

VEDA PARAYANAM

The Vedas are considered the highest revelation and authority in Hinduism. Orthodox philosophical systems and religious authorities in India acknowledge their absolute truth and validity for all time, and revere them as the ultimate authority in any controversy. No human source can be attributed to them and they are considered to be of Divine origin, revealed to the *rishis* of ancient times. The Vedas were a strictly oral tradition and among pundits today it is Brahma Rishi Vyasa who is considered to be the 'compiler' of the four extant texts (*Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva*). For thousands of years the four were chanted solely without being written down. The term *sruti* (meaning 'what is heard') is used to refer to these holy texts which ultimately communicate the nature of Absolute Truth in the metaphysical sphere. Sound emanates as 'the word' (*nama*) and can be said to precede *rupa* (form). The beginning of the Gospel of St. John states this truth in a similar manner.

The vibration which is generated by the holy sounds is spiritual in nature and counters the dark forces of inert matter in an effort to uplift creation. The universal mantra AUM, now known throughout the world, is the essential spiritual vibration of the universe. Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas, is said to have been revealed and it is claimed that the sounds that form its 50 letters and perfect grammar are unique. Even Western philologists study it as a great revelation in the course of human history.

There is a school of research today which refutes the notion that Sanskrit originated in Central Asia or the Caucasus and was transported to India during the 'Aryan invasion'. This idea was propounded in the late nineteenth century by Western philologists, some of whom had never visited India. It is currently argued that Sanskrit was indigenous and that its texts go back several thousand years. European languages quite possibly developed from Sanskrit and not the reverse.

A great many hymns, ceremonies and philosophical matters are contained in the Vedas, the principal sections of each Veda being *Samhita* (hymns), *Brahmanas* (ceremonies), and *Aranyakas* (philosophical treatises). The Upanishads are usually

contained in the last section, known as forest dialogues, since they were imparted by rishis mostly living in forest ashrams.

The highest philosophical thought in India is revealed in the Upanishads of which 108 are extant today. Of these 10 major Upanishads are widely studied and known. Sri Sankara's commentaries on these texts from the eight century A.D. are available to scholars and are considered one of the pillars of the last school of philosophy to emerge, i.e. Advaita Vedanta. The portion of the Vedas referring to 'knowledge' is called *jnana kanda*, while the portion that deals with rituals and sacrifices is termed *karma kanda*. It is generally agreed that a spiritual seeker must first purify himself through a selfless process of karma, according to his dharma and that he can only then pass on to *jnana kanda*.

Today the Rig and Yajur Vedas are the most commonly known and chanted, followed by the Sama Veda. The Atharva Veda is slowly disappearing. The Rig Veda is the 'root' Veda and contains many hymns to various gods of the Hindu pantheon including Indra, Rudra, Saraswati, Vishnu, etc. The other Vedas contain many mantras from the Rig Veda.

The Yajur Veda has two well-known derivatives that are chanted today, the Shukla and the Krishna (White and Black), dealing mostly with rituals. At all Siva temples where Vedic ritual is performed, parts of the Veda known as *chamakam*, *namakam*, etc, are used in pujas. Participants often know these sections by heart. The Krishna Yajur Veda consists of 44 *prashna* (chapters) which in turn are divided into 7 *kandas* (major divisions) in the *Samhita*, 28 in the *Brahmana*, divided into 3 *ashtakas* (including 3 *prashnas* called *katakam*) and 10 in the *Aranyaka*. In this last section the final 4 chapters are Upanishads.

The chanting style of the Sama Veda is very melodious and is reminiscent of the Gregorian chant in the Christian monastic tradition.

To this day the Vedas are passed down from generation to generation, from a Brahmin teacher to a student in a continuous lineage from its originators, the great Brahma Rishis. In fact a young boy when initiated during the *upayanam* or 'thread'

ceremony is given his *gotra*, or lineage, which links him to the great ancient sages like Vashista and Viswamitra. The Gayatri mantra is imparted at this time and should be repeated 108 times daily during the *sandya* (junctures of the day)— sunrise, noon and sunset. This mantra appears in all four Vedas and was considered to be very secret. In fact, traditionally the Vedas were not to be heard by non—Brahmins. Formerly this was strictly observed and the purity of the tradition was maintained but during the twentieth century, especially after independence from Britain, when Hindu social laws and customs changed considerably, secrecy was no longer maintained to such an extent.

The school where a young boy is sent, the Veda Patasala, is run even today on the ancient system of *gurukula*, where the boy is given over to the guru by his parents for all further study. It is a rigorous course of training, where 7 year old boys (some may start younger) start their lessons at 5 a.m., with chanting lasting for at least 8 hours a day. No doubt a prodigious memory is required. Some outstanding students can memorize an entire page within two or three readings.

