

# Introduction to Vedic Knowledge

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## **The perception of Vedic culture in western history**

This publication originates from the need to present in a simple, clear, objective and exhaustive way, the basic information about the original Vedic knowledge, that in the course of the centuries has often been confused by colonialist propaganda, through the writings of indologists belonging to the euro-centric Christian academic system (that were bent on refuting and demolishing the vedic scriptures rather than presenting them in a positive way) and through the cultural superimposition suffered by sincere students who only had access to very indirect material, already carefully chosen and filtered by professors or commentators that were afflicted by negative prejudice.

It was pope Onorius IV (1286-1287) to inaugurate in the West the study of oriental languages and precisely Hebrew, Greek and Arabic. He had studied at the University of Paris before entering the diplomatic career at the service of pope Clement IV (1265-1268), who sent him to celebrate the crowning of Charles d'Anjou as King of Sicily. After becoming pope, Onorius introduced in the University of Paris the new curriculum (*Studia linguarum*) aimed at building the linguistic knowledge required to understand the original texts of the Old and New Testament and the coranic texts, that were the theological, ethical and philosophical foundations of the scholars which in those times were not subject to the Church of Rome: Jews, orthodox Christians and Muslims.

The Ecumenic Council of Wien (1311-1312) recognized the importance of Onorius' strategy and encouraged the creation of suitable departments in all the other European universities, that were then under the complete control of the Church of Rome. In fact, all the universities started as *Scholae monasticae* approved by the papal bull *Studia generalia*, and were managed by the cathedrals or monasteries and aimed at training priests, government officers, lawyers and physicians that would remain strictly loyal to

the Church of Rome. All the students received the clerical tonsure and were only subjected to the ecclesiastic legal authority and not to the authority of the King or any other government agency.

The passage from *Schola monastica* to University (*universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, "universal community of teachers and scholars") was specifically characterized by the creation of teachers' guilds that acquired a certain organizational autonomy from the parishes on which they initially depended. The first of such universities was recognized in Bologna in 1088, followed by those of Paris in 1150, Oxford (1167), Valencia (1208), Cambridge (1209), Salamanca (1218), Montpellier (1220) and Padova (1222).

The official language of all universities was Latin, even if the students - coming from all parts of Europe - were divided into "*nationes*". At the University of Paris these were France, Normandie, Picardie and England-Germany, which also included the students from Scandinavia and eastern Europe.

After attending the preliminary courses (*trivium*: Latin grammar, rhetoric and dialectics, and *quadrivium*: arithmetics, geometry, music and astronomy) the students proceeded to further degrees of specialization, importance and glory consisting in the studies of arts, natural philosophy, medicine, canonic law and theology.

That period saw the resurfacing of some ancient texts that had somehow escaped the anti-pagan devastation conducted by Christians during the previous millennium. However, the only "approved" author allowed to be studied was Aristotle, and his writings were adapted to support the Christian theology, as we can see in the famous *Summa Theologica* by Thomas Aquinas. There were also strict limitations on Aristotle's books: his prohibited texts included physics and metaphysics.

The arabic texts studied in that period were on mathematics, geometry, medicine and the commentaries on the fragments of Aristotle; the most famous authors were Avicenna e Averroè.

Avicenna (Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn Sīnā, 980-1037 CE), considered the father of modern medicine and "avicennan logic", perhaps the greatest representative of the so-called "golden age of Islam". He wrote *The Book of Healing* and the *Canon of*

*Medicine*, based on the teachings of *Sushruta samhita* and *Charaka samhita* as well as the writings of Hippocrates and Galen. He also explored Indian mathematics and aristotelic and neoplatonic philosophy.

Averroè (Abū l-Walīd Muhammad ibn Ahmad Muhammad ibn Rushd, 1126-1198), *qadi* of Sevilla and Cordoba like his father and grandfather, became famous for his logical refutations in defense of the philosophical search, that he presented as compatible and non-contrary to theology. Specifically, he wrote many famous translations with commentaries to the texts of Aristotle, that had become completely forgotten in the West.

His most important work, *The Destruction of Destruction* (*Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, in Latin *Destructio destructionis*) is a refutation of *The Destruction of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, in Latin *Destructio philosophorum*), the aggressive text in which Al Ghazali presented freedom of thinking as offensive against Islamic theology. Averroè also composed a voluminous text focused on the analysis of the Islamic religious doctrines of his times and a treatise on *General Medicine*. Because of his defense of the intrinsic value of culture and free thinking, Averroè was pronounced as heretic, exiled and kept under strict control until his death: this sentence is considered the turning point closing the brief period of the "golden age" of Islamic domination.

Aristotle's works were translated from Greek into Latin also by the monks of Saint Michel, including Giacomo Veneto, starting from 1127. However, the study of Aristotle's philosophy was merely aimed at creating Church leaders that were adequately equipped with the knowledge required to protect it and bring about its triumph at global level. Among the laureates from the University of Paris there were many popes, such as Celestine II, Adrian IV, Innocentius III and Onorius IV.

In his attempts at becoming independent from the Church of Rome, Henry VIII of England too established chairs of "Regius Professor" to teach Hebrew at Cambridge in 1540 and at Oxford in 1546; then a department of Arabic was established in Cambridge in 1643. In 1669 Edmund Castell published his "Dictionary of seven language", the *Lexicon Heptaglotton Hebraicum, Chaldaicum, Syriacum, Samaritanum, Aethiopicum, Arabicum, et Persicum*.

Of course, all the knowledge offered in the universities had to be subordinated to the Christian doctrine: only in the 19th century, after the French revolution and Napoleon's

regime, theology ceased to be a compulsory study in the universities - first in Paris and then in Oxford.

Indology proper (as the study of Sanskrit and Vedic texts) only started after a new sea route to the Indies became feasible. During the period of Islamic expansion, commerce with India was strictly controlled and exploited by Muslims, therefore the European kingdoms suffered great economic losses due to the extreme rise in the cost of spices. At that time, spices were used as medicines, flavorings and preservatives for food, as well as ingredients for perfumes and scents for body, clothing and houses. We need to remember that in that period there was no refrigeration system, the Christian rules discouraged people from taking baths and toilets were seriously rudimentary.

The crusades failed in their attempt to take the Middle East away from Islam, and south Europe had to engage in a hard war on its very territory - Spain, south Italy, Greece - to fight back the invasions of the "Sarrasins". Only in 1491 the King of Spain was able to retake Grenada from the hands of the Muslims. When Constantinople fell in the hands of the Turks, the European monarchs started to seek urgently for a sea route that could allow them to reach the Indies without having to travel through the territories occupied by Islam. This was precisely the plan of Christopher Columbus, as when he started his journey in 1492 he was not looking for America but rather for India, It was also the plan of Vasco da Gama (journey from 1497 to 1499), Magellan (journey of 1519-1522) and other great navigators of those times. The explicit ambition of those monarchs was the direct conquest of the territories and their resources, to be exploited for the greater power of Christianity, so each expedition was accompanied by an ambassador of the Church of Rome, who was to report everything to the pope.

Francis (Francisco) Xavier de Jasso y Azpilicueta (1506-1552) had graduated from Paris University together with Ignatius Loyola and Pierre Favre. He left in 1549 to accompany the Portuguese expedition of Vasco da Gama and organize India's christianization. Initially Xavier had founded the Jesuit order together with Ignatius of Loyola and other 5 friends, with the declared purpose of "converting all the Muslims of the Middle East", but as that task had proven impossible, the Company of Jesus shifted its attention to the fabulous Indies. The Portuguese expedition landed at Goa, on the west coast of India, taking possession of the territory in the name of the pope and immediately founding the College of Saint Paul, a seminar to train lay priests, that was entrusted to by Michele



Ruggieri. This became the headquarters of the Jesuits in Asia, the base from which Nobili, Ricci and Beschi started for their missions respectively to India and to the Far East.

In India, Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) developed the method of inculturation (*accommodatio*), that had already been successfully applied in Europe in the early centuries of Christianity (for example with the Christmas tree, Easter eggs, the processions of the saints, etc) adopting and adapting those Indian traditions and customs that could make Christianity "more digestible" for the natives. He dressed as a *sannyasi*, with a shaved head and *sikha*, and utilized terms in Sanskrit and Tamil - for example calling "Veda" the Bible and "Guru" the Christian priest. He also explained the *brahmanas'* sacred thread as a symbol of Christian Trinity and so on.

All over the occupied region Xavier destroyed the temples, the sacred places and the religious scriptures, that he openly denounced as "works of the devil, repellent and grotesque", applying the usual brutal ways to force the native population to convert to Christianity. All the *brahmanas* were killed or expelled together with their books, and the population was forced to regularly gather in churches to listen to the preaching against their own religion. All the texts that were not written in Portuguese language were burned, no matter what their subject was.

Xavier was particularly interested in children and he removed them from their families "to educate them in a Christian way". Still today in India we find innumerable schools and especially institutes of higher studies - colleges and universities - dedicated to the name of Francis Xavier, and still today it is normal among Hindus to call "idols" the sacred images of their own religion and "mythology" the sacred stories contained in *Upanishads*, *Puranas* and *Itihasas* - so much that people have difficulties in understanding why such definitions are incorrect and inadequate to refer to the objects of their own faith.

In his diaries, Xavier wrote about the children educated by the Jesuits: "Their hatred for idolatry is wonderful. They revolt against the heathens and when they see their own parents engaging in pagan practices, they scold them and come at once to me to report. As soon as I know about one such situation, I go to the spot with a band of these children, who immediately shower the devil with an amount of insult and damage greater than

what was the amount of honor and worship it had received from parents, relatives and friends. The children jump on the idols, they throw them down, break them to pieces, spit on them, trample them under their feet and kick them around - in short, they do them all possible offense. I order to destroy the huts where the idols were kept, and to shatter the idols into the smallest pieces possible. I would never end to describe the great consolation that fills my soul when I see this destruction of the idols by the hands of the idolaters themselves. I cannot describe the happiness I feel watching the idols cast down and destroyed by those same people that once used to worship them. If in spite of all good advice someone persists in making idols, we have him punished by the chief of the village, who sentences him to exile, and we burn his house as a warning for the others."

Besides tirelessly carrying on with this kind of preaching, Xavier repeatedly asked both the pope and the King of Portugal to introduce the Inquisition in India (where it continued in full swing until 1812) to uproot all traces of paganism as well as heresy and even punish scarce enthusiasm in the Christian faith. The local Penal Code of the Inquisition filled 320 pages with the list of prohibitions, and the punishments for the rebels were considered by all contemporaries as the heaviest ever applied by the Portuguese catholic Church. Still today the region of Goa is strongly Catholic, and the remnants of Francis Xavier's body are worshiped as a relic in the main basilica.

The two great maritime and colonial powers in those times were Portugal and Spain, to which pope Martin V assigned the entire world as legal possession with the bulla *Rex Regnum*, giving them "right of crusade and conquest" on all the territories they would find, each on either side of the famous "Tordesillas line" that divided the planet into two halves. The Portugal was given Africa and Asia, while Spain was assigned the new territories of the Americas.

The kingdoms of Britain, France and Holland, that were politically non-aligned with the pope and therefore "not authorized" to conquer lands outside Europe, organized first their pirate fleets to grab whatever they could of the immense wealth transported home by the Spanish and Portuguese fleets. Soon they realized that it was much easier and convenient to establish their own colonies in the New World dealing directly with the natives, who did not seem to care much for the authority of the pope in Rome or Christianity in general.

After the battle of Gravelines (1588) and the famous defeat of the Spanish Invincible Armada that was trying to invade the English coasts, and the two subsequent Spanish failures of 1596 and 1597, England became the greatest maritime and colonial power of the times, under the enlightened reign of Elizabeth I. Already in 1600 the Queen created the East India Trading Company with the status of English Royal Charter. The Company practically had the European monopoly of trade on tea, cotton, silk, indigo and opium, with a strong competitor in the Dutch equivalent of East India Trading Company, that was dealing mostly with spices, cocoa, coffee, sugar etc.

In the subsequent centuries England founded colonies of migrants in north America and Australia, and established a strong commercial and political control on India. In 1670 king Charles II gave the Company the right to acquire territories independently, to mint currency, hold forts and command army troops, establish alliances, wage war and sign peace treaties, exercising full civil and criminal jurisdiction on the territories it acquired. The British regime in India had started.

William Carey (1761-1834), founder of the Baptist Missionary Society, published in 1792 the volume *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. To further his mission, he started to study oriental languages and with the help of one Pandit Mrityunjay he compiled a series of dictionaries of the local languages. From his Serampore Mission press, near Calcutta, he printed over 200 thousands Bibles in 45 Indian and oriental languages (including Oriya, Hindi, Tamil, Sikh, Parsi, Sindhi, Nepali, Armenian, Afghan, Gujarati, Bhutani, Javanese, Siamese and Sinhalese) and started to train a group of "Christian pundits" who studied the Vedic scriptures to refute and oppose them. He also started the publication of school texts for the Fort William College and for the Calcutta School Book Society, as well as the first monthly magazine and then the first daily newspaper in Bengali, starting from 1818. His organization also produced the paper for the printing.

Charles Grant (1746-1823), president of the East India Company, was an ardent activist of the Evangelic party led by William Wilberforce (1759-1833). Under his protection Claudius Buchanan arrived in 1790 at Calcutta; Buchanan was convinced that God had delivered India into the hands of the British for the only purpose of christianizing the Hindus, liberating them from "the yoke of the dark and degrading, monstrous and absurd superstitions of their native faith." After becoming vice president of the Serampore

College, Buchanan journeyed to Orissa in 1805 bringing back deeply distorted descriptions of the "Moloch Jaggernaut" to whom - according to him - thousands of human sacrifices were offered during the annual Ratha yatra at Puri, the "Mecca or Jerusalem of the Hindoos, the Sebastopol of their idolatry".

In 1797 Charles Grant wrote a libel entitled *Observations on the State among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain, particularly with respect to morals and means of improving them*, in which he clearly expressed his intention to introduce to India a strictly Christian school system aimed at demolishing Vedic culture. His Evangelist fellow A.H. Bowman wrote, "Hinduism is a great philosophy which lives on unchanged whilst other systems are dead, which as yet un supplanted has its stronghold in Vedanta, the last and the most subtle and powerful foe of Christianity." This hostile approach was obviously inspired and supported by the university academics, still heavily under the control of Christianity - specifically, in Britan it was Anglican Protestantism, in which the monarch (now emperor of the colonies) was the highest religious authority.

Horace Hayman Wilson (1786-1860), graduated in Medicine at the St Thomas Hospital, arrived in India as assistant surgeon with the East India Company and became secretary (from 1811 to 1833) and then director (from 1837 to 1860) of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal. He translated the *Meghaduta* by Kalidasa and the *Vishnu Purana*, then in 1819 he published the first English-Sanskrit dictionary and helped Mill to compile his famous historical treatise. He was the first to obtain the post of Professor for the Boden Chair of Sanskrit at Oxford in 1833 and he immediately announced a prize of 200 sterling pounds for "the best refutation of the Hindu religious system".

After him, the Boden Chair went to Sir Monier-Williams (1819-1899, author of the most famous and still popularly used Sanskrit/English dictionary), who wrote, "For what purpose then has this enormous territory been committed to England? Not to be the 'corpus vile' of political, social, or military experiments; not for benefit of our commerce, or the increase of our wealth - but that every man, woman and child, from Cape Comorin to the Himalaya mountains, may be elevated, enlightened Christianized... When the walls of the mighty fortress of Brahmanism are encircled, undermined, and finally stormed by the solders of the cross, the victory of Christianity must be signal and complete."

Contrarily to what had been done by the Portuguese government in Goa, where the catholic Inquisition had been imposed by force, the British colonial government strictly maintained a neutral facade, that was necessary in order to avoid the indignation and the violent rebellion of 50 million Indians against the 30 thousand Britishers staying in India. The documents of that period show that sometimes this motivation was also openly declared, as for example by Mr. Twinings, pioneer of the tea trade, and by Colonel Montgomery, commander in chief of the British army in India. Under the governorate of Lord Cornwallis (1786-1805) the official position of the colonial government was to "preserve the laws of the Shaster and the Koran, and to protect the natives of India in the free exercise of their religion," but the missionaries were not only tolerated but even actively helped, because this was convenient for the colonial purposes. The British prime minister, Lord Palmerston (Henry John Temple, 3rd viscount of Palmerston, in office from 1807 until his death in 1865) declared, "It is not only our duty, but in our own interest to promote the diffusion of Christianity as far as possible throughout the length and breadth of India".

Secretary of State Lord Halifax (1881-1959), too, was of the same opinion: " Every additional Christian is an additional bond of union with this country and an additional source of strength to the Empire."

It is interesting to notice that Lord Halifax, also known as Edward Frederick Lindley Wood, first Earl of Halifax, remained in charge as Secretary for Foreign Affairs from 1938 to 1940, and was appointed Viceroy of India from 1926 to 1931 with the additional title of Baron of Irwin on direct recommendation of King George V, also because Edward's grandfather had been Secretary of State for India. In that position, and under the direct pressure of the British King, Lord Halifax took a series of disastrous decisions with the aim of severely repressing the Indian independence movement.

Thomas Babbington Macaulay (1800-1859), first Legislator Lord under the General Governor of India, was given the task to organize the academic system in India precisely in this direction. In a 1836 letter to his father, Macaulay wrote, "It is my belief that if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolator among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence... No Hindu who has received an English education ever remains sincerely attached to his religion."

The missionary Alexander Duff (1806-1878) founded in Calcutta the famous Scottish Churches College, which he envisioned as a "headquarters for a great campaign against Hinduism." He trained students from the wealthy classes of Indian society and possibly from the "high castes" to learn the language and ideals of the colonial government, thus shaping the impressionable minds of the youngsters into the firm belief in the superiority of Christianity and European civilization, for the purpose of creating an intermediate class of "brown sahibs" that would control the native masses for them. The cultural battle against Hinduism was well beyond the scope of the British colonial government: the christianization of the entire world was presented as "the white man's burden" - the duty and mission of each European.

Amongst the many others, Baron von Bunsen, ambassador of Prussia in England, dreamed about converting the entire world to Christianity. His protégé Fredrich Max Mueller (1823-1900), born in Dessau (Germany), studied Sanskrit at Leipzig and translated the *Hitopadesa* before arriving in England in 1846. He was introduced to Macauley and obtained from the East India Company the task to translate the *Rig Veda* into English - 4 shillings a page. After settling in Oxford, Max Mueller translated many other texts and wrote the encyclopedia *The Sacred Books of the East* (50 volumes, started in 1875). He wrote, "This edition of mine and the translation of the Veda will hereafter tell to a great extent... the fate of India, and on the growth of millions of souls in that country.... the only way of uprooting all that has sprung from it during the last 3000 years... and that is of a more degraded and savage character than the worship of Jupiter, Apollo or Minerva... It may have but served to prepare the way of Christ... India is much riper for Christianity than Rome or Greece were at the time of Saint Paul."

Max Muller was particularly irked by those scholars who, instead of devoting themselves to this "evangelic mission", committed the mortal sin to sincerely appreciate Vedic knowledge: one who did that "should know that he can expect no money; nay, he should himself wish for no mercy, but invite the heaviest artillery... to condone Brahminical idolatry and to discountenance Christianity is to commit high treason against humanity and civilization."

One of such rebels was Louis Jacolliot (1837-1890), a French scholar that for a period became supreme Judge in the court of Chandranagar for the colonial regime. In his book *The Bible in India*, Jacolliot wrote, "O Land of ancient India! O Cradle of Humanity,

hail! Hail revered motherland whom centuries of brutal invasions have not yet buried under the dust of oblivion. Hail, Fatherland of faith, of love, of poetry and of science. May we hail a revival of thy past in our Western future... How glorious the epoch that then presented itself to my study and comprehension! ... I enquired of monuments and ruins, I questioned the Vedas whose pages count their existence by thousands of years and whence enquiring youth imbibed the science of life long before Thebes of the hundred gates or Babylon the great had traced their foundations... And then India appears to me in all the living power of her originality – I traced her progress in the expansion of her enlightenment over the world – I saw her giving her laws, her customs, her morale, her religion to Egypt, to Persia, to Greece and Rome... Name of us any modern discovery, and we venture to say that Indian history need not long be searched before the prototype will be found on record... we may read what Manu said, perhaps 10,000 years before the birth of Christ: The first germ of life was developed by water and heat. Water ascends towards the sky in vapors; from the sun it descends in rain, from the rains are born the plants, and from the plants, animals. ... India of the Vedas entertained a respect for women amounting to worship; a fact which we seem little to suspect in Europe when we accuse the extreme East of having denied the dignity of woman, and of having only made her an instrument of pleasure and of passive obedience."

Even the officers of the British government were often very impressed by Vedic culture. In 1689, John Ovington (the King's chaplain) wrote *A Voyage to Surat*, where he said, "Of all the regions of the Earth (India is) the only Public theatre of Justice and Tenderness to Brutes and all living creatures." He also found that, because of their (vegetarian) diet, the Hindus kept "a comely and proportionate body and lived a long life. The simple and meatless food made their thoughts quick and nimble, their comprehension of things easier and developed in them a spirit of fearlessness."

In 1690 the diplomat Sir William Temple wrote in his *Essay upon the Ancient and Modern Learning*, "it seems most probable that Pythagoras learned, and transported into Greece and Italy, the greatest part of his natural and moral philosophy, rather than from the Aegyptians... Nor does it seem unlikely that the Aegyptians themselves might have drawn much of their learning from the Indians long before."

Lord Warren Hastings (1732-1818), first governor general of India (from 1773 to 1785),

wrote, "The writers of the Indian philosophies will survive, when the British dominion in India shall long have ceased to exist, and when the sources which it yielded of wealth and power are lost to remembrances."

Sir Thomas Munro (1761-1827), officer of the British government and governor of Madras (in 1819) stated to the House of Commons, "If a good system of agriculture, unrivalled manufacturing skill, a capacity to produce whatever can contribute to convenience or luxury, schools established in every village for teaching, reading, writing and arithmetic; the general practice of hospitality and charity among each other; and above all, a treatment of the female sex full of confidence, respect, and delicacy, (if all these) are among the signs which denote a civilized people, then the Hindus, are not inferior to the nations of Europe; and if civilization is to become an article of trade between England and India, I am convinced that England will gain by the import cargo."

Colonel James Tod (1782-1835) wrote in his *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan: or the Central and Western Rajput States of India*: "sages like those whose systems of philosophy were prototypes of those of Greece: to whose works Plato, Thales & Pythagoras were disciples? Where do I find astronomers whose knowledge of planetary systems yet excites wonder in Europe as well as the architects and sculptors whose works claim our admiration, and the musicians who could make the mind oscillate from joy to sorrow, from tears to smile..."

In 1887 Sir William Wedderburn Bart (1838 - 1918), magistrate in Pune and chief secretary to the government in Bombay, wrote, "The Indian village has thus for centuries remained a bulwark against political disorder, and the home of the simple domestic and social virtues."

Sir John Malcolm (1829-1896), governor of Bombay, wrote, "The Hindoo...are distinguished for some of the finest qualities of the mind; they are brave, generous, and humane, and their truth is as remarkable as their courage."

Lord Curzon (1859-1925), Marquis of Kedleston, was viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905. In a speech in Delhi in 1901 he said, "Powerful Empires existed and flourished here [in India] while Englishmen were still wandering painted in the woods."

Sir Charles Norton Edgcumbe Eliot (1864-1931) similarly stated, "Let me confess that I



cannot share the confidence in the superiority of Europeans and their ways which is prevalent in the West... Hinduism has not been made, but has grown. It is a jungle, not a building. It is a living example of a great national paganism such as might have existed in Europe if Christianity had not become the state religion of the Roman Empire." He also liked to quote the *Taittiriya Upanishad* (3.6): "Bliss is Brahman, for from bliss all these being are born, by bliss when born they live, into bliss they enter at their death."

Even Francis Yeats-Brown (1886-1944), officer of the Bengal Lancers, was attracted to the study of vedic knowledge and yoga, and ended up writing a book on these topics (*Yoga Explained*).

However, the British officer to be most impressively transformed by the Indian experience was Sir John Woodroffe, also known as Arthur Avalon (1865-1936), general advocate for Bengal during a period of 18 years and supreme magistrate in 1915. The study of Sanskrit and vedic scriptures conquered him to the point he personally adopted the traditional Indian clothing (*dhoti*). His greatest interest was for Yoga and Tantra, which he considered the greatest expression of India's religious spirit, with its deep symbolism and secret philosophical aspects. He translated many original texts and published several treatises including the famous *The Serpent Power*, and gave innumerable lectures and presentations. He wrote, "I believe that the East and particularly India possesses that which is the highest value. I wish to see this preserved for the mutual benefit of East and West... An examination of the Vedic thesis shows that it is in conformity with the most advanced philosophical and scientific thoughts of the West and, where this is not so, it is the scientist who will go to the Vedantist and not the Vedantist to the scientist... In India there has been intellectual and spiritual freedom - the most valuable of all... As the Veda says, Truth will conquer."

Sir William Jones (1746-1794), graduated from Oxford, was appointed judge of the supreme court in Calcutta; during his stay in India he started to study Sanskrit and founded the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal. He was fluent in 13 languages and knew 28 more rather well, and probably this is why he was the first to see a relationship between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin, and more distantly with Goth and the other Celtic languages, and with ancient Persian. Starting from these observations, he formulated the famous theory of an ancient indo-european civilization, and the belief that Pythagoras and Plato had tapped the Indian wisdom of Vedanta to develop their philosophical

systems. He wrote poems dedicated to Narayana, Lakshmi and Ganga, and he declared himself to be in love with the *gopis*, charmed with Krishna, an enthusiastic admirer of Rama and a devout adorer of Brihma (Brahma), Bishen (Vishnu), Mahisher (Maheshwara)".

He encouraged his colleague Charles Wilkins to produce the first English translation of *Bhagavad gita* and inspired many other later men of culture, such as Schopenhauer (who mentioned him in various writings) and indirectly the poets of the romantic movement, such as Lord Byron and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Jones was heavily criticized by James Mill (father of the philosopher John Stuart Mill), that in 1818 had written for the government the voluminous *History of British India* greatly based on the description of the notorious French missionary Abbé Dubois. Mill's treatise was one of the compulsory texts at the Haileybury College, training the government officers that were going to serve in India.

Many scholars have noticed a strong connection of the ancient Vedic knowledge with Greek culture, still considered by mainstream academia as the origin of western culture. It is well known that in ancient times culture freely circulated in the form of books, teachers, religious people and scholars, traveling along the rich commercial routes both by sea and by land. Merchants of all nations used to establish small colonies in the countries where they had commercial interests, and often facilitated the traveling and settlement of fellow countrymen who wanted to emigrate for various reasons. Both the caravans and the cargo ships were happy to accept passengers traveling in both directions, connecting India with the mediterranean and middle-eastern countries such as Greece, Rome, Egypt, Phoenicia, Anatolia and Mesopotamia. This is how culture spread - philosophy, religion and sciences, that in the ancient world were considered all harmonious parts of the One Knowledge.

The first "foreign" scholars to approach Vedic knowledge were probably the Greek philosophers, who even before the advent of Alexander the Great went to study in the famous universities of Nalanda and Takshila, that were nearest to the western boundaries of India. Indians, too, traveled often, and there is evidence of the presence of *brahmanas* and Buddhist monks in Greece, especially in Athens, even before Socrates. Eusebius and Aristoxenes speak about them, and there is also a fragment of Aristotle's preserved in the writings of Diogenes Laertius, specifically in his *Biography of Pythagoras*.

Another of Pythagoras' biographers, Iamblichus (582-506 BCE), clearly states that the great philosopher and mathematician visited India during his study journeys. Certainly during his traveling he had the opportunity to study the *Sulba sutras*, the section of Vedic scriptures that deals with mathematics, containing the theorem that is known today as "Pythagoras' theorem" (the quadrature of the hypotenuse), as well as the square root of 2 correct to the fifth decimal, and other jewels of knowledge. The oldest existing copy of the *Sulba sutra* is a transcription by Baudhayana, traced back at least to the 8th century BCE.

Among the Vedic concepts embraced by Greek scholars there are certainly mathematics and geometry, music, cosmology, astronomy, physics, medicine, metallurgy as well as metaphysics or philosophy, religious symbolism and the awareness of the unity of life. Specifically, the compassionate awareness of the common nature of all beings gave rise to ethical vegetarianism, of which the pythagoreans became the main exponents, so much that until the 20th century in Europe all vegetarians were called pythagoreans.

In *Phedo*, Plato describes silent meditation as the withdrawing of the senses from their objects and stopping the flow of the movements of the mind. To understand how deeply ancient Greeks absorbed the religion of Vedic India it is sufficient to compare the image of the Omphalos ("the navel of the world"), center of the Orphic cult at Delphi and in the entire Mediterranean region, with the picture of any Shiva linga.

Another great personality that certainly visited India was Apollonius Tyanaeus, neopythagorean philosopher hailing from Cappadocia, compared by the christians of the 4th century to Jesus himself. Apollonius' biographer Philostratus speaks of his journey to India in 2 chapters of the book he wrote in 210 CE. He also writes, "Everyone wishes to live near God, but only Hindus succeed in doing that."

A contemporary of Philostratus, Lucius Flavius Arrianus also known as Xenophon (86 - 160 CE) compiled the *Anabasis Alexandri*, the story of the campaigns of Alexander the Great, based on the writing of Ptolemy (the most important general in Alexander's army), Callisthenes (the nephew of Aristotle, Alexander's tutor), Onesicritus, Nearchus and Aristobulus, all contemporaries of Alexander. Here is how Xenophon describes the Indians: "They are remarkably brave, and the best warriors among all the Asians. They give enormous value to moral integrity and truthfulness, they are so honest that they do

not use bolts for their doors or written contracts for their agreements. They are so reasonable that rarely they require the intervention of judges to regulate their disagreements... It is also remarkable how in India all Indians are free and there is no slavery. Their armies have never invaded foreign countries with the purpose of conquest."

Many peoples came in contact with Vedic culture and were fascinated by it to the point that they spontaneously chose to embrace it, and yet they remained completely independent politically; the *Mahabharata* lists several of them among the allies of the Pandavas or the Kurus that took part in the Kurukshetra war.

After his brief and unsuccessful campaign in India, Alexander the Great returned to the West with a great quantity of Vedic texts and a numerous group of translators and copiers, that settled in the new capital called Alexandria of Egypt and became the foundation of the very famous library and university of Alexandria, where many hundreds of thousands of texts were preserved.

Hellenistic culture was perfectly compatible with vedic knowledge and religion, yet there were also some who chose to fully embrace the Hindu orthodox tradition, especially Vaishnavism. In India we still find the famous column of Heliodorus the son of Dion, Greek ambassador for the King Antialkila of Bactria, who was envoyed to the court of King Bhagabhadra of Varanasi in the 2nd century BCE. This Heliodorus was so taken with Indian spirituality that he officially converted to Hinduism, becoming a devotee of Vishnu, and erected a commemorative pillar with a Sanskrit (Brahmi) inscription to praise "Vasudeva, the God of all Gods, who rides Garuda".

Still in 662 CE, Severus Sebokht di Nisibis, christian bishop of Kenneserin in Syria, although condemning astrologers of all denominations, was very favorably impressed by the "knowledge of the Hindus, their subtle and ingenious discoveries, superior to those of the Greeks and Babylonians, of their rational mathematical system and calculation method (the decimal system) that no words can praise enough".

Trade and cultural exchanges continued for many centuries also between the western ports of India and Egypt - one example for all, the five ships sent by Queen Hatsheput to purchase spices - and between India and the ancient kingdom of Israel at the times of Solomon. These contacts continued with the Alexandria of the Ptolemies and with Rome.

At Muziris (now Cranganore, in Kerala) there was a garrison of 1200 legionaries guarding the Roman merchants' colony. In the same period some colonies of Jewish traders settled in the area.

The ports of the east coast of India were the base of trading and cultural exchanges with the countries of the far east. The greatest Chinese river, the Yang-tze, received its name in honor of the Ganges. Hu Shih, ambassador of China in the United States, declared, "India conquered and dominated culturally China for 20 centuries, without ever sending one single soldier beyond the borders."

Ancient Indians founded many colonies (collectively called Svarnabhumi) all around Indonesia up to Singapore (originally called Sinha Puri, "the city of the lion"). Still today we can see in Cambodia one of the largest Hindu temples in the religious complex of Angkor Vat, and of course we must remember the huge spreading of Buddhism in the far east - Buddhism being derived without interruptions from Vedic culture and still sharing many ideas with it.

After the fall of the Roman empire and with the advent of Islam, it was the Muslims that controlled access to India. They, too, studied the scientific discoveries of the Vedic civilization and percolated some of them into the regions of Europe they had conquered.

Already in 638 Khalifa Umar launched a campaign to conquer India, particularly the region that is today known as Beluchistan. From 638 to 715 these invasions were regularly contained and pushed back by the Baluch princes of Makaran. The Arab chronicles of the time attribute such defeats to the "black magic" apparently used in the mysterious weapons of the Hindus - who became famous as the great magicians of the Arabian tales, developing into legends such as those of the *Arabian Nights*.

Since the ethical code of the *kshatriyas* did not allow the persecution of defeated enemies, the Hindu princes stopped fighting as soon as their opponents accepted defeat, and when the enemies surrendered they were allowed to enter freely into the territories and approach the population without restrictions, as long as they abstained from any form of violence. Actually all visitors and foreigners were offered great honors, as enjoined by the vedic teaching *atithi devo bhava*, "a guest must be respected like God himself".

This gave the Arab invaders the opportunity to come in contact with the texts and the

teachers of Vedic knowledge. The fourth Khalifa Ali bin Abi Talib (656-661 CE) described India as "the land where books were written for the first time, and where wisdom and knowledge were born". In the 9th century the historian Yaqubi wrote, "Hindus are superior to all other nations for intelligence and thoughtfulness. They are the most precise in astronomy and astrology, and the most expert in medicine. Greeks and Persians have gained much from their knowledge." Another Muslim historian of the 9th century, Al Jahiz, commented, "the Hindus excel in mathematics and in the other sciences, they have perfected the arts such as sculpture, painting and architecture, and have collections of poetry, philosophy, literature and ethical sciences. They are wise, brave, and possess the virtues of cleanliness and purity".

After consolidating their knowledge of Indian society and its territory, and fearing the growing Hindu religious and cultural influence on their own lands (especially on the sufi movement), the Arabs returned to their aggression plans and in 711 Mohammed-ibn-Qasim took possession of Deval (presently Debal, near Karachi) by blackmailing the guardian of the fortress gates. He kidnapped his 3 children, beheaded one of them and threatened he would kill the other two if the gate keeper refused to open for him a secondary secret door that led into the walls.

