‘to be strong’ and the more familiar English word *vigor* are derived from this Sanskrit root *vij*. Thus putting the meanings together, we obtain that “Fire is a cosmic vibration of universal Truth.”

The final line is also open to a finer analysis. The word *hotāram* is derived from the root *hu* meaning to attack, to slay, as in a battle. This explains why Fire is the fierce warrior. Indeed, the fire of enthusiasm must slay the demon of lethargy before we can gain any insight into higher truths. Thus, comparing fire to a fierce warrior is appropriate.

¹See Aurobindo, Complete Works, Vol. 11, Hymns to the Mystic Fire, pp. 448ff.

The word *ratnadhātāmam* too can be broken down into *ratna* and *dhātāmam*. The word *ratna* can be taken as “jewel” or more precisely, “that which shines”, or “that which delights.” The second word *dhātāmam* is derived from the root word *dhā* meaning to bestow, to give, to create. Hence, Fire is the bestower of delight.

Thus, putting everything together, the psychological interpretation of the first verse of the first mandala of the Rg Veda is: “I adore the fire of enthusiasm, the gateway to higher knowledge, the destroyer of lethargy, the bestower of delight.” It is quite an opening for the development of later philosophical thought. The notion of *tapas* or discipline that we shall meet later more explicitly in the Upanishads, is derived from this view. Namely, the mind must rise from a lower level to a higher level so that it can gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the universe, and more importantly, the nature of itself. Indeed, *tapas* literally means ‘to heat’, invoking again the image of agni or fire.

This exemplary verse is enough to indicate the general trend of thought found in the Rg Veda. We indicate one more example to show that a similar development of thought persists in the other vedas also.

For example, the following verse² from the Yajur Veda (1.5) supports this view.

*Agne vrata pate vratam charishyami tachakeyam tanme
Rādhyām idamaham nrutāthsatyamupaimi*

May Agni, the fire of our vows, inspire me to master my lower self. May the fire grant me the strength and make my effort fruitful.

Thus, in reading many of the hymns of the Vedas, it is clear that the ‘fire principle’ was recognized early. The opening verse of the Rg Veda confirms this. The sages intuitively knew that Fire, or more abstractly, creative energy lay at the heart of all things. At the same time, we see in the opening passage that though Fire is fundamental it is not the ultimate, but only an intermediary to a deeper level of reality.

The analysis above is based on an exposition of Aurobindo³ where many of the hymns of the Rg Veda have been analysed from a psychological perspective with linguistic corroboration. For instance, Indra is not the ‘god of thunder’ but rather that which controls the *indriyas* which refer to the sense organs. Thus,

²Swami Yatiswarananda, Universal Prayers, p. 55.

³See Aurobindo, Complete Works, Vol. 10, Secret of the Veda, p. 33ff.

Indra really refers to the power of the mind. For Aurobindo, Fire, or Agni refers to the cosmic will.

Thus the ‘gods’ are energies of the mind or some psychic aspect of the human being. They are all, in some sense, intermediaries or guardians of a higher Reality. Here are some examples.

Usha represents the dawn. Clearly, the transition from night into day or day into night is not only an event of great beauty but also inspires one into a contemplative mood. As such, it was perceived at the individual level as a transition from a period of rest or contemplation to a period of activity or vice versa. Here again, let us observe that Dawn is an intermediary, the ushering of light, just as Fire was seen as an intermediary between ourselves and the ultimate Reality.

Vāk represents the power of speech and it is given the status of a goddess. The origins of the Latin word *vox* or the English word *voice* and *vocal* can be traced to the Sanskrit word *vāk*. Later, we see how the Word becomes an intermediary beyond which lies the ultimate Reality.

Vāyu is said to be the god of wind, but when we analyse the various hymns, a distinct meaning of the life principle emerges. The words *prāna* and even *ātman* are used later in the Upanishads to indicate the Life Principle, as an abstract idea. Observe that the Greek word *atmos* which means vapor, is derived from the Sanskrit word *atman* signifying the early usage of the word to mean ‘air’ or the ‘giver of life’. Here also, beyond *prāna* lies something deeper. Thus Vāyu is also an intermediary.

Even if we abandon the psychological perspective of Aurobindo and adopt the naive viewpoint that these hymns are in praise of natural forces, it is clear that the early naturalistic polytheism, if we admit it, developed slowly into monotheism and finally into monism. The evidence is clear in this regard. That is, from the many “gods and goddesses” of natural forces, the sages arrived at the principle of the One and then recognized that it was one supreme, vast, all-pervasive being manifesting in various ways.

Nowhere is this more explicitly stated than in the first mandala, hymn 164:

Indram mitram varunam agni māhuradho divyah

Sa suparno garutmān

Ekam sat vipra bahudhāvadanti. Rg Veda 1.164.46

They call it Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni as well as Garutman of heavenly

plumage. That which exists is One, sages call it by various names.

