

The Mahatma in Deep Meditation, by Elizabeth Farkas Brunner, 1934

Real Knowing

BY GENE R. THURSBY

The Vedas are among the most ancient and highly esteemed scriptures in the world, but knowledge of them has been very slow to spread beyond India. When people in Europe at last began to be aware of these ancient teachings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their belated discovery became part of an “oriental renaissance” that reached all the way to the United States and was a major influence on thinkers and writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Yet, even now as we approach the end of the twentieth century, few people know much about the Vedas. They seem to hold a mystery that resists being solved by conventional academic scholarship, though it may open itself to the followers of authentic spiritual disciplines.

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THE ESSENTIAL VEDAS

The traditional understanding of the Vedas is that they are essentially sound vibrations that are ever present and never created. Understood that way, the Vedas are at the basis of all reality. There is a similar view expressed in the Islamic teaching that the Koran that was revealed on earth is derived from an eternal prototype in heaven. Another closely corresponding view, in Rabbinic Judaism, is that the unwritten, original Torah guided the Lord God as He went about His work of creation. And a distinctively Christian version can be found in the opening words of the Gospel of John in the New Testament.

The fundamental Vedic sound currents, though more vital and real than any of the more obvious features of the universe that are derived from them, are so subtle that they could be heard only by the most highly developed beings. The ones who had the rare sensitivity to hear the primal sounds were called *rishis*. According to ancient Indian tradition, those great sages heard and remembered the essential Vedas and then selected a set of human beings to learn them as audible word patterns. The *rishis* took *brahmins* as their students and gave them the hereditary responsibility to keep the Vedas in the same form they had been received, to use them rightly, and to pass them down in every succeeding generation to properly prepared young male pupils from their own clans. This was a way to ensure that the Vedas would remain a reliable resource to humanity, regardless of whatever else might change through the ages.

SECRET FORMULAS

The classical Sanskrit language derives from those timeless sounds, and the meaning of the Sanskrit term *Veda* itself comes from the root *vid*, which means "knowledge." The Vedic mantras are believed to bring together all of the

profound dimensions of real knowing — the intimate, the practical, and the theoretical. For that reason, a person who will be taught to recite them must be prepared very carefully before he can safely be brought so close to the powerful presence of Truth. And after receiving the proper preparation and training, he will be ritually empowered to recite in a way that will bring results and that will convey wisdom. Some brahmin names still in use today — such as Dwivedi, Trivedi, or Chaturvedi — began as titles of honor that testified to Vedic learning. It is mainly due to their close association with the Vedas over millennia that the brahmins have been given special respect in India.

Because of these beliefs about the Vedas, for many centuries they were kept as a spiritual secret that was allowed to go no farther than from the mouth of a brahmin Master to the ear of his designated disciples. Only those who had been initiated into Vedic teaching were permitted to hear the sounds of the chanting or to participate in the Vedic rituals. This caution was wholly appropriate, and if we think about it, should be expected. In every area of life, people all the way down to the present day have taken special care to limit the circulation of any kind of knowledge that might have profitable or powerful consequences. There are many kinds of secret knowledge, and they go right across the full range of life, from the families and guilds that found the metallurgical techniques necessary to produce the finest musical gongs and cymbals, through the French order of Christian monks who perfected and preserved the method of making chartreuse liqueur, right down to the modern-day nations that closely guard the technology needed to tap nuclear power.

THE VEDAS AS LITERATURE

The Vedas are also called *shruti*, or "what is heard," because of their original nature as sound. Early brahmins who could recite *shruti*

were like living libraries of sacred and secret knowledge. However, probably somewhere between 1500 and 1200 B.C. the Vedas were committed to writing and organized into four basic collections called the Samhitas.

The first of the four collections is the *Rig Veda*. In the version of the *Rig* that was preserved by the Shakala school of Vedic chanting, there are 1,028 hymns, or *suktas*, made up of varying numbers of metrical verses and brought together in ten books or *mandalas*. Within the ten books the hymns are arranged according to the gods (*devas*) toward whom they are directed, and six out of the ten books are each associated with the name of the particular brahmin clan responsible for maintaining its contents. The *Rig* as a whole is massive and impressive. Its 350,000 words equal the combined length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

The *Sama Veda* and the *Yajur Veda* complement the *Rig*. There are more than 1,500 different mantras in the *Sama*, nearly all of them taken from the *Rig* and given a musical setting for use by the brahmin priest who officiated at the Vedic rituals dedicated to Soma — the elixir of immortality and the divine being who embodies its power. The *Yajur Veda* likewise derives from the *Rig* but preserves mantras and instructional materials to support the functions of another kind of brahmin priest and a broader range of rituals. The three Samhitas comprise a single set of writings that stem from the *Rig Veda* and clearly belong together.