Once the Sindh was occupied, the invaders focused on Rajasthan and Gujarat, attacking respectively the Rajputana and Chalukya (Solanki) princes, who successfully defended their territories. In 980 there was a second wave of invasions by the "new Muslims" of the islamized regions of Persia, Turkey and Mongolia. The army of the Persian Sabuktgin occupied Kubha (now Kabul, in Afghanistan) by exploiting the Hindu princes' ethical code in war, according to which one should not attack an enemy who is not ready for battle. So the Sultan dressed his soldiers in black, wrapped the horses' hooves with cloth to muffle the sound of their steps, and attacked the Hindu army camp in the middle of the night, when all the warriors had gone peacefully to sleep. In the confusion and surprise, almost all the warriors were killed before they had the time to get their weapons. The few survivors, including prince Anandapala the son of King Jayapala, withdrew to Ubandapura (presently Und in Pakistan) in the kingdom of Pakhtunistan. That region, too, was invaded by the muslims, who won the Lahore battle by secretly administering a slow effect poison to the war elephants in the Hindu army.

The 17 years old Trilochanapala, son of Anantapala, was crowned king and moved the

capital to Kangra (Himachal Pradesh); in 1020 he was killed by a small group of Muslims disguised as Hindu *sannyasis*, who insisted to meet him in his apartment to deliver a secret message. The fake *sadhus* cut the prince's throat and left the decapitated body with a message stating that "all those who opposed Allah's soldiers would suffer the same fate". The subsequent attack to the Kangra fort found the defenders still shocked, confused and without a leader, so almost all the inhabitants fled to the mountains.

The way to the subcontinent was opened: the Persian Sultan Mahmud Ghazni, son of Sabuktgin, immediately started a series of regular incursions against Purushapura (Peshawar), Lavakushpura (Lahore), Mulasthana (Multan), Somanath, Palitana, Staneshvara (Thanesar), Mathura, Kannauj and Khajuraho, looting treasures and enslaving the local people, that were sent through the Himalayan passes of the Hindu Kush ("the Hindu killer"), a territory that earned that name because the Hindu slaves were forced to carry the looted treasures by walking to the inner lands of their conquerors, and at every journey they died in their thousands of exhaustion, cold and starvation.

From 1033 to 1187 the islamic power in India became consolidated, and the Sultans investigated more deeply into Indian culture. With the new Sultan Mohammed Ghori, belonging to the second generation of Indian converts (the Gauris had been cowherd men subject to the Solanki princes) the situation changed drastically. Now the invaders had no more need to collect information from the local Hindus, therefore all masks were thrown aside. In 1191 Ghori attacked Prithviraj Chauhan, Maharaja Rajput of Shaka Ambara, but he was defeated; Ghori's army escaped by covering their retreat with a herd of cows chained to one another, so that the Hindu warriors could not advance without killing the innocent animals.

After being defeated, Ghori proposed the peace, begging forgiveness for his aggression and calling the Maharaja "brother"; he was allowed to go free and the Maharaja even gave him an escort with 500 horses and 20 elephants. But as soon as he was out of reach, Ghori massacred his escort and sent their heads to the Maharaja, then immediately resumed his attacks. Finally he defeated the Hindu King by challenging him to a personal duel, and instead capturing him as a prisoner. The Maharaja was chained, force-fed opium and paraded in that condition in front of the Rajput army, then his eyes were carved out and he was kept as a slave in the court of Ghori. The entire territory conquered

by Ghori was then submitted to the strict islamic law: all the Vedic texts were destroyed, the *brahmanas* slaughtered or forced to convert, the temples razed to the ground (and mosques were built in their place) and the Persian language was imposed as the only allowed language (which later became the present Urdu-Hindu). The "infidels" could continue to practice their religion but only in a strictly private way, and only by submitting to a constant system of limitations and humiliations. All the non-Muslims were given a legal status of permanent slavery (*zimma*), under the power of a local Muslim owner (*zamindar*) to whom they had to pay a "survival tax" just to avoid being killed, plus the rent for the land they lived on (*kharaj*), and various other and completely new taxes. Only a Muslim could ride (horses etc) or carry weapons. The non-Muslims had no right to disobey any order given them by a Muslim, build a house that was taller than the house of the poorest Muslim in the region, build new temples or repair the old or damaged temples, teach or study texts that were "contrary to Islam". Non-Muslims also had to submit to a series of rules for clothing (for example the prohibition to wear shoes) and restrictions in social life and professional occupation, specifically engineered to make life extremely difficult to those who chose not to convert to Islam.

The islamic invasion also wiped out Buddhism - an essentially monastic, non-violent and non-political system that until then had survived and thrived under the protection of the Hindu princes. The Muslims saw the Buddhists as even more "infidel" than Hindus, because Buddhism denies the existence of God and the soul. The monks that survived the destruction of the Buddhist university centers escaped to Tibet, Lanka and the regions east of India, where they started to thrive again under the local monarchs.

In 1192 the islamic invaders took Hastinapura (Delhi); from there they swarmed into the Ganges plain down to present Bangladesh, imposing the fundamentalist islamic government in the regions they were occupying. The Bengal sultanate became the easter counterpart of the sultanate of Delhi, with which it often clashed for the supremacy on the subcontinent. In 1326 the Muslims arrived in south India, seizing a large part of the territory; the city of Madras took its name from the *madrassa* (islamic religious school) that made it famous, and the name of Hyderabad, in central-south India, was imposed to the pre-existing city. The same thing happened with Allahabad (ancient Prayaga), Ahmedabad and many other cities.



For some time the hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara resisted in the region, fighting successfully from 1331 to 1565 against the Bahamani sultans that had settled in present Andhra pradesh. At that time Vijayanagara became the only shelter for the *brahmanas* and the teachers of Vedic knowledge, until 1565 when this last Hindu stronghold was stormed, his inhabitants slaughtered to the last, and all buildings totally destroyed during 6 continuous months of looting and destruction.

The islamic control on the Indian subcontinent was opposed in Maharashtra by Maharatha Chatrapati Shivaji, and in Kashmir and Punjab by Sikhism, originally founded by Guru Nanak and transformed into the combative Khalsa Panth by Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh.

The Marathas fought the Mughals from 1674 to 1701, when they succeeded in reclaiming a great part of the subcontinent to hindu rule; however from 1775 the Marathas were engaged in wars by the British and were finally defeated in 1818. Similarly, the Sikh empire developed in the north (Panjab, Kashmir, Sindh etc) from 1799 to 1849, when it was dissolved by the British. The Kings of Orissa also defended their territories from 1212 (the time of the first invasion) to 1567, when the Afghans declared their independence from the Moghul empire and established themselves in Orissa, to be briefly substituted by the Marathas and then by the British.

However, by and large over several centuries the islamic fundamentalists were able to conduct their systematic persecutions against the tradition of Vedic knowledge. One important exception was Muhammad Dara Shikoh (1627-1658), son of the Moghul emperor Shah Jahan. The *mullahs* did not like Muhammad Dara because of his sufi heterodoxy and his admiration for Vedic knowledge; he was particularly fascinated by the *Upanishads* and translated 50 of them under the title of *Sirr i Akbar* ("the Great Secret"), a book that also included quotes from *Bhagavad gita* and *Yoga vashista*. On the order of his brother Aurangzeb, who ascended the throne after his father, Dara was executed in 1659 as a heretic because he stated in his book *Majma ul Bahrayn* ("the meeting of two oceans", referring to Hinduism and Islam) that the Koran meant to indicate the Vedic texts when it spoke of the *Kitab al Maknun*, "the hidden book".

In Europe, after the cultural darkness of the middle ages, the French illuminists were among the first to rediscover the fascination for the ancient Indian wisdom. Voltaire

(1694-1774) wrote, "The Vedas are the most precious gift for which the west is eternally indebted to the east... everything came to us from the banks of the Ganges - astronomy, astrology, metempsychosis and so on. It is important to note that at least 2500 years ago Pythagoras traveled from Samo to the Ganges to learn geometry. Certainly he would not have embarked in such a journey if the reputation of the *brahmanas'* science had not been established in Europe for a long time."

A contemporary of Voltaire, Pierre Sonnerat (1748-1814), author of *Voyage to the east Indies and China*, wrote, "Among the Indians we find the traces of the remotest antiquity... we know that all peoples came here to seek the elements of their knowledge... It is well known that Pythagoras went to India to study under the *brahmanas*, who were the most enlightened among the human beings... In her splendor, India gave religion and law to all the other peoples; Egypt and Greece owed her their own wisdom."

Astronomer Jean-Claude Bailly (1736–1793), member of the Academy of Sciences, wrote, "The Hindu astronomical system is much more ancient than the ones of the Greeks and even of the Egyptians; the calculations made by the Hindus 4500 years ago on the star movements are precise to the minute." Another French astronomer, Pierre Simon de Laplace (1749-1827), who became famous for his hypothesis on the origin of the solar system from a nebula, as well as for the equation and the mathematical differential operator that took his name, wrote, "It is India that gave us the ingenious method to express all numbers with 10 symbols, each with a value of position and an absolute value - a deep and important idea that only seems so simple now because we ignore its true merit. This simplicity, this ease of utilization that conferred to all calculations, puts our arithmetics above all other useful inventions. We can better appreciate the greatness of this conquest when we remember that it escaped the genius of Archimedes and Apollinius, two of the greatest men produced by antiquity."

Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731-1805) was the first academic scholar to study specifically Indian culture. He lived in India for 7 years and produced the French translation of the *Zenda Avesta*, the main text of parsism, and also a Latin translation of the *Upanishads* published in 1804, that became one of Arthur Schopenhauer's favorite readings. Duperron wrote, "If the British... continue to refuse to enrich European culture with the Sanskrit scriptures... they will bear the shame of having sacrificed honor, honesty and humanity to the vile lust for gold and money, and man's knowledge will get

no glory or benefit from their conquests."

Another French thinker of the times, Victor Cousin (1792-1867), wrote, "By carefully reading the poetic and philosophical monuments of the East, and especially of India, that are starting to spread in Europe, we discover so many and so deep truths, that we are compelled to kneel in front of eastern philosophy, and to see this cradle of the human race as the motherland of the most sublime philosophy."

Cousin, too, became a source of inspiration for the subsequent generations, among which we may mention Théodore Simon Jouffroy, Jean Philibert Damiron, Garnier, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Jules Barthelemy Saint-Hilaire, Felix Ravaisson-Mollien, Charles de Rémusat, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jules Simon, Paul Janet, Adolphe Franck and Patrick Edward Dove.

In France the interest for the study of the *Vedas* continued with Jules Michelet (1798-1874), who wrote, "From India we get a stream of light, a river of Right and Reason... while in our West dry and barren minds treat Nature with arrogance, the Indian spirit, that is the richest and most fecund of all, has generously embraced universal brotherhood, that includes the identity of all souls."

Another great Frenchman, Victor Hugo (1802-1885), author of *Les misérables* and *Notre Dame de Paris*, wrote a poem on *Kena Upanishad*.

Henri Frédéric Amiel (1821- 1881) stated, "It is not a bad thing, to have some brahminical souls in the western world."

Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) wrote a poem entitled after Savitri and considered the Vedic texts "much better than the Bible, the Gospels and all the works written by the Fathers of the Church."

Romain Rolland (1866-1944), Nobel Prize 1915 for literature, author of a book on Ramakrishna's life, added, "If there is a place on this earth where man's dream have found a home since the earliest days of his existence, this is India! For over 30 centuries the tree of vision, with all its thousands of branches and millions of twigs, has grown in this torrid land, the burning lap of the Gods, and is tirelessly renovated... Let us return to our eagle nest on the Himalaya. It is waiting for us because it belongs to us, and we, european eaglets, do not need to renounce any part of our true nature... The spirit of the

Vedanta has never been obstructed by a class of priests, each man has been totally free to go wherever he wanted, seeking the spiritual explanation for the spectacle of the universe."

The Frenchman Edgar Quinet (1803-1875) was the first to introduce the concept of "eastern renaissance... a new reform of the religious and secular world: this is the great subject of today's philosophy." Followed Pierre Loti (1850-1923, *nom de plume* of Louis-Marie-Julien Viaud) who wrote, "I pay homage to you with veneration and awe, o ancient India, of whom I am an adept, India of the greatest glory of arts and philosophy... May your awakening dazzle the west!"

Edward Gibbon (1734-1794), great English historian of the Enlightenment period, author of the famous *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, describes with admiration the freedom of religion in Hinduism: "Thus the Hindus have an extraordinary wide selection of beliefs and practices to choose from: they can be monotheists, pantheists, polytheists, agnostics or even atheists. They may follow a strict or a loose standard of moral conduct, or they may choose instead an amoral emotionalism or mysticism. They may worship regularly at a temple or may not go there at all. ... The ancient Romans also had a similar form of worship like the Hindus... The policy of the emperors and the senate, as far as it concerned religion, was happily seconded by the enlightened, and by the habits of the superstitious, part of their subjects. The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord."

Among the other great British thinkers of the times, we may mention Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), who later became the idol of subsequent generations of poets such as Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne and William Butler Yeats. Both Shelley and his wife Mary (author of the famous *Frankenstein* novel) were passionate admirers of Vedic wisdom, that also turned them into vegetarian activists. Shelley even wanted to move to India. Robert Southey (1774-1843) was the first English poet to incorporate Vedic references in his works - for example in *The curse of Kehama* he speaks of mount Meru, Parvati, Shiva and the Ganges.

Among the German admirers of Vedic knowledge we can mention Immanuel Kant (1712-1804), who gave many lectures on the subject at the Konigberg University in eastern Prussia, and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) the leader of the famous movement Sturm und Drang.

He wrote, "(India is) the lost paradise of all the religions and philosophies, the cradle of humanity, and my eternal home, the great Orient awaiting to be discovered within ourselves. The origins of mankind can be traced back to India, where the human mind has obtained the first forms of wisdom and virtue with a simplicity, a strength and a sublimity that have, frankly, absolutely no equal in our cold philosophical european world."

A very similar opinion was expressed by Friedrich Creuzer (1771-1858), philologist and archeologist, in his *Symbolik und Mythologie der allen Volker*: "If there is a country on earth which can justly claim the honor of having been the cradle of the human race or at least the scene of the earliest civilization, the successive developments of which carried into all parts of the ancient world and even beyond, the blessings of knowledge which is the second life of man, that country assuredly is India."

August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1767-1845) founder of the Romantic movement together with his brother Frederich (1772-1829), produced 18 lectures on *Bhagavad gita*, entitled *Dialogues of Krishna and Arjoon*. In his commentaries he wrote, "Even the loftiest philosophy of the Europeans, the idealism of reason as it is set forth by the Greek philosophers, appears in comparison with the abundant light and vigor of Oriental idealism like a feeble Promethean spark in the full fold of heavenly glory of the noonday sun, faltering and feeble and ever ready to be extinguished."

The Prussian minister of public education, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) became such an enthusiast of Schlegel's edition of *Bhagavad gita* that he started to study Sanskrit himself.

He wrote to his friend, the statesman Frederick von Gentz (1764-1832): "I read the Indian poem for the first time when I was in my country estate in Silesia and, while doing so, I felt a sense of overwhelming gratitude to God for having let me live to be acquainted with this work. It must be the most profound and sublime thing to be found in the world."

Friedrich Majer (1771-1818) wrote, "It will no longer remain to be doubted that the

priests of Egypt and the sages of Greece have drawn directly from the original well of India... Towards the Orient, to the banks of the Ganga and the Indus that our hearts feel drawn as by some hidden urge - it is there that all the dark presentiments point which lie in the depths of our heart...In the Orient, the heavens poured forth into the earth." In his book *Philosophy of Mythology*, F. W. J. Schelling (1773-1854) devoted over 100 pages to India; in a 1802 lecture he praised "the sacred texts of the Indians, that are superior to the Bible."

Novalis (1772-1801), pseudonym of Baron Friedrich von Hardenberg, leader of the romantic movement, wrote, "Sanskrit takes me back to the original people that had been forgotten."

Inspired by von Schlegel, Friedrich Ruckert (1788-1866), professor of eastern languages in Erlangen from 1827 to 1841, produced many translations from Sanskrit to German, including the *Gita Govinda*.

Henrich Heine (1797-1856), whose poems were put in music as Lieder ("sonate") by Robert Schumann and Franz Schubert, speaks in his Buch der Lieder "the dear motherland, the blue and sacred Ganga, the eternally shining Himalayas, the gigantic forests of Banyan trees on whose wide shadowy paths quietly walk wise elephants and pilgrims".

Always in the field of music, it is interesting to know that Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) left several fragments of translations and adaptation of the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad gita*.

However, the most famous scholar of the Vedas in this period was Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), who wrote, "There is no religion or philosophy so sublime and elevating as Vedanta... The Vedas are the most rewarding and the most elevating book which can be possible in the world... In the whole world there is no study so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It is destined sooner or later to become the faith of the people... It has been the solace of my life - it will be the solace of my death. It is the product of the highest human wisdom." Schopenhauer openly expressed his disappointment about the european Christian culture based on the Bible; he often proclaimed that his own philosophy was based on Vedic teachings.

Another great German scholar, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), expressed in various occasions his admiration for the works of Kalidasa (*Shakuntala* and *Meghaduta*) and for *Gita Govinda*.

Heinrich Zimmer (1890-1943), the greatest German scholar on Indian philology, to whom a Chair was dedicated at the University of Heidelberg (for Indian philosophy and intellectual history), wrote, "with the cult of the Great Goddess in Hinduism, the archaic heritage of sensual earth-bound rites rises once again overwhelmingly to the zenith".

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) spoke disparagingly of those Europeans who, lacking in intellectual discernment, wanted to convert and "civilize" the *brahmanas*. Paul Dessen (1845-1919) also known as Deva Sena, wrote, "on the tree of wisdom there is no fairer flower than the Upanishads, and no finer fruit than the Vedanta philosophy". Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), the founder of the Analytical Psychology, gave summer lectures on yoga philosophy and kundalini in Zurich for a few years. He wrote, "We do not yet realize that while we are turning upside down the material world of the East with our technical proficiency, the East with its psychic proficiency, is throwing our spiritual world into confusion."

Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925), the famous founder of the Anthroposophic Society, wrote, "What we read in the Vedas, those archives of Hindu wisdom, gives us only a faint idea of the sublime doctrines of the ancient teachers".

Herman Hesse (1877-1962), Nobel Prize 1946 for literature, became famous for his *Siddharta*, a novel centered on spiritual search in ancient India. He wrote, "India is not only a country and something geographical, but the home and the youth of the soul, the everywhere and nowhere, the oneness of all times... The marvel of the Bhagavad-Gita is its truly beautiful revelation of life's wisdom which enables philosophy to blossom into religion."

Albert Einstein (1879-1955), famous physicist, author of the revolutionary relativity theory and the law of the photoelectrical effect (the basis of quanta theory) and Nobel Prize for Physics 1921, declared, "We owe a lot to Indians who taught us how to count, without which no worthwhile scientific discovery could have been made... When I read the Bhagavad-Gita and reflect about how God created this universe everything else seems so superfluous."

The Belgian Count Maurice de Maeterlinck (1862-1949), Nobel Prize 1911 for literature, explains in his book *Mountain Paths* that the doctrine of Karma is "the only satisfactory solution of life's injustices." He also wrote, "We cannot tell how the religion of the Hindus came into being... we find it already complete in its broad outlines, its main principles. Not only is it complete, but the farther back we go, the more perfect it is, the more unadulterated..."

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), one of the most famous German philosophers, author of the thesis of Total Reality, wrote, "India has created a special momentum in world history as a country to be searched for... Without being known too well, it has existed for millennia in the imagination of the Europeans as a wonderland. Its fame, which it has always had with regard to its treasures, both its natural ones, and in particular, its wisdom, has lured men there... India has always been an object of yearning, a realm of wonder, a world of magic."

Inspired by the ancient Indian schools described by the Greeks, Count Hermann Keyserling (1880-1946) founded in 1920 the *School of Wisdom* in Darmstadt, Germany - based on the concept of a planetary culture beyond nationalism and cultural ethnocentrism. He wrote about the "absolute superiority of India over the West in philosophy; poetry from the Mahabharata, containing the Bhagavad-Gita, "perhaps the most beautiful work of the literature of the world."

One of the most remarkable personalities of this period was Margaret Elizabeth Noble (1867-1911), born in Ireland, but famous in India as Sister Nivedita. She wrote various books, such as *The Master as I Saw Him; Notes of Some Wanderings; Kedar Nath and Bhadri Narayan; Kali the Mother; The Web of Indian Life; An Indian Study of Love and Death; Studies from an Eastern Home; Indian Art; Cradle Tales of Hinduism; Religion and Dharma; Aggressive Hinduism; Footfalls of Indian History; Civic Ideal and Indian Nationality; Hints on National Education in India; Lambs Among Wolves; On Education; On Hindu Life, Thought and Religion; On Political, Economic and Social Problems.*

She met Swami Vivekananda in London in 1895 and became his disciple, moving to Calcutta on his invitation and accepting the order of *brahmacharya* in 1889; she the first western woman admitted to an Indian monastic order. A few weeks later she was joined



by two more female disciples of Vivekananda, the Americans Sara C. Bull (wife of the famous Norwegian violinist and composer Ole Bull) and Josephine MacLeod. Vivekananda had written her, "Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a man, but a woman - a real lioness - to work for Indians, women especially. India cannot yet produce great women, she must borrow them from other nations. Your education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination and above all, the Celtic blood make you just the woman wanted."

She was intimate friend of Sarada Devi (Ramakrishna's wife), Aurobindo Ghosh and many intellectuals in the Bengali community, such as Rabindranath Tagore, Jagadish Chandra Bose (the Indian scientist that invented the radio simultaneously with Marconi) and his wife Abala Bose, and the artists Abanindranath Tagore, Ananda Coomaraswami and Nandalal Bose. She is particularly famous in India because she actively contributed to the cause of Indian independence and to the development of a Hindu educational system for women, including adult women and widows. She wrote, "The whole history of the world shows that the Indian intellect is second to none... Are the countrymen of Bhaskaracharya and Shankaracharya inferior to the countrymen of Newton and Darwin? We trust not."

In this brief review of the admirers of Indian culture we cannot forget the founders of the Theosophical Society. Helena Petrova Blavatsky (1831-1891) greatly drew from Vedic knowledge, especially from the *Upanishads* and the *Vedanta*, to write her *magnum opus*, *The Secret Doctrine* (published in 1885). It was precisely the Theosophians who first introduced Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to the reading of *Bhagavad gita*.

The Theosophist Christopher W. B. Isherwood (1904-1986) worked with Swami Prabhavananda to the translation of *Gita*, *Upanishads* and Patanjali's *Yoga sutras*, awakening among Indians a new interest for vedic knowledge, "that was so valued by westerners". Isherwood also wrote *Vedanta for the Western World* and *My Guru and His Disciple* (about Swami Prabhavananda, who was his spiritual guide for about 30 years). He declared, "I believe the Gita to be one of the major religious documents of the world... The Gita is not simply a sermon, but a philosophical treatise."

Colonel Henry S Olcott (1832-1907), co-founder of the Theosophical Society together

with Blavatsky, strongly believed that "the ancient Hindus could navigate the air, and not only navigate it, but fight battles in it... they must have known all the arts and sciences related to the science", as he stated in a lecture in Allahabad (the ancient Prayaga).

Probably the most famous personality in this Theosophist group was Annie Wood Besant (1847-1933), active socialist on the executive committee of the Fabian Society along with George Bernard Shaw. She became directly engaged in the Indian independence movement and was a founder of the Indian National Congress (still today the most powerful party on the Indian political scene). Besant wrote, "After a study of some forty years and more of the great religions of the world, I find none so perfect, none so scientific, none so philosophical and none so spiritual that the great religion known by the name of Hinduism. Make no mistake, without Hinduism, India has no future... This is the India of which I speak - the India which, as I said, is to me the Holy Land. For those who, though born for this life in a Western land and clad in a Western body, can yet look back to earlier incarnations in which they drank the milk of spiritual wisdom from the breast of their true mother - they must feel ever the magic of her immemorial past, must dwell ever under the spell of her deathless fascination; for they are bound to India by all the sacred memories of their past; and with her, too, are bound up all the radiant hopes of their future, a future which they know they will share with her who is their true mother in the soul-life... India is the mother of religion. In her are combined science and religion in perfect harmony, and that is the Hindu religion, and it is India that shall be again the spiritual mother of the world."

Mirra Alfassa (Morisset or Rochard, 1878-1973), also known as Mother Meera, or Mère as she was called by Aurobindo and his followers, arrived in India for the first time with Alexandra David-Neel (1868-1969), French explorer and scholar in Sanskrit and Buddhism at the Sorbonne University - the first woman to travel alone in India and to organize tours for her friends. In 1920 Mère settled in Pondicherry where she established an ashrama for Aurobindo, who had decided to retire in isolation. This first ashrama later developed into the great project now known as Auroville.

Also rather famous, albeit extremely controversial, is the Russian George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1877-1949). Both Gurdjieff and his "rebellious" student Peter D. Ouspensky (1878-1947) greatly drew from the Indian traditions of Yoga and sacred dance to create their personal philosophy, although they never recognized their intrinsic original value. In

this, they were following the path already traced by the medieval sufis, dervishes and fakirs, that had come in touch with the surviving fragments of the Hellenic and Vedic knowledge and utilized some of their concepts to build an "islamic mysticism" to mellow out the public image of the political islam.

The number of the admirers of Vedic knowledge continued to grow all over Europe among philosophers, literates, scientists, musicians and thinkers of all fields. Here is a brief chronological list.

Edward Washburn Hopkins (1857-1932), American sanskritist who studied at Leipzig, secretary of the American Oriental Society and director of its magazine, and also author of several books, such as *Religions of India, Epic Mythology, History of Religions, Origin and Evolution of Religion*.

Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (1862-1932), pacifist activist during World War 1, was the father of the concept of the League of Nations, that later became the United Nations Organization. Hailing from a Christian-socialist family, Dickinson gave up Christianity and embraced the Indian religion.

*In An Essay on the Civilizations of India, China & Japan*, he wrote, "The real antithesis is not between East and West, but between India and the rest of the world. Only India is different; only India unspools some other possibility fantastically.. In the first place, India has never put Man in the center of the universe. In India, and wherever Indian influence has penetrated, it is, on the one hand, the tremendous forces of nature, and what lies behind them that is the object of worship and of speculation; and, on the other hand, Mind and Spirit; not the mind or spirit of the individual person, but the universal Mind or Spirit, which is in him, but which he can only have access by philosophic mediation and discipline... Indian religion has never been a system of dogma, and is not entangled in questionable history. Indian philosophy and religion have always affirmed that there is; that by meditation and discipline an internal perception is opened which is perception of truth."

Gustav Holst (1874-1934) composed various symphonies inspired by the Hindu scriptures: in 1903 to Indra and in 1908 to Savitri (inspired by the *Mahabharata* episode) and *The Cloud Messenger*, inspired by Kalidasa's *Meghaduta*. Another work, dedicated to Sita and inspired by the *Ramayana*, was never completed. Later in life he started to

study Sanskrit to produce a translation of the *Rig Veda* that could be adapted to western music.

Lady Maria Callcott (1785-1842) also known as Mrs. Graham, from the name of her second husband. She is the author of *Journal of a Residence in India*, published in 1812 when she returned to England. She declared that the purpose of her journal was "to exhibit a sketch of India's former grandeur and refinement so that I could restore India to that place in the scale of ancient nations, which European historians have in general unaccountably neglected to assign to it... Were all other monuments swept away from the face of Hindustan, were all its inhabitants destroyed, and its name forgotten, the existence of the Sanskrit language would prove that it once contained a race who had reached a high degree of refinement... superior to the havoc of war and conquest, it remains a venerable monument of the splendour of other times, as the solid Pyramid in the deserts of Egypt."

Albert Schweizer (1875-1965) wrote, "The Bhagavad-Gita has a profound influence on the spirit of mankind by its devotion to God which is manifested by actions."

Erwin Schroedinger (1887-1961), Austrian physicist and political refugee, Nobel Prize 1933 for quantum mechanics, kept at his bedside *Gita*, *Upanishads*, and various Vedic texts especially on Yoga and Sankhya. He stated, "Some blood transfusion from the East to the West to save Western science from spiritual anemia... is the only solution... found in the ancient wisdom of the Upanishads." Schroedinger was the author of *What is Life? The Physical Aspect of the Living Cell*, and *Mind and Matter*, both inspired by Vedic concepts. Especially the second book became very famous and according to Francis Clark, who discovered the DNA genetic code, it created the basis for that revolutionary breakthrough. Here are some extracts, "This life of yours which you are living is not merely a piece of this entire existence, but in a certain sense the whole; only this whole is not so constituted that it can be surveyed in one single glance. This, as we know, is what the Brahmins express in that sacred, mystic formula which is yet really so simple and so clear; tat tvam asi, this is you... From the great Upanishads the recognition Atman = Brahman was considered, far from being blasphemous, to represent, the quintessence of deepest insight into the happenings of the world. The striving of all the scholars of Vedanta was, after having learnt to pronounce with their lips, really to assimilate in their minds this grandest of all thoughts."

According to Schroedinger's biographer, Walter Moore, "The unity and continuity of Vedanta are reflected in the unity and continuity of wave mechanics. In 1925, the world view of physics was a model of a great machine composed of separable interacting material particles. During the next few years, Schrodinger and Heisenberg and their followers created a universe based on super imposed inseparable waves of probability amplitudes. This new view would be entirely consistent with the Vedantic concept."

Friedrich Heiler (1892-1967), author of *Mysticism of the Upanishads*, *Christian faith and Indian thought* and *Das Gebet and Die Religionen der Menschheit*, wrote, "India is our motherland of speculative theology... There runs an unbroken chain from the Atman-Brahman mysticism of the Vedic Upanishads to the Vedanta of Sankara on the one side and on the other through the mystical technique of the Yoga system... Another line of development equally continuous leads from the Orphic-Dionysiac mysticism to Plato, Philo and the later Hellenistic mystery cults to the Neoplatonic mysticism of the Infinite of Plotinus which is in turn is the source of the mystical theology" of the pseudo-Dionysius the Areioagute. Perhaps this second chain is only an offshoot from the first."

Amos Bronson Alcott (1799-1888), self-taught philosopher and school teacher, strictly vegetarian and founder of the community "Fruitlands", was author of *Orphic Sayings*, *Tablets*, and *Concord Days*. He was the father of Louisa and May Alcott, famous respectively as a writer and an artist. Ralph Waldo Emerson was so impressed by Amos' intellectual power that he convinced him to move to Concord and join his circle of friends. Amos wrote in his diary, "I read more of the Bhagavad Gita and felt how surpassingly fine were the sentiments. These, or selections from this book should be included in a Bible for Mankind... Were I a preacher, I would venture sometimes to take from its texts the motto and moral of my discourse. It would be healthful and invigorating to breathe some of this mountain air into the lungs of Christendom."

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), father of the American Transcendentalist Movement, writer, philosopher, minister of the Unitarian Church, lecturer and professor of theology at Harvard, was a great admirer of Vedic scriptures. He came to know about the Vedic texts from the works of Victor Cousin, and from his 1845 diary we learn that he was reading *Bhagavad gita* and Henry Thomas Colebrooke's *Essays on the Vedas*. We also know he read the *Vishnu Purana*, *Katha Upanishad* and various other texts. Emerson wrote, "I owed a magnificent day to the Bhagavad-Gita. It was as if an empire spoke to

us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.... When Confucius and the Indian Scriptures were made known, no claim to monopoly of ethical wisdom could be thought of. It is only within this century (in the 1800s) that England and America discovered that their nursery tales were old German and Scandinavian stories; and now it appears that they came from India, and are therefore the property of all the nations... (Vedic thought) is sublime as night and a breathless ocean. It contains every religious sentiment, all the grand ethics which visit in turn each noble poetic mind.... Nature makes a Brahmin of me presently: eternal compensation, unfathomable power, unbroken silence.... Peace, she saith to me, and purity... It teaches to speak truth, love others, and to dispose trifles... all is soul and the soul is Vishnu ... Hari is always gentle and serene."

In his poem *Brahman*, Emerson offers the perspective of American Vedantism, and in his Essays we find many comments on Vedic knowledge and its diffusion in the West. Among his other poems on Vedic knowledge, we may mention *Hamatreya* and *Maya*.

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892), one of Emerson's circle of friends, borrowed a copy of the *Bhagavad gita* from him and wrote, "It is a wonderful book-and has greatly excited my curiosity to know more of the religious literature of the East." He later introduced many vedic ideas in his poems, including *The Brewing of Soma*, that imaginatively describes the use of the Vedic sacrificial drink.

Another representative of American Transcendentalist, Walt Whitman (1813-1892), is the author of the famous *Leaves of Grass*, and *Passage to India*. In another poem, entitled *Salut Au Monde*, he wrote, "I hear the Hindoo teaching his favorite pupil he loves, wars, adages, transmitted safely to this day from poets who wrote three thousand years ago." Emerson described *Leaves of Grass* as something between the *Gita* and the *New York Tribune Herald*. In his 1889 essay *A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads*, Whitman says he read "the ancient Hindu poems".

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), also part of Emerson's circle, was a philosopher, writer, social critic and the father of the "civil disobedience" concept. Although he was a minister of the Unitarian Church, he rejected organized Christianity (he never went to church) and wrote, "Whenever I have read any part of the Vedas, I have felt that some

unearthly and unknown light illuminated me. In the great teaching of the Vedas, there is no touch of sectarianism.... When I read it, I feel that I am under the spangled heavens of a summer night... In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial... I would say to the readers of the Scriptures, if they wish for a good book, read the Bhagvat-Geeta... It deserves to be read with reverence even by Yankees... Ex oriente lux may still be the motto of scholars, for the Western world has not yet derived from the East all the light it is destined to derive thence... One sentence of the Gita, is worth the State of Massachusetts many times over."

From 1849 to 1855 he borrowed all the Indian texts of the library of Harvard University, and in 1855 he received from his friend Thomas Chilmondeley a gift of 44 eastern volumes, including *Rig Veda Samhita*, *Mandukya Upanishad*, *Vishnu Purana*, *Manu smriti*, *Bhagavad gita*, and *Bhagavata Purana*.

Herman Melville (1819-1891), author of the novel *Moby Dick*, wrote, "the most ancient extant portrait anyways purporting to the whale's is to be found in the famous cavern pagoda of Elephanta, in India. ...The Hindoo whale referred to, occurs in a separate department of the wall, depicting the incarnation of Vishnu in the form of leviathan, learnedly known as the Matse-Avatar."

Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy (1828-1910), Russian writer and mystic, founder of the first vegetarian society (closed down in 1917 by the bolshevic revolution) quoted in a 1909 letter to Gandhi the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad gita* and the Tamil *Tirukkural*, as well as Vivekananda's writing, encouraging Indians "not to give up their ancient religious culture for the materialism of the West." He inserted many quotes from the Vedas in his *Range of Reading*, *Thoughts of Wise Men*, and other collections. To the orthodox Church that informed him about his excommunication, he replied, "To regard Christ as God, and to pray to him, are to my mind the greatest possible sacrilege."

Sir Edwin Arnold (1832-1904), wrote a translation of *Bhagavad gita* entitled *The Song Celestial*. He wrote in the introduction, "This famous and marvelous Sanskrit poem ... enjoys immense popularity and authority in India, where it is reckoned as one of the "Five Jewels" - pancharatnani - of Devanagari literature... blending as it does the doctrine

of Kapila, Patanjali, and the Vedas." In his book *India Revisited* he emotionally describes the ritual of ablutions in the Ganges river.