The monistic tendency dominant in Indian philosophy is often traced back to this ancient verse. It sets to naught all controversy about many gods, one god or even no gods. “That which exists is One, sages call it by various names.” This idea is repeated in many places in the Rg Veda. For example, “That which has become all this,” (Rg Veda, 8.58.2) “which the learned and the wise describe through many forms of expressions,” (Rg Veda 10.114.5) are two instances that point to the emergence of a monistic theme. This trend culminates in the famous hymn of creation, in Mandala 10.

Neither non-being nor being was as yet,
Neither was airy space nor the sky beyond;
What was enveloped? And where? And sheltered by whom?
And was there water? Bottomless, unfathomed?

Death did not exist nor life immortal,
Nor was there any sign then of night or day,
By its inherent force the One breathed windless,
Beyond that, indeed, nothing whatever was.

Darkness was there first hidden by darkness,
Undifferentiated surge was this whole world.
That which, becoming, by the void was covered,
That One by force of heat came into being.

In the Principle, thereupon, arose desire,
Which of consciousness was the primeval seed.
Then the wise, searching within their hearts,
Perceived that in non-being lay the bond of being

Their ray extended light across darkness.
Was there a below? And was there an above?
There were sowers of seeds and forces of might:
Potency from beneath and from on high the Will.

Who really knows, who could here proclaim,
Whence this creation flows, where is its origin?
The gods were born after this world's creation.
Who therefore knows from where it has arisen?

This flow of creation, from where did it rise,
 Whether it was ordered, or whether it was not,
 The Observer, in the highest heaven,
 That alone knows, or perhaps, ... It knows it not.

Rg Veda 10.129

In the second verse, we meet the phrase *tad ekam*, which means “That One”. No further elaboration is given, except to indicate the principle of One. In the third verse, the word *tapas*, which literally means heat, is used. But it is more than that. It refers to the fire of austerity and in the later tradition it becomes synonymous with the power of meditation. The last three verses begin a questioning culminating in the last line suggesting that there may be a limitation to human knowledge. At a deeper level, it signals that ‘knowing’ maybe a “lower” stage since a duality is implied by it between the knower and the object of knowledge. This issue is taken up later in the Upanishads.

The theme of the ‘One’ resonates in many places of the Rg Veda. For instance, let us look at 8.58.2 of the Rg Veda:

Eka evāgnir bahudhāsamiddha
Ekah sūryo visvam anu prabhūtah
Ekaiivosāh sarvam idam vibhāty
Ekam vaidam vi babhūva sarvam *Rg Veda 8.58.2*

“One fire burns in many ways; one sun illumines the world; one dawn dispells the darkness of night; All that exists is One and It has taken all these various forms.”

Surya, or the sun, was an object of worship in many of the ancient civilizations. This is not surprising because it is the most striking of all natural phenomenon occurring every day. It was worshipped as the bestower of light and energy in many of the early cultures. However, for the Vedic sages, it becomes a powerful psychological symbol for Pure Awareness, for Brahman. Just as the sun energizes all life on the planet, but does not participate in the good or the bad, the Pure Awareness animates the energies of our being, and illumines our thoughts and feelings but is not touched by good and evil. Thus, the sun becomes the symbol of Brahman, the vast expansive consciousness. This psychological use of the symbol of the sun is apparent in many of the hymns of the Rg Veda. To cite a specific and celebrated hymn, let us consider the Gayatri mantra.

The famous Gayatri mantra occurs in the third mandala of the Rg Veda:

*Tat savitur varenyam bhargo devasya dhimahi
Dhiyo yo nah prachodayāt Rg Veda 3.62.10*

The meaning of this verse is as follows: “let us meditate on the glory of that Supreme Being that illumines everything. May That illumine our understanding.” The word *dhi* refers to understanding, and its cognate word *buddhi* means the reasoning faculty of the mind implying that by reason we may gain a deeper understanding. The Upanishads will declare later that *buddhi* must be transcended to experience the Ultimate Reality.

Before we conclude this lecture, there is one more hymn that is worth considering from a sociological context. It reflects a recognition that when any group of people gather together, they must live in harmony and not in conflict. The “unity prayer” seems relevant to the modern age, at a time when technology has brought together all the people from the remote corners of the planet to inhabit a “global village” and the threat of total annihilation hovers ominously over us all like a mushroom cloud.

The famous “unity hymn” occurs in Mandala 10:
*Samāno mantrah samiti samāni
Samānam manah saha cittamesām
Rg Veda 10.191.3*

“Common be your prayers. Common be the end of your assembly. Common be your purpose. Common be your deliberations.”

The word “same” has its roots in the sanskrit word *samānam*. The use of the word in poetic cadence in the hymn resonates beautifully the message of harmony. In any society, there must be unity to hold it together. Thus, humanity must gather together with a common purpose to keep it unified.