The *Atharva Veda* probably circulated separately at first and later was incorporated into the larger collection. Only some 1,200 of its 6,000 stanzas come from the *Rig*. Its independent contents also may reflect a process in which nonbrahmins gained an accepted place in Vedic culture. Many of its hymns refer to the *kshatriya*, or warrior class, which came to be regarded, along with the *vaishyas*, or merchants, as eligible to be patrons of Vedic rituals and to observe and benefit from them. Many of the

Atharva's hymns deal with immediately practical matters, too, such as protection from illness, healing, and prosperity.

The Samhitas actually marked the beginning of an extensive Vedic literature that was written down over subsequent centuries. They were followed by a series of Brahmanas, or further commentaries on the conduct of Vedic rituals, each of them attached to one of the Samhitas. Eight of these and a fragment of a ninth have survived. After them came the Aranyakas, several sophisticated works reflecting on the significance of major themes in the earlier literature. These led to the twelve or fourteen great Upanishads, probably the best known and most frequently translated part of the Vedic literature, which were put into written form down to about 500 B.C.

WHAT IS VEDA?

This literature raises the question again and from a new angle: What is Veda? Whether the word *Veda* appears in the singular or the plural does not affect the range of typical responses to this question. The subject is weighty enough to attract multiple answers from sages and scholars. We have been introduced already to the concept of the essential Vedas, which also may remind us of the unstruck sound of the *anahata chakra*; to the audible Vedas as recited by the brahmins; and to the written Vedas in a literature that extends from the *Rig* through the last of the great Upanishads. The term *Veda(s)* can be applied to any one of them. But the four basic collections, or Samhitas, may be called the Vedas, too. And because of its premier place in the literature, the *Rig* sometimes is referred to by itself as the Veda.

Those may seem like more than enough answers, but that is not quite the end of it. In the traditional understanding, the Vedas essentially have no beginning. So we might ask, is there somewhere they come to a stop?

Not essentially. But there are conventional boundaries to the Vedas as a category, limits to what qualifies to be called "Veda" or "shruti." The most widely accepted definition is that the last of the great Upanishads brings the Vedas to a close. That is why the Upanishads and their teachings are called Vedanta, which means literally "the end of the Veda."

However, the importance of the Vedas, and the complexity of the ritual context in which they were recited, led to ongoing development of a far more vast *smṛiti*, or supporting literature. Some of it was so closely related to the Vedas as to serve almost as a supplement to them. The Vedangas, or "limbs of the Veda," were written from about 400 B.C. onward in order to formalize procedures for pronunciation, metrical pattern, and grammar that would maintain regularity in Vedic recitation, as well as to instruct in measurement, astrology, and other skills required to establish the correct times and sites for the conduct of Vedic rituals.

VEDIC RITUALS

A general pattern seems to run like a bright thread all the way through the whole variety of Vedic rituals represented in the literature, from the great community *shrāuta* ceremonies down to the most simple household or *grihya* rites. This connecting thread is the practice of *yajna* or sacrifice. It is the great theme, the vivid image, and the central method throughout the Vedic literature.

The devas, or divine beings, epitomize various aspects of the sacrificial process. Nearest and most obvious is Agni, the spirit of the sacrificial fire that is the medium between the human and the divine. Most distant from the ordinary understanding and most mysterious is Soma, guardian of the elixir of immortality. Linking and undergirding everything is Varuna, the representative of *rita* or cosmic order. At center in the early literature is the cosmic person, Purusha, though his place is taken later

by Prajapati. Around and above these divine figures, but moving closer in some ritual contexts, are ranged the many other devas known by the Vedic sages.

In *Rig Veda* X.90, also known as the *Purusha Sukta*, the primal person makes an offering of himself and becomes the material for the original sacrifice from which this world was produced. Purusha is described as so great that it takes only a quarter of him to contain everything visible. The greater part of him, and of the Prajapati who displaces him in later texts, surpasses this world. Yet it is true to say that neither of them succeeded in fashioning this universe directly, but rather their contribution to its formation was by serving the great process sacrificially. Throughout the literature, Purusha and Prajapati provide examples of the need to "make sacrifice to sacrifice."

Prajapati, in the later Vedic literature, repeatedly attempts to complete the process of creation by himself. The results of his solitary efforts are never viable, harmonious, or finished. They require the further process of *yajna* to perfect them. Vedic *yajna* mediates between the visible and the invisible, and it manifests the hidden connections among all things. The rituals performed by the brahmins become the means to repair and renew the cosmos and to return it to its true and perfect condition.

THE VEDAS AND THE SPIRITUAL PROCESS

The literature of the Vedas is sometimes analyzed into two main parts. The Samhitas and Brahmanas are considered the *karma khanda*, or work portion, because of the emphasis in that early part of the literature on the details of actually performing *yajnas*. The Aranyakas and Upanishads are considered the *jñāna khanda*, or knowledge portion, because their emphasis is on the significance of sacrifice as a theme for contemplation.