Mark Twain is the pen name of Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835-1910). One of the most famous American writers, he is the author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, *Following the Equator* and *Travelogue* - a sort of diary on his experiences in Asia. He wrote, "Land of religions, cradle of human race, birthplace of human speech, grandmother of legend, great grandmother of tradition. The land that all men desire to see and having seen once even by a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for the shows of the rest of the globe combined... Our most valuable and most artistic materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only!.. India had the start of the whole world in the beginning of things. She had the first civilization; she had the first accumulation of material wealth; she was populous with deep thinkers and subtle intellects; she had mines, and woods, and a fruitful soul... Varanasi or Banaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together."

Clarence Edward Dutton (1841-1912), geologist, poet and captain of the United States army, named the peaks of the Grand Canyon "Vishnu temple", "Shiva temple", and "Brahma temple".

Georg Morris Cohen Brandes (1842-1927), Danish literary critic, had a great influence on Scandinavian literature. He wrote, "my spiritual home is on the banks of the Ganga."

William James (1842-1910), first president of the American Society for Psychological Research, philosopher and pioneer of psychology in America, brother to novelist Henry and diarist Alice. He was a close associate of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Sanders Pierce, Bertrand Russell, Mark Twain, Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud. He wrote, "from the Vedas we learn a practical art of surgery, medicine, music, house building under which mechanized art is included. They are encyclopedia of every aspect of life, culture, religion, science, ethics, law, cosmology and meteorology."

Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889), the greatest Romanian poet, discovered Indian philosophy through Schopenhauer. In his poem *Tattvamasi* he speaks of the identity of Atman and Brahman. In another poem, *Kamadeva*, he speaks of the Deva of erotic love as the spark of creation.



Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850-1919), American poet and journalist, supporter of the Rosicrucian movement in the United States, wrote, "India - the land of Vedas, the remarkable works contains not only religious ideas for a perfect life, but also facts which science has proved true. Electricity, radium, electronics, airship, all are known to the seers who founded the Vedas."

Richard Garbe (1857-1927), professor at the University of Tubingen, became famous for his work to trace the original version of *Bhagavad gita*. In 1885 he traveled to India on the request of the Ministry of Culture of the Prussian government, and later he published the diary of his experience under the title *Indian Travel Sketches*. This book is particularly interesting because in the 19th century very few German indologists actually visited India. He dedicated most of his life to study the Sankhya philosophy.

George Bernard Shaw, (1856-1950), Irishman, Nobel Prize 1925 for literature, vegetarian activist, socialist activist, founder of the London School of Economics, member of the Executive Committee of the Fabian Society, writer and dramatist, wrote, "The Indian way of life provides the vision of the natural, real way of life."

William Butler Yeats (1856-1939), another Irishman and Nobel Prize 1923 for literature, was a personal friend of Rabindranath Tagore, Mohini Chatterji and Sri Purohit Swami. He wrote a poem entitled to Mount Meru, which he identifies with the Everest, and where he pictures the yogis engaged in meditation. He wrote, "It was my first meeting with a philosophy that confirmed my vague speculations and seemed at once logical and boundless."

Nicola Tesla (1856-1943), one of the most ingenious inventors of western history, used Sanskrit terms such as *akasha* and *prana* to describe the natural phenomena and described the universe as a kinetic system full of energy that could be channeled from any point.

Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), pacifist activist, pioneer of mathematical logic and analytic philosophy, member of the Royal Society and the British Academy, president of the Aristotelian Society from 1922 to 1923, co-author with Bertrand Russell of the famous *Principia Mathematica*, stated, "Vedanta is the most impressive metaphysics the human mind has conceived."

Maurice Winternitz (1863-1937), famous indologist and author of *History of Indian Literature*, wrote, "From the mystical doctrines of the Upanishads, one current of thought may be traced to the mysticism of Persian Sufism, to the mystic, theosophic logos doctrine of the Neo-Platonics and the Alexandrian Christian Mystics, Eckhart and Tauler, and finally to the philosophy of the great German mystic of the nineteenth century, Schopenhauer... Garbe, the greatest authority on Samkhya Philosophy in Europe, has made it very probable that Samkhya Philosophy has been of influence on the philosophical ideas of Heraklitos, Empedokles, Anaxagoras, Demokritos and Epikuros... It seems to me to be proved the Pythagoras was influenced by the Indian Samkhya. Nor have I any doubt that the Gnostic and Neo-Platonic philosophies have been influenced by Indian philosophical ideas."

Sylvain Levi (1863-1935), French orientalist and professor of Sanskrit at the Sorbonne University, wrote, " From Persia to the Chinese sea, from the icy regions of Siberia to Islands of Java and Borneo, India has propagated her beliefs, her tales, and her civilization... has left indelible imprints on one fourth of the human race in the course of a long succession of centuries. She has the right to reclaim ... her place amongst the great nations summarizing and symbolizing the spirit of humanity."

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), Nobel Prize 1907 for literature, author of the famous *The Jungle Book*, *Kim*, *Captains Courageous*, and *The Man Who Would Be King*. Among his poems the most famous are *Gunga Din*, *Mandalaya* and *The White Man's Burden*, in which he describes, with an irony that may be invisible to the eyes of the fanatic supporters of european imperialism, the attitude of the British colonist that believes himself invested with the duty to "civilize" the rest of the world, sacrificing in the attempt himself and his own children to exile. Kipling's parents moved to India before his birth, but as demanded by the social convention of the times, they sent him to England to study when he was 5, alone with his little sister aged 3.

Rudyard was permanently scarred by the cultural and emotional trauma of the shift from the colonial home in Bombay to the Lorne Lodge, the private hostel in the house of Captain Holloway at Portsmouth, where Rudyard and his sister Alice - together with other children of British settlers in India - were regularly mistreated and neglected. At the age of 16 he returned to India, where he started his writing career.

Count Louis Hamon (1866-1936), born in Ireland as William John Warner and also known as Cheiro, was a famous palmist and astrologer, whose clients included Mark Twain, Sarah Bernhardt, Mata Hari, Oscar Wilde, Grover Cleveland, Thomas Edison, the Prince of Wales, General Kitchener, William Gladstone, Bernard Shaw and Joseph Chamberlain.

He wrote, "Looking back to the earliest days of the history of the known world, we find that the first linguistic records belong to the people under consideration, and date back to that far distant cycle of time known as the Aryan civilization. Beyond history we cannot go; but the monuments and cave temples of India, according to the testimony of archaeologists, all point to a time so far beyond the scant history at our disposal... Long before Rome or Greece or Israel was even heard of, the mountains of India point back to an age, of learning beyond, and still beyond. From the astronomical calculations that the figures in their temples represent, it has been estimated that the Hindu understood the Precession of the Equinoxes centuries before the Christian Era... and made the calculation that it took place once in every 25,870 years. The observation and mathematical precision necessary to establish such a theory has been the wonder and admiration of modern astronomers. They, with their modern knowledge and up-to-date instruments, are still quarrelling among themselves as to whether the precession, the most important feature in astronomy, takes place every 25,870 years or every 24,500 years."

Herbert George Wells (1866-1946), historian and novelist, author of *The Time Machine*, *A Short History of the World* and *Crux Ansata: An Indictment of the Roman Catholic Church*, wrote, "The history of India for many centuries had been happier, less fierce, and more dreamlike than any other history. In these favorable conditions, they built a character - meditative and peaceful and a nation of philosophers such as could nowhere have existed except in India."

A. E. George Russell (1867-1935), Irish nationalist, economist, leader of the movement for cooperation among Irish farmers, poet, essayist, painter and mystic, wrote, "Goethe, Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau among moderns have something of this vitality and wisdom but we can find all they have said and much more in the grand sacred books of India. The Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads contain such godlike fullness of wisdom on all things that I feel the authors must have looked with calm remembrance back through a thousand passionate lives, full of feverish strife for and with shadows, ere they

could have written with such certainty of things which the soul feels to be sure."

W. Somerset Maugham (1874-1965), son of the British ambassador in Paris, had an early start in his writing career and is considered the greatest English novelist. In India he met Ramana Maharshi - this event inspired his famous novel *The Razor's Edge*, whose title is taken from an example in *Katha Upanishad*: "the wise say that the path is like the sharp edge of the razor, narrow and difficult to tread". The main character in the story goes to India to seek relief from the horrors of the war and finds peace in the Indian philosophy of Vedanta.

Professor James Bissett Pratt (1875-1944), American writer author of *Why Religions Die* and *India and its Faiths*, believed that Hinduism was the only religion capable of surviving the modern crisis of faith. He wrote, "The Vedic Way.. is a self perpetuating religion... not death, but development... keeping that which in it was vital and true cast off the old shell and clothed itself in more suitable expression, with no break in the continuity of life and no loss in the sanctity and weight of its authority... If a religion is to live it must adapt itself to new and changing conditions; if it is to feed the spiritual life of its children, it must have the sensitivity and inventiveness that shall enable it to modify their as their needs demand... because of its ingrained conclusiveness, its tolerance, and its indifference to doctrinal divergences, stressed the essential unity of all Indian Dharmas, whether Hindu or Buddhist, and minimized differences... For most Westerners the histories of philosophy begin with the Greeks and end with the Americans, and convey not the least suggestion that anyone outside of the West ever had a philosophical idea. A glance at the curricula of most our colleges and universities would seem to indicate that the one principle on which they are planned might be phrased: nothing east of Suez!... To one who has had a taste of the riches which Indian thought and Indian literature can contribute to our intellectual life and our spiritual experience, this deprivation which we Westerners inflict upon ourselves and upon our young people seems pitiful in the extreme. Indian philosophical literature, taking its rise several centuries before the time of Thales, has swept down through the ages, retaining always a characteristic point of view of its own, but developing in a great variety of fresh forms. Indian thought constitutes today the one type of living philosophy independent of our Western tradition... The tendency of nearly all the schools of Western philosophy is more and more steadily setting in the direction of naturalism, and often of a rather crude

naturalism. The victories of natural science have hypnotized most of our philosophers. From such a world as Western naturalism usually offers, the thoughtful mind which craves something more than a scientific pattern of space-time events may be glad to take refuge in the eternal insights into a spiritual realm, spread out before us in the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, and the Vedantic philosophy."

Robert Earnest Hume (1877-1948), born in India from an American family, taught both in India and at Oxford. In 1921 he published *Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, in which he wrote, "In the long history of man's endeavor to grasp the fundamental truths of being, the metaphysical treatises known as the Upanishads hold an honored place . . . they are replete with sublime conceptions and with intuitions of universal truth... The Upanishads undoubtedly have great historical and comparative value, but they are also of great present-day importance... The earnestness of the search for the Truth is one of the more delightful and commendable features of the Upanishads."

Jacob Wilhelm Hauer (1881-1961), the son of German protestant missionaries, taught in a missionary school in India from 1907 onwards. After coming in touch with Hinduism and yoga, he studied Sanskrit and wrote various books on the subject, such as *Der Yoga als Heilweg* ("Yoga as a means of salvation") dedicated to C.G. Jung. He considered *Bhagavad gita* as "a work of imperishable significance" occupying a central place in his own faith. He wrote, "gives us not only profound insights that are valid for all times and for all religious life, but it contains as well the classical presentation of one of the most significant phases of Indo-German religious history... It shows us the way as regards the essential nature and basal characteristics of Indo-Germanic religion."

Satyananda Stokes, born Samuel Evans Stokes (1882-1946), abandoned his studies at the Yale University at the age of 22 and traveled to India with the purpose of dedicating himself to the service of humanity. In 1905 he started working at a leper home at Sabathu, then he was sent to Kangra for rescue and relief work after a serious earthquake, and later he worked at the Christian Mission House at Kotgarh, in Himachal Pradesh. In 1910 he purchased an abandoned tea plantation, he married and settled in Barubagh, Kotgarh. He built a temple for the Arya Samaj at Thanedar, which became famous as Paramajyoti Mandir, "the temple of the supreme Light". Although he still considered himself "a lover of Christ", he studied Sanskrit and in 1932 he officially became a Hindu in a ceremony performed by Arya Samaj. He expressed his own philosophy of life in a

book entitled *Satyakam*, explaining that he had decided to convert to Hinduism because he detested the Christian concept of eternal punishment. He wrote, "The light from the Hindu scriptures had come to fill the gaps in Christianity."

Vera Christine Chute Collum (1883-1957), author of *The Dance of Civa or Life's Unity and Rhythm*, wrote, "The conviction that seeming diversities and differences are but passing and rhythmically varying phases of a fundamental unity led the East to symbolize Life and Death as the ever supple and continuously flowing Dance of Civa, in which construction and destruction are rhythmically pulsating patterns that the subtle dancer eternally presents and dissolves with the swiftness of a rapidly turning wheel."

Ernest E. Wood (1883-1965) lived in India for 38 years and founded 2 Universities, working as a principal and professor of physics, English and Sanskrit, with the aim of contributing to the Indian culture renaissance started by Rabindranath Tagore and his contemporaries. He was author of several books, including *Practical Yoga* and *The Glorious Presence*. He wrote, "Shankara did not leave the Vedanta teaching as a matter of religious belief, however, but said we must verify it by thinking, and the realize it by experience, as did the illumined men of old... The ancient Aryan thinkers who collected, collated, classified and commented upon the thought-traditions accumulated by their distant progenitors performed a rational and ethical service of the greatest value to posterity, when they put together a set of brief sayings, which they called the Vedanata (the end or highest point, of knowledge; the 'last word'), and presented them for study along with further statement: 'you will not be able to understand or realize the full import of these Great Sayings unless you first put your mind in order by certain practices or disciplines, which we will describe.'"

American writer Will Durant (1885-1981), author of *The Story of Philosophy*, *The Story of Civilization* (11 volume work for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1967 and Presidential Medal of Freedom, by President Ford in 1977) and *The Case for India*, wrote, "India was the motherland of our race, and Sanskrit the mother of Europe's languages: she was the mother of our philosophy; mother, through the Arabs, of much of our mathematics; mother, through the village community, of self-government and democracy. Mother India is in many ways the mother of us all... It is true that even across the Himalayan barrier India has sent to us such questionable gifts as grammar and logic, philosophy and fables, hypnotism and chess, and above all our numerals and our decimal

system. But these are not the essence of her spirit; they are trifles compared to what we may learn from her in the future... This is the India that patient scholarship is now opening up like a new intellectual continent to that Western mind which only yesterday thought civilization an exclusive Western thing."

General George S. Patton (1885-1945), one of the greatest military figures in history, came from a long family tradition in the army, firmly believed in reincarnation and was convinced that he had learned his personal strategic abilities on ancient battlefields. He often quoted *Bhagavad gita* to support his beliefs.

Rene Grousset (1885-1952), French historian, author of *Civilization of India* and *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia*.

He wrote, "In the high plateau of eastern Iran, in the oases of Serindia, in the arid wastes of Tibet, Mongolia, and Manchuria, in the ancient civilized lands of China and Japan, in the lands of the primitive Mons and Khmers and other tribes of Indo-China, in the countries of the Malaya-Polynesians, in Indonesia and Malay, India left the indelible impress of her high culture, not only upon religion, but also upon art, and literature, in a word, all the higher things of spirit... There is an obstinate prejudice thanks to which India is constantly represented as having lived, as it were, hermetically sealed up in its age-old civilization, apart from the rest of Asia. Nothing could be more exaggerated. During the first eight centuries of our era, so far as religion and art are concerned, central Asia was a sort of Indian colony. It is often forgotten that in the early Middle Ages there existed a 'Greater India,' a vast Indian empire... the Indian Ocean really deserved its name." Grousset was particularly impressed by Indian arts, and gave emotional descriptions of the images in the Elephanta caves and of Shiva Nataraja. In this regard he wrote, "Universal art has succeeded in few materializations of the Divine as powerful and also as balanced... Never have the overflowing sap of life, the pride of force superior to everything, the secret intoxication of the inner god of things been so serenely expressed."

Niels Bohr (1885-1962), Danish nuclear physicist, Nobel Prize 1922 for physics, wrote, "I enter the Upanishads to seek answers to my questions."

Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949), American linguist, wrote, "The Hindu grammar taught Europeans to analyze speech forms; when one compared the constituent parts, the resemblances, which hitherto had been vaguely recognized, could be set forth with

certainty and precision... As one of the greatest monuments of human intelligence is by no means an exaggeration; no one who has had even a small acquaintance with that most remarkable book could fail to agree. In some four thousand sutras or aphorisms - some of them no more than a single syllable in length - Panini sums up the grammar not only of his own spoken language, but of that of the Vedic period as well. The work is the more remarkable when we consider that the author did not write it down but rather worked it all out of his head, as it were. Panini's disciples committed the work to memory and in turn passed it on in the same manner to their disciples; and though the Astadhayayi has long since been committed to writing, rote memorization of the work, with several of the more important commentaries, is still the approved method of studying grammar in India today, as indeed is true of most learning of the traditional culture... It was in India, however, that there rose a body of knowledge which was destined to revolutionize European ideas about language."

T.S (Thomas Stearns) Eliot (1888-1965), poet and dramatist, Nobel Prize 1948 for literature, wrote, "Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman, and a year in the mazes of Patanjali's metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification. A good half of the effort of understanding what the Indian philosophers were after - and their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys... In the literature of Asia is a great poetry... and I know that my own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility."

Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889-1975), author of *A Study of History*, an encyclopaedic work of metahistory or historical synthesis on the rise and fall of the various civilizations, with a strong spiritual orientation, wrote, "It is already becoming clear that a chapter which had a Western beginning will have to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in self-destruction of the human race. At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation is the ancient Hindu way. Here we have the attitude and spirit that can make it possible for the human race to grow together in to a single family... So now we turn to India. This spiritual gift, that makes a man human, is still alive in Indian souls. Go on giving the world Indian examples of it. Nothing else can do so much to help mankind to save itself from destruction... India is not only the heir of her own religious traditions; she is also the residuary legatee of the Ancient Mediterranean World's religious traditions."



Walter Eidlitz (1892-1976), also known as Vaman dasa, author of *Journey to Unknown India*. He was a Jew from Germany, and was sent to an internment camp during the World War 2 while he was traveling in search of God. He later became a follower of the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement. He wrote, "God himself speaks the Bhagavad Gita, the innermost God which Brahma the Creator, Vishnu, the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer are only aspects."

Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), English novelist and essayist, author of *Brave New World*, *The Doors of Perception*, *Heaven and Hell* and *The Perennial Philosophy*, wrote, "The Bhagavad-Gita is the most systematic statement of spiritual evolution of endowing value to mankind. The Gita is one of the clearest and most comprehensive summaries of the spiritual thoughts ever to have been made... The Perennial Philosophy is expressed most succinctly in the Sanskrit formula, *tat tvam asi* ('That art thou'); the Atman, or immanent eternal Self, is one with Brahman, the Absolute Principle of all existence; and the last end of every human being, is to discover the fact for himself, to find out who he really is."

Paul Brunton (1898-1981), traveler, mystic and author of *A Hermit in the Himalayas*, *A Message from Arunachala*, *The Orient: Legacy to the West*, and *A Search in Secret India*. His experience in India, among yogis, mystics and gurus culminates in his meeting with Ramana Maharshi in his ashram at Arunachala. He wrote, "We are witnessing in the West the appearance of an at present thin but slowly deepening current of interest in those very thoughts and ideas which the young men of India are today doing their best to reject as inadequate to their needs and which constitute the faith and religious traditions of their forefathers... The Bhagavad Gita contains the mental quintessence and successful synthesis of the various systems of religion and philosophy, it offers a unique epitome of the high culture of prehistoric India."

Theos Casimir Bernard (1908-1947), pioneer of the Indian and Tibetan studies at Columbia University, USA; his doctorate thesis was on Hatha Yoga. In his book *Hindu Philosophy* he wrote, "There is an innate in the human heart a metaphysical hunger to know and understand what lies beyond the mysterious and illusive veil of nature... Hindu philosophy does not attempt to train one to discern metaphysical truths; it offers a way of thinking which enables us one rationally to understand the reality experienced by self fulfilled personalities, and thereby to lead one to the realization of Truth. In this light, philosophy is seen as art of life and not a theory about the universe, for it is the means of

attaining the highest aspirations of man. It is not for the discovery, but for the understanding of Truth."

David Bohm (1917-1992), one of the greatest physicists of quanta mechanics, pupil of Einstein and Oppenheimer, was deeply influenced by his contact with J. Krishnamurti. He wrote, "You would say Atman is more like the meaning. But then what is meant would be Brahman, I suppose; the identity of consciousness and cosmos."

Daniel Joseph Boorstin (1914-2004), American historian and Librarian of Congress from 1975 to 1987, author of *The Discoverers*, *The Creators* and *The Seekers*.

He wrote, "The Hindus have left an eloquent history of their efforts to answer the riddle of Creation. The Vedas, sacred hymns in archaic Sanskrit from about 1500 to 900 BC do not depict a benevolent Creator, but record a man's awe before the Creation as singers of the Vedas chant the radiance of this world. Their objects of worship were devas (cognate with Latin dues, god) derived from the old Sanskrit div, meaning brightness. Gods were the shining ones. The luminosity of their world impressed the Hindus from the beginning... What sanctifies the worshipper is no act of conversion, no change of spirit, but the simple act of seeing, the Hindi word darsan. A Hindu goes to a temple not to 'worship,' but rather for 'darshan,' to see the image of the deity... According to the Hindus, the deity or a holy spirit or place or image 'gives darsan' and the people 'take darsan' for which there seems no counterpoint in any Western religion."

Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), author of *A Hero with Thousand faces*, was an intimate friend of J. Krishnamurti, and he cooperated to the translation of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. He stated that the reading of *Mandukya Upanishad* had a stronger impact on him than the beginning of World War 2. He wrote, "The first principle of Indian thought, therefore, is that the ultimate reality is beyond description. It is something that can be experienced only by bringing the mind to a stop; and once experienced, it cannot be described to anyone in terms of the forms of this world. The truth, the ultimate truth, that is to say, is transcendent. it goes past, transcends, all speech all images, anything that can possibly be said. But, as we have just seen, it is not only transcendent, it is also immanent, within all things, Everything in the world, therefore, is to be regarded as its manifestation... In the Biblical tradition, God creates man, but man cannot say that he is divine in the same sense that the Creator is, where as in Hinduism, all things are

incarnations of that power. We are the sparks from a single fire. And we are all fire. Hinduism believes in the omnipresence of the Supreme God in every individual. There is no fall. Man is not cut off from the divine."

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), originally from Sri Lanka, author of *The Dance of Shiva: Essays on Indian Art and Culture*, wrote, "We must, however, specially mention the Bhagavad Gita as probably the most important single work ever produced in India; this book of eighteen chapters is not, as it has been sometimes called, a "sectarian " work, but one universally studied and often repeated daily from memory by millions of Indians of all persuasions; it may be described as a compendium of the whole Vedic doctrine to be found in the earlier Vedas, Brahmanas, and Upanishads, and being therefore the basis of all the later developments, it can be regarded at the focus of all Indian religion."

Walter Raymond Drake (1913-1989), author of *Gods and Spacemen in the Ancient East*, published 4 years before Erich Von Daniken's bestseller *Chariots of the Gods*, wrote, "The oldest source of wisdom in the world must surely spring from India , whose initiates long ago probed the secrets of heaven, the story of Earth, the depths of Man's soul, and propounded those sublime thoughts which illumined the Magi of Babylon, inspired the philosophers of Greece and worked their subtle influence on the religions of the West... The Indian lyricize of spaceships faster than light and missiles more violent than H-bombs; their Sanskrit texts describe aircraft apparently with radar and cameras."

André Malraux (1901-1976), author of *Anti-memoir*, wrote, "The problem of this century is the religious problem and the discovery of Hindu thought will have a great deal to do with the solving of that particular problem."

John Archibald Wheeler (1911-2008), American theoretical physicist, worked with Niels Bohr on the foundations of nuclear fission, introduced the S-matrix and created the expressions *black hole*, *quantum foam* and *wormhole*. He wrote, "I like to think that someone will trace how the deepest thinking of India made its way to Greece and from there to the philosophy of our times."

Alun Lewis (1915-1944), who served in the military regiment of Royal Engineers in the World War 2, wrote *The Earth is a Syllable* - a story inspired by *Mandukya Upanishad* and that also contains a reference to the *Brihad aranyaka Upanishad*. The novel tells the

story of a soldier who, mortally wounded in the jungle, experiences the various stages of awareness towards enlightenment and remembers the first verse of the *Mandukya Upanisad*: "the entire Earth is the syllable Om".

Yehudi Menuhin (1915-1999), one of the greatest violin players of the 20th century, descendent of Russian jews emigrated to America, became famous as disciple of the Hatha yoga teacher BKS Iyengar and friend of sitarist Ravi Shankar. He wrote, "India is the primal source, the mother country."

Nancy Wilson Ross (also known as Mrs. Stanley Young, 1901-1986), writer and lecturer, wrote, "Many hundreds of years before those great European pioneers, Galileo and Copernicus, had to pay heavy prices in ridicule and excommunication for their daring theories, a section of the Vedas known as the Brahmanas contained this astounding statement: The sun never sets or rises. When people think the sun is setting, he only changes about after reaching the end of the day and makes night below and day to what is on the other side. Then, when people think he rises in the morning, he only shifts himself about after reaching the end of the night."

Huston Smith (nato nel 1919), author of *The World's Religions*, *Science and Human Responsibility*, and *The Religions of Man*, wrote, "When I read the Upanishads, I found a profundity of world view that made my Christianity seem like third grade... The invisible excludes nothing, the invisible that excludes nothing is the infinite – the soul of India is the infinite."

Alexander Zinoviev (1922-2006), the controversial Russian writer and dissident intellectual, wrote, "But I would like to believe Hinduism is too valuable for humanity, and sacred Indian books contain too much precious and unique knowledge that it will not sink in oblivion. I'd like to believe that the principles of Indian philosophy and religion are much more in agreement with the needs for the future than any other religion in the world, in agreement with the tendency, known in Western countries as New Age. It's my deep belief that without India the world will sink in spiritual darkness and ignorance."

Carl Sagan (1934-1996), astrophysicist and author of *Cosmos*, wrote, "The Hindu religion is the only one of the world's great faiths dedicated to the idea that the Cosmos itself undergoes an immense, indeed an infinite, number of deaths and rebirths. It is the only religion in which the time scales correspond, to those of modern scientific

cosmology. Its cycles run from our ordinary day and night to a day and night of Brahma, 8.64 billion years long... And there are much longer time scales still."

Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), author of *Language of the Self*, defined his own ideology as Sanatana Dharma, "the eternal religion", and wrote, "The Vedanta appears among explicit doctrines as one of the most direct formulations possible of that which makes the very essence of our spiritual reality."

Julius Robert Oppenheimer (1904-1967), famous as the "father of the atomic bomb", author of the Born-Oppenheimer approximation, the electron-positron theory, the Oppenheimer-Phillips process and the first foundations of the quantum tunneling, of the modern theory of neutrino stars and black holes, quanta mechanics, the theory of the quantum field, and the interaction of the cosmic rays. He wrote, "What we shall find [in modern physics] is an exemplification, an encouragement, and a refinement of old wisdom... the juxtaposition of Western civilization's most terrifying scientific achievement with the most dazzling description of the mystical experience given to us by the Bhagavad Gita, India's greatest literary monument... the most beautiful philosophical song existing in any known tongue... Access to the Vedas is the greatest privilege this century may claim over all previous centuries."

Watching the first atomic explosion at the Trinity Test in New Mexico, on 16 July 1945, he emotionally quoted verse 11.12 of Gita: "If the radiance of a thousand suns Were to burst at once into the sky, That would be like the splendor of the Mighty One." He also quoted *Bhagavad gita* in a speech for the memorial service at the death of president Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1963, the *Christian Century* magazine asked him in an interview to list the 10 books that did most to shape his vocational attitude and philosophy of life; he mentioned the *Bhagavad gita* (that he read in the original Sanskrit), Bhartrihari's *Satakatrayam*, and *The Waste Land* by T S Eliot, in which he speaks of the Vedic scriptures, specifically of the *Upanishads* and the *Gita*.

Queen Fredricka (1931-1981), researcher in physics and wife of King Paul of Greece, went to Kalahasti to pay homage to the Shankaracharya there, attracted by his book on the Advaita Vedanta. She declared, "While Greece is the country of my birth, India is the country of my soul."

Savitri Devi (1905-1982), born Maximiani Portas in France, obtained the Greek citizenship and embraced Hellenism, then she traveled to India to discover the roots of the aryan civilization and became famous in the nazi circles. She believes that only Hinduism could oppose the Judaeo-Christian heritage. In 1939 she published *A Warning to Hindus*, in which she expressed the fear that the Muslims could overtook the Hindus in India. In 1939 she married a Bengali *brahmana*, Asit Krishna Mukherjee; together they helped Subhash Chandra Bose to get in touch with the Japanese to support his Indian National Army in the campaign against the British occupation. She wrote, "We defend Hinduism, because it is India's very self-expression; and we love India, because it is India... Hinduism is really superior to other religions, not for its spirituality, but for that still more precious thing it gives to its followers: a scientific outlook on religion and on life... If those of Indo-European race regard the conquest of pagan Europe by Christianity as a decadence, then the whole of Hindu India can be likened to a last fortress of very ancient ideals, of very old and beautiful religious and metaphysical conceptions, which have already passed away in Europe. Hinduism is thus the last flourishing and fecund branch on an immense tree which has been cut down and mutilated for two thousand years."

Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976), pioneer of quanta mechanics (formulated with Max Born and Pascual Jordan in 1925), father of the "uncertainty principle of quantum theory", Nobel Prize 1932 for the work that set the foundations for the discovery of the allotropic forms of hydrogen. At the end of the war he was appointed director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physics and he reorganized it until the transfer to Munich in 1958, when it was renamed Max Planck Institute for Physics and Astrophysics. He was also president for the German Research Council, chairman of the Commission for Atomic Physics, chairman of the Nuclear Physics Working Group, and president of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. He wrote, "After the conversations about Indian philosophy, some of the ideas of Quantum Physics that had seemed so crazy suddenly made much more sense."

We must also mention Alain Danileou, Mircea Eliade and Juan Mascarò, respectively from France, Romania and Spain. Danielou (1907-1994, also known as Shiv Sharan), author of many books on the philosophy, religion, history and arts of India, such as *Virtue, Success, Pleasure, & Liberation : The Four Aims of Life in the Tradition of*

*Ancient India.* He lived 15 years in India to study Sanskrit, he was initiated in Varanasi by Karpatraji Maharaja, and he was the first European to open claim to be a Hindu. He wrote, "The Hindu lives in eternity. He is profoundly aware of the relativity of space and time and of the illusory nature of the apparent world. Hinduism especially in its oldest, Shivaite form, never destroyed its past. It is the sum of human experience from the earliest times. Non-dogmatic, it allows every one to find his own way. The Greeks were always speaking of India as the sacred territory of Dionysus and historians working under Alexander the Greek clearly mentions chronicles of the Puranas as sources of the myth of Dionysus...The Egyptian myth of Osiris seemed directly inspired from a Shivaite story of the Puranas and that at any rate, Egyptians of those times considered that Osiris had originally come from India mounted on a bull (Nandi), the traditional transport of Shiva."

Eliade (1907-1986) novelist born in Bucharest, Romania; he was fluent in Romanian, French, German, Italian and English, and could read Hebrew, Persian and Sanskrit. His long doctorate thesis was entitled *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, translated and published in French 3 years later. In 1928 he traveled to India, where he spent a long period studying at the University of Calcutta under the guidance of Surendranath Dasgupta, the author of a five volume *History of Indian Philosophy*. He wrote, "From the Upanishads onward, India has been seriously preoccupied with but one great problem - the structure of the human condition. With a rigor unknown elsewhere, India has applied itself to analyzing the various conditionings of the human being."

Mascarò (1897-1987) produced a translation of *Bhagavad gita*. He wrote, "Sanskrit literature is a great literature. We have the great songs of the Vedas, the splendor of the Upanishads, the glory of the Upanishads, the glory of the Bhagavad-Gita, the vastness (100,000 verses) of the Mahabharata, the tenderness and the heroism found in the Ramayana, the wisdom of the fables and stories of India, the scientific philosophy of Sankhya, the psychological philosophy of yoga, the poetical philosophy of Vedanta, the Laws of Manu, the grammar of Panini and other scientific writings, the lyrical poetry, and dramas of Kalidasa... The greatness of the Bhagavad Gita is the greatness of the universe, but even as the wonder of the stars in heaven only reveals itself in the silence of the night, the wonder of this poem only reveals itself in the silence of the soul.. the essence of the Bhagavad Gita is the vision of God in all things and of all things in God."

Mascarò's work constitutes a remarkable exception to the deep ignorance and intellectual

blindness shown by the scholars of Spain, Portugal and Italy, who remained largely unable to drop the prejudices of the colonial indology - as for example the Crepuscular Guido Gozzano (1883-1916) and the imaginative but disinformed Emilio Salgari (1862-1911). Also the more recent Antonio Tabucchi, Alberto Moravia and P.P. Pasolini have perceived India superficially and through dense prejudice, painting a sad picture of a miserable India, devoid of culture and humanity, doomed to remain slave to ignorant fatalism. Similarly, those who want to understand the genuine Indian tradition and the vedic wisdom may be misled by the famous novel *Passage to India* by Edward Morgan Forster, published for the first time in Great Britain in 1924 and by *The City of Joy* by Dominique Lapierre (both adapted for the big screen) and also by the recent movie *Slumdog millionaire*, directed by Danny Boyle.

Alan Watts (1915-1973), pioneer of the popularization of eastern knowledge in the 1960s, author of *The Way of Zen* and *Psychotherapy East and West*, wrote, "To the philosophers of India, however, Relativity is no new discovery, just as the concept of light years is no matter for astonishment to people used to thinking of time in millions of kalpas (a day of Brahma, about 4,320,000 earth years)."

Fritjof Capra (born in 1939), American of Austrian origin, founder of the *Center for Ecoliteracy* and author of *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, wrote, "Modern physics has shown that the rhythm of creation and destruction is not only manifest in the turn of the seasons and in the birth and death of all living creatures, but is also the very essence of inorganic matter. Modern physics has thus revealed that every subatomic particle not only performs an energy dance, but also is an energy dance; a pulsating process of creation and destruction... The dance of Shiva is the dancing universe, the ceaseless flow of energy going through an infinite variety of patterns that melt into one another... The scale of this ancient myth is indeed staggering; it has taken the human mind more than two thousand years to come up again with a similar concept... the two foundations of of twentieth-century physics - quantum theory and relativity theory - both force us to see the world very much in the way a Hindu, Buddhist...sees it."

Hans Torwesten (born in Germany in 1944), author of *Vedanta - Heart of Hinduism*, wrote, "A fair number of leading physicists and biologists have found parallels between modern science and Hindu ideas. In America, many writers such as J. D. Salinger (An



Adventure in Vedanta: J.D. Salinger's the Glass Family), Henry Miller, Aldous Huxley, Gerald Heard, and Christopher Isherwood, were in contact with the Vedanta. Most of them came from elevated intellectual circles which rejected the dogmatism of the Christian Churches yet longed for spirituality and satisfactory answers to the fundamental questions of existence. In Vedanta, they found a wide-open, universal, and philosophically oriented religion where even the penetrating scientific mind could find something to its taste."

Canadian Klaus Klostermaier (born in 1933), Distinguished Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Manitoba in Canada and *author of Hinduism: A Short Introduction*, wrote, "Hinduism has proven much more open than any other religion to new ideas, scientific thought, and social experimentation. Many concepts like reincarnation, meditation, yoga and others have found worldwide acceptance. It would not be surprising to find Hinduism the dominant religion of the twenty-first century. It would be a religion that doctrinally is less clear-cut than mainstream Christianity, politically less determined than Islam, ethically less heroic than Buddhism, but it would offer something to everybody... Hinduism will spread not so much through the gurus and swamis, who attract a certain number of people looking for a new commitment and a quasi-monastic life-style, but it will spread mainly through the work of intellectuals and writers, who have found certain Hindu ideas convincing and who identify them with their personal beliefs. A fair number of leading physicists and biologists have found parallels between modern science and Hindu ideas. An increasing number of creative scientists will come from a Hindu background, will consciously, and unconsciously blend their scientific and their religious ideas. All of us may be already much more Hindu than we think."

George Ifrah (born in 1947), author of *The Universal History of Numbers*, quotes 24 passages from Indian scriptures to support the ancient knowledge of mathematics. He noticed the connection between mathematics and metaphysical abstractions, and exalts the scientific character of Sanskrit, highlighting the fact that the very term *samskrita* means precisely "perfect, complete, definitive".

He wrote, "A thousand years ahead of Europeans, Indian savants knew that the zero and infinity were mutually inverse notions."

Brian David Josephson (born in Wales, 1940), pioneer of superconductivity and magnetic fields, director of the project of Unification Mind-Matter, and Nobel Prize 1973 for physics, wrote, "The Vedanta and the Sankhya hold the key to the laws of mind and thought process which are co-related to the Quantum Field, i.e. the operation and distribution of particles at atomic and molecular levels."

Another theoretical physicist, Bernard Enginger (1923-2007), had taken the vedic name of Satprem. Member of the French resistance during the World War 2, he was arrested by the Gestapo and spent 18 months in a concentration camp, then at the end of the war he went to India where he served under the colonial French government at Pondicherry, where he discovered Aurobindo and Mère. He wrote, "Which sadist God has decreed that we would have only one life to realize ourselves and through which colossal ignorance Islam and Christianity have decided that we shall go to Heaven or Hell, according to the deeds, bad or good, which we have committed in a single life?"

Many other Westerners have openly converted to Hinduism. We may mention for example Ram Dass (born Richard Alpert in 1931) author of *Be Here Now* and disciple of Neem Karoli Baba.

Another well known personality is Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927-2001), American by birth, editor of the magazine *Hinduism Today*. He wrote, "Hinduism is so broad. Within it there is a place for the insane and a place for the saint...There is a place for the intelligent person and plenty of room for the fool. Hinduism, the Eternal Way or Sanatana Dharma, has no beginning, therefore will certainly have no end. It was never created, and therefore it cannot be destroyed. It is a God-centric religion. The center of it is God. All of the other religions are prophet-centric."

Daya Mata (1914-2010), president and *sanghamata* ("Mother of the Association") of Self Realization Fellowship, Los Angeles, and Yogoda Satsanga in India for 55 years. Born Faye Wright in a prominent family of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, descendent of the early Mormon pioneers, wrote *Only Love': Living the Spiritual Life in a Changing World, Finding the Joy Within You: Personal Counsel for God Centered Living*, and *Enter the Quiet Heart: Creating a Loving Relationship with God*.

Swami Kriyananda (born J. Donald Walters in 1926), disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952) and minister of his church called Self Realization Fellowship,

wrote more than 100 books (including *The New Path*, *The Essence of Self-Realization* and *Conversations with Yogananda*) and composed 400 music pieces. He speaks English, Italian, Romanian, Greek, French, Spanish, German, Hindi, Bengali and Indonesian. In 1962 he left the SRF and founded Ananda, a global movement of spiritual communities based on "simple living, high thinking", with 1000 full time residents. In 1973 he founded a schooling system called Education for Life based on an ecumenical curriculum open to students of all religions, and later he produced movies on Francis of Assisi and Jesus Christ.

In contrast, David Frawley (also known as Pandit Vamadeva Shastri, a name he received from Avadhuta Shastri), has focused on traditional hinduism, vedic astrology, yoga and Ayurveda. He was the first westerner to receive the title of Jyotish Kovid from the Indian Council of Astrological Sciences (ICAS) in 1993. Founder and director of the American Institute for Vedic Studies in Santa Fe (New Mexico), he is also professor at the Hindu University of America in Orlando (Florida). Author of *How I Became a Hindu*, *Arise Arjuna : Hinduism and the modern world*, *Awaken Bharata: A Call for India's Rebirth*, *Hinduism and the Clash of Civilizations*, *Gods, Sages, and Kings*, *From the River of Heaven*, *Hinduism: The Eternal Tradition (Sanatana Dharma)*, *The Myth of the Aryan Invasion Theory*, *In Search of the Cradle of Civilization*, *The Rig Veda and the History of India*, *Yoga and Ayurveda*, *Tantric Yoga*, *Wisdom of the Ancient Seers*, *Yoga and the Sacred Fire*, *Oracle of Rama*, *Ayurvedic Healing*, *Ayurveda and Marma Therapy*, *Yoga for Your Type: Ayurvedic Guide to Your Asana Practice*, *Ayurveda: Nature's Medicine*, *Yoga of Herbs: Ayurvedic Guide to Herbal Medicine*, *Ayurveda and the Mind*, *Astrology of the Seers*, *Ayurvedic Astrology*. He speaks of the need to develop a new intelligentsia composed by intellectual *kshatriyas* ("warriors") trained in Vedic dharma to face cultural challenges. He writes, "Hinduism honors the Earth as the Divine Mother and encourages us to honor her and help her develop her creative potentials. The deities of Hinduism permeate the world of nature...they don't belong to a single country or book only... I see Hinduism as a religion eminently suited for all lands and for all people because it requires that we connect with the land and its creatures - that we align our individual self with the soul of all beings around us."

Some other great thinkers among our contemporaries who have openly taken a stand, with words and action, in support of the enormous value of vedic knowledge are also

Koenraad Elst (from Holland), Michel Danino and François Gautier (from France).

Michel Danino (born in 1956) from a Jewish family emigrated from Morocco, has been living in Tamil Nadu for about 30 years. Author of *The Invasion That Never Was*, *The Indian Mind Then and Now*, *Arise Awake to the New Indian Age*, *The Lost River: On the trail of the Sarasvati*, *L'Inde et L'invasion de nulle part*, and *Kali Yuga or The Age of Confusion*. He is also the convener of the International Forum for India's Heritage.

He wrote, "The so-called "New Age" trend of the 1960s owed as much to India as to America; a number of Western universities offer excellent courses on various aspects of Indian civilization, and if you want to attend some major symposium on Indian culture or India's ancient history, you may have to go to the U.S.A; some physicists are not shy of showing parallels between quantum mechanics and yogic science; ecologists call for a recognition of our deeper connection with Nature such as we find in the Indian view of the world; a few psychologists want to learn from Indian insights into human nature; hatha yoga has become quite popular... Western civilization, not even three centuries after the Industrial Revolution, is now running out of breath. It has no direction, no healthy foundations, no value left except selfishness and greed, nothing to fill one's heart with. India alone has preserved something of the deeper values that can make a man human, and the world will surely be turning to them in search of a remedy to its advanced malady... In fact, since the start of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the West broke away from Nature and began regarding her as so much inanimate matter to be exploited (a polite word for plunder). The contrast with the ancient Indian attitude is as stark as could be. Indian tradition regards the earth as a goddess, Bhudevi ; her consort, Vishnu, the supreme divinity, incarnates from age to age to relieve her of the burden of demonic forces... 'Heaven is my father; my mother is this vast earth, my close kin,' says the Rig-Veda (I.164.33)."

Koenraad Elst (born in 1959 in Belgium in a Flamish family), author of *The Saffron Swastika*, *Decolonising The Hindu Mind - Ideological Development of Hindu Revivalism and Negationism in India: Concealing the Record of Islam*, wrote, "The struggle of Hindu society is not primarily with the Muslim community. The most important opponents of Hindu society today are not the Islamic communal leaders, but the interiorized colonial rulers of India, the alienated English-educated and mostly Left-leaning elite that noisily advertises its 'secularism'. It is these people who impose anti-Hindu policies on Hindu

society, and who keep Hinduism down and prevent it from proudly raising its head after a thousand years of oppression... The worst torment for Hindu society today is this mental slavery, this sense of inferiority which Leftist intellectuals, through their power positions in education and the media, and their direct influence on the public and political arena, keep on inflicting on the Hindu mind... Most Western scholars positively dislike Hinduism when it stands up to defend itself. They prefer museum Hinduism."

François Gautier (born in 1950), political analyst for the French daily paper *Le Figaro* and defender of Indian nationalism, author of *A Western journalist on India : The Ferengi's Columns*, *Rewriting Indian History* and *A New History of India*. He wrote, "Ancient Hindus were intensely secular in spirit, as their spirituality was absolutely non-sectarian - and still is today in a lesser measure. Seven thousand years ago, Vedic sages, to define the Universal Law which they had experienced within themselves on an occult and supra-spiritual plane... Hinduism is probably the only religion in the world which has never tried to convert others, or conquer other countries to propagate itself as a new religion. The same is not true of Islam and Christianity... O members of the Indian intelligentsia! You think that reading the latest New York Times bestseller, speaking polished English, and putting down your own countrymen, specially anybody who has a Hindu connection, makes you an intellectual. But in the process you have not only lost your roots, you have turned your back on a culture and civilisation that is thousands of years old and has given so much to the world... For the greatness of India is spiritual. The world has lost the truth. We have lost the Great Sense, the meaning of our evolution, the meaning of why so much suffering, why dying, why getting born... But India has kept this truth. India has preserved it through seven millennia of pitfalls, genocides, and mistakes."

## Study of vedic scriptures in Indian history

In the previous chapter we have seen how Vedic knowledge was systematically attacked and weakened by the invasions suffered by India in the course of centuries, and how still today such negative effects are influencing the image that Indians have of the Vedas and Hindu tradition. The most serious problem is the cultural inferiority complex in the majority of Indians in general and especially in Hindus.

An important symptom is the naive and uninformed utilization of definitions that contain a negative meaning, such as "idol", "mythology", or "legend", that usually almost all Hindus use to refer to the sacred images and stories of Hinduism, while they would never dream of applying them to the Christian or Muslim equivalents. Other definitions that communicate a distorted meaning, that demeans the original sense, are for example "seer" to indicate a *rishi* and "incantation" or "litany" to refer to a *mantra*.

Equally symptomatic is the utilization - especially by those who want to pass as "intellectuals" - of definitions of typically Christian origin to refer to Hindu concepts having very different meanings: for example "pontiff" to refer to an *acharya*, *mahanta* or *guru*, "monk" to refer to a *brahmachari* or *sannyasi*, "priest" for a *brahmana* or *pujaka*, and "caste" to indicate *varna* as well as *jati* and *kula*.

Actually these Sanskrit words do not have a precise translation in the western languages, because they refer to very specific concepts - just like the words *yoga*, *ashrama*, *dharma* and *karma*, that would require several lines of explanation in order to be translated adequately, and therefore are better left in their original form, so much that they have officially entered the vocabulary of other languages. In the west, many of those who study Hinduism and Vedic culture have already adopted the original definitions - such as

*guru, acharya, brahmana, sannyasi, brahmachari, pujaka, varna* etc - but strangely Indians themselves show a greater attachment for the bad English translations, that in their eyes seem to lend a kind of "respectable aura" to the Indian concepts.

Also persisting, albeit in a smaller measure, is the obsolete anglicization of the spelling of the original terms when they are written in western letters - such as *hindoo, pooja, mutt, teertha, sreeman* and so on, and the unnecessary use of English words and expressions within conversations in Hindi, even by people who practically have no knowledge of the English language, and ironically by people who are openly hostile to the use of English as "colonial" and "foreign" and who want to impose the use of Hindi over the entire Indian territory and in the contacts with foreigners or people who have a different mother-tongue... for the purpose of highlighting their dedication to the cause of Indian nationalism.

Even more significant is the frequent reference to the idea that all religions are equally valid (*sarva dharma samabhava*) and therefore a Hindu who does not claim to appreciate Bible, Gospels and Koran is watched suspiciously or even openly accused of "Hindu fundamentalism", while nobody expects Christians or Muslims to appreciate Vedic scriptures as much as their own scriptures, or even just to recognize the genuineness and legitimacy of Vedic scriptures or Hindu tradition.

This creates a paradoxical situation, in which openly and publicly insulting Vedic scriptures constitutes a legitimate exercise of freedom of religion, while defending them constitutes a crime and a proof of intolerance, if not even an act of inciting to hatred and violence. So the great majority of Hindus feel compelled to abundantly praise the Christian and Islamic scriptures, even without having any knowledge of them.

Thus Shirdi Sai Baba, Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ramana Maharshi, Paramahansa Yogananda, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and many others after them have felt and still feel the need to validate their own ideological position with frequent quotes, recognition, appreciation and praise for the Christian ideology. Rare exceptions are for example Swami Dayananda Sarasvati of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam and Pejawar Visvesha Tirtha Swami.

This sense of subordination towards the abrahamic ideology, not only in India but at global level, has created the widespread idea that the most representative form of Vedic or Hindu knowledge and culture is monism, sometimes modified in a drastic manner towards impersonalism, that was more digestible for the Islamic or protestant Christian iconoclasts, who still consider "diabolic" the tradition of worshiping the visible forms of the Godhead, especially the multiple forms - an iconoclastic position that was unfortunately absorbed and carried on by the Arya Samaj.

The only "personalist" form of Hinduism that is tolerated by this colonial-type ideological tendency is Vaishnavism, especially presented as an absolute monotheism focused on a male God, usually identified as the God of the Bible and Koran. In this context, the Gaudiya Vaishnavism presents Chaitanya as the divine incarnation in the garb of a prophetic figure equated to the figure of Jesus Christ in christianity.

It is important to remember this fact when we see that the majority of the presentations on Vedic knowledge presently available to the public have been produced by colonialists of Christian faith, by "impersonalist" monists or by monotheistic Vaishnavas that have become institutionalized in a church-like form. Later on in the chapter we will see how the present Hindu Resurgence is striving to overcome these limitations, that are detrimental to the understanding of the genuine and original Vedic knowledge.

Another symptom of the Hindu cultural inferiority complex is the passive acceptance of non-verified negative concepts, such as the idea that Vedic tradition is the origin of the so-called "social evils" of India, such as the mistreatment of women, the mistreatment of "low castes" and "outcaste people" generally known as *dalit* or "downtrodden" and the opposition against scientific or cultural progress. Unfortunately, due to a widespread ignorance many Hindus have embraced these negative concepts and keep propagating and defending them as if they were genuine Vedic teachings of the so-called "ancient tradition"... although they are systematically unable to quote the appropriate passages from the original scriptures. For a very simple reason: they do not exist.

The propaganda by the Christian missionaries and the colonialist literature have painted Hinduism in dark tones, for example quoting the immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands; there is a famous story described by Jules Verne in his *Around the world in 80 days*, where the British hero Phineas Fogg saves a young Indian woman



who was precisely going to be killed in that way. Such propaganda also claims that Vedic tradition is at the root of the arranged or forced marriages based on profit considerations, female infanticide, child marriages, and some kind of prostitution connected to the temples. Nothing of these is prescribed by Vedic culture - neither by the original texts nor by their commentaries or by the general ethics on which their practical application is based.

However, it is true that under the Muslim domination in India unmarried women were in a disadvantaged and difficult position, because they were more exposed to the danger of sexual exploitation by the invaders. Often the widows of the warriors that had fallen on the battlefield chose mass suicide (*jauhar*) rather than the inevitable rape, followed by the sufferings of slavery. For this same reason the warriors of a besieged fort prepared themselves for battle by wearing the saffron colored clothes of a *sannyasi*.

Vedic civilization considers the possibility that at the death of her husband a woman may feel an overwhelming sense of loss, considering herself devoid of the support and protection she wanted, and may not wish to continue to live in that condition. In such case she could freely choose to kill herself in order to be immediately reunited to the husband's soul and follow him in his next destination, on the heavenly planets or in a new earthly incarnation. The western tradition, too, has witnessed similar sentiments. Their most famous expression is seen in Juliet and Romeo, described by the beautiful tragedy written by William Shakespeare. Such sentiments can be observed even among animals, that sometimes let themselves die when they lose their life companion. Such choice is severely condemned by the Christian ideology as a major sin deserving eternal hell, irrespective of the circumstances that prompted it; on the other hand it is considered legitimate in the Vedic ethics, that sees death as a normal fact of life, a simple passage from one incarnation to another, along a path of personal evolution. In the Vedic ideological system there is no eternal hell and nobody has the authority to judge what another person does with his or her own body. Based on these considerations, suicide (of women and men alike) is not condemned - although it is not recommended either, and certainly it is not prescribed. And certainly there is no authorization for false suicide - that is to say, homicide passed as suicide on the basis of social or cultural pressure or even committed by violence.

In Vedic culture, the fundamental factor is not death in itself - which is an inevitable and often liberating passage - but the type of awareness that a person has at the moment of death, as it is confirmed for example in *Bhagavad gita* (8.6). The entire human life is a preparatory course for the moment of death, that must be faced with the maximum respect and the maximum attention, to ensure a favorable birth in the next life.

In western countries this perspective is only recently being understood and appreciated, for example by those who oppose prolonged artificial life support for patients that are in desperate and irreversible conditions, especially when the patient himself/herself has expressed the intention of being allowed to die in a serene and dignified way.

In any case, as we have already mentioned, the choice of voluntarily leaving one's body is never suggested or prescribed by Vedic tradition, and the original texts only describes a very small number of cases. For example, there is the story of Sati, Shiva's wife, who decided to leave her body as an act of protest against the offensive behavior of her father Daksha against her because she had chosen to marry Shiva. Sati's suicide, committed by awakening the inner fire from within her body and using it to consume the body itself, was therefore a rejection of the relationship with the physical body of which Daksha could claim to be the father. Sati considered Daksha as an unworthy person, with whom she did not want to have any relationship any more.

Popular ignorance, reinforced by the distorted propaganda of colonialism, has connected this radical choice of Sati's with the idea of the widow that immolates herself (or worse, that is immolated) on the funeral pyre of her husband, precisely called *sati* - forgetting that Sati's suicide has nothing to do with widowhood. Shiva had certainly not died. On the contrary, many *Puranas* clearly describe this very famous episode and say that Shiva, informed about the death of his beloved wife, became extremely angry and rushed to the spot, taking the dead body of his wife in his arms, and immediately decided to punish the offender that had caused such a drastic gesture.

Other examples of self-immolation are described in regard to Self-realized *yogis* and *yoginis* and *tapasvis/ tapasvinis* (both males and females) who left their bodily sheath exactly in the way used by Sati and in circumstances chosen in conscious and deliberate way - but never dictated by despair and fear as it is the norm with ordinary suicides. This factor gives a superior dignity and glory to such action, transcending the identification

with a particular material body and offering the opportunity of liberation or a better birth.

In the light of these considerations, we can better understand the reasons why, during the late middle ages, under the Islamic threat or domination, some Hindu women chose to commit suicide at the death of their husband - also because this action discouraged those who could consider the killing of the husband of an attractive woman as an easy and convenient method to force her into their own harem, something that used to happen frequently in those times.

On the basis of similar considerations, the fathers of young girls tended to be quick in officializing the marriage of their daughters to guarantee them a better protection. According to the Islamic law, a married woman belongs to her husband (even if he is of a very low social condition) and it is more difficult to get her into the harem of another man.

We see from the descriptions of the *Puranas* that in Vedic society girls marry only after attaining the "marriageable age", when they actually desire to unite with a man and have children, directly choosing their future husband, and there is not even one single mention of a marriage in pre-pubescent age. On the other hand, still today the Islamic ideology teaches that it is perfectly moral and legitimate to organize or force marriage on a pre-pubescent girl, following for example the model offered by Mohammed himself, who at the age of 52 married Ayesha, a little girl that was only 6 years old. In the *Tahrirolvasyeh* of Ayatollah Khomeini (volume IV, published in 1990) we even find the following statement: "It is not illicit for an adult male to have a sexual relationship with a girl that is still in her weaning age".

Because according to the Muslim logic it is normal that a married woman is kept within the house under the strict control of her husband, the Hindu families that married their daughters at a very young age could keep their girls out of sight for their better protection. On the other hand, the *brahma vadinis*, *devadasis* and *ganikas*, the "independent women" that had been very respected in Vedic society, became fully exposed to the danger of sexual exploitation under the new norms imposed by the Islamic government, so their tradition totally disappeared, substituted by vulgar prostitution - often forced prostitution or sex slavery.

The legal system of *sharia*, introduced in India under the Muslim domination and only partially abolished by the British regime, imposes considerable restrictions to women's rights, including the right to property, to inheritance and to court witness. For example, according to the *sharia* a raped woman must bring at least one male witness supporting her declarations, so that her version can have more weight than the rapist's word who chooses to deny the facts. Failing which, she will be subjected to severe corporal punishment (including stoning) for the crime of adultery, as we often hear from international news. If the raped woman and her supporting witness are non-Muslims while the rapist is a Muslim, she will require no less than 4 male witnesses to support her claims. This system of legislation can still be seen in the countries with an Islamic government, as in Saudi Arabia, and in Islamic reference texts regarding women's rights, that can be consulted on many internet websites.

Many, even among Hindus, believe that the *purdah*, i.e. the segregation of women and the obligation for women to remain completely covered or at least "as covered as possible" in public, is a "morality" value characteristic of Hinduism based on "shyness". It is easy to disprove this myth, simply by visiting one of the few surviving temples among those that had been built and decorated before the Muslim invasions. The more ancient are the temples, the more we can find many depictions of women that are very scantily dressed: anyone can observe the joyful and serene exaltation of the beauty and glory of the human body as a religious value in itself. And these are not simply depictions of female dancers or ordinary women visiting the temple: they include women worshipers, painted or sculpted in the act of personally fanning the Deity or offering various worship articles - and even the female Deities themselves, whose majestic and splendid physical forms are amply revealed to the devotees. Someone may object that such Deities were sculpted with very little clothing because the worship method precisely includes the offering of clothing as dress, but even a quick verification will show that the sculpted image is already adorned not just with some clothing (although rather revealing), but even with a wealth of beautiful ornaments, including crowns, belts and necklaces. On the other hand, the images of female Deities sculpted or painted after the period of the Muslim and British dominations usually come as a sort of monolithic bloc, where the clothing completely covers and hides the body.

The technical term defining these paradigms is *laukika sraddha* or "popular belief", devoid of factual value because it is opposed to *shastra pramana*, or authoritative "scriptural foundation".

Another of these silly beliefs claims that Hindu girls or women, especially from "good families", should not receive any cultural or professional education, so that they will remain more "faithful and obedient" to their husband and in-laws, because they totally depend on them. Instead of "getting ideas" about their own personal value as individuals within the family and society, these women should simply concern themselves to produce a sufficient number of male children. This idea, that is certainly offensive towards women, has infiltrated into the mass of other prejudices cultivated by ignorant people, but does not have any foundation in the genuine vedic Tradition. On the contrary, in the original scriptures and especially in the very little known *Kama sutra*, we read that girls, especially those from good families, including princesses, were encouraged to learn the 64 arts, thanks to which they would become able to bring prosperity to their home and even get independent income in case of widowhood or financial difficulties of the husband or his family - as the text explicitly states.

Such arts include the study of foreign languages, gastronomy and culinary arts, medicine, gardening, the preparation of preserves, drinks, perfumes, oils and medicinal extracts, tailoring, dyeing of clothes and other materials, fashioning gold and creating jewels, the ability to evaluate the price of gems and metals, chemistry and mineralogy, metallurgy and the knowledge of mining processes, the creation of flower ornaments both for the person and for home decoration, the creation of turbans and various hair-dressing styles, tattooing, the art of service to the Deity, the art of making *malas* (rosaries) and religious decorations, magical (i.e. tantric) arts, spells and magical potions, coded languages and communications, the management of cisterns for water and storage facilities, singing, dancing, performance arts, painting, sculpting and all the figurative arts, poetry and the various literary arts, training and care of pet animals, the art of toy making, martial arts and military strategy, architecture, carpentry and ebonistry, house management and accountings, gambling, psychology (especially marital counseling), sociology, as well as the various sexual arts. The original scriptures clearly state that the women who are expert in these arts and sciences are immensely respected in society even when they live alone independently; thanks to their personal abilities they obtain a place of respect in the

city assemblies, they are praised by respectable people and become able to overcome any crisis at personal or family level.

Besides these independent professional abilities, married women could normally participate in a direct way to the professional activities of their husband. A famous example is queen Kaikeyi, who normally went to battle on her own chariot in the army of the kingdom of Ayodhya; once she entered the fight to face the great warriors that had stricken king Dasaratha unconscious. After defeating and routing the generals of the enemy army, Kaikeyi picked up the unconscious body of her husband, moved him to her own chariot and took him to safety, saving his life. For this action, Dasaratha had promised to repay his debt by fulfilling any request from her.

Similarly, the wives of *brahmanas* and *vaisyas* were welcomed to directly participate to the professional activities of their families if they so desired.

The ignorant notion for which women should not be given any education, however elementary, specifically because they must not be made able to honestly make a living in an independent way, obviously leads degraded people to believe that the birth of a girl child should be considered a disgrace rather than a happy event as in the case of a male child. In the most extreme cases the disapproval of the family can turn into serious neglect towards the girl all along her childhood, if not into infanticide or foeticide when the ultrasound tests reveal that the unborn child is a female.

Such ideas do not find any support in any Vedic texts, either in a theoretical or in a practical form. Rather, the teachings of the *Vedas* lead in a completely opposite direction. There are no Vedic texts that endorse, contemplate or even mention the killing of girl children or the neglect or mistreatment of girls or women, of any age. On the contrary, according to the Vedic scriptures a woman or a *brahmana* must never be subject to physical punishment or mistreatment of any kind, even when they are factually recognized as guilty of some serious crime.

Apart from being respected as visible manifestations of the Divine Feminine, women are described as perfectly equivalent counterparts to men. The *Saunaka Samhita* of *Atharva Veda* (10.8.27) states, *tvam stri tvam pumanasi*, "you (i.e. the incarnation of *atman/ brahman*) are woman and man", and *stri pumsau brahmano jatau striyah brahma utha bhavana*, "both women and men are born from the same Brahman - women are

manifestations of the Supreme Being and so are men" (*Atharva Veda Paippalada Samhita* 8.9.11). The *Mahanirvana tantra* (8.47) teaches that a girl must be raised and educated with the same opportunities that are offered to male children. In Vedic civilization there is no discrimination between sons and daughters: *Rig Veda* (8.31.8) offers the description of a happy family, blessed by Indra with sons and daughters.

It is true that Vedic scriptures do not force anyone to engage above and beyond their capacities and wishes, and therefore in Vedic civilization a woman may choose to simply dedicate herself to family, children, husband, home, and concern herself about her own physical appearance without being forced to engage in other activities, but such occupations do not constitute a limitation, an obligation or a priority duty.

According to the *Harita Dharmasutra* of the Maitrayaniya school of *Yajur Veda*, women can be classified into two types: (*dvi vidha striyah, brahmavadinyah sadyovadhvas ca, tatra brahmavadini namupanayana magnindhanam svaghre bhikshacharyeti*).

The first type of women mentioned in this *Dharma sutra* is the category of the *brahma vadinis*, those who choose to dedicate their lives to the study, practice and teaching of Vedic knowledge and Brahman realization. These transcendental and powerful women are not required to marry and raise children, although there is no rule that forbids them to do so, even later in life. Tradition offers the examples of Visvavara, Ghosha, Sikata, Nivavari, Apala and Visvavara from the family of Atri, Angirasi Sarasvati from the family of Angirasa, Yami Vaivasvati, Sraddha, Ghosha, Surya, Indrani, Urvasi, Sarama, Juhu and Paulomi Saci, who are associated to the *mantras* of *Rig Veda*.

Another famous *brahma vadini*, Lopamudra, was famous for her deep knowledge of Sanskrit and Tamil. The meaning of her name is "completely absorbed in the Self", and we find her in the category of the Brahmadadhini Rishi-patnis, because she became the wife of Agastya Rishi. Two *mantras* of the *Rig Veda* (1.179.1-2) are attributed to her.

It is said that some Vedic scholars named their literary work from their wives or daughters, as in the case of the *Vedanta* commentary called *Bhamati* and the mathematic treatise called *Lilavati*. However, we cannot dismiss the possibility that such texts have in fact been written or composed by the women whose names they bear, because there is no specific documentation for the authorship of these works.

The *Rig Veda suktas* 10-134, 10-39,10-40, 10-91, 10-95,10-107,10-109,10-154,10-159,10-189 are explicitly feminine in origin; the book 14 of *Atharva Veda* and various sections in several more books are attributed to Rishikas or "female Rishis". The *Vac sukta* (*Rig Veda* 10.125), focusing on the very revelation of the *Vedas*, is attributed to the Rishika Vagambhrina. The entire book of *Atharva Veda* concerning domestic rituals, marriage etc, is attributed to a Rishika. Many parts of the other 19 books are attributed to women, and the rituals described as specifically called *strikarmani*, ceremonies specifically celebrated by women.

The ritual texts of the *Vedas* offer a list of the Rishikas to whom the student must offer his homage during the learning of the divine texts - for example the *Ashvalayana Grhyasutra* (3.4.4) and *Shankhayana Grhyasutra* (4.10) that list female Vedic *gurus*, such as Sulabha Maitreyi and Vadava Prathiteyi. Some Vedic texts present women as authorities on the details of the Vedic rituals; for example the *Aitareya Brahmana* 2.9 quotes the opinion of Kumari Gandharva-grihita on the ritual of Agnihotra (the daily celebration of the fire sacrifice).

Some texts are specifically destined to be recited by women - like the *mantras* of the *Madhyandina Yajurveda* (5.17, 3.44-45 etc), the *Apastambha dharmasutras* (2.2.29.11-15) and the *Srauta sutras* on the Vedic ceremonies. Also many *mantras* from the *Yajur Veda* (for example *Sukla* 5.17) are specifically meant to be recited by women. Even when men recited the other *slokas*, the presence of women was implicit: the recitation of the *Sama Veda* is intended to be accompanied by the music of the instruments played by women.

In *Kena Upanishad*, Uma Brahmavidya appears to dissipate Indra's ignorance with her teachings: apparently Adi Shankara saw this discourse as very important, because he wrote no less than two different and subsequent commentaries on this one text.

The girls called *brahma vadini* underwent the vows of *brahmacharya* and the *upanayana samskara* just like boys, beginning the performance of the Agnihotra (daily fire sacrifice) and the *veda-adhyayana* (daily study of Vedic scriptures) at a very young age, with the only difference that - due to their generally more delicate physical structures - girls were not required to observe the strict rules of austerities prescribed for males. Therefore they were allowed to spend their *brahmacharya* period in the home of their own father or in



the home of other relatives, receiving a private tuition and obtaining their *bhiksha* (ritual alms) from family members rather than from strangers. This is also confirmed in another text (now lost) quoted by other commentators/ writers with the title of *Yama-dharmashastra*.

However, it is important that such provision did not constitute a limitation or obligation, or a strict rule. Still in post-Vedic times, Panini wrote that girls attend Vedic schools called *charanas* (4.1.63) and that sometimes they reside in hostels or *chhatra-sala* (6.2.86) for the purpose of their studies. According to the grammarian Katyayana (4.1.14, 6.1.92), who lived after Panini, one of such schools was very famous because of the grammar course by Apisali, an illustrious grammarian who lived before Panini. In his *Mahabhasya* (2.206) Patanjali mentions a school where female students learn the Mimamsa philosophy and makes a distinction between beginner and advanced students, respectively defined by the terms *adhyetri* and *manavika* (4.193, 2.249).

When they chose to marry, the *brahma vadinis* looked for men who were equally dedicated to the cultivation of spiritual knowledge and practice. Some famous Rishi patnis, respected and famous at least as much as their husbands, were Romasa the wife of Svanya, Anasuya the wife of Atri, Maitreyi the wife of Yajnavalkya, Arundhati the wife of Vasistha, Vasukra patni, Ghosha and so on. And just like men, these *brahma vadinis* had the opportunity to go through the other traditional *ashramas* in human life, up to the level of the order of total renunciation or *sannyasa*. It is said that Gargi attained perfect realization in the stage of *brahmacharya*, Chudala in the *grihastha ashrama*, Maitreyi in the stage of *vanaprastha*, and Sulabha yogini as a *sannyasini*. This Sulabha *bhikshuni* ("sacred mendicant") was famous for her vast and deep knowledge of the *Mahabharata*.

According to the Vedic tradition the second category of women, called *sadhya vadhu*, consists of the ordinary persons who simply aspire to be housewives and mothers. They may not be particularly learned or austere, but they are much respected nonetheless, precisely for the educational role and influence they have for their children, and for the support and care they provide to all the members of the family and the clan. Unlike the women who live under the Islamic segregation regime, ordinary married women in Vedic society are totally free to move around, and they can go out in public either alone or escorted, to participate to the various social, religious or cultural functions, or for shopping or visiting pleasant or interesting places. In this regard there are many

descriptions from the scriptures and historical records. However, everyone is expected to be faithful to their duties, as duty is the basis of religion, so Vedic women who are dedicated to the family and the home must give priority to such duties even in the case financial prosperity allows them to maintain servants and maidservants: the mistress of the house must supervise all work strictly. Thanks to the pleasantness and comfort of traditional Vedic housing structures, endowed with vast orchards and kitchen gardens, water tanks, storing rooms and laboratories for the home production of various goods, the "mother of the family" did not need to leave her house in order to perfectly perform her duties. In Vedic society merchants and independent service providers (such as astrologers, palmists, physicians, artists etc) were usually going from door to door to present their merchandise and services for the convenience of customers. There are no rules that prevent women from interacting with merchants (male or female), and for this reason the women of wealthy families did not need to take the trouble to go out of their homes to run errands or to enjoy the pleasures of shopping, entertainment or popular culture.

The ordinary mother of a family, called *sadhya vadhu*, was encouraged to directly participate to all the religious rituals as Guardian of Dharma, while men are excluded from the participation to some specific domestic rituals. This position of great importance for women within the religious system in the family is symbolized by the ancient tradition of the husband who walks behind the wife around the sacred fire during the marriage ceremony. Such tradition is still alive in Orissa, together with a strong devotion to the Mother Goddess - in spite of all the efforts made by invaders to demolish it, both through laws that oppress women and through the distortion of Vedic concepts, or even with the physical destructions of the texts on the subject and the qualified teachers that supported the original and genuine version.

The *brahmanas* who were famous for their learning and experience in the study of scriptures were particularly targeted during the Islamic conquest of India: normally they were slaughtered or deprived of their distinctive symbols and forced to work in extremely dangerous, exhausting and degrading conditions. For example, they were engaged in the removal of garbage, stool and dead bodies, or personal service to the conquerors. To make a small example, within the short period of the year 1393, just one ruler among many, Sultan Sikander But-Shiken, was responsible for the disappearance of about 80

thousand *brahmanas*: the number of his victims can be calculated on the basis of the 80 kg of sacred thread that he collected by eliminating those who were wearing it. Consider that the weight of one sacred thread is approximately 1 gram. The chronicles of another Islamic sultan in India, Amir Shamasu'd-Din Iraqi, openly state that every day from 1500 to 2000 *brahmanas* were brought to his palace, where they were deprived of their sacred thread, forcibly circumcised and force-fed with cow meat. If the unfortunate victims dared to return to their old religion, they were immediately slaughtered together with their families and associates.

Unfortunately in India the texts of the Muslim chronicles are difficult to access, because their free consultation by the public is considered dangerous as it could cause "communal tension". However, it is possible to find the quotes in other countries, especially where the government is openly Islamic, where the events related by such chronicles are still proudly considered as great and glorious achievements by the religious fundamentalists.

The same type of persecution targeted the texts of Vedic scriptures. While such texts were extremely numerous originally, they were decimated or mutilated in such a way that it became impossible to effectively counteract the invaders' propaganda. Nonetheless, there is still sufficient material to help us understand the true ideological position of Vedic knowledge in relation to these problems. The *Dharma shastra* text commented by Kullukabhata (15th century CE) is missing many texts in its later versions: these texts specifically said that the wives are in charge of the daily performance of the *agnihotra* in the house. In fact according to the traditional rule a man becomes eligible to celebrate the Vedic rituals only after marriage (*Madhaviya Shankara digvijaya* 2.14) and the *samskaras* (the ritual purification ceremonies) can be successful only if the two spouses sit together (*Aitareya Brahmana* 7.10, *Rig Veda* 8.31.5-9, *Taittiriya Brahmana* 2.2.2.6, commentary by Shabara Swami sul *Purvamimamsa sutra* 6.9.17, *Siddhanta kaumudi* on *Ashtadhyayi* 4.1.33).

Tradition requires the wife to support the husband's hand every time he pours the *ahuti* (ritual oblation in the sacrificial fire) to indicate that the ritual is performed jointly. However, there is no similar prescription for women when they directly celebrate the *homa* and pour the *ahuti* - something they can do independently. In the *Mahabharata* we see Savitri and Amba performing the Agnihotra, the fire sacrifice, by themselves and on their own right. This tradition is confirmed in the *Gobhila Grihasutra* (1.3.15) and in the

*Asvalayana Grihasutra* (1.9), that quotes the famous female teacher Vadava Pratiteyi (3.4.4). In *Ramayana* we see Kausalya, Sita and Tara (respectively wives of Dasaratha, Rama and Sugriva) independently performing the Agnihotra, while on the occasion of Rama performing the Asvamedha yajna in the absence of his wife Sita, he is required to install a golden statue of his wife in the *yajna* site so that the process will not be invalidated.

According to Vedic scriptures, women also possess the necessary requisites to perform the daily *sandhya* rituals. In Vedic Arya society all women wear the sacred thread (*upavita*), as *brahmacharini* (celibate students) or as married women. In Dandin's *Kadambari* (8th century CE) a lady called Mahasveta is described as decorated by a white sacred thread resplending like pure moonlight.

According to the *Harita smriti*, the second category of women (*sadyo vadhus*) having more ordinary tendencies, who have not undergone the stage of *brahmacharya* and connected rituals, received their sacred thread (in the ceremony called *upanayana*) just before marriage. In fact the *Gobhila Grihasutra* (2.1.9) states that during the marriage the bride must wear the *upavita* (sacred thread) signifying that she has undergone all the *samskaras* or prescribed purification rituals, and is therefore an *arya*, a "civilized and educated person".

*Manusmriti* (2.145) teaches that the mother is 1000 times more venerable than the father, and many scriptures (such as *Gautama Dharmasutra* 2.57, *Yajnavalkya Smriti* 1.33, *Mahabharata* 1.196.16) state that the mother must be considered the greatest Guru for her children, before the father and even before the *brahmana* that gives initiation. At the celebration of the Sraddha (the ritual to honor the dead) the mother is remembered and honored before the father. Furthermore, special extra ceremonies such as the Chandana dhenu sraddha are performed for the mother (but not for the father). While an unworthy father can be excluded from the Sraddha offerings performed by the son (*Vasistha Dharmasutra* 13.47, *Gautama Dharmasutra* 20.1) the mother can never be. A son is considered as directly responsible for the atonement for his mother's bad actions after her death (*Hiranyakeshin Grihasutra* 2.4.10.7, *Shankhyayana Grihasutra* 3.13.5).

A man who enters the order of *sannyasa* receives *pranama* (ritual homage) from his own father, but offers it to his mother. According to the Vedic tradition, at the time of *diksha*

or initiation (*upanayana samskara*) the student approaches his mother to beg for *bhiksha* (ritual alms) and when the student returns home after completing his studies, he bows to his mother and offers her whatever he has acquired.

Devotion to mother as everybody's first Guru also remains when all other relationships are abandoned. We know about the example of Adi Shankara, who personally performed the cremation of his deceased mother in the courtyard of her own house even after he had entered the order of *sannyasa*. Still today, the Namputiri *brahmanas* perform the cremation of their family members in the courtyard of their own homes, as a homage to Adi Shankara. Chaitanya, too, was famous for his devotion towards his mother Saci.

When he entered the order of *sannyasa* he approached her offering his obeisances and asked her orders about his future residence. Mother Saci told him to reside in Jagannatha Puri and he obeyed, remaining in Puri for the rest of his life.

In many cases, glorious sons are associated to the name of their mother rather than to the name of their father - like Devakiputra Krishna (also mentioned in *Chandogya Upanisad*), Rishi Aitareya (son of Itara), Mahidasa of *Aitareya Upanishad*, Dakshiputra Panini (the grammarian) and Kaunteya Arjuna, and obviously all the main Devas, called Adityas ("sons of Aditi").

In *Taittiriya Upanisad* (1.11.2) the teachers speak to the students of Vedic knowledge, recommending them to first offer their homage to their own mother as a manifestation of the Divine. In the famous dedication song of the devotee, God is first celebrated as Mother and then as Father: *tvam eva mata ca pita tvam eva*.

A very well-known teaching recommends all men to consider all women as their mothers, as manifestations of the one Mother Goddess, she who gives life to everyone.

*Manu smriti* states, *yatra naryastu pujoyante, ramante tatra devata*: where women are venerated the Gods are pleased, but where they are not honored, no sacred ritual can give fruits. The houses where women are not properly honored and therefore pronounce a curse, completely perish. In the marriage hymn of the *Rig Veda* (10.85.26) it is said that the bride "addresses the assembly like a general addresses the army". Then *Rig Veda* continues (10. 159.2) describing the position of a married woman in the words of Sachi Paulomi: "I am the banner. I am the guide. I possess excellent eloquence; my husband

cooperates with me and follows my will."

*Rig Veda* (1.73.3) describes the Divine Reality as manifested in the "glorious wife of the worshiper", that is formally venerated as Griha Lakshmi, the personification of the house's prosperity (*Taittiriya Brahmana* 2.9.4.7, *Manusmriti* 9.26), "auspicious" (*Rig Veda* 3.53.6), "very auspicious" (*Rig Veda* 10.85.37), "worthy of worship" (*Mahabharata* 5.38.11), that must be treasured by her husband more than his own life itself, worshiped as a mother and respected as an elder sister (*Mahabharata* 4.3.13). The husband must never do anything that displeases his wife (*Mahabharata* 1.74) because this would make all rituals ineffective.

Still today in Hinduism, the most important and popular religious festivities are dedicated to the Mother Goddess - like Navaratri (the seasonal celebration of "nine nights"), Durga puja, Diwali and so on. The appearance of Sri Rama and his victory are both celebrated in the immediate vicinities of the Navaratri festival, because it is said that Rama was able to defeat Ravana and to return to Ayodhya to be crowned there as king, only by the grace of Mother Durga, who was devoutly worshiped by Rama. Before participating to the battle of Kurukshetra, Arjuna worshiped Mother Durga, following Krishna's instructions.

The famous *Devi mahatmya* in the *Markandeya Purana* describes how the Mother Goddess, on the request of all the Devas and for the purpose of protecting them, killed the demoniac Madhu and Kaitabha, Sumbha and Nishumbha, Raktabija and Dhumralochana, and Mahisha asura with all his army.

In fact the worship of the female form of the Divine seems to have been the main tradition in the ancient times, followed by a subsequent development of iconography towards the masculine form especially after the beginning of Kali yuga, although the worship of the male Deities is done together with the Shakti or even openly subordinated to the Shakti, like in the examples of Shiva/Kali and Krishna/Radha.

Mother Kali ("the Black", identified with Time and Change) is often depicted standing over the body of Shiva, who lies on the ground in a submissive and passive position. In the Krishna lila, beautifully represented by the great poet Jayadeva, Govinda embraces Radha's feet and worships them with love - the echo of such devotion is also found in the personal relationship of the poet with his own wife Padmavati. Even when the female form in the Divine couple is depicted as submissive and devoted towards the Lord, the

name of the Shakti is always mentioned before the name of the Lord - Sita Rama, Radhe Shyam, Uma Mahesha, Lakshmi Narayana, Sri Vishnu, etc.

Lakshmi is considered inseparable from Vishnu, as stated in the *Vishnu Purana* (1.8.17-20), where Parasara says: "Constant companion of Vishnu and Mother of the Universe, Lakshmi Devi is eternal. She is speech where Vishnu is the object of description. Where Vishnu is the law, she is policy. Where Vishnu is knowledge, she is intelligence. Where Vishnu is creator, she is creation. He is mountain, she is earth. He is pleasure, she is perfect satisfaction. Vishnu is desire, she is the object of desire. He is *yajna* (the sacrificial ritual), she is *dakshina* (the gift offered in sacrifice)."

The female forms of Sri Vidya and Gayatri are considered the personifications of knowledge, respectively in *Tantras* and *Vedas*. *Atharva Veda* (19.71.1) and many other texts state that Gayatri is "the Mother of all *Vedas*" (*namaste surya sankaro surya gayatrike amle, brahmavidye mahavidye vedamata namo 'stu te*).

No scholar or student could even imagine starting any study without first offering his homage to Goddess Sarasvati, and the annual festival of Sarasvati puja is still considered fundamental in all Indian schools. Sarasvati is often called Vag Devi ("the Goddess of Word"), mistress and teacher of all knowledge, both spiritual and material. Traditionally, the recitation of Vedic texts begins with an invocation to the Devi - *om shanno devirbhishtiyeh apo bhavantu* (*Atharva veda*). Specifically, this *mantra* constitutes the beginning of Pippalada's version of the *Atharva Veda*. It appears again as *mantra* 1.6.1 in Shaunaka's version of *Atharva Veda*, and in many texts even this version starts with the invocation to the Devi.

Bhumi puja, the ritual homage to Mother Earth as the *asana* of the worshiper, is an integral part of all traditional ritual ceremonies. *Rig Veda* contains various hymns dedicated to Mother Earth, and *Atharva Veda* (12.1.63) contains this beautiful hymn: "O Earth, Mother! Safely establish me in spiritual and material happiness, and in full accord with the Heaven. O greatest of Sages! Support me in grace and splendor!"

Cereal grains, too, are considered sacred as a form of Devi Annapurna, and water is considered sacred as the form of the Goddess (*jala rupena samsthita*), that should be present in all celebrations in the form of the sacred *kalasha* or water pot, that traditionally "forms the body" of all the invoked Deities (males and females). The *kalasha* is also

present over the temple domes and as an auspicious image painted inside temples and homes, especially on the occasion of festivals and certainly for marriages.

Both male and female Deities are praised in the *Apri suktas* and in the family prayers of all the 10 Rishi lineages. The primeval Goddess, Aditi or Adi Shakti, the mother of all the Devas, has a central place in these songs. Among the ancient Vedic Deities we find two Adityas ("children of Aditi") are in female form (Dhatri and Savitri). Also female are the names of the Deities called Ila, Usha, Yami, Ratri, Prithivi, Kamadhenu, Aranyani, Urvasi, and so on. All these Goddesses are mentioned as venerable in themselves, without any association with a male Deity counterpart; others - such as Saci and Rati - are mentioned together with a male companion, such as Indra and Kama respectively.

Regarding the supposed oppression of the "low castes" or "outcaste" and the rigid hereditary immobility of social position, it will suffice to read the original text of *Puranas* and *Itihasas*, for example, to find out a very different reality. To begin with, in the original texts there is no reference to persons or categories called *dalit* ("oppressed") or *paria* ("emarginated") or "outcaste" or "untouchables" that are part of the hindu society. In fact, Vedic scriptures state that human kind (*manusya jati*) can be divided into two vast categories - *arya* and *anarya*, respectively those who follow the Vedic rules of civilized life, and those who don't. Both these definitions can be applied at individual and collective level.

These rules are based on hygienic, ethical, social and cultural principles. The most important example is cleanliness or purity: an *arya* must take a bath every day, 1 to 3 times a day according to the circumstances. After bathing in clean water, preferably running water, one must wear fresh clean clothes. In any case it is necessary to take a complete bath and wear fresh clothes in order to purify oneself from excretions - for example after going to the toilet or in case of vomit, sexual secretions, mucus secretions, bleeding etc. The general rule becomes even stricter when the individual is engaged in activities that require a higher hygienic level, such as food preparation, water management (especially drinking water) and all those religious activities with a public distribution of food, water, flowers, leaves and other substances that have been offered to the Deity and that are traditionally eaten or drunk with great respect by people.

The need of cleanliness and purity also applies to one's food habits through vegetarianism



as the abstention from substances that are intrinsically impure such as the bodies of dead animals, as well from substances that can contaminate the mind such as alcoholic drinks or some plants containing active principles with undesirable effects.

The second fundamental principle of Vedic civilization is the individual's evolution of awareness through study and personal discipline, the participation to social prosperity through the performance of professional duties (irrespective of the profit that one can get), the responsibility towards one's family and ancestors, gratitude and respect towards one's superiors, gradual detachment from temporary identifications and material attachments, and liberation from all conditionings in preparation for death. These qualities are cultivated through the system of the *ashramas* or progressive stages in the life of an individual, where one is trained in one's personal evolution. In the west, the word *ashrama* is generally known for its meaning of "residence of persons who are engaged in spiritual life", but the original sense also include the meaning of "position in life".

In the first stage of life, in the *ashrama* called *brahmacharya*, the student learns to follow the rules of purity and cleanliness, studies the scriptures and applies their teachings in practice, developing a strong basis of loyalty to *dharma*, the universal rules of ethics and civilized life. In the second stage, called *grihastha*, the individual engages in economic development and prosperity by working for the family and for society without any sense of selfishness. The *grihastha* ("one who lives in his own home") faithfully performs his sacred duties, thus repaying his debt towards his ancestors, society in general and the Devas.

Gradual detachment is attained in the stage of *vanaprastha* ("that lives in the forest") when one leaves his house to his adult children and retires from social activities to devote himself to pilgrimages and austerities, until he arrives at the level of complete renunciation, called *sannyasa*, where a man abandons all fixed residence, personal property, social position and all kinds of material identifications.

Vedic or *arya* society, composed by individuals that accept to follow these rules of personal purification, is divided into four *varnas* or occupational categories, constituted respectively by *brahmanas* (intellectuals), *kshatriyas* (administrators and warriors), *vaisyas* (entrepreneurs and traders of all types) and *sudras* (craftsmen and laborers).

These categories constitute the natural divisions of all human societies because they are based on spontaneous talents and tendencies that are found everywhere; the difference in Vedic society is that the *varna* system is regulated by the precise description of the qualities, the activities, the duties and the rights characteristic of each position.

Classification in one of such categories does not simply depend on birth, although birth may help considerably - just like someone who was born in a family of medical doctors or lawyers can take advantage of a favorable environment, of the constant example and of the expert guidance of his relatives. When the Vedic system and rules are strictly followed (especially in regard to the circumstances of conception) and the level of consciousness of the family is solid and consistent with the position it occupies in society, there are good probabilities that the souls attracted to take birth in that family will be positively attuned to the family traditions. In order to reinforce the positive and virtuous tendencies of the children, the parents also must perform a series of purificatory rituals that are meant to constantly elevate the level of consciousness; the number of such purification rituals (called *samskaras*) can sum up to 40, for those who choose to perform the less important ceremonies as well. Of course it is always possible to fall into accidents on the way, and sometimes it is evident that a soul who has taken birth in a particular family does not possess the necessary qualities that are required to properly carry on the family tradition. In this case the child must be offered choices that are more suitable to his actual potential.

It is also possible that in some cases affection and attachment could obscure the judgment of parents and relatives on the factual potential of a child. To counteract this danger, in Vedic society all children are sent to the Gurukula, "the family of the Guru", in the home of a qualified teacher, where they will be watched and trained in a personalized way for a certain number of years.

Since the children (generally from the age of 5 onwards) live in close contact with the Guru and his family, day and night, the teacher can easily observe their behavior in a variety of situations and evaluate which professional and social occupation each child will best perform in the future. Of course the Guru must be qualified for such task, because by his endorsement and guidance he becomes totally responsible for the success or failure of each student. Apart from the fundamental education and training on ethical and religious principles that is given to everyone, each boy is specifically engaged in one

of the four occupational fields that is most suitable according to his natural tendencies and capabilities. Those who love to study and learn quickly, and show the most exemplary ethical behavior are trained as *brahmanas*, or teachers and consultants. Those who are good in organizing things (because they are able to manage people) and love physical activities are trained as *kshatriyas*, while those who have entrepreneurial tendencies (organizing materials and resources) are trained as *vaisyas*. These three categories of students receive the religious initiation or *diksha*, by which they become officially recognized as "twice born", something that includes precise duties for the performance of rituals and work for society,

The less enthusiastic students, who are lazy, hungry for sense gratification, rather selfish and devoid of specific talents, unable to actually take responsibilities, remain in the generic position of *sudras* and they are simply expected to perform the duty to assist the other social categories. In exchange, their employers take care of them and their families in all aspects of life.

It is important to understand that the *sudras* are not "untouchables", *parias* or *dalits*. The life conditions of a *sudra* depend solely on his relationship with his employer and has nothing to do with social conventions or prejudice. *Sudras* are considered *aryas* and their employers treat them like their own children or family members. Because generally the *sudras* or servants live in their employer's house, the British colonialists that observed Indian society from the outside, through the lenses of their own social prejudice, mistakenly confused the position of the *sudra* with the position of the slaves in some ancient European societies. This misunderstanding has been solidified by the notorious Aryan Invasion Theory, on which we will discuss later on.

The key to correctly understand the position of the *sudra* in Vedic society consists in the analysis of the two apparently similar definitions of *dasa* ("servant") and *dasyu* ("thief, criminal"). As we have already examined, Vedic scriptures encourage each individual to evolve and improve himself. However, it may happen that some people choose to indulge in the lowest and most degrading tendencies, and tend to pick up bad habits instead of developing good habits. For example, a *sudra* can become lazy to the point of neglecting the basic hygienic and cleanliness norms, or greedy to the point of misappropriating valuable objects without the permission of the legitimate owner. Or he can become selfish to the point of showing a cruel and insensitive behavior towards people or towards

animals. These violations to the rules are not extremely serious in themselves, but they create a danger for the proper functioning of society, therefore one who chooses to continue into that direction is dismissed from service and expelled from Vedic social life, thus becoming known as an *anarya* or *chandala*, a "non-civilized person". It is important to understand that the classification into the category of *anarya* or *chandala* is based on the individual's free choice of not following the basic rules of cleanliness, austerity and compassion. In the original system, this is not about birth right, and nobody is forced in that direction.

Of course we must consider the importance of the environmental factor of family in the development of a system of values for the individual - because taking birth in a degraded family exposes one to the bad example and to the bad teachings of his parents and relatives. However, this is not a decisive factor, because as we all know there are often exceptions both in the good and in the bad. Such exceptions must be recognized and officialized by the leaders of society, specifically by the teachers (*brahmanas*) and rulers (*kshatriyas*), who have always had the power to officially modify the social position of an individual on the basis of his actual qualities, his level of consciousness and his behavior.

Apart from these exceptions, that we will examine later on, we need to understand that in general the *anaryas* (also called *chandala* or *mleccha*) constitute a cause of disturbance and danger for Vedic society, and for this reason they are not permitted to normally reside within the urban areas where civilized people live. However, they are left free to choose a fixed or nomadic residence of their liking in any area that is distant enough from urban habitation.

This effectively contradicts the picture of slavery and mistreatment that is presented by the anti-Vedic propaganda, because normally such drastic segregation does not allow sufficient conditions of contact and vicinity between members of the civilized society and members of the wild or tribal societies. In the case where a member of the civilized society (*arya*) comes in contact with a member of a non-civilized society (*anarya*), the *arya* has the duty to always behave in a kind and respectful way, because each human being deserves a basic level of respect simply because of the potential development afforded by his body. No mistreatment or coercion is ever allowed.

*Svetasvatara Upanishad* (II. 5) says that all human beings, without any distinction, are *amritasya putra*, "children of the Immortality", as they are heirs to spiritual realization.

Both the *Rig Veda* (5-60-5) and *Yajur Veda* (16.15) state that all human beings are members of the same family, and they are all entitled to equality. *Atharva Veda* (3-30-1) states that all human beings must have for each other the same affection and love shown by a cow to her newborn calf, they should share food and be firmly united like the spokes in a chariot wheel. Tolerance of lifestyles that are different from ours should be based on such considerations, but it should not fall into the opposite exaggeration, by which one must give the same value to all behaviors, or even give more facilities and rights to those people who are less qualified. This would inevitably cause people to behave in the worst possible way and to avoid all effort to improve and evolve personally.

Therefore, the clear perception of the basic equality of all human beings does not invalidate the need to regulate the normal community life, because the free choices of one individual or one group of individuals should not damage other individuals or other groups of individuals.

The rules that forbid *chandalas* or *anaryas* to live in close contact with *aryas* are not based on racism or social prejudice, but simply by strictly hygienic considerations. Even when we talk of segregation, it is important to understand that it is not based on birth considerations or prejudice, and above all it is not a permanent or coercitive system, and it is not caused by a condition of financial poverty. In Vedic civilization the lack of financial resources never constitutes a reason for segregation or social discrimination, and certainly it is not the cause of impurity or contamination. Anyone can maintain his legitimate position of civilized person in Vedic society by simply accepting to keep himself decently clean, something that can be done even by regularly bathing and washing one's clothes in a river or pond, without spending any money, and abstaining from dirty and unhygienic life habits. Not even travelling beggars are assimilated to the *chandalas* - of course provided they observe the fundamental rules of hygiene and civilized behavior.

In some cases, *chandalas* can enter the urban areas if they wish to do so in order to perform some legitimate activity - for example to remove the dead bodies of human beings that are carried to the crematorium outside the city, or the bodies of animals who

died of natural causes, that the *chandalas* will be allowed to utilize to get leather and meat, because they are characteristically non-vegetarian. In fact, one of the most frequent definitions for a *chandala* is *sva-pacha*, "one who cooks/ eats dog meat". The habit to consume impure foods, such as meat, fish and eggs - that are not part of the diet of *aryas* or civilized persons - constitutes an extremely important factor in the definition of *anarya* and in the necessity for them to reside in separate settlements at a distance from the *aryas*. This is not simply for the comfort of the *aryas*. For those who are attached to the consumption of non-vegetarian foods it is not convenient to live in civilized urban areas, because in such areas it is not possible to slaughter animals. In fact the *kshatriya* has the duty to protect all the *prajas*, those who have taken birth in his area - and this also includes innocent animals, those animals that do not cause damage or even constitute an asset for civilized society, as for example the cows.

Characteristically, the *anaryas* do not care for such considerations and eat any animal they want to kill, therefore they prefer to live in their own villages, in the forests and on the hills, or at the delta of rivers or along the sea, where the environmental situation offers ample opportunities for hunting and fishing, and where they are free to behave according to their chosen lifestyle, even if it is disgusting, cruel and unhygienic.

When they enter civilized areas, the *chandalas* are always treated kindly, respectfully and generously, provided they abstain from behaviors that create a danger for the hygiene of the civilized community - as for example contaminating water tanks or cooked foods, or imposing unwanted and unpleasant physical contact to the inhabitants of the city. Such prohibitions are purely functional to the purpose of maintaining a rigorous public hygiene, and are comparable to the laws of contemporary societies that regulate the sanitary requirements and the behavior of those who handle food destined to the public, for example, or to the rules that require swimmers to use the bathroom and take a shower before entering into a public swimming pool.

Contemporary societies also condemn unwanted physical contacts by dirty and smelly persons, or persons who may be carriers of contagious diseases, and although usually there are no specific laws that punish the violators, nobody will be scandalized when such individuals are removed from public and private places by security guards. In this regard it is important to notice that among the characteristics defining the *chandala* category there is the uncontrolled consumption of alcoholic beverages and other intoxicating

substances that distort the state of awareness and the perception of reality - something that in contemporary western societies is often considered a crime proper.

When they perform a service of transportation of dead bodies to the crematorium, the *chandalas* always receive gifts or payment from the relatives of the deceased, and they are allowed to keep the valuable ornaments that remain among the ashes after cremation. Often a small number of *chandalas* choose such occupational profession in a permanent way and establish their residence within a crematorium or in its immediate vicinity, obtaining further income from the collection and selling of firewood for the cremation. Often the members of this particular category of "undertakers" are financially very prosperous and can afford servants and luxuries of various kinds, as we can still see today, for example among those who work in the cremation *ghats* in Varanasi (Benares). This is not a recent development, because in the puranic story of emperor Harischandra we find that the king fell from his position and ended up as the servant of a *chandala* who worked in a crematorium.

Another traditional occupational position for a *chandala* consists in the removal and treatment of garbage in general, or the cleaning and maintenance of sewage. Although Vedic civilization produces a very small amount of garbage if compared to the consumeristic industrial culture based on plastic and "disposable" products and packaging, there is always a certain amount of detritus that will be found in an urban area - for example broken utensils and containers, worn out and damaged clothes or furniture and so on. All these discarded materials must be taken out of the city to a suitable place, and they are generally recycled, which creates another occupational opportunity for those who do not have particular abilities or talents, and are not very concerned about hygienic rules.

It is important to understand that Vedic society does not need *chandalas* to perform these services, because there is no rule that prohibits the four social categories (*sudras*, *vaisyas*, *kshatriyas* and *brahmanas*) to personally perform even the "dirtiest" jobs for themselves. In other words, anyone can perform any work within one's own house or family, including the ordinary and extraordinary activities of cleanliness and the removal of dead bodies. Besides, the *sudras* who works as servants and assistants to the other three occupational categories normally perform such services for the family of their employers, but they are not considered as *chandalas*, for the simple reason that they normally

observe the rules of cleanliness and hygiene. Many people confuse the category of *sudras* with the category of *chandalas*, but these are very different positions: as we have already mentioned, the *sudras* live in the same house with the family that employs them and are considered family members.

The contamination associated with the occasional performance of impure or dirty activities, such as the transportation and cremation of dead bodies and the cleaning of animal detritus, the removal of garbage and the cleaning of sewage systems is a temporary problem and can easily be removed with a nice full bath, a change of clothes and in the case of the three social categories of "twice born", they simply need to change their sacred thread with a new clean one. Also, there are some simple ceremonies of ritual purification, especially for those who are engaged in delicate tasks, such as the worship of Deities and the preparation of food that will be distributed as *prasada*.

Furthermore, all social categories, including the highest, go through a period of ritual contamination on the occasion of a death or birth in their family; for 10 days the concerned persons cannot perform the usual rituals, visit temples or sacred places, or touch sacred objects, because they consider themselves temporarily impure. At the end of the prescribed period such contamination is removed by the physical and ritual purification that we have mentioned.

The persons who live as *chandalas* outside the Vedic rules of purification can also enter the urban areas inhabited by the *aryas* to sell useful products that they had collected outside the city - for example conchshells and pearls, ivory, wood and firewood, feathers from peacocks and other birds, hides and leather, wild honey, medicinal herbs and other forest products, as well as gardening soil, clay and so on. Such merchandises are considered pure (for example honey is a natural antibiotic) or they can easily be purified before being used.

When the *chandalas* or *mlecchas* consider their impure life habits as a valid ethnic and cultural tradition, they take a tribal name according to the particular ethnic or cultural group to which they belong: the *nishadas* are the members of wild tribes that live by hunting in the forests or deserts (with a life style that is typical for example of some african tribes), the *pulindas* are the peoples belonging to the patriarchal Greek culture, the *yavanas* are the peoples who lived in the arabian region (considered the descendants of



Maharaja Yayati), the *kiratas* and *khasas* are peoples of mongolian culture, the *hunas* are the Huns, and so on. In this case, too, the condition of "uncivilized" people is conditioned to the choice of not observing the rules of hygiene and civilized life, and become obsolete when an individual agrees to follow the civilized rules, and even more so when he engages in personal evolution towards a level of transcendental consciousness.

*Bhagavata purana* (2.14.18) unambiguously declares: *kirata hunandhra pulinda pulkasa abhira sumbha yavanas khasadaya, ye 'nye ca papa yad apasrasrayah sudhyanti tasmai prabhavisnave namah*, "Kiratas, Hunas, Andhras, Pulindas, Pulkasas, Abhiras, Sumbhas, Yavanas, Khasas and others (similar groups), even those who were born in still more degraded cultures, are immediately purified when they put themselves under the guidance and protection of those who have taken shelter in Vishnu. Therefore I offer my homage to the all-powerful Sri Vishnu."

Even the historical chronicles and archaeological findings confirm that often individuals or entire populations of foreign origin chose to become part of Vedic society, adopting Sanskrit names and the rules of the *varna ashrama*, like for example the Scythian kings who became known as Satyasimha and Rudrasena.

Because Vedic society does not force anyone to perform specific actions or to follow rules, the *anaryas* and *chandalas* are even free to choose to become robbers. This was the case of the family of origin of Valmiki Rishi, the famous author of the *Ramayana*, who after meeting Narada Rishi renounced his uncivilized way of life and became a great *brahmana*.

In fact, at any time, any member of the various categories of *anaryas* can decide to purify himself and reform his habits, under the guidance of *arya brahmanas*, and become a part of the civilized community, in the very least in the position of *sudra* or generic laborer. From that position, he will be allowed to evolve further. In the exceptional case of a person who was born in a family of *anaryas* but already naturally possesses the level of consciousness of an *arya* or even of a *brahmana*, his actual position must be immediately recognized without the need of intermediate passages.

The greatest *brahmana*, Veda Vyasa, who compiled the entire *corpus* of Vedic literature, was the son of a woman from the fishermen community (considered in the category of *chandalas*). His mother Satyavati was engaged in ferrying the travelers by boat on the

river Yamuna, and this is how she met Parasara Rishi; the boat girl was very attracted by the Rishi, but she was ashamed of the fish stench emanating from her own body; when the Rishi realized that, he was moved and by a special blessing he transformed the stench into a very sweet scent, then the couple retired to a small island on the river. These were the circumstances of the birth of Vyasadeva, also called Dvaipayana Vyasa precisely because he was conceived on an island (*dvipa*). Parasara immediately resumed his traveling without marrying the girl, and later on Satyavati became the wife of king Santanu, from whom she had more children, as described in the *Mahabharata*.

The *Rig Veda* (9.63.5) clearly states that all human beings must make an effort to become civilized: *krnvanto visvam aryam* - "everyone should become *aryas*". The colonialist myth according to which belonging to the class of *aryas* is determined by the genes of the "aryan race" will be amply refuted later on, when we will speak about the famous theory of aryan invasion in India. Here we will simply quote some traditional scriptures to demonstrate that anyone can become an *arya*, provided he accepts to follow the rules of civilized life in his own life. According to the original scriptures, the fundamental rule of civilized life consists in personal evolution, purification and cultivation of Vedic knowledge, that lead one to realize the Self at the spiritual and religious level.

The *Bhagavata Purana* (6.16.43) states: *na vyabharati taveksa hy abhihito bhagavato dharmah, sthira-cara-sattva-kadambesv yam upasate tv aryah*, "*Aryas* are those who do not hesitate to follow the Dharma prescribed by God, and who have no prejudice towards the various types of living beings."

The religious nature of the position of *arya*, identifying it with the original Hinduism, is highlighted by many passages of the scriptures and practical examples in the lives of great personalities. Again the *Bhagavata purana* (3.33.7) states: *aho bata sva-paco 'to gariyan yaj-jihvagre vartate nama tubhyam, tepus tapas te juhuvuh sasnur arya brahmanucur nama grnanti ye te*, "It is wonderful to see how those who have accepted to invoke your holy name (the prayer is addressed to Vishnu) are immediately glorified as civilized persons (*aryas*) and are called *brahmanas*, even if there were born in uncivilized families. The very fact that they call your name qualifies them for the performance of sacrifices and austerities according to tradition."

A very famous verse of *Garuda purana*, regularly used in all the daily rituals of

purification and sacrifice, recites: *om apavitrah pavitro va sarvavasthan gato 'pi va yah smaret pundarikaksam sa bahyabhyantarah sucih*, "Anyone who remembers the lotus-eyed Lord (Vishnu) is immediately and completely purified, both internally and externally, irrespectively of the conditions he has gone through." The *Mahabharata* (5.88.52) states: *vrittina hi bhavaty aryo na dhanena na vidyaya*, "The requisite by which a person becomes *arya* is the level of consciousness, not scholarship or wealth."

Later on in *Bhagavata purana* (11.14.21) we find another relevant verse, spoken by Krishna: *bhaktayaham ekaya grahyah sraddhayatma priyah satam, bhaktih punati mannistha sva-pakan api sambhavat*, "Only devotion enables one to attain me. The devotees who serve me with faith and transcendental attachment are completely purified through their devotion, even if they had been born in uncivilized families (of dog-eaters)."

It is important to note that all categories of uncivilized people are free to practice any form of worship or religiosity they prefer, including the typically brahminical cult offered to Vishnu, Shiva and the Mother Goddess - and in such case they should be considered "Hindu". Both scriptures and oral tradition present many illustrious examples, starting from Visvvasu, the tribal chief of the Sabaras or Saoras of Orissa, who lived in the forest where he worshiped the beautiful Deity of Nila Madhava, a particular form of Vishnu that later on manifested as Jagannatha. Still today the *daitas*, the most intimate servants of the Jagannatha Deity in the original temple in Puri, who have the privilege of physical contact with the Deity especially during the festivals, are Visvvasu. The entire region of Orissa (presently called Odisha) was originally populated by uncivilized tribal groups, of which many continue to exist in considerable numbers. These populations started to follow the Vedic rules after the arrival of some groups of *sasana brahmanas* invited into the region by Hindu kings for the purpose of teaching Vedic knowledge to the natives. The members of these aryanized tribal populations are generally called *vratyas*, because their purification and their vow (*vrata*) to follow the ethical rules was officialized in the particular ritual of sacrifice called *vratyastoma*.

The same concept of purification and evolution applies to the requirements for membership in one of the four *varnas* or social categories that constitute the Vedic society of the *aryas*.

Among the various popular beliefs (*laukika sraddha*) that do not have a genuine basis,

there is a rather widespread misconception saying that the knowledge of Vedic scriptures is exclusive monopoly of a "caste of brahmins" to which one can belong only by birth: this creates the double disaster by which one who was not born in a family of brahmins is not allowed to study the scriptures because he does not possess the "intellectual and religious DNA" that is needed to learn their knowledge and become purified by it, while one who was born in a family of brahmins has no need to study the scriptures because his "intellectual and religious DNA" automatically makes him learned, pure and qualified by nature. Thus ignorance triumphs, because for one reason or another, nobody studies or practices.

Of course one who has even a minimum genuine knowledge of biology and psychology knows that the genetic code has nothing to do with the habits of physical and mental cleanliness, or with knowledge, wisdom, morality, honesty, truthfulness, benevolence for other living beings, generosity and professional talents. These qualities are determined partially by the environment and training, and partially by the individual tendencies that the soul carries along lifetime after lifetime, according to its particular evolutionary journey. As we have seen, each human being (whose genetic code is not seriously damaged) possesses the potential of personal evolution that can take him/her to Self realization and to the development of adequate professional and social qualities, in a more or less brilliant way. The scriptures clearly state that the system of professional and social categories is not based on birth (*jati*) but on natural talents (*guna*) and the duties actually performed (*karma*) by each individual. The Vedic scriptures quote this universally recognized and very clear statement by Atri Rishi: *janmana jayate sudra, samskarad bhaved dvijah, veda-pathad bhaved viprah, brahma janati iti brahmanah*, "By birth everybody is simply a *sudra*, while through ritual purification one becomes a twice-born, through the study of Vedic knowledge one becomes learned, and *brahmana* is one who knows Brahman."

According to *Bhagavad gita* (18.42), a *brahmana* is recognized by the following characteristics: *samo damas tapah saucam ksantir arjavam eva ca, jnanam vijnanam astikyam brahma-karma svabhava-jam*, "Peacefulness, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge, wisdom and religiousness - these are the natural qualities determining the duties of the *brahmana*."

The *Mahabharata* confirms: *dharmas ca satyam ca damas tapas ca amatsaryam hris*

*titiksanasya, yajnas ca danam ca dhrtih srutam ca vratani vai dvadasa brahmanasya,* "(A *brahmana*) must always behave in accordance to *dharma* (the ethical principles that constitute the foundations of religion). First of all he must be truthful and able to control his own senses. He must be austere, detached, humble and tolerant. He must not envy anyone. He must be expert in the performance of sacrifices and distribute his possessions in charity. He must be determined in the study of Vedic scriptures and in religious activities: these are the 12 fundamental qualities of a *brahmana*."

Again in the *Mahabharata* (Vana Parva chapter 180) we find: *satyam danam ksamasilam anrsyamsam tapo ghrna, drsyante yatra nagendra sa brahmana iti smrtah,* "A persons who is truthful, charitable, forgiving, sober, kind, austere and free from hatred is called *brahmana*."

In the *Bhagavata purana* (7.11.21) Narada Muni states: *samo damas tapah saucam santosah ksantir arjavam, jnanam dayacyutatmatvam satyam ca brahma-laksanam,* "The qualities that characterize a *brahmana* are the control of one's mind and senses, austerity and tolerance in the face of difficulties, cleanliness, contentment, tendency to forgive, simplicity, knowledge, compassion, truthfulness, and complete surrender to the Supreme Personality of Godhead."

One who does not show such qualities cannot really be considered a *brahmana*. In the *Mahabharata* (Vana Parva chapter 180), Maharaja Yudhishthira states: *sudre tu yad bhavel-laksma dvije tac ca na vidyate, na vai sudro bhavec chudro brahmano na ca brahmanah,* "If these qualities (listed as the characteristics of the *brahmanas*) are found in a *sudra* (i.e. a person born in a *sudra* family), such person must never be called a *sudra*, just like a *brahmana* (i.e. a person born in a *brahmana* family) is not a *brahmana* if he lacks these qualities."

Again the *Mahabharata* gives further clarifications in this regard (Anusasana Parva 163.8, 26, 46), where Shiva tells Parvati: *sthito brahmana-dharmena brahmanyam upajivati, ksatriyo vatha vaisyo va brahma-bhuyah sa gacchati, ebhis tu karmabhir devi subhair acaritais tatha, sudro brahmanatam yati vaisyah ksatriyatam vrajet, etaih karma-phalair devi suddhatma vijitendriyah, sudro'pi dvija-vat sevyā iti brahmabravī svayam, sarvo'yam brahmano loke vrttena tu vidhiyate, vrtte sthitas tu sudro'pi brahmanatvam niyacchati.* Here is the translation: "If *kshatriyas* or *vaisyas* (i.e. persons

born in *kshatriyas* or *vaisyas*) behave like *brahmanas* and engage in the occupations of *brahmanas*, such persons attain the position of *brahmana*. In the same way, a *sudra* (i.e. a person born in a *sudra* family) can become a *brahmana* and a *vaisya* can become a *kshatriya*. O Devi, thanks to the performance of these activities and by following the instructions of the *Agamas* (Vedic scriptures that contain the instructions for the rituals) even a person born in a family of *sudras* devoid of qualifications can become a *brahmana*. In this world, a person is born in a *brahmana* family as a result of his tendencies, therefore a *sudra* that manifests the tendencies of a *brahmana* and acts as a *brahmana*, automatically becomes a *brahmana*."

Another verse of the *Mahabharata* (Anusasana Parva 143.50) explains even more precisely: *na yonir napi samskaro na srutam na ca santatih, karanani dvijatvasya vrttam eva tu karanam*, "Neither birth, nor purification rituals, scholarship of ancestry constitute legitimate qualifications for the position of *brahmana*. Only the behavior as *brahmana* constitutes the basis for the position of *brahmana*."

*Bhagavata purana* (7.11.35) confirms: *yasya yal laksanam proktam pumso varnabhivyanjakam, yad anyatrapi drsyeta tat tenaiva vinirdiset*, "One who shows the characteristics of a *brahmana*, *kshatriya*, *vaisya* or *sudra* as described above, should be classified in the corresponding social category."

Actually, one who refuses to recognize such qualifications based on *guna* and *karma*, and rather maintains a birth prejudice and the identification with the gross body is behaving in an offensive and degrading way that automatically disqualifies him from the position of *arya*. The *Bhagavata purana* (10.84.13) states: *yasyatma buddhih kunape tri-dhatuke sva-dhih kalatradisu bhauma ijya-dhih, yat tirtha buddhih salile na karhicij janesv abhijnesu sa eva go-kharah*, "Those persons who identify the self as the gross material body, who maintain a sense of belonging to their family, who worship their native land, and who visit the sacred places simply to take a bath, are not better than animals like cows and donkeys, even if they were born as human beings."

The *Padma Purana* states: *arceye visnau sila-dhir gurusu nara-matir vaisnave jati-buddhir, visnor va vaisnavanam kali-mala-mathane pada-tirtha 'mbu-buddhih, sri visnor namni mantr sakala-kalusa-he sabda samanya buddhir, visnau sarvesvarese tad-itara sama-dhir yasya va naraki sah*. This is the translation: "Only a person who has a hellish

mentality can think that the Deity of Vishnu is a statue, that the Guru is an ordinary human being, that a Vaishnava can be judged based on his birth, that Vishnu and the Vaishnavas can be touched by the contamination of the Kali yuga, that a sacred place of pilgrimage is just a water reservoir, that the mantra constituted by the name of Vishnu is just an ordinary sound, or that the Supreme Lord, Vishnu, is an ordinary person."

In the *Padma purana* Lomasa Rishi declares, *sudram va bhagavad bhaktam nisadam svapacam tatha viksatam jati samanyat sa yati narakam dhruvam*, "A devotee of the Lord may have taken birth in a family of *sudras*, *nishadas* or *sva-pachas*, but those who evaluate him on the basis of his birth are destined to fall into a hellish condition." In the same text, Vishnu himself states, *na me bhaktas caturvedi mad-bhaktah svapachah priyah, tasmai deyam tato grahyam sa ca pujyo yatha hy aham*, "Even if he was born as a *sva-pacha*, my devotee is dearer to me than one who is expert in reciting the four *Vedas*. His touch is purifying, and he is as worshipable as me."

The *Padma Purana* states, *na sudra bhagavad-bhaktas te tu bhagavata matah sarva-varnesu te sudra ye na bhakta janardane*, "A devotee of God should never be considered a *sudra*, while those who are devoid of devotion must be considered *sudras*, irrespective of the *varna* of the family where they were born." And again, *sva-pacham iva nekseta loke vipram avaisnavam vaisnavo varno-bahyo 'pi punati bhuvana-trayam*, "If a person born as a *brahmana* is devoid of devotion to Vishnu, he should be avoided just like we avoid the contact with a *sva-pacha*. On the other hand, a devotee of Vishnu has the power to purify the three worlds, even if he was born outside the social system of the *varnas*."

It is important to understand that being "a devotee of Vishnu" is not just about some external demonstration of superficial or fanatical devotion to a particular form of the Deity, but it must be sustained in practice by the level of consciousness and behavior that is characteristic of pure *sattva*.

One of the most famous examples is the famous Rishi Satyakama Jabala, whose story is told in the *Chandogya Upanisad* (4.4.1-5): "Satyakama, the son of Jabala, told his mother, 'I wish to go to study as a *brahmachari* in the house of the Guru. To which *gotra* (ancestry) do I belong?' Jabala replied, 'My dear child, I do not know who your father is, because during my younger years I worked in many places, and in that period I had you. Simply tell the teacher that your name is Satyakama Jabala.' Thus Satyakama went to

Haridrumata Gautama and said, 'I wish to live with you as a *brahmachari*.' Gautama said, 'To which lineage do you belong?' Satyakama simply repeated what his mother told him, and Gautama said, 'Dear boy, only a *brahmana* could be this truthful, therefore you certainly are a *brahmana* and I accept you as such. Go now to get the firewood to kindle the sacred fire. And never abandon truthfulness.'

In his commentary to the *Chandogya Upanishad*, Madhvacharya writes, *arjavam brahmane saksat sudro'narjava- laksanah, gautamas tviti vijnaya satyakamam upanayat*, "A *brahmana* is recognized by the quality of simplicity, while a *sudra* is recognized by his contorted mentality. Knowing this fact, Gautama accepted Satyakama as a disciple."

As we have already mentioned, Veda Vyasa and Valmiki are other famous persons who became known as full fledged *brahmanas* in spite of their birth in families of low condition. Vyasa had a *brahmana* son (Sukadeva), two *kshatriya* sons (Pandu and Dhritarastra) and a son that was situated on a level of consciousness that was completely transcendental to the *varna* system (Vidura).

Visvamitra son of Maharaja Gadi and Maharaja Vitahavya became *brahmanas* although they were born in *kshatriya* families; they are mentioned precisely in this regard in *Mahabharata* respectively in Adi Parva chapter 174 and Anusasana Parva, chapter 30. The story of Visvamitra, who became the *guru* of Rama and Lakshmana the sons of Dasaratha, is very famous because it is found in *Ramayana* and in several *Puranas* as well. Vitahavya attained the level of *brahmana* due to the blessing of Bhrigu Muni. Also the son of Vitahavya, Gritsamada, became a *brahmana*, and so his descendents Suceta, Prakasa, Pramiti (very expert in *Veda* and *Vedanga*), Sunaka, and his son Saunaka Rishi (who narrated the *Bhagavata purana* to the Rishis assembled in Naimisharanya). The *Hari vamsa* (29.7-8) also says that among the descendants of Gritsamada there were many *brahmanas*, as well as *kshatriyas*, *vaisyas* and *sudras*.

Another *kshatriya* who became a *brahmana* and generated a descendance of *brahmanas* was Maharaja Dhrista, mentioned in *Bhagavata purana* (9.2.16-17). Again the *Bhagavata purana* (9.2.22) mentions for the same reason Maharaja Agnivesya, son of Devadatta, whose *brahmana* descendants became famous as the Agnivesyayanas. We must also remember Jahnu Muni born as the son of king Hotra of the Chandra vamsa (*Bhagavata* 9.15.1-4), Kanva Rishi born in the dynasty of Maharaja Puru and his son



Medhatithi who was the ancestor of the *brahmanas* Praskanna (*Bhagavata* 9.20.1-7), Gargya the son of King Sini, the three sons of King Duritakshaya called Trayyaruni, Kavi and Puskararuni (*Bhagavata* 9.21.19); Ajamidha and his son Priyamedha and his descendents such as the great Rishi Mudgala (9.21.21, 9.21.31).

Also, the *Bhagavata* informs us that among the 100 sons of king Rishabhadeva, 81 became *brahmanas* (5.4.13) and that the *vaisyas* Nabhaga and Dista later became *brahmanas* (8.18.3). The *Hari vamsa* (31.33-35) states that Maharaja Bali had 5 *kshatriya* sons but also other sons who were *brahmanas* and generated *brahmana* lineages.

Another important thing is the concept of adopted son or disciple, that according to Vedic culture is perfectly equivalent to the concept of seminal son, both at the social and the legal level, to all effects.

On the other hand, one who was born in a family of *brahmanas* but does not possess the required abilities and tendencies is called *brahma bandhu*, or "relative of *brahmanas*". This is the definition given by *Chandogya Upanishad*: *asmad kulino 'nanucya brahma-bandhur iva bhavati*, "A *brahma bandhu*, a relative of *brahmanas*, is a person who belongs to a family of *brahmanas* but has failed to study the *Vedas*." In his commentary to this verse, Adi Shankaracharya writes, *he saumya ananucya anadhitya brahma-bandhur iva bhavati, brahmanan bandhun vyapadisati, na svayam brahmana-vrtah*, "One who has not studied the *Vedas* (in spite of being born from *brahmana* parents) is simply a relative or kinsman of *brahmanas*. He can call such *brahmanas* his dear and near, but he does not have the required behavior to qualify personally as a *brahmana*."

The definitions of *brahma bandhu* ("relative of *brahmanas*) and *brahma atma-ja* ("son of a *brahmana*") is used by Krishna in the *Bhagavata purana* to refer to Asvatthama the son of Drona (1.7.19, 1.7.35) and to describe the general category of unqualified persons (*dvija-bandhu*) for whom Vyasa compiled the *Mahabharata* (1.4.25). *Dvija-bandhu*, or "relative of twice-born" is used not only to describe the unqualified sons of *brahmana* parents, but also for the unqualified children of *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas*, because *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas* too receive the sacred thread in the religious initiation that constitutes the second birth of an *arya*. Sometimes in the Vedic scriptures we find the definition *kshatra bandhu* to refer to some unworthy descendent of *kshatriyas*. The lack

of particular qualifications in the sons of *vaisyas* or entrepreneurs is considered less serious, and not dangerous in the administration of society, therefore it is not mentioned.

This applies to the sons of *brahmanas* who, due to their individual nature, are lacking the personal qualifications that are characteristic of the *brahmanas* in regard to *guna* (qualities) and *karma* (activities). So what is, according to the Vedic scriptures, the position of a person who had previously been recognized as *brahmana* but for one reason or another falls to a lower level of consciousness or behavior?

The *Manu samhita* (4.245) states, *uttamanuttaman gacchan hinam hinams ca varjayan, brahmanah sresthatam eti pratyavayena sudratam*, "According to the good or bad company he keeps, a *brahmana* can become extraordinarily elevated or even a *sudra*."

The *Kurma purana* explains: *go-raksakan vanijakan tatha karuka-silinah, presyan vardhusikams caiva vipran sudra-vad acaret, yo'nyatra kurute yatnam, anadhitya srutim dvijah sa sammudho na sambhasyo veda-bahyo dvijatibhih*, "Those *brahmanas* who earn a livelihood by raising cattle, by trade, by artistic shows, by the service to others, or by lending money on interest, are nothing but *sudras*. One who does not study the *Vedas*, but carefully engages in other activities is certainly a foolish person and must be ostracized from the Vedic society - the (true) *brahmanas* should not even talk to him."

It is important to understand that Vedic tradition accepts as valid those improper actions that were performed due to emergency considerations. The *Bhagavata purana* (11.17.47) states that in case of serious financial constraints a *brahmana* can temporarily engage in the occupations that are characteristic of the *vaisyas* or the *kshatriyas*, but he must consider such activities as an emergency action, and return as soon as possible to the activities that are characteristic of the *brahmanas*, otherwise he will lose his social position as a *brahmana* and acquire the position of the activities that he performs continuously.

Particularly serious and degrading is the case of a *brahmana* who chooses to perform the activities that are characteristic of the *sudra*, such as service under salary, even to the government (*raja sevakan*), employed teacher against a salary (*bhrtakadhyapakan*), employee in banking or trade (*vanijakan*), technician of any kind (*yantra-vidyakan*), medical doctor or pharmacist (*cikitisikan*). Even worse are those activities that are based simply on the use of one's body, such as the show business - the performances of dancers,

singers, actors, professional reciters, painters, sculptors, craftsmen and so on - as well as personal service to others, especially to persons who are on the level of *sudras* or even worse, of *anaryas*. Such professional occupations are not negative in themselves, but because they are aimed at the satisfaction of the customer and depend on it, they create a situation of dependence and reinforce the identification with the material body: therefore they are completely incompatible with the duties of the *brahmana*.

Neglecting to study and to understand the Vedic scriptures (*svadhyaya tyaga*) still remains the most serious cause for degradation for a son of *brahmana* parents. The *Vishnu dharma shastra* (93.7) states, *yaitral-laksyate sarpa vrttam sa brahmanah smrtah yatraitan na bhavet sarpa tam sudram iti nirdiset, na vary api prayacchet tu vaidalavratike dvije na baka-vratike vipre naveda vidi dharma-vit*, "Persons who observe the religious teachings should not offer even a drop of water to a hypocrite that, in spite of being the son of a *brahmana*, behaves in a way that is contrary to the laws of ethics."

*Manu samhita* (2.157, 2.172) states, *yatha kastha-mayo hasti yatha carma-mayo mrgah yas ca vipro'nadhiyanas trayas te nama bibhrati*, "A *brahmana* who does not study the *Vedas* is comparable to an elephant or deer made of leather, that are called elephant or deer but cannot function as such. We must know that as long as a *brahmana* is not qualified in the Vedic knowledge, he remains on the same level of a *sudra*."

Traditionally, a *brahmana* is considered fallen from his social position if he commits violations to purity, for example because of the consumption of non-vegetarian foods, alcoholic drinks, or even of vegetarian foods that have been cooked by *sudras* (*sudranna pustam*), as confirmed by the *Kurma purana*: *nadyac chudrasya vipro'nnam mohad va yadi kamatah sa sudra-yonim vrajati yas tu bhunkte hy-anapadi*. This is the reason why a *brahmana* never goes to a restaurant for eating, and is extremely careful about what he purchases on the market.

The *Mahabharata* (Santi parva, 189.7) declares, *himsanrta-priya lubdhah sarva-karmopjvinah krsna saucaparibhrasthast e dvijah sudratam gatah sarva-bhaksyاراتirn ityam sarva-karmakaro 'sucih tyakta-vedastvanaca rah sa vai sudra iti smrtah*, "A *brahmana* who commits violent acts (as for example in the consumption of non-vegetarian foods), who lies and cheats, who is greedy, impure, or engages in any activity in order to earn a livelihood, is degraded to the position of *sudra*. Precisely because he

eats and drinks anything without discrimination and is attached to the material things and to the idea of making money, he has abandoned Vedic dharma and ethical behavior, and is called a *sudra*."

It is said that because of the negative influences of the age in which we live, the Kali yuga ("the black age") we should expect an increasing degradation for all the social categories.

The *Padma purana* states, *brahmanah ksatriya vaisah sudrah papa-parayanah nijacara-vihinas ca bhavisyanti kalau yuge, vipra veda-vihinas ca pratigraha-parayana hatyanta-kaminah krur bhavisyanti kalau yuge, veda-nindakaras caiva dyutacaurya karas tatha, vidhva-sanga- lubdhas ca bhavisyanti kalau dvijah, vrttyartham brahmanah kecit mahakapata-dharminah, raktambara bhavisyanti jatilah smasrudharinah, kalau yuge bhavisyanti brahmanah sudra-dharmina*. This is translation: "In Kali yuga, all the four social categories become degraded, abandoning the proper behavior, and fall into activities that are contrary to ethics. The *brahmanas* do not study Vedic knowledge and do not perform sacrifices, and abandoning the five ritual duties prescribed in the Vedas and the level of spiritual consciousness, they engage in other activities, even while still claiming the social position (of *brahmanas*) in order to collect money and ask for donations, that they will utilize to satisfy their unlimited desires for sense gratification.

The so-called *brahmanas* of Kali yuga are afflicted by lust and cruelty, malice and envy, and become professional thieves, blaspheming the Vedic scriptures, getting drunk and exploiting women for sexual pleasure. They even come to the point of wearing the red robes of the *sadhus*, growing long beard and hair, in order to better cheat the people."

Many examples of degraded people who were born in *brahmana* families can be found in the scriptures as well as in the more recent historical tradition - from the young Sringhi, the son of Samika Rishi, who cursed Maharaja Parikshit to die within 7 days to avenge himself of a silly joke, to the entire generations of corrupt priests whose nefarious activities in the distortion of the Vedic ritual sacrifices prepared the way to the Buddhist revolution and to the decadence of Indian society.

Even among the followers of Buddhism and Jainism we find many *brahmanas* who openly rejected the authority of Vedic scriptures rather than condemning its distortion - for example Boddhidharma, Buddhapalita, Nagarjuna, Asvaghosa, Asanga, Kumarajiva,

Dinnaga, Dharmakirti, Chandrakirti, Santideva and Ratnakirti for Buddhism, and Prabhachandra, Anantavirya, Devasuri, Hemacandra, Nemichandra, Mallisena, and Siddhasena Divakara for Jainism. What to speak of the innumerable *brahmanas* who chose to convert to Islam during the muslim invasions and domination, or the many *brahmanas* who, out of greed or foolishness, cooperated with the British colonialists to the distortion of the Vedic scriptures and to the translation of the Christian propaganda into the Indian languages.

The *Varaha purana* even states, *raksasah kalim asritya jayante brahma-yonisu utpanna brahmana-kule badhante srotriyam krsan*, "Some who were demoniac beings in their previous lifetimes will be born in Kali yuga in *brahmana* families with the purpose of weakening and destroying the tradition of *sruti* (of Vedic scriptures)."

Obviously this situation was exploited as much as possible by the colonialists, as we have already mentioned in our first chapter. Only recently Hindu society is trying to become free from the shackles of the colonial mentality and to rediscover the genuine version of the Vedic scriptures. For example Dr. Raj Pandit Sharma, member of the managing committee of the Hindu Council of the United Kingdom has prepared an important report on this topic - which has been published by his organization and approved by the Shri Guru Valmik Sabha of Southall in Londra, the official organization of the so-called hindu outcaste. The report states: "It was the British who single-handedly formulated the caste schedules that remain in place today. The evils manifest in the current form of the caste system can not be ascribed to the Hindu faith. The current adulteration of the Hindu *varnashram* system is a direct result of generations of British Colonial bureaucracy."

Already Swami Vivekananda wrote: "The plan in India is to make everybody Brahmana, the Brahmana being the ideal of humanity. If you read the history of India you will find that attempts have always been made to raise the lower classes. Many are the classes that have been raised. Many more will follow till the whole will become Brahmana. That is the plan. Our ideal is the Brahmana of spiritual culture and renunciation. By the Brahmana ideal what do I mean? I mean the ideal Brahmana-ness in which worldliness is altogether absent and true wisdom is abundantly present.

We read in the Mahabharata that the whole world was in the beginning peopled with Brahmanas, and that as they began to degenerate they became divided into different

castes, and that when the cycle turns round they will all go back to that Brahmanical origin. The son of a Brahmana is not necessarily always a Brahmana; though there is every possibility of his being one, he may not become so.

As there are *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* - one or other of these *gunas* more or less - in every man, so the qualities which make a Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya or a Shudra are inherent in every man, more or less. But at time one or other of these qualities predominates in him in varying degrees and is manifested accordingly. Take a man in his different pursuits, for example: when he is engaged in serving another for pay, he is in Shudra-hood; when he is busy transacting some piece of business for profit, on his account, he is a Vaishya; when he fights to right wrongs then the qualities of a Kshatriya come out in him; and when he meditates on God, or passes his time in conversation about Him, then he is a Brahmana. Naturally, it is quite possible for one to be changed from one caste into another. Otherwise, how did Viswamitra become a Brahmana and Parashurama a Kshatriya?

Formerly the characteristic of the noble-minded was (*tri bhuvanam upakara shrenibhih priyamanah*) 'to please the whole universe by one's numerous acts of service', but now it is - I am pure and the whole world is impure. 'Don't touch me!' 'Don't touch me!' The whole world is impure, and I alone am pure! Lucid Brahma-jnana! Bravo! Great God! Nowadays, Brahman is neither in the recesses of the heart, nor in the highest heaven, nor in all beings - now He is in the cooking pot! We are orthodox Hindus, but we refuse entirely to identify ourselves with 'Don't- touchism'. That is not Hinduism; it is in none of our books; it is an orthodox superstition, which has interfered with national efficiency all along the line. Religion has entered in the cooking pot. The present religion of the Hindus is neither the path of Knowledge or Reason - it is 'Don't-touchism'. - 'Don't touch me', 'Don't touch me' - that exhausts its description. 'Don't touchism' is a form of mental disease. See that you do not lose your lives in this dire irreligion of 'Don't- touchism'. Must the teaching (*Atmavat sarva bhuteshu*) - 'Looking upon all beings as your own self - be confined to books alone? How will they grant salvation who cannot feed a hungry mouth with a crumb of bread? How will those, who become impure at the mere breath of others, purify others?

I sometimes feel the urge to break the barriers of 'Don't-touchism', go at once and call out, 'Come all who are poor, miserable, wretched and downtrodden', and to bring them all

together. Unless they rise, the Mother will not awake. Each Hindu, I say, is a brother to every other, and it is we, who have degraded them by our outcry, 'Don't touch', 'Don't touch!' And so the whole country has been plunged to the utmost depths of meanness, cowardice and ignorance.

Our solution of the caste question is not degrading those who are already high up, is not running amock through food and drink, is not jumping out of our own limits in order to have more enjoyment, but it comes by every one of us fulfilling the dictates of our Vedantic religion, by our attaining spirituality and by our becoming ideal Brahmana.

The command is the same to you all, that you must make progress without stopping, and that from the highest man to the lowest pariah, every one in this country has to try and become the ideal Brahmana.

This Vedantic idea is applicable not only here but over the whole world. The Brahmanahood is the ideal of humanity in India as wonderfully put forward by Shankaracharya at the beginning of his commentary on the Gita, where he speaks about the reason for Krishna's coming as a preacher for the preservation of Brahmanahood, of Brahmaneness. That was the great end. This Brahmana, the man of God, he who has known Brahman, the ideal man, the perfect man, must remain, he must not go. And with all the defects of the caste now, we know that we must all be ready to give to the Brahmanas this credit, that from them have come more men with real Brahmaneness in them than from all the other castes. We must be bold enough, must be brave enough to speak their defects, but at the same time we must give credit that is due to them. Therefore, it is no use fighting among the castes. What good will it do? It will divide us all the more, weaken us all the more, degrade us all the more. It seems that most of the Brahmanas are only nursing a false pride of birth; and any schemer, native or foreign, who can pander to this vanity and inherent laziness, by fulsome sophistry, appears to satisfy more."

Vivekananda's diagnosis is correct. Those who were born in "traditionally qualified" families but do not make the effort required to qualify personally through the study of the scriptures and proper behavior, life style and spiritual practices, end up by creating an atmosphere of cynicism, more or less unconscious inferiority/ superiority complexes, fear, sense of dissatisfaction, that are covered and hidden by arrogance and aggressiveness. When such imbalanced persons insist in claiming that the study of Vedic

scriptures is their exclusive birth right, and cannot be legitimately taken up by persons who were born in family of a different origin, they enforce on society in general the impression that trying to become spiritually qualified is a useless pursuit, at least in this lifetime.

Because the degrading tendencies of Kali yuga are dragging down all those who fail to sincerely make efforts to progress and elevate themselves, even those who have some good tendencies and a good potential for development end up falling back into laziness and indifference, thus wasting the valuable opportunity of human birth.

This situation did not happen by chance. The accusation of the Hindu Council is well founded. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the British colonial government was certainly interested in weakening the Vedic ideology, so that the Indian subcontinent could more easily be dominated. And certainly there was some malice in their introducing the notorious Aryan Invasion Theory and the idea of the caucasian origin of the so-called indo-european race. The idea that the Vedic culture had been introduced to India by the so-called indo-european aryan, of white race, was presented as the justification rationale of the superiority of the "white" civilization on racial basis. To understand the origin of this theory and its fallacy, we need to clarify some important Vedic concepts, defined as *varna*, *kula*, *gotra*, *vamsa* and *jati*. We have already seen that *varna* is the social position, including rights and duties, of the four professional categories defined as *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas*, *vaisyas* and *sudras* - respectively intellectuals, administrators, entrepreneurs and laborers.

The word *kula* refers to the "family" or "house" to which one belongs - by birth or by choice - in a permanent or temporary way. For example, the house of the Guru where the students live during their *brahmacharya* period is called Guru Kula. This word also applies to religious associations, especially in the tantric field, where the initiated members consider themselves as belonging to the same family.

The words *gotra* and *vamsa* indicate seminal descent, or the origin of a particular family descending from a founder of the "dynasty", respectively for *brahmanas* (*gotra*) and *kshatriyas* (*vamsa*). The descendents of *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas* are (or should be) aware of the responsibilities that derive from their family heritage, and make all the necessary efforts to cultivate the qualities (*guna*) and activities (*karma*) that make them



worthy of their ancestors and constitute a brilliant example for the personal development for their own children. This is about a relationship of affection, gratitude and respect, of a veritable debt (*rina*) that must be repaid, both by ritually honoring the memory of one's ancestors and by adequately training one's descendants. As in the case of the *varna*, membership in the *gotra* can also be modified in the course of one's lifetime, especially with the ostracism of an unworthy descendent.

A different situation concerns *jati* or "birth", that exclusively relates to the genetic condition, that enables (or not) the individual to physically perform particular duties through fundamental characteristics and abilities of the body and the mind. Vedic scriptures describe 3 types of *jati*: *manusya jati* ("birth as a human being"), *pakshi jati* ("birth as a bird") and *mriga jati* ("birth as a mammal animal").

The British propagandists erroneously grafted the concept of *jati* on their own pseudo-scientific ideas on racial anthropology that had been brewing in Europe from the times of Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), the famous physician, botanist, and zoologist. In *Systema Naturae* (1767) he wrote of five human races: the white *Europeanus* of gentle character and inventive mind, the red *Americanus* of stubborn character and angered easily; the the black *Africanus* relaxed and negligent; yellow *Asiaticus* avaricious and easily distracted; and the *Monstrosus* sub humans such as aborigines. Even thinkers such as Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant and Auguste Comte believed that western European culture was the acme of human socio-cultural evolution in a linear process, and approved slavery of "inferior races". In their *Indigenous Races of the Earth Before Origin of Species* (1850), Josiah Clark Nott and George Robins Gliddon implied that "negroes" were a creational rank between "Greeks" (considered the beginning of western European culture) and chimpanzees.

Non-white people were kept in cages at "human zoos" during colonial exhibitions promoting the benefits of white colonialism to such colored peoples. In 1906 a Pygmy named Ota Benga was displayed as the "Missing Link", in the Bronx Zoo, New York City, alongside apes and animals. Several others examples are recorded.

Max Muller is often identified as the first writer to speak of an Aryan "race". In 1861 in his *Lectures on the Science of Language* he referred to Aryans as a "race of people". Muller was responding to the development of racial anthropology and to the influence of

the work of Arthur de Gobineau who argued that the Indo-Europeans represented a superior branch of humanity. A number of later writers, such as the French anthropologist Vacher de Lapouge in his book *L'Aryen* argued that this superior branch could be identified biologically by using the cephalic index (a measure of head shape) and other indicators. He argued that the long-headed "dolichocephalic-blond" Europeans, characteristically found in northern Europe, were natural leaders, destined to rule over more "brachiocephalic" (short headed) peoples.

In the 18th century an early physical anthropologist, the American physician Samuel George Morton (1799-1851), collected human skulls from around the world and attempted a logical classification scheme. Influenced by the contemporary racist theory, Dr Morton said he could judge racial intellectual capacity by measuring the interior cranial capacity - ergo a large skull denoted a large brain, thus high intellectual capacity; conversely, a small skull denoted a small brain, thus low intellectual capacity. Of course nobody noticed that the cranial capacity of Neanderthals was much larger compared to the Cro Magnons', the modern type of man that is the supposed result of progressive evolution - or that in proportion to the total weight of the body, a rat's brain constitutes the maximum brain capacity of all species, including the human species.

In the United States, scientific racism justified Black African slavery to curb the moral opposition to the Atlantic slave trade. Alexander Thomas and Samuel Sillen described black men as uniquely fitted for bondage because of their "primitive psychological organization". In 1851, in antebellum Louisiana, the physician Samuel A. Cartwright (1793-1863) labeled the escape attempts of slaves as "drapetomania", a kind of mental illness, and wrote that "with proper medical advice, strictly followed, this troublesome practice that many Negroes have of running away can be almost entirely prevented". After the Civil War, Southern (Confederacy) physicians wrote textbooks of scientific racism based upon studies claiming that black freemen (ex-slaves) were becoming extinct because they were inadequate to the demands of being a free man, implying that black people actually benefited from enslavement.

With the purpose of gaining support from the "highest breeds" of India, British ideologists formulated the "Aryan invasion theory", according to which some foreign invaders, the white "Aryan" nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes coming from Central Northern Asia (i.e. Caucasus, hence "Caucasian race") had swept into India around 1500

BCE and conquered the primitive and pacific civilization of black Dravidians by means of superior iron weaponry, chariots and horses. According to this theory, the stronger, war-mongering and ruthless invaders killed the "primitive indigenous tribes" by the thousands, enslaved some of them and drove the rest away to South India.

Thus India was supposedly "civilized" by these typically white nomads with the introduction of Vedic knowledge and Sanskrit, and the division of social classes where the two higher and dominating classes (*brahmanas* and *kshatriyas*) were of "pure Aryan race", the third class (the *vaisyas*) was a mixture of the conquerors and the conquered, and the fourth and lowest class (*sudra*) was composed by the enslaved conquered "primitive and racially inferior" (black) Dravidians. The same theory also affirmed that Aryan peoples invaded Europe, too, where they became the dominant race, identified by Nazi theories as stout and tall white people with blond hair and blue eyes.

The above described "Aryan invasion theory" has been amply discredited by many archaeological finds, starting from 1922 with the discovery of the remains of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, two highly developed and civilized urban settlements that have been dated much earlier than 1500 BCE. The most ancient of such urban settlements, Mehrgarh, is presently dated around 7000 BCE, while the largest - Lakhmirwala and Rakhigarhi - covered 225 hectares each, more than double the area of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa.

While it is perfectly possible that around 1500 BCE a wave of barbaric and nomadic invaders actually came down into India from the Caucasus, as this also happened several centuries later with the Huns and other similar populations, the result of such marginal invasions could not be the introduction of Sanskrit and Vedic knowledge with a "civilizing effect". As such, these barbaric and nomadic invaders could not possibly have been a "superior race of civilizers".

Why? Simply because the *aryas*, i.e. the people following Vedic civilization, Sanskrit and the Vedas were already in India, with a presence that dates back several thousands years. In all the Vedic scriptures or in the oral tradition there is absolutely no mention of a previous place of origin of the *aryas* that was not the Indian subcontinent, from which the *aryas* might have "migrated".

The revolutionary discovery of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa was the mind-boggling

testimony of a highly refined urban civilization, with modern sanitary works (each house had a bathroom connected to a city sewage system running under the paved streets, with regular manholes for inspection), shopping complexes, public granaries, swimming pools, and rounded corners in the ample streets to ease the passage and turning of large vehicles. People used to wear cotton clothes, decorated themselves with complex ornaments and hair arrangements, used containers made of vitrous ceramic and had developed a flourishing river-born commercial trade. The houses had worship rooms (centered around the Vedic system of fire sacrifice, as well as images of Shiva, Durga, and other vedic Deities) and among the great wealth of seals discovered, many seals depict Vedic deities, the bull, and other classical Vedic symbols.

Today we know of more than 1,000 similar sites with remains of urbanized settlements along the valleys of ancient Sindhu and Sarasvati, spread across a territory that includes present Pakistan and Afghanistan besides India. The ancient Sarasvati river is particularly interesting as it dried up more than 5000 years ago, yet it is amply described in Vedic texts as a very important and large river. Western scholars used to consider the river Sarasvati a mere legend or a symbolic figure, until its huge dry bed was located by satellite photos. The drying of the Sarasvati river, that occurred around the same period of the drying of the Sahara region in Africa, seems to be the most likely reason why these areas were abandoned, when their inhabitants went to join the other very ancient cities of the Ganga plains, such as - for example - Prayaga (presently known as Allahabad) and Kasi (also known as Varanasi or Benares).

The long academic success of the Aryan Invasion Theory (still taught in schools in India and at global level as an historically proven and unquestionable fact) is even more disconcerting when we take the pain of actually reading the *Vedas* and Vedic literature, and find that they always describe a highly urbanized, prosperous, settled and refined Vedic society which does not tally with the inevitably limited conditions of nomadic life or even with the desolate, arid and mountainous territory of Caucasus which was supposed to be the "place of origin" of the so-called Aryan race.

People that are constantly on the move as a way of life do not build cities, palaces, or temples. Rather, they need to live very simply in tents, preferably made of animal skins (as hunting is an important resource of nomads) that can be packed and moved easily, as we can see still today in the populations that continue to live in this way. Nomads are

people who are constantly on the move as a life style, therefore they never build cities, palaces or temples: they are forced to keep the material possessions to a minimum that can be transported easily (which usually do not include books) and do not have complex knowledge. The nomads' culture is transmitted orally, around the camp fires, and religion is usually of a shamanic type. Even simple craftsmanship is reduced to the minimum because there is a tendency to abandon those utensils that are not strictly necessary and to build new ones when the next camp is set.

In nomadic life cattle herding is only practical when the animals are regularly slaughtered for meat, especially the young and old ones that cannot move quickly with the tribe when it's time to move the camp. On the contrary, we see that Vedic civilization never contemplates the slaughtering of cattle (especially calves), rather considering it a very heinous sin. Even separating the calf from the mother is considered an act contrary to religiosity. A nomadic life is naturally dependent on hunting and pillaging rather than agriculture (that requires a settled life) and marginally with the occasional gathering of spontaneously growing vegetables. All the accounts of Vedic civilization, in the form of the many stories they contain astronomical references even dating back to hundreds of thousands of years, show a great development of settled agriculture based on cultivation of cereals, a preference towards ethical vegetarianism, non-violence and peacefulness, and a system of social classes based on the natural tendencies of each single individual, no matter what color or race. The Aryans they describe were not a genetically superior race but a civilized society to which anyone could be admitted. Similarly, the chronology accepted by mainstream academic institutions and textbooks for the compilation of the Vedic scriptures, based on the Aryan Invasion Theory, seems to be highly biased and above all it does not correspond with what the Vedas themselves tell.

Still in the 20th century, the dating of ancient civilizations were influenced by the belief of many scholars and archaeologists, including the famous Max Muller, according to which the creation of the world had been established in 4004 BCE, and the Great Flood described in the Bible in 2500 BCE. Even when the Bible's version was disproved by the discovery of fossils and by the growing popularity of Darwin's evolutionary theory, academy maintained the belief that until a few thousands years before Christ, the entire mankind had been living in an extremely primitive state, slowly evolving from the Stone Age (up to 3000 BCE) to the Iron Age (starting around 600 BCE) with the most ancient

civilizations located in Sumer, in the middle east and in Egypt, between 3500 and 2200 BCE, then in Greece and in the Roman Empire, while the rest of the world was more or less immersed in a barbaric state up to the colonial period.

With the end of colonialism and the establishment of the humanistic values and the independent scientific research in the fields of anthropology and archeology, many old myths of indology have justly been exposed. The very perspective on ancient history has been deeply transformed, thanks to many revolutionary discoveries in the last century, that "set back the clock" on the history of human race several thousands years. Unfortunately the outdated model of the history of mankind is still taught in the majority of the school texts, especially those for the primary schools.

Later on, the nazi theories on the aryan race have unjustly burdened the word "aryan" (and the symbol of *svastika*, also stolen from the vedic culture) with a very unhappy association with the negative concepts of racism, oppression and violence, that are expressed in our days with the "politically correct" euphemism *ethnic cleansing*.

The resurgence of Vedic culture in India had to struggle against all these huge difficulties. In the beginning, under the British colonial regime, the only chance of survival consisted in presenting Vedic knowledge in a format that could be acceptable to the victorian British mentality, and this was the origin of the so-called neo-Hinduism or "reformed" Hinduism.

Among the famous teachers that started to spread the spiritual message of Sanatana Dharma in English language already during the British colonial regime in India we remember Ramakrishna (1836-1886) and especially his disciple Vivekananda (1863-1902), Bhaktivinoda (1838-1914) and his son Bhaktisiddhanta (1874-1936), Aurobindo (1872-1950), Ram Tirtha (1873-1906), Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), Swami Ramdas (1884-1963), Swami Sivananda (1887-1963), Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952) and Swami Chinmayananda (1916-1993).

This presentation of the Vedic tradition to the western work by Indian preachers started as a reaction to the denigratory comments given by the majority of the officers of the colonial empire and by the European scholars that visited the British colonies. The first stage was some kind of "reform of Hinduism" meant to give a secondary place or to eliminate altogether those ideas that seemed to be most difficult to digest for the

sensitivity of the British officers, academics and religious missionaries - specifically, anglican protestants.

The first of these groups, the movement called Brahma samaj (1820) founded by Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), was strongly influenced by the teachings of the Unitarian Church and by the syncretist concept of the Radical Universalism. Roy wrote a treatise entitled *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness*, and he learned Hebrew and Greek to study the Bible and translate it into Bengali, with the idea of "purifying" and "modernizing" Vedic tradition, by merging it with Christianity, Hebraism, Islam and Buddhism. The ideology of the Brahma samaj rejected the worship to the sacred images (which they called "graven images" and "idols"), the validity of the sacred stories of *Puranas* and *Itihasas* (which they called mythology), the tradition of the temples and the holy places of pilgrimage (which they called superstition) and the multiplicity of the Personalities of Godhead (which they called demigods). It also rejected the system of *varnas* or social categories, the offerings in the memory of the deceased, and whatever component of the Vedic tradition could appear as "pagan" or somehow unacceptable for the victorian moralism of that period. It only retained those aspects that it considered "respectable", such as the highly symbolic hymns of *Rig, Sama, Yajur* and *Atharva Veda* (translated in a practically incomprehensible way and impossible to apply into some practical or useful knowledge) and the concept of Brahman as God or Universal Spirit or Logos as explained in some *Upanishads*. A similar ideology, albeit less openly servile towards the British missionaries and the other religions, was affirmed by the Prarthana samaj and by the subsequent Arya samaj (1875), still surviving and prospering - and bizarrely considered one of the most authoritative official representatives of traditional hinduism, especially by the government.

Swami Dayananda Sarasvati (1824-1883) founder of the Arya samaj, strongly condemned the "idol worship, ritualism, legends and superstitions" of the Hindu tradition, exalting instead the philosophical speculation on the four original branches of *Rig, Sama, Yajur* and *Atharva Veda* (*Samhitas, Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*), celibacy for the religious students and the meditation on the sacred syllable Om, considered "the real name of God".

He also supported Universalism, or the spreading of knowledge without limitations of nationality or race or religious faith. Briefly joined to the Theosophical Society, the Arya

samaj became the inspiration for many other "Hindu reformers" of the colonial period, as well of many western philosophers who were attracted by the eastern ideas in general.

Ramakrishna, who inspired the Ramakrishna Mission founded by his disciple Swami Vivekananda, openly stated he wanted to follow "all religions".

Vivekananda wrote, " I shall go to the Mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian's Church and kneel before the Crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhist Temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha, and in his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu who is trying to see the Light, which enlightens the heart of every one."

Still today the Ramakrishna Mission calls "abbots" its "top monks", compares its "monasteries" to the Essene communities of the times of Jesus Christ and to the Catholic monastic orders, and has openly renounced the Hindu identity by declaring itself "non-hindu organization" in its registration with the Indian government. It freely celebrates Christmas and Easter, but it does not recognize its western-born disciples as eligible to become authorized gurus to confer initiation in the name of the Math. It also has a separate organization for women, called Sri Sarada Math, because the Ramakrishna Math is strictly for men only. The ideology of the Ramakrishna Mission states that God is essentially without a form, but he takes personal aspects for the benefit of mankind; however, it discourages the building of temples or altars including private altars in one's own house.

After India obtained independence from the British empire, a slow recovery period started, especially with the help of the second generation of the preachers of Sanatana Dharma - starting from Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (the famous founder of the Hare Krishna movement), followed by Neem Karoli Baba, Herakhan Babaji, Meher Baba, Mother Meera, Swami Muktananda (Siddha Yoga), Anandamayi, Amritananda Mayi, Osho (Rajneesh), Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Mataji Nirmala Srivastava (of Sahajya Yoga), Sant Sri Asaramji Bapu (founder of Sri Yog Vedanta Seva Samiti), Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (not the musician, but the head of the Art of Living Foundation) and a growing number of Swamis and Gurus who have accepted millions of disciples among westerners.

The teachings deriving from Vedic knowledge have become extremely popular especially in the form of the various yoga disciplines, with thousands of teachers (Iyengar for



example) and natural Ayurvedic medicine with popular names such as Deepak Chopra and many others. Very soon westerners too have moved from the position of disciples to the position of teachers, multiplying the groups, the schools, the centers and the organizations that present such disciplines.

In the last decades western countries have seen a huge increase in the interest for spiritual research through a number of methods of personal growth produced by the New Age culture but inspired by the Indian wisdom - such as rebirthing, the various forms of meditation, creative visualization, conscious dreaming, pranotherapy, spiritual healing and so on.

For a sincere seeker who wants to study the original Vedic knowledge for his/ her own cultural and spiritual progress, free from political, institutional or academic motivations, the best choice is to make the best efforts to go directly to the source, approaching those who have followed the Vedic knowledge as their own belief system and way of life for innumerable generations on the Indian subcontinent. Although in the course of the centuries Indian culture has been subjected to the superimposition of cultural influences from the Islamic and European domination (especially British), its roots continue to survive almost unchanged by the millennia, in what is today known as traditional Hinduism.

"Hinduism" is a rather controversial definition, because the word *hindu* is never mentioned in the original texts.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan wrote: "The Hindu civilization is so called, since its original founders or earliest followers occupied the territory drained by the Sindhu (the Indus) river system corresponding to the North-West Frontier Province and the Punjab... The people on the Indian side of the Sindhu were called Hindu by the Persian and the later western invaders."

Many prefer the Vedic definition of *sanatana dharma*, that can be approximately translated as "the eternal function of the living being", where *sanatana* means "eternal, imperishable". To get a more precise translation of the technical word *sanatana dharma* we need to analyze the deep meanings of the word *dharma*, that contrarily to what many believe, does not exactly correspond to the western idea of "religion". Later on we will elaborate more on this very important concept: now we will simply say that the primary

meaning of *dharma* is "the natural law that sustains the universe".

As the eternal and universal law that supports the cosmos, Vedic knowledge is therefore on a level that transcends space and time, and rather exists intrinsically as the "original blueprint" of everything that exists in the universe. From time to time it is perceived, experienced and revealed by the Self realized souls, that transmit it in the form of sacred literature. Thus, it does not have a historic origin in time.

According to tradition, Vedic knowledge was manifested by the creator of the universe, Brahma, at the time of starting to form the various elements of creation. Because it is the natural awareness of reality, the original *Veda* ("knowledge") does not need to be explained or taught, but is directly realized in the heart, in the transcendental awareness of the Self that constitutes the true spiritual nature of all beings, and that is eternity (*sat*), happiness (*ananda*) and knowledge (*cit*). According to Vedic tradition, the individual Self (*atman*) or microcosm is not different from the universal Self (*brahman*) or macrocosm. By realizing his own nature of knowledge, one becomes able to understand the nature of everything, because he obtains the *darshana* of the Reality from which everything emanates.

At the creation of the universe, all human beings were adequately qualified to realize Vedic knowledge in its most complex and concentrated form, orally transmitted in a perfect way thanks to the excellent memory that constitutes the original genetic heritage of human beings. Later on, with the passing of time, the qualities of the human beings became weaker and the original *Veda* had to be explained in a more elaborate way and divided into various categories. Contrarily to the western theory of the progress of mankind, starting from a primitive condition of brute ignorance and culminating with the contemporary technological man (considered the final result of an evolution where survival is obtained thanks to the best characteristics of a species) the Vedic vision speaks of a journey of reverted evolution, or involution, where man's genetic patrimony gradually decays to a minimal part of the original qualities. Then the genetic assets of mankind are renewed cyclically according a calendar of four universal seasons or ages (*yuga*), called respectively Satya, Treta, Dvapara and Kali.

At each cycle of creation of each single universe there is a set of 1000 cycles of four ages constituting one "day" of Brahma, the creator of that particular universe. Each night

Brahma withdraws the greatest part of his creation and "puts the rest to sleep" until the next morning. There is also a longer cycle that covers the entire life of Brahma the creator, constituted by 100 of his years, each composed of 365 of his days. Thus it is calculated that in each lifetime of Brahma there are 36.5 million complete cycles of the four ages (365x100x1000). In each of these cycles mankind is created according to the original and perfect genetic project, and the same applies to all the other living species - according to the Vedas there are 4 million 300 thousand species of life, of which 400 thousand are human or humanoid. Not all these species are simultaneously present, because their particular characteristics make them suitable to different circumstances of time and place. This mechanism of incompleteness in the diversity of the species in a particular historical moment can give the impression of an evolution of the darwinian type, but according to the Vedic tradition these are rather cyclic manifestations that may sometimes superimpose, with the continued existence of elementary forms of life (i.e. unevolved bodies) that according to the darwinian theory should have been extinct already. According to the people's ability to understand and work in each period, Vedic knowledge is expressed in more or less extended and complex way. Furthermore, it is said that the extension and the complexity of the Vedic texts are different on the various planets inhabited by the 400 thousand human and humanoid species existing in the universe. The present version of Vedic scriptures existing on this planet and in this particular period (that started about 5 thousand years ago) is the simplest and shortest, because in the age of Kali, in which we live, the potential of the human beings falls to a minimum. It is said that at the beginning of the Kali yuga the *avatara* Vyasa decided to write down this particular compilation precisely to cater to the different needs of the people.

As we have already mentioned, in Satya yuga (the first age of the four), human beings are all qualified to the maximum level - healthy and sound of body and mind, endowed with great intelligence, extraordinary longevity and good fortune, and naturally able to understand and follow the universal principles of *dharma* - austerity, cleanliness, compassion and truthfulness. There were no particular social categories because everybody was able to understand, directly and personally, the subtleties of Vedic knowledge simply by listening to the natural voice of conscience and intuition, without the intervention of teachers or guides. There were no dangers, criminality or wars, and therefore there was no need of warriors or kings, or of any form of government. As the

land spontaneously produced nutritious plants and the cows had a natural production of excess milk, people had plenty of food and other commodities without any need to work in agriculture, trade, or enterprises of any kind. And because everybody was perfectly able to take care of themselves, there was no need for servants or assistants. Therefore the entire population was constituted by *brahmanas*, without any need of *kshatriyas*, *vaisyas* or *sudras* (what to speak of *chandalas*). For everybody, the method for spiritual and religious realization was the practice of Yoga and meditation on Transcendence, that purifies intelligence from all material identifications and attachments. Renunciation, balance, dutifulness and self-discipline enabled everyone to control the mind and the senses and to engage in the contemplation of the Divine within their own hearts. This ancient happy period saw the rise of Yoga, Sankhya and Tantra, and the expression of the highly symbolic hymns of the original *Veda*.

In the subsequent *yuga* mankind started to become degraded because of the restlessness of the mind and because of strong desires. At first austerity was lost, because people developed a lust for the pleasures of the heavenly planets and the material advantages that can be obtained on this planet: a favorable birth, good descendents, a good wife or husband, fame, wealth and opulence, material power, beauty, physical strength, mental strength, knowledge and so on.

Thus in Treta *yuga* the *yuga dharma* consists in the ritual performance of sacrifices, in the faithful celebration of the *nitya karmani*, the daily duties that include the *homa* or fire sacrifice. The main qualification, the prime concern for this type of religious practice is cleanliness (*sauca*), therefore tradition gives a huge importance to purification and cleanliness at every step: both externally and internally. Without the proper cleanliness and purity, a person does not have the *adhikara* (right) to perform the traditional rituals, while on the other side as we have seen anyone can become qualified through the proper system of purification and cleanliness.

In the cycle of the universal seasons, Treta *yuga* is followed by the Dvapara *yuga*, with a proportional decrease of the qualities of the human beings. Cleanliness becomes difficult to maintain, both internally and externally, therefore the emphasis of religious activities moves towards the more compassionate *yuga dharma* consisting in Deity worship. Although cleanliness and austerity are still recommended, the worship of the Deities in the temple is made accessible to those who do not possess great qualifications in that

field, because the mass of people can always assist to the rituals, offer their homage and receive the *prasadam* without having to demonstrate to have any personal qualification. The direct worship of the Deities on the altar is delegated to the *pujaks* that are able to maintain high levels of cleanliness and austerity because they are not required to perform any other work, and they act as intermediaries in the relationship between people in general and the *vigrahas* installed in the temple. Therefore in Dvapara yuga wealthy *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas* take up the responsibility to establish temples and provide to the regular maintenance of the *brahmanas* who perform the rituals in the name of the *karta* (the person that finances the worship and is thus considered its author) and of society and large.

Of course cleanliness is always encouraged, especially for the officiating priests but also for the general visitors, albeit in a lesser degree. For example, the traditional temples always have at least a sacred pool, called *kunda* or *sarovara*, where the devotees or pilgrims can take bath or at least purify themselves a little before entering the temple. However, the main activity of the temple is the compassionate distribution of sanctified food (*prasadam*) and other consecrated offerings such as water, flowers etc, and the performance of lectures and public discussions on the *shastra*, so that the mass of people can obtain the benefit of transcendental knowledge without having to strictly observe the rules of cleanliness or austerity.

The age where we live at present, started about 5 thousand years ago, is the age of Kali, a period of degradation where human decadence reaches a maximum - and then there is a crisis at global level, by which the population of the planet is purified and small groups of persons evolved as qualified *brahmanas* inaugurate a new golden age or Satya yuga, returning to the original version of Vedic knowledge.

# **When, how and by whom the Vedas were written**

In the previous chapters we have seen how Vedic knowledge has been perceived in the West and in India in the past centuries, and which misconceptions have developed because of the superimposition of various influences and motivations.

We have also seen how Vedic knowledge transcends time and applies to reality itself, and how at each age it is again presented in the modalities and in the dimensions required to cater for the needs of the people of that age. Therefore when we speak of Vedic scriptures we refer not only to the original manuscripts that bear witness to the great antiquity of Hinduism in this age, but also to the previous versions of which we do not have copies, and also to the later texts compiled by self-realized souls that explain the original knowledge in harmony with the same eternal conclusions.

For example in the case of the *Puranas* ("ancient stories") we see that the original version is presented and elaborated by a series of realized teachers. In the *Bhagavata purana* the two most prominent speakers are Sukadeva and Suta; Suta had received the knowledge of this *Purana* from Sukadeva when Sukadeva was speaking to King Parikshit and the other great sages assembled on the bank of the Ganges, and later he transmitted it to Saunaka and the other sages assembled at Naimisharanya. The *Bhagavata* also contains spiritual discourses between Maitreya and Vidura, Kapila and Devahuti, Narada and Vyasa, Krishna and Uddhava, and so on. However, we know from other Vedic texts that the *Bhagavata purana* (as the description of the activities and glories of Bhagavan Vishnu) was originally spoken by Shiva to Parvati, and that on that occasion Sukadeva listened to it while he was hiding among the branches of the banyan tree under which the divine couple was sitting.

If they refuse to believe the statements of Vedic scriptures regarding their own origin and antiquity, archeologists can at most date a compilation of such and such manuscripts that are in their possession. Usually this is done by evaluating the antiquity of the material on which the text is written - palm leaves, paper etc - but here the situation is complicated because the text often quotes previous "ancient" texts that contained the same knowledge. So in the Vedic texts and in Vedic tradition in general there is a very strong sense of continuity, called *parampara* (or *tradition*, literally, "transmitted through a chain of temporal succession"). This continuity is supported by a sense of universality, that unlike abrahamic traditions (that are exclusively linear) recognizes the validity and complementarity of parallel traditions that continue to develop in time.

Another factor that tends to confuse conventional archeologists about dating consists in the evaluation of the complexity of the ideas and language of the text; this confusion originates from the theory that human technological progress is exclusively linear - that from a primitive initial period, the entire mankind developed through a series of inventions and discoveries up to the maximum level of technological progress of today.

School books list such technological developments as the use of fire, the passage from stone to bronze to iron and then the inventions of the wheel, agriculture, pictographical writing, alphabetical writing, mathematics, geometry, organized religion (in the institutional-teocratic model), philosophy, physics and mechanics, astronomy, industry, electricity, steam engine, internal combustion engine, electronics, informatics, nuclear physics and so on. This evolutionary model is eminently centered on a series of historical events that were reported or documented first in the regions around the Mediterranean sea, and for example considers Greek civilization as superior to the Mesopotamic and Egyptian, then the Roman civilization as superior to the Greek, the Roman-Christian civilization as superior to the "pagan" one, and so on. Following this faulty logic, the European kingdoms created colonies in the rest of the world with the idea of "civilizing" those other peoples, and still we can see a deliberate campaign of "globalization" of the industrial culture of non-sustainable development of the north-American type. Thus we end up in the absurd position of considering "more advanced" those practices that destroy and pollute the environment and the resources, create conflicts in society and family, break the harmony between the living beings and nature, degrade the fundamental ethical values and bring sufferings, degradation and despair.

When archeologists and anthropologists stumble on evidence that disproves this paradigm, the most frequent reaction of conventional academy is to hide the proof of the existence of a reality different from what it preaches in a fideistic way. Vedic scriptures constitute one of the most brilliant examples of such evidence, and therefore they have been specifically targeted by the conventional western academy, as we have seen in the first chapter - also because they speak of things such as spaceships, atomic time, electricity, control of the atmospheric conditions, biotechnology and control of those human faculties that still today are considered "paranormal" because contemporary science is unable to explain them.

The present compilation of Vedic scriptures is attributed to Veda Vyasa, who was born about 5000 years ago, son of Satyavati and Parasara Muni.

The name Vyasa means "one who divides", because Vyasa compiled four separate collections, dividing the various texts that composed the original *Veda* and elaborating on its meanings according to different perspectives, to facilitate their understanding for the people of this age, whose intellect was weaker in comparison to the previous ages. Later on we will see how this division was structure, and what are the main texts of that period which are traditionally recognized as "Vedic scriptures".

Another name of Veda Vyasa or Vyasa Deva is Krishna Dvaipayana, "the Black from the Island", because Vyasa's complexion was very dark and the circumstances of his birth (that we already mentioned in the second chapter) were centered around a small island on the Yamuna river.

The Vedic scriptures are composed in Sanskrit, a language that is also called *devanagari* ("of the Devas' cities") because it is considered the universal language also used on other planets. The word Sanskrit derives from the Sanskrit word *sanskrita*, that literally means "perfect, highly evolved".

According to the western academy, Sanskrit is considered the mother language of the various "indo-european" languages, but we can add that Sanskrit also has some special characteristics that are not found in European languages: particularly the "modular" build of the simple and complex consonants, that produces a huge number of graphic configurations. The most important and basic point to understand in the study of Sanskrit is the concept of *akshara* ("letter-syllable"): unlike the Latin alphabet, where each



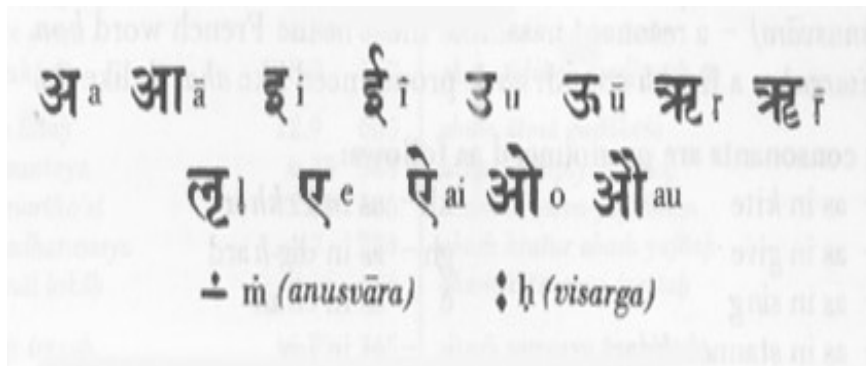
consonant is standing alone (B, C, D, M, G etc), in Sanskrit each consonant is accompanied by a vocalic sound that enables its pronunciation (normally, A). Therefore when we refer to the consonants in Sanskrit, we call them Ba, Ca, Da, Ma and so on.

Actually the same thing happens, albeit not officially, also in the European languages, because the consonants by themselves are spelled as Bi, Ci, Di, eM, Gi, and so on. Sanskrit/Devanagari scientifically applies this instinctive concept and codifies it precisely: this already shows us the type of mental structure that is the basis of Vedic knowledge - the precise understanding and the scientific formulation of the natural universal laws instinctively known and applied by everyone.

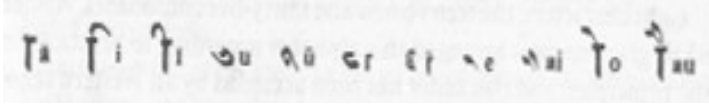
The Sanskrit alphabet includes 15 vowels and 34 simple consonants, 4 of which (*ra, ya, la, va*) are considered "semi-vowels" and according to the laws of *sandhi* ("euphonic ties") they can transform in their vocalic counterpart or in special consonantic groups with a special graphic configuration. This, too, is a "natural" law of language, that we find especially in ancient Greek but also in the transformation of words in modern languages. Simple consonants, when doubled or coupled with other consonants, unite graphically to create a remarkable number of complex consonants, which sometimes due to the particular pronunciation may take on a very different look compared to the simple consonants that compose them.

Furthermore, vowels have a different form when they are alone or at the beginning of a word, and when they are within a word. However, each letter - vowel or consonant - has a very precise sound, that always remains the same in all cases without exception, therefore there cannot be doubts in pronunciation.

This is how the vowels appear at the beginning of a word:



This is how the vowels appear within a word:



Here are the simple consonants:

क ka	ख kha	ग ga	घ gha	ङ ṅa
च ca	छ cha	ज ja	झ jha	ञ ña
ट ṭa	ठ ṭha	ड ḍa	ढ ḍha	ण ṇa
त ta	थ tha	द da	ध dha	न na
प pa	फ pha	ब ba	भ bha	म ma
य ya	र ra	ल la	व va	
श śa	ष ṣa	स sa		
ह ha	ऽ = ' (avagraha)			

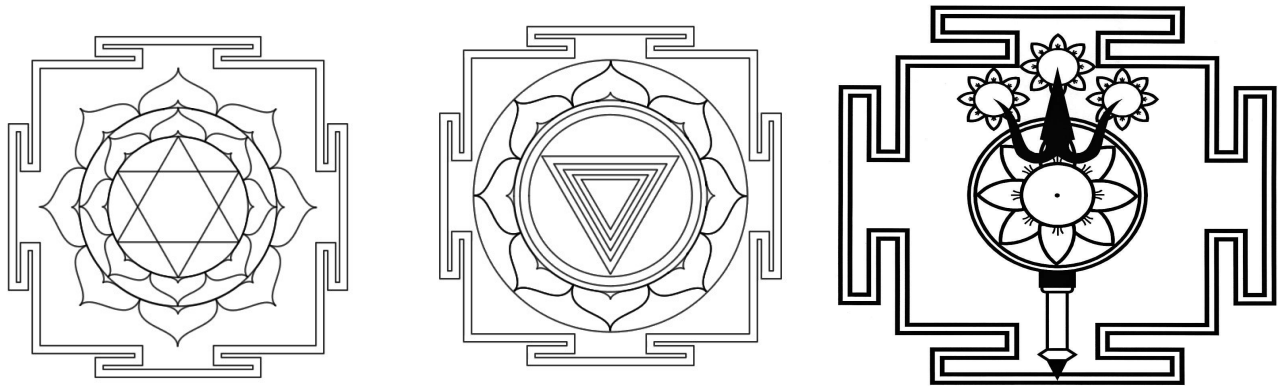
Many scientists have analyzed the structure and the dynamic of Sanskrit, and have found them so perfectly logical and consistent to be comparable to the informatic language used to program computers. Its mechanism to develop words from common roots is also scientifically precise in determining the meaning of the various definitions, the hues and the logical connections between the concepts. Sanskrit is therefore a highly scientific and precise language, used by the Rishis to express the deep realities they had perceived, both regarding the knowledge of matter and the knowledge of spirit.

The philosophical implications of this language structure are extremely deep. First of all, the need of the primary vowel A, that can be easily recognized in the graphic structure of most consonants, and that transforms into the other vowels through the modulation of the primeval sound, helps us to better understand the importance of the sacred syllable AUM, that Vedic scriptures consider the first divine incarnation, that the Greeks called Logos.

The primeval sound as the origin and foundation of the entire creation, of energy, elements, knowledge and visible manifestations, is therefore highlighted already from the first steps of schooling, when the pupil learns the alphabet letters. As modulations of the primeval sound (*sabda brahman*) the letters of the alphabet are considered sacred also in the context of religious practices, that include the special *bija mantras*, "seed mantras" or letters/syllables that are recited singularly as primary representations of the Deity and have the power to directly evoke that specific energy that is present everywhere.

A vague memory of this tantric science is still found in the various cultures of the world in the form of "magic spells" or "formulas" that seem to have no literal meaning. The *bija mantras* are not ordinary lexicons with a limited meaning, and they are not the "name" of the Deity either: they are the "sound form" of the Deity, just like the *yantra* ("sacred diagram") is its geometrical form.

Here are some examples of *yantras*, in the order Bhuvanesvari, Kali and Shiva.



The "popular" counterpart of Sanskrit, anciently used at familiar level for the simplest and most immediate forms of communication is called *prakrita* (literally "simple, natural") and has given origin to the various modern Indian languages through the superimposition with the local tribal languages. Specifically, Hindi constitutes the modern version of the Prakrita modified by the influence of the Persian and Arab languages during the Muslim invasions, so much that it has an almost identical twin, Urdu, that is written in Arab characters instead of the original Devanagari characters of Sanskrit. The Rajasthani and the Bihari languages are closely related to the Hindi.

Among the other major languages derived from the *prakrita* form of Sanskrit that are still popular in India we may mention Bengali, Oriya, Marathi, Assamese, Panjabi, Gujarati and Sindhi: although apparently varying in the graphic representation of the characters, they use exactly the same linguistic structure and each letter exactly corresponds to a Devanagari equivalent.

More differences can be found between the north-Indian and the south-Indian groups of languages, led by Tamil, the language that gives the name to the State of Tamil Nadu. The 19th century indologists deducted that Tamil was the original language of the Dravidian populations that lived in India before the aryan invasion, while Sanskrit had been introduced in relatively recent times. On the contrary, scriptural evidence shows that the presence of Sanskrit in south India is just as ancient, if not more ancient, than the presence of Tamil. Furthermore, about 80% of the words in Tamil (and related languages such as Telugu, Kannada and Malyalam) are taken directly from Sanskrit.

The version of the *Vedas* that precedent the present compilation was simply called *Yajus*, or "knowledge of the sacrifice" (in the sense of "sacred action"); it was more concentrated and was generally transmitted from teacher to student through a complex system of memorization that still survives in a few traditional schools. To make sure that the students perfectly remembered and repeated the original texts and with the proper intonation, teachers arranged the verses in various sequences, called *prakriti patha* ("simple reading") and *vikriti patha* ("elaborate reading").

The *prakriti patha* consists in reciting the verse as it is written, without dividing the words that are connected by *sandhi*. For example, here is a *mantra* offering homage to Sambhu (another name of Shiva) and Maya, respectively the Supreme Lord and the Divine Energy:

नमश्शम्भवे च मयोभवे च नमः

*namaśśambhave ca mayobhave ca namaḥ*

The *pada patha* ("step by step reading") consists in separating the basic words from each other, so that the verse can be better understood and memorized: *namaḥ sambhava, iti sam-bhave cha, mayobhava iti mayah bhava cha namaḥ*

The *krama patha* ("programmed reading") consists in uniting the basic words in an elaborate mathematical scheme (1+2, 2+3, 3+4 and so on): *namassambhave: sambhave cha, sam bhava iti sam-bhave, cha mayobhave: mayobhave cha, mayabhava iti mayabhava, cha namah nama iti namah.*

The 8 types of *vikriti patha* ("elaborate reading") are called *jata* ("bunch"), *mala* ("necklace"), *sikha* ("peak"), *rekha* ("line"), *dhvaja* ("banner"), *danda* ("stick"), *ratha* ("chariot") and *ghana* ("cloud"). Here are some examples applied to the verse we mentioned before:

*Jata:*

*namassambhave sambhave namo namas sambhave*

*sambhave cha cha sambhave sambhave cha*

*sambhave iti sam-bhave*

*cha mayobhave mayobhave cha cha mayobhave*

*mayabhava cha cha mayobhave mayobhave cha*

*mayabhava iti mayah-bhave*

*cha namo namascha cha namah*

*nama iti namah*

*Sikha:*

*namassambhave cha cha sambhave namo namassambhave cha*

*sambhave cha mayobhave mayobhave cha sambhave sambhave cha mayobhave*

*sambhava iti sam-bhave*

*cha mayobhave cha cha mayobhave cha cha mayobhave cha*

*mayobhave cha namo namascha mayobhave mayobhave cha namah*

*mayobhava iti mayah-bhave  
cha namo namascha cha namah  
nama iti namah*

*Ghana:*

*namassambhave sambhave namo  
namassambhave cha cha sambhave  
namo namassambhave cha  
sambhave cha cha sambhave sambhave cha  
mayobhave mayobhave cha sambhave  
sambhave cha mayobhave  
sambhava iti sam-bhave  
cha mayobhave mayobhave cha  
cha mayobhave cha  
mayobhave cha cha mayobhave mayobhave  
cha namo namasca mayobhave  
mayobhave cha namah  
mayobhava iti mayah-bhave  
cha namo namasca cha namah  
nama iti namah*

About the intonation: the recitation of the *Vedas* utilizes 3 types of intonations, called

*anudatta* ("low"), *udatta* ("high") and *svarita* ("medium"), with a passage towards the high tone towards the last letter/syllable of the word. We will speak again about the pronunciation and intonation in the reading of Vedic texts in the chapter on the *Vedangas* ("the secondary limbs of the *Veda*").

In any case it is important to understand that oral tradition does not mean that at those times people were too ignorant and primitive and therefore they did not know how to write. It rather means that before Kali yuga people had a much better memory and did not need to depend on written texts - although these also existed.

We can verify this easily by considering that according to the scriptures themselves, Veda Vyasa started to compile the collections (in Sanskrit *samhita* means "collection" or "anthology") of Vedic hymns just after the battle of Kurukshetra. The narration of the historical events of that period, contained especially in the *Mahabharata* (also compiled by Veda Vyasa together with the *samhitas* and other texts) includes many episodes where we see many people normally utilizing written documents, texts, books, letters and written messages of various types. This proves that people in that period not only knew the art of writing, but they considered it a totally normal and elementary thing.

As we have already mentioned, Vyasa is credited with having organized the 4 collections of hymns called *Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*, adding the respective texts with the ritual instructions (called *Brahmanas* because they were meant to be utilized by the officiating *brahmanas* during the performance of the ceremonies) and philosophical elaborations (called *Upanishads* and *Aranyakas*). Vyasadeva is also credited with the compilation of the *Vedanta* (also called *Uttara mimamsa*), the *Mahabharata* (which includes *Bhagavad gita*) and the *Puranas*, including the *Bhagavata purana*.

Many other Rishis contributed to the body of knowledge of Vedic scriptures, compiling various texts even before Vyasa's work.

Here is a short list:

\* Parasara (father of Vyasa), is the author of *Brihat Parashara Hora Shastra* (famous treatise on astrology), as well as some hymns of the *Rig Veda* (dedicated to Agni and Soma), the *Parasara dharma samhita*, *Vishnu purana*, and *Vriksha ayur Veda* (herbology and botanics).

\* Atri Rishi is the author of the 5th book (or *mandala*) of the *Rig Veda*, that is also called *Atri samhita*. Atri, husband of Anasuya and father of Dattatreya, Durvasa and Patanjali Rishi (considered as incarnations respectively of Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma) is a direct son (*manasa putra*) of Brahma and the first of the Seven Rishis who reside on the planets of the Great Dipper (Ursa Major) constellation. Among his descendents there are many other Rishis, such as Mugdala, Uddalaki, Shakalayani, Chandogya etc.

\* Agastya Rishi, another of the Seven Rishis, is the author of an original text on the *Ayur Veda* (now lost, but mentioned in later literature), the *Nadi jyotisha* (treatise on astrology), the famous *stuti* ("prayer of glorification") called *Lalita sahasranama* ("the 1000 names of Lalita", the Mother Goddess), the famous *Aditya hridayam* ("the heart of Aditi's son", a hymn to the Sun), and the *Sarasvati stotram* (in honor of Sarasvati, the Goddess of Knowledge). Agastya's wife, princess Lopamudra of the Vidarbha kingdom, cooperated to the *Lalita sahasranama* and personally wrote one hymn of the *Rig Veda*.

\* Gautama Maharishi, another of the Seven Rishis, is the author of many *suktas* ("hymns") of the *Rig Veda*, the hymn *Bhadra* of *Sama Veda*, and the *Gautama Dharma sutra*, the first text among the *Dharma shastras*. Gautama is descendent of Angirasa Rishi; he married Ahalya, *manasa putri* ("born from the mind") of Brahma the creator of the universe. He became father of Shatananda, *purohita* ("royal officiating priest") of King Janaka of Mithila father of Sita (the wife of Rama), as well as of Vamadeva, author of the 4th *mandala* ("book") of *Rig Veda*, and of Nodha.

\* Vasistha, another of the Seven Rishis, family Guru of the *avatara* Rama, is the author of the 7th book of the *Rig Veda*, as well as the *Vasistha samhita* (a treatise on *Jyotisha*, or astrology). The teachings of Vasistha are also related by Valmiki Rishi (the author of the *Ramayana*) in the famous *Yoga Vasistha*.

\* Marici, direct son of Brahma and another of the Seven Rishis, was the father of Kashyapa Rishi, who in turn generated almost all the creatures of the universe, including the Devas and the Danavas, through his two wives Aditi and Diti.

\* Pulastya, direct son of Brahma and one of the Seven Rishis, received from Brahma the *Vishnu purana* and transmitted him to Parasara Rishi. Father of Visravas and therefore grandfather of Kuvera and Ravana, is considered the forefather of all the Rakshasas.



- \* Bharadvaja, another of the Seven Rishis, is famous for having written the *Vimanika shastra* (a treatise on aeronautics-astronautics).
- \* Brighu, a famous Rishi who lived in Treta yuga, is the protagonist of the famous episode in which the other Rishis sent him to verify who was the most magnanimous among the great divine Personalities Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma. He is the author of the *Brighu samhita*, a oracle-treatise on astrology, by which one can find out even the past and future lives of a person, with 45 millions of possible astrological combinations. He compiled about 500 thousand horoscopes, most of which have been lost. He also compiled a treatise on the *Dhanur Veda*, the military and strategical science.
- \* Brihaspati, also known as Deva Guru ("the Guru of the Devas"), is considered the author of the *Artha shastra*, the treatise on the science of economic development and the *Barhaspatya sutras*. Brihaspati is son of Angirasa and has 3 wives - Shuba, Havishmati and Mamata.
- \* Kasyapa Rishi (not to be confused with the other Kasyapa also known as Kanada) is the author of the *Kasyapa samhita* (also known as *Braddha Jivakiya Tantra*) and the *Vraddha jivakiya tantra* (both treatises on the *Ayur Veda*).
- \* Markandeya Maharishi, descendent of Brighu, is the author of the *Markandeya purana*, where we find the *Devi mahatmya*, one of the most famous and beloved texts of the *shakta* Tradition. The *Devi mahatmya*, also called *Chandi path*, is traditionally recited during all the festivities connected to the worship of the Mother Goddess. Markandeya Rishi is mentioned in many other *Puranas* and in the *Mahabharata*, and is credited also with the famous *Maha mrityunjaya mantra*.
- \* Kapila, son of Kardama Rishi and Devahuti, is considered the founder of the Sankhya philosophy; his teachings are mentioned in the *Bhagavata purana* and *Mahabharata*. Unfortunately, no text compiled directly by him has survived.
- \* Narada Rishi, son of Brahma, is famous for having compiled the *Bhakti sutra*, a treatise on the path of devotion.
- \* Valmiki Rishi, disciple of Narada, is the famous author of *Ramayana* and *Yoga Vasistha*.

\* Nandi, direct disciple and companion of Shiva Mahadeva, is the author of the original *Kama shastra*, that regulates and organizes the activities meant for sense gratification.

\* Bharata Muni, disciple of Tandu, who is also direct disciple and companion of Shiva Mahadeva, is the author of the present *Gandharva Veda*, dealing with music, singing, dance and drama.

\* Dhanvantari, considered an *avatara* (direct manifestation) of Vishnu, is the primary source of the knowledge of *Ayur Veda*.

Other Rishis that composed hymns of the original *Veda* are:

\* Angira, author of most of the *Atharva Veda*, is known as a dignitary at the court of Yama on Pitriloka, the inter-dimensional planet where the virtuous ancestors live.

\* Atharva is author of many hymns of the *Atharva Veda*; the fact that the *Atharva Veda* was composed by these two Rishis has earned it the name of *Atharvangirasa samhita*.

\* Kausika, Vasistha, Kasyapa, Saunaka, Vamadeva, Meghatithi, Priyamegha, Nodha, Savya, Nrimegha, Kusta, Pracheta, are the authors of other hymns of the *Atharva Veda*.

\* Kanva is the author of various hymns of the *Rig Veda* dedicated to Agni, Yupa, Marut, Brahmanaspati, Varuna, Mitra, Aryaman, Pusha, Rudra and Soma. Kanva Rishi was the adoptive father of Sakuntala, the protagonist of the famous poetic work by Kalidasa.

\* Medhatithi, author of various hymns of the *Rig Veda* dedicated to Agni, Nirmathya Havaniya Agni, Idhmah Samiddha Agni, Astanunapat, Narasamsah, Ilah, Barhih, Devirdvarah, Ushasanaktha, Daivya, Hotara, Pracetasa, Sarasvati, Ila, Bharati, Tvashta, Vansapati, Svaha Akrutayoh Agnih, Visve Devah, Indra, Maruta, Tvashta, Mitra Varuna, Dravinoda Agnih, Asvini (*ritu devatah*), Indra Varuna, Gayatri, Padani, Brahmanaspati, Soma, Dakshina, Sadaspati, Narasama, Maruta, Rbhu, Asvini, Savita, Devyah, Varuna, Anyagnayah, Dyavapruthivya, Prithivi, Vishnu, Ayu, Vayu, Marutvan, Pusha, Apah and Pura-ushnik.

\* Praskanva, author of various hymns of the *Rig Veda* dedicated to Agni, Usha, Ashvini and Surya.

- \* Ghosha, author of 2 *suktas* ("hymns") in the 10th book of *Rig Veda*.
- \* Vagambhrina, author of the *Vac sukta* of *Rig Veda*.
- \* Maitreyi, wife of Yajnavalkya, is author of 10 hymns of *Rig Veda*.
- \* Gargi, mentioned in *Yajnavalkya samhita* and *Brihad aranyaka Upanishad* on the occasion of a famous philosophical debate, is the author of the *Gargi samhita*.

Besides Ghosha, Vagambhrina, Maitreyi and Gargi, there were several other Rishikas (female Rishis) who composed some of the hymns of the *Rig Veda*: we may mention Visvavara, Sikata, Nivavari, Apala and Visvavara from Atri's family, Angirasi Sarasvati from Angirasa's family, Yami Vaivasvati, Sraddha, Surya, Indrani, Urvasi, Sarama, Juhu and Paulomi Saci.

Among the Rishis of the generation after Vyasa we may mention:

- \* Jaimini, disciple of Vyasa; he compiled the section *Karma kanda* (also called *Purva mimamsa*) of the *Brahmana* texts as well as a treatise on *Jyotishi* (astrology).
- \* Yajnavalkya, who compiled his own *Dharma shastra* on the direct instructions by Brahma, Manu and Brighu, and he became famous especially for the *Vajasaneyi-samhita*.
- \* Panini, famous for his treatise on grammar.
- \* Charaka and Sushruta, who wrote the *Charaka samhita* and the *Sushruta samhita*, respectively, both important texts of *Ayur Veda*
- \* Patanjali, famous for his *Yoga sutras*, he also wrote treatises on Panini's grammar and on Charaka's *Ayur Veda*

According to the *Bhagavata purana*, Vyasa assigned the 4 collections of hymns to his disciples, entrusting the *Rig Veda* to Paila, the *Yajur Veda* to Vaisampayana, the *Sama Veda* to Jaimini and the *Atharva Veda* to Sumantu.

In turn, Paila divided the *Rig Veda* in two parts, assigning them respectively to Indrapramiti and Bashkala. Bashkala divided his part in 4 sections, giving them to his disciples Bodhya, Yajnavalkya, Parasara and Agnimitra. Indrapramiti taught the texts

given to him to Mandukeya, whose disciple Devamitra gave it to Saubhari and others. Mandukeya's son Sakalya divided the text he had been given into 5 parts, distributing them to Vatsya, Mudgala, Saliya, Gokhalya and Sisira. Another disciple of Sakalya, named Jatukarnya, divided his texts in 3 parts and added a glossary, entrusting these divisions to his disciples Balaka, Paila, Jabala and Viraja respectively. From the various texts of the *Rig Veda* Baskali also made an anthology and transmitted it to Valayani, Bhajya and Kasara.

The disciples of Vaisampayana became the recognized authorities on the *Yajur Veda*. One of them, Yajnavalkya son of Devarata, abandoned Vaisampayana handing back the hymns he had been given; the other disciples immediately took them, like the quails (*tittirah*) eat what has been regurgitated by other animals. Therefore that particular collection of hymns of the *Yajur Veda* is called *Taittiriya samhita*.

From his part, Yajnavalkya directly approached Surya, the Deva of the Sun, praying him to reveal the secret *mantras* of the *Yajur Veda*. Taking the form of a horse, Surya revealed himself to Yajnavalkya and gave him 15 new chapters of Vedic knowledge, known as *Vajasaneyi-samhita* (because they emanated from Surya's mane). These new chapters were entrusted to the disciples of Kanva, Madhyandhina and other Rishis.

Jamini Rishi, the authority of the *Sama Veda*, had a son named Sumantu, who became the father of Sutvan; Jaimini entrusted both son and grandson with one of the divisions of the *Sama Veda samhita*. Another disciple of Jaimini, named Sukarma, divided his part of the *Sama Veda* in 1000 *samhitas*, that were entrusted to Hiranyanabha (son of Kushala), Paushyanji and Avantya.

The 5 main disciples of Paushyanji - Laugakshi, Mangali, Kulya, Kushida and Kukshi, received 100 *samhitas* each, while 500 among the disciples of Paushyanji and Avantya developed their own disciplic successions in the north.

Krita, disciple of Hiranyanabha, transmitted 24 *samhitas* to his own disciples, and the remaining text was entrusted to the Rishi Avantya.

Sumantu Rishi, the authority on the *Atharva Veda*, taught his *samhita* to his own disciple Kabandha, who in turn transmitted it to Pathya and Vedadarsha. The main disciples of Pathya were Kumuda, Sunaka and Jajali, while the disciples of Vedadarsha were

Sauklayani, Brahmabali, Modosha and Pippalayani. The *Atharva Veda* was also commented by the two disciples of Sunaka named Babhru and Saindhavayana, and by Savarna, the disciple of Saindhavayana. Among the *acharyas* of the *Atharva Veda* we may also mention Nakshatrakalpa, Santikalpa, Kashyapa and Angirasa.

The development of the *Puranas* was entrusted to Trayyaruni, Kashyapa, Savarni, Akritavrana, Vaisampayana and Harita; each one of them studied one of the 6 anthologies prepared by Romaharshana, who was a disciple of Vyasadeva.

A beginner in the study of the Vedic scriptures can easily remain confused by their vastity and variety, that are aimed to offer a suitable approach for many different types of people and mentalities. Where should one start from, to actually understand the contents of Vedic knowledge?

The 3 most authoritative scriptures are defined as *Prasthanaya traya* (“starting points”) because they constitute the best beginning for the study of Vedic knowledge.

They are:

- \* *Bhagavad gita*, also called *Sadhana prasthanaya*, centered on the practical application of Vedic teachings,
- \* *Upanishads*, also called *Upadesha prasthanaya*, are the most philosophical part,
- \* *Brahma Sutra* or *Vedanta sutra*, also called *Nyaya prasthanaya* or logical discussions.

Other perspectives on the categorization of Vedic scriptures are based on different factors. For example, all the various texts belong to 2 vast groups called *sruti* (“to be heard”) and *smriti* (“to be remembered”). *Sruti* are the original texts of the *Vedas* (*Rg*, *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*) including the respective *Samhitas*, *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*, while the *smritis* or collections of commentaries are all the other texts.

## The four original Vedas

It is said that originally the *Rig Veda* had 21 *sakhas* or branches, *Yajur* 109, *Sama* 1000 and *Atharva* 50, for a total of over 100 thousand verses. Unfortunately not all the Vedic texts have survived: at present we know only about 1/5 of the total volume, about 20 thousand verses.

Of the 21 original *samhitas* ("collections") of the *Rig Veda* there is now only the *Sakhala samhita*, of the 85 of the *Krishna Yajur Veda* there are now only 5 (*Taittiriya*, *Maitrayani*, *Katha*, *Kapisthala* and *Svetasvatara*), of the 17 of *Sukla Yajur Veda* only 2 remain (*Kanva* and *Madhyandina*, also known as *Vajasaniya*), of the 101 of *Sama Veda* only 3 remain (*Kauthuma*, *Ranayaniya* and *Jaminiya*), of the 9 of the *Atharva Veda* only 2 remain (*Pippalada* and *Saunaka*).

The *Bhagavata purana* (1.4.15-18 and 4.19-20) and *Vishnu purana* (3.4) say that Vyasadeva divided knowledge into the four *Vedas*. Vyasa considered the particular requirements of the people in Kali yuga and decided to simplify the traditional religious and spiritual practices.

The scriptures state that in ancient times there was one Veda only, called *Yajur*, and that Vyasadeva divided it into four parts. The *Vishnu purana* also explains that Vyasa instituted four categories of officiants for the rituals, each of them expert in one of the four categories - respectively the Hotri for the *Rig Veda*, the Adhvaryu for the *Yajur*, the Udgatri for the *Sama* and the Brahmana for the *Atharva*. Thus the Hotri recites the hymns to invoke the various manifestations of the Divine, the Adhvaryu performs the ritual proper, the Udgata provides a musical background by singing the hymns of the *Sama* and the Brahmana or Acharya supervises the procedure by correcting any mistakes, protecting the rituals from negative influences and producing the higher level of consciousness required for the success of the ritual.

The knowledge of these three components (*upasana kanda* or worship of the Deity), the performance of the ritual (*karma kanda* or practical procedure) and the consciousness of their esoteric meaning (*jnana kanda*) is collectively defined as *Trayi Vidya*, "Threefold Knowledge".

The officiating priests that are expert in all these three aspects of Vedic knowledge are called Trivedi - a title that later on, with the spreading of the typical degradation of the Kali yuga, became hereditary like an ordinary family name, exactly like the titles of Acharya ("supervising or founder spiritual master"), Gosvami ("master of the senses", indicating a person that had learned to perfectly control his own senses), Tyagi ("renounced", i.e. a person who has renounced all material attachments and possessions) and so on.

The definition of Brahmana, characterizing the most expert and realized among those who cooperate to the sacrifice ritual, derives from the word Brahman, referring to the Transcendental Reality on which all visible and invisible creation is resting. According to the definition provided by Atri Rishi: *janmana jayate sudra* ("by birth everyone is *sudra*"), *samskarad bhaved dvijah* ("through the purification rituals one becomes a twice-born person", initiated to the knowledge and performance of the rituals, *veda pathad bhaved viprah* ("through the study of the *Vedas* one becomes learned and inspired") and *brahma janati iti brahmana* ("*brahmana* is one who knows Brahman").

This transcendental knowledge and awareness gives the name to the definition of *brahmanism*, sometimes used in place of *Hinduism*. Here we need to clarify the difference between the two names Brahman (also written as Brahma, with a short final *a*) referring to the Transcendental Reality and Supreme Spirit - and Brahma (with a long final *a*), that is the first created being in each universe, the demiurge-creator that appears in the Trimurti or "triad" of the *guna avataras*, the divine manifestations ruling over the three fundamental qualities of matter. This Brahma (also called Prajapati) rules over the quality of passion, because he creates or better manifests the universe, while Shiva rules over the quality of ignorance because he destroys it at the time of the dissolution, and Vishnu rules over the quality of goodness because he is the one to whom the Devas resort to maintain and protect the universe during the period of its manifestation.

It is easy to give in to the temptation of cultural superimposition and read this Trimurti as an Indian version of the Christian Trinity (composed by Father, Son and Paraclitus) but that would be a serious mistake and would cause unnecessary confusion, because the two concepts do not tally with each other.

We have already mentioned how each one of the four *Vedas* is composed by four parts:

1. *Samhita* ("collections") or the hymns or prayers proper, collected in the texts called *Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama* and *Atharva*.

2. *Brahmana* ("of the *brahmanas*") containing the meditations to be performed during the rituals, the history of the rituals and the reason why they are celebrated, and the procedures to be executed by the *brahmanas* officiating the rituals. The texts that are still available are called *Aitareya* and *Kausitaki* (also called *Sankhyayana*) from the *Rig Veda*, *Taittiriya* from the *Krishna Yajur Veda*, *Sathapatha* from the *Sukla Yajur Veda*, *Panchavimsa* (or *Tandya*), *Sadvimsa*, *Samaidhana*, *Arsheya*, *Mantra*, *Devatadhyaya*, *Vamsa*, *Jaiminiya* from the *Sama Veda*, and *Gopatha* from the *Atharva Veda*.

3. *Aranyaka* ("of the forest"), containing the symbolic meaning of the rituals, the inner mystic knowledge elaborated by the Rishis that have renounced materialistic activities and retired to the forest (*aranya*) to engage in meditation. At present there are only the *Aitareya* and *Kausitaki* (*Sankhyayana*) from the *Rig Veda*, *Taittiriya* and *Maitraniya* from the *Krishna Yajur Veda*, *Brihad aranyaka* from the *Sukla Yajur Veda* and *Talavakara* or *Jaiminiya* from the *Sama Veda*.

4. *Upanishad* ("the instructions"), containing the philosophical and theological elaboration of the *Aranyaka*; luckily the majority of the *Upanishads* have survived until our times.

These distinctions are rather indicative, because sometimes the *Upanishads* are directly inserted in the text of the *Aranyakas* or *Samhitas*.



## Rig Veda

The *Rig Veda samhita* that have survived contain some hundreds of mystical hymns (*rik*, or *richa*) dedicated to the Deities that manifest the material manifestation (considered as personifications of the universal archetypes or forces of nature) meant to keep us in harmonious contact with them in our daily life. For example, the hymn (10.85) describing the marriage between Soma Deva, the God of the Moon, and Surya, the daughter of the Sun God, is still chanted during the traditional marriage ceremonies.

However, the most important and famous hymn of the *Rig Veda* is the *Purusha sukta* (10.90), that constitutes an important part of the traditional worship rituals. Not less famous is the *Sri sukta*, dedicated to Lakshmi and recited in the traditional rituals, that is in one of the *khilanis* or "appendixes" of the *samhita*.

Some collections directly insert it in the *mandala* or book number 5. The *Vak sukta* (10.125) is another famous hymn dedicated to the Mother Goddess.

The precise number of the hymns is controversial because there are several manuscripts, more or less complete. The *Rig Veda samita* consists of 10 books or *mandalas*, which are in turn organized in chapters and sections and accompanied by *anuvakas* or "explanations" and *suktas* or "poems". Not all the *mandalas* are of the same length or have the same number of hymns.

One for the most authoritative sources offers this subdivision:

Book 1: the largest, with 191 hymns - especially for Agni (fire), Vayu (wind), the two Asvini kumaras (the healing principle), Indra (rain and thunder/ lightning), Visvedeva (all the Devas in general), Ritu (the seasons), Indra-Varuna (the water falling in the form of rain), Brahmanaspati or Brihaspati (the teaching of religious knowledge), Marut (the directions), Ribhu (the rulers of the universe), Aryaman or Yama (death), Pushan (growth), Rudra (destruction), Usha (dawn), Surya (the sun), Soma (the moon), Agni-Soma (the offering of the medicinal tonic into the fire), Vishnu (the transcendent principle), Indra-Vayu (the tempest), Mitra-Varuna (the sun on the water), Bhumi-Dyayoh (earth and sky, both considered Deities), Asva (the horse), Rati (attraction),

Annam (food), Apris (the three-fold Goddess that manifests as Sarasvati, Bharati, Ila), Ap-Trina-Surya (water, grass and sunlight).

Book 2: 43 hymns, praising Agni, Indra, Brihaspati, Aditya, Varuna, Visvedeva, Rudra, Marut, Kapinjala (the hawk).

Book 3: Agni, Yupa (the sacrificial pillar), Indra, Parvata (mountains), Visvedeva, Asvini, Mitra (the sun), Ribhu, Usha.

Book 4: 58 hymns praising Agni, Indra, Kapinjala, Ribhu, Indra-Varuna, Indra-Vayu, Indra-Brihaspati, Brihaspati, Usha, Savitar (the sun in its androgynous aspect), Visvedeva, Bhumi-Dyayoh, Kshetrapati (the principle of protection for the earth), Ghrita (clarified butter).

Book 5: 87 hymns praising Agni, Indra, Surya, Atri (the Rishi), Visvedeva, Marut, Mitra-Varuna, Asvini, Usha, Savitar, Parjanya (rains), Prithivi (earth), Indra-Agni.

Book 6: 75 hymns praising Agni, Indra, Visvedeva, Kamadhenu (the cow), Pushan (nourishment), Indra-Agni, Sarasvati (knowledge and speech), Asvini, Usha, Marut, Mitra-Varuna, Indra-Varuna, Indra-Vishnu, Bhumi-Dyayoh, Savitar, Indra-Soma, Brihaspati, Soma-Rudra, Ayudha (weapons).

Book 7: 104 hymns praising Indra, Asvini, Marut, Asvini, Aditya (the 12 main Devas), Savitar, Bhaga, Dadhikras, Rudra, Apas (the waters of rivers and lakes), Ribhu, Bhumi-Dyayoh, Vastospati (the personification of Vastu), Mitra-Varuna, Usha, Indra-Varuna, Varuna, Indra-Agni, Sarasvati, Brihaspati, Vishnu, Parjanya, Indra-Soma.

Book 8: Indra, Asvini, Marut, Aditya, Agni, Mitra-Varuna, Visvedeva, Indra-Agni, Varuna, Soma, Vak (speech).

Book 9: the extraction of the *soma rasa*, the juice of the *soma* plant or *soma lata*. Colonial scholars explained that the *soma rasa* was the milky juice of the *Sarcostemma viminalis* (or *Asclepias acida*) turned alcoholic with the fermentation with flour and butter - but this procedure does not correspond with the original texts in regard to the preparation or in regard to the beneficial and purification effects described in the traditional texts. On the other hand, the ancient Ayurvedic tradition identifies the *soma lata* with the *Ephedra gerardiana*, the Indian variety of the ubiquitous Ephedra, a very

popular medicinal herb that grows spontaneously in Asia, Europe and America, where it is called *Mormon Tea* and *Squaw Tea*.

The *Susruta samhita* (which is part of the *Ayur Veda*) lists those places where the *soma lata* grows spontaneously in two varieties: the mountain and the marsh. Ephedra contains a bland alkaloid called ephedrine, comparable to the "good caffeine" of *guaranà* and *yerba matè*, used in Ayurvedic medicine as a stimulant at the mental and physical level, for curing headaches, allergies and rheumatism, and improving metabolism and digestion. Its active principles stimulate the natural production of adrenaline, and in fact it is very popular among sports people and students during the exam periods, and also for the purpose of burning off excess weight. Synthetic ephedrine is catalogued by the International Olympic Committee and by the World Anti-Doping Agency among the banned substances in professional sports, so much that some athletes have been disqualified in some competitions.

Hymn 4 of *mandala* 9 of *Rig Veda* prays, "may we obtain agility, strength and mental power, to win and repel our enemies, and to become better persons." In the various descriptions of the chapter we also find the important information that the *soma* plant does not have leaves or bark, but smells like pine and tastes rather bitter. Depending on the variety and the age of the plant, the color goes from bright green of the evergreen to green with golden or dark red hues. The stems are pressed with special stones, then the juice is filtered and left to macerate for one night: a procedure that is normally used in herbal medicine to extract the active principles. It is interesting to see that Soma as the juice of the plant is identified with the Deity Soma (the Moon) and the other way around, and that in traditional iconography it is represented as a bull, a bird or a human embryo.

Book 10: hymns to Agni, Apas, Yama and Yami (the twins Yamaraja and Yamuna, children of the Sun), Havirdhanas (the oblation of clarified butter), Yama, Pitri (the ancestors), Indra, the Asvinis, Soma, Pushan, Surya, Indra-Vaikuntha, Agni, Manas (the mind), Visvedeva, Brihaspati, Apris, Jnanam (knowledge), Nadi (the rivers), Visvakarman (technological ability), the marriage of Surya (the daughter of the Sun), Purusha (the personification of the cosmos), Urvashi and Pururava (the ancestors of the human race, or the union between the human and the heavenly), Vak, Ratri (the night), Sristi (creation), Mitra-Varuna, Savitar, Sapatnibadhanam (the performance of the rituals together with the wife), Aranyani (forests), Sraddha (faith), Saci Paulomi (one of the

Rishikas), Usha, Kamadhenu (the cow), Raja (the king), Mayabheda (the duality produced by illusion), Yajamana (the performer of the ritual), Aditi (the mother of the Devas), Vayu.

Here are some extracts from the first book or *mandala*:

"We call on Agni, the Officiant God, minister of the sacrifice, who grants wealth, who is worthy of being honored, who will bring the Gods to us... Be easily accessible to us, like a father to a son." (1.1)

"Beautiful Vayu, please come: we have prepared these drops of *soma rasa* ("juice of the Soma") for you, and the singers are praising you with their hymns. O Indra-Vayu, come to accept our offer. O Mitra and Varuna, please be our Rishis, you who love and honor Dharma: give us strength and success." (1.2)

"O Asvinis, splendid Lords, rich with treasures and nimble-handed, please accept this sacrificial food and our songs. Come, treading on blazing red roads... O Visvedeva, who change your shape like serpents, who are brave and sincere, you are our protectors: please reward and love human beings, accept this drink from our hands, and bring the powerful river Sarasvati so that she will inspire us with gracious thoughts and accept our ritual." (1.3)

"Come, Indra, and enjoy the stimulating juice of the *soma*, be present at these offerings. Grant us opulence, o powerful king of the heavens, glorious Lord of rains..." (1.9)

"O Agni, bring the Gods to the one who offers the sacred gifts. Please worship them, o purifier. I call upon the Night and Dawn, so that they will sit on the sacred straw at this solemn sacrifice.. Ila (Earth), Sarasvati (Knowledge), Mahi (Power), o three Goddesses who bring joy, please sit with us... Tvastar (Chaos) I call, the first born, who wears any shape at will: o Lord and King of the woods, please present these oblations to the Gods." (1.13)

"May we awaken the Asvini twins, the Gods who travel in the splendid chariot that reaches up into the skies, to go to the abode of those who offer the *soma* juice. I invoke Savitar of golden hands, so that he will protect me and send me help. Praise to Savitar, born from the water: we aspire to follow his saintly way... O Agni resplendent with youth, bring here the spouses of the Gods - Hotra (oblation), Bharati (prayer), Varutri

(the power of Varuna) and Dhisana (meditation), Indrani, Varunani and Agnaya (respectively the powers of Indra, Varuna and Agni), so that they will accept the *soma* juice from us... May Heaven and Earth sit with us and nourish us with their blessings... you who were covered by the three steps of Vishnu, the Guardian, he whom nobody can cheat." (1.22)

"Rise over us, inundating us with blessings and prosperity, o Usha, daughter of the sky, Lady of the light. Awaken the sounds of joy, let the sons of Kanva sing to the princes generous with gifts, while dawn advances. Dawn has yoked her horses beyond the place where the Sun rises, and on one hundred chariots she comes forth, while all creatures bow down before her glance... bring us the Gods from the firmament, so that they will drink our *soma* juice and grant us a large house free from enemies..." (1.48)

"The fast Maruts, sons of Rudra, strong and wild, taste the offerings of the sacrifice... The sons of Kamadhenu, resplendent in their beautiful clothes, decorate themselves with golden ornaments and chase away the adversaries from their path. O powerful warriors who carry sparkling spears, o conquerors of the unconquerable, please evoke the lightning and yoke your battle chariots so that the storm clouds will shower down torrential dark red waters, to moisten and soften the land with water... Sit on the sacred straw, on the comfortable seats prepared for you, and delight in this pleasant food." (1.85)

"May the auspicious powers and the good things come to us from all sides - free from deceit, obstacles and defeat. May the God always be generous with us, constantly watching on our good. May the generous favors of the Gods bring us all abundance. We devoutly aspire to the friendship with the Gods, so that they may extend our lives... we evoke them with the hymns of the ancient times." (1.89)

"O Agni, may your friendship always save us from all sufferings. Those for whom you celebrate the sacrifice become prosperous, free from enemies, strong and happy... In you, the Gods consume the offerings that we present to them. Bring us the Adityas, because we desire their company... We will provide the firewood and the offerings, remembering you at each festival... o wonderful harbinger of the Dawn, you are powerful and capable of seeing even in the darkness of the night. Listen to our words and let our hymns chase away the evil."(1.94)

"In the water the *soma* runs like the moon, with its wonderful heavenly wings, chariot

wheels like lightning, abode impossible to find for mortals. O Earth and Heaven, look at my condition... human beings have desires to satisfy. Where is the ancient divine law? Who will be its new preacher? O Gods who live in the three splendid realms of the heaven, what is truth for you? How do you firmly sustain Dharma? How can we escape from the wicked?... I am the one who sang many praises to you while the *soma* juice flowed, yet worries assault me like a wolf chases a thirsty deer. May the five Bulls that rise in the middle of the glorious sky return to me after taking my prayers to the Gods." (1.105)

"To our aid we call Indra, Mitra, Varuna and Agni, and the Maruts, and Aditi and the Vasus. May they save us from all sufferings and grant us prosperity. May the glorious Fathers and the two Mother Goddesses, who give strength to Dharma, save us from all sufferings... O Brihaspati, open an easy path for us... may our prayer be heard by Varuna, Mitra, Aditi, the river Sindhu, the Earth and the Sky." (1.106)

"To the strong Rudra we offer our hymns of praise, to the Lord of the heroes, whose hair is braided. May everything be auspicious for our people and our herds, may there be health and plenty of food in our village. Bring us joy, o Rudra: we will serve you with great respect... Guide us, so that we may obtain the health and strength that our father Manu obtained through his sacrifices... To our aid we call the wandering sage, the impetuous Rudra, the wild boar of the sky, who makes the sacrifice perfect. May he grant us his grace, and by his healing hand give us protection, shelter and a safe house. O immortal, grant us the food of the mortals, bless our progeny, avert your arrows that kill men and beasts. May not the fathers die, may not the mothers die, may not the children die, may not the adults die." (1.113)

"We bring sacrifices to the generous Rudra, this juice to drink for him whose anger easily abates! Like the heroes of the Asura Dyaus, I have praised the Maruts with prayers to the Heaven and the Earth. Strong in the first invocation to the Night and to the Dawn... and the radiant Morning that shines with the light of Surya... Listen, o Mitra-Varuna, these invocations raised by all the men in the worship hall." (1.122)

"I call Agni as the harbinger, the generous and gentle, the child of power, who knows everything that lives, the holy singer, omniscient, Lord of the sacred rites, the God that rises towards the Gods, who leaps forth to the offerings of sacred butter. We the

sacrificers evoke you, the best of worshipers, the singer of hymns... o bull of the fiery mantle... at whose touch the solid things tremble