The course takes around 7 to 8 years for a normal student, but some take much longer and some drop out mid-way and take up other work, or practice as priests in small temples.

On completion of his studies a student is qualified to be called a Veda-Vit, or Yajur-Vedi. No other subjects are usually taught at this stage, since a great deal of attention is required for accurately memorizing and correctly chanting the Vedas. The prescribed religious observances are carried on by all students together with their course work in the school day.

Teaching techniques differ according to the tradition of the teacher. The following remarks will shed some light on the process. First, of course, the alphabet must be learned and here there is a difference between South and North India. In the South *grantha* script is used, while in the North, it is the *devanagari*, the usual Sanskrit alphabet. The Brahmanas are usually learned first since these mantras are simpler and easier for the student to grasp. The teacher recites one *vakya* (line) and the student repeats it twice. For a normal student 10 to 30 lines may be given, but for

an outstanding student up to 500 lines. This will continue for 9 days, during which a student is expected to repeat the lesson at least 100 times per day. Once the Samhitas are taken up, they are taught 50 *padas* (words) at a time. This is called *panchashati*. There are 2195 *panchashatis* in the 7 *kandas* of the Samhita of the Krishna Yajur Veda. There is no doubt that very strong samskaras play an important part concerning the innate ability of the student. At the level of *ghanam* (the most advanced chant form), one can almost be assured that samskaras from a previous life are at work, since this very exacting mode of chanting cannot be taken up by most students.

At Ramanasramam the Krishna Yajur Veda was chanted twice a day when Bhagavan was in the body. This tradition is carried on at his Samadhi to this day. Before the Veda Patasala was founded at Ramanasramam, pundits from town would come to chant in front of Bhagavan and all accounts of his life mention that at the 5 p.m. session of the Veda Parayanam Bhagavan would often sit rock-like and the silence and grace that were present would be apparent to even casual visitors. He commented that listening to the Vedas has a calming effect on the mind, which is a pre-condition for any meditation practice, as well as *atma-vichara*, his most well-known method.

Today at Ramanasramam, the Veda Patasala has around 20 students and slowly the 'career' of being a pundit is regaining its former respect and status. About a hundred years ago, due to the economic conditions of the times, Brahmins had to abandon their dharma as pundits and priests and engage in worldly pursuits, usually in posts as civil servants with the British administration. They could not make a living from the traditional way of life and slowly the tradition degenerated and fewer boys were brought into a formal study of the Vedas. The situation has currently reversed and today pundits can earn a very reasonable income, as they are invited to all types of ceremonies throughout the country, including household rituals and marriage functions. Of course, many Brahmins have now totally abandoned their links with the Vedas as a modern education in English is the standard of success in modern Indian society. Many boys are not taught the basic texts and have no knowledge of Sanskrit or religious duties, but one still sees a few modern young men in western

dress chanting happily in front of Bhagavan' Samadhi, no doubt due to the influence of their parents in fostering a more 'religious' and traditional way of life.

When fully qualified, a student will either continue studying rituals and become a priest, or follow further study and eventually become a pundit. This latter tradition involves chanting in more complicated modes and each additional level may take two or three years longer, depending on the ability of the student. Pundits are usually invited to special religious events at large temples or to important feasts and festivals. In Tiruvannamalai at *Arunachaleswarar Kovil*, the main Siva temple, Veda Parayanam in the *kramam* mode of the Krishna Yajur Veda is chanted for 9 days by 25 pundits during the 10 day Kartigai Deepam festival. (This Parayanam is ongoing in its 127th year.) Sama and Rig Vedas are also chanted by smaller groups. In 1995 the entire Samhita in the ghanam mode was chanted in Ramanasramam (New Hall) by an eminent Vedic scholar, lasting 32 days, eight hours per day. In recent years, groups of 4 to 6 pundits are occasionally invited for special parayanam, usually lasting 4 to 6 days, with some sessions lasting 2 to 3 hours, for a total of 6 hours per day.

After the normal chanting called *padam* and *moolam*, the next level is termed *kramam*, which is still not too complicated and most good students master it. The last two modes called *jattay* and *ghanam* are particularly difficult. The last mode is achieved by very few pundits. They are called *ghanapatins*. The rules for the more complex types of chanting are given in two texts not within the Vedas, called *Pratasakra* and *Uyasa Siksha*. A more detailed explanation of a mantra in different modes will be given later.

A fully qualified *ghanapatin* may continue to study *Vedanga*, i.e. the limbs of the Veda. This includes the following six disciplines: *Siksa* (Phonetics); *Nirukta* (Lexicon and Etymology); *Kalpa* (Rituals); *Lakshanam* (Grammar); *Jyothisha* (Astrology and Astronomy); and *Chandas* (Prosody or versification). There are different levels and specializations in all these disciplines, and major Mutts, such as Sringeri and Kanchipuram, carry out tests and give certification that a certain level of knowledge and proficiency has been achieved. Eventually a highly trained and

qualified pundit becomes a well-known teacher in his own right and is recognized throughout India for his erudition.

To give an idea of the level that may be reached, one can point to Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni, Bhagavan's foremost disciple in the Vedic tradition. At the age of about eight, Ganapati Muni started uttering Sanskrit poetry spontaneously and eventually was given the title of *Kavyakanta*, which means 'one who has poetry flowing from his throat', i.e. an extempore poet. He was also a *chaturvedi* meaning he knew all four Vedas and it was later remarked by Bhagavan that Ganapati Muni's memory was such that he had almost 'total recall' of all events that had occurred in the Ashram. Even at this level of erudition, Ganapati Muni recognized that Bhagavan was not only a Rishi, but a 'great Rishi', i.e. a Maharshi and changed his name to 'Ramana Maharshi' (he was previously known as Brahmana Swami). Bhagavan had never studied Sanskrit, yet he could utter perfect poetic compositions, with such deep and terse meaning that they were considered by Kavyakanta to be comparable to the Upanishads. Throughout the rest of his life Bhagavan was consulted by great pundits from all over India, who went away convinced that Bhagavan was indeed a Maha Rishi.

Pundits who pass their entire lives chanting the Vedas are going through a process of purification and some of them report that even in their sleep the holy utterances carry on. The audiences and sponsors of the *yagnas* and other parayanams are also being purified and accumulate merit, but one can also say that the chanting benefits the entire world. One interesting fact worth mentioning is that in the purnahuti at the end of a *homa*, the pundit symbolically surrenders his ego into the sacred fire.

In Sri Adi Sankara's *Vivekachudamani* it is stated that it is difficult to obtain a human birth, more difficult to be born a Brahmin, more difficult still to walk the path of Vaidika Dharma in which the Vedas are chanted, but still more difficult to become a perfect scholar. Yet it is pointed out that all of this is still not enough 'to attain wisdom born of experience of the Self', which is what Bhagavan intimately knew and for which it is not necessary to follow the path described above.

One comment worth quoting with respect to the reason for the more complex types of chanting was made by the late Shankaracharya of Kancheepuram Mutt, Sri Chandrashekara Saraswati, who was recognized throughout India as a saint and sage:

“Our forefathers devised a number of methods to preserve the unwritten Vedas in their original form, to safeguard their tonal and verbal purity. They laid down rules to make sure that not a syllable was changed in chanting... [and] they insured that the full benefits were derived from intoning the mantras.

“When we listen to the ghanapatin chant the ghanam we notice he intones a few words of the mantra in different ways, back and forth. It is most delightful to the ear. Similiarly, in other methods of chanting like *karma*, *jatta*, *moola*, and so on, the intonation is nothing less than stately, indeed divine.”¹

As a small example of the various modes of chanting, a simple mantra is transliterated below, giving the principal forms that are taught and chanted:

Nama somaya cha (*moolam*)

Nama somaya somaya cha (*kramam*)

Nama somaya somaya namo, nama somaya (*jattai*)

Nama somaya somaya namo, nama somaya cha-cha somaya
namo, nama somaya cha (*ghanam*)

In *jattai* two words are joined in the chanting and each word is repeated six times, while in *ghanam* three words are joined together and each word is repeated thirteen times. A rough guide to the sequence in which *ghanam* is chanted is given below:

1-2-2- 1-1-2-3-3-2-1-1-2-3-2-3-3-2-2-3-4-4-3-2-2-3-4-3-4-4-3-3-4-5-5-4-3-3-4-5.

¹ Hindu Dharma, p. 156, Published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

There are, of course, different tones, lengths of syllables chanted, emphasis of particular sounds and volumes uttered, ranging from faint whispers to great bellowing sounds which literally “shake the walls”. When the chanting alternates between two groups, it is termed *charchai*. Ghanam can only be chanted for the Samhita portion of the Vedas. A very interesting and advanced technique of chanting is called *varna kramam* known only to highly qualified ghanapatins. Even though it sounds rather simple, it is very difficult as each word in the Vedas is slowly analysed for its deeper significance, starting from where in the body the sound originates, how it travels up through the throat and finally how the tongue is positioned to utter the holy sound. The purpose is to maintain the purity of the chanting and it is possible to ascertain very precisely whether a pundit is chanting a specific pada correctly or not. Some eminent pundits know *varna kramam* for every single word in the Vedas.

This description does not of course communicate the experience of listening intently to the Vedas chanted directly, where often a state of immense peace is felt by the listener, highlighting the divine origin of these great ancient texts. Bhagavan started that merely listening to the Vedas, even without understanding them, was sufficient to purify listeners and to alter their state of consciousness to a deeper level within themselves.