In the *karma khanda* there is a general

enthusiasm for living and a confidence that ritual is a key to ordering and directing the flow of events in a way that will be life-enhancing. *Atharva Veda* XIX.67 wonderfully expresses the early Vedic attitude of life-affirmation:

*For a hundred autumns may we see,
for a hundred autumns may we live,
for a hundred autumns may we know,
for a hundred autumns may we rise,
for a hundred autumns may we flourish,
for a hundred autumns may we be,*

*for a hundred autumns may we become,
— and even more than a hundred autumns!*

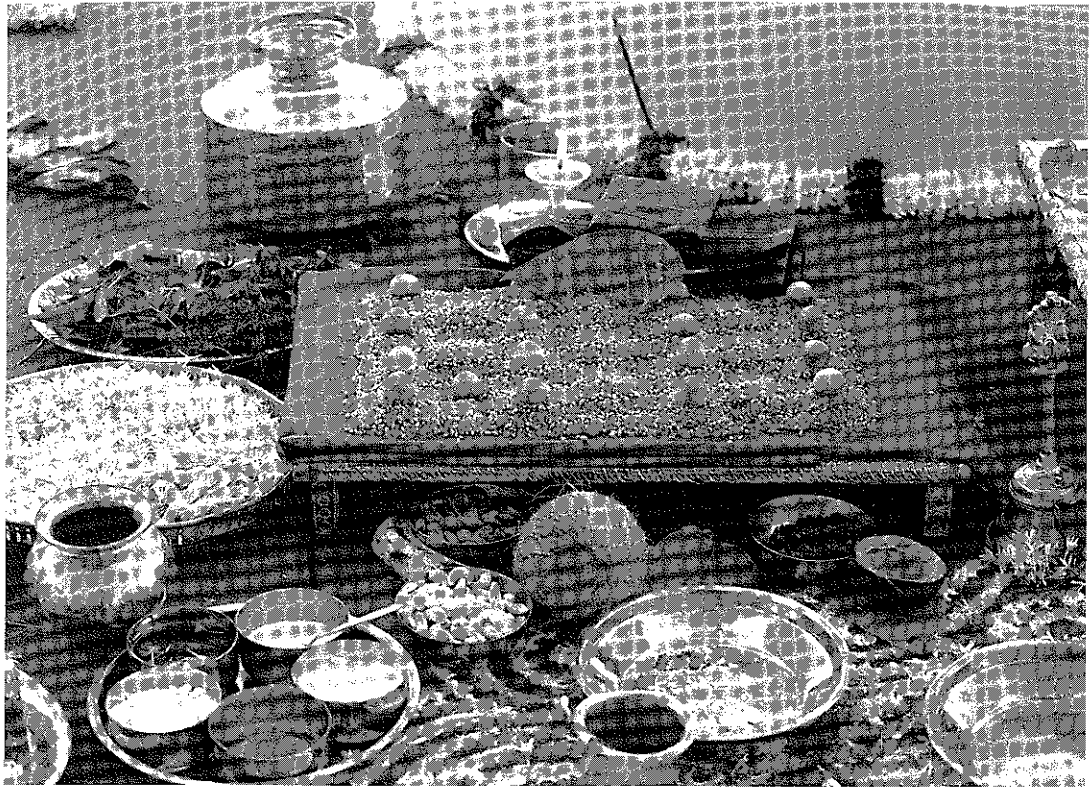
The practical optimism of the ancient people who first sought to be the beneficiaries of Vedic sacrificial rites may seem familiar to you. It is congenial to the modern outlook. But the Vedic optimism is grounded in the assumption that we should act in the knowledge that life is a profoundly interactive process that ultimately depends on sacrifice.

In the *jnana khanda* the idea of sacrificial

ritual is given a more inclusive meaning that allows it to become a theme for contemplation. The formal ritual always has been the special responsibility of learned brahmins and still remains the outward and evident yajna. But in addition the fire and its heat come to be understood as a mysterious reality that is experienced within us as well. There are times in the process of spiritual awakening when every person feels the sacrificial fire as an inner heat that the Vedas call *tapas*. This is the energy already at work in us by the Guru's power, guided by the

Guru's grace, and perfected in the Guru's service.

The experience of Siddha Yoga gives us an opportunity to appreciate the Vedas as a source of spiritual teaching, as a guide to ritual action, and as the foundation of a great culture. At the same time it brings us back to the mystery at the heart of the Vedas. Under the Guru's guidance, we begin to recognize that they are inseparable from the inmost throb of awareness that enables us to see God in each other and to see the world as whole, complete, and perfect.



Sacred offerings of flowers and food at a Vedic fire ceremony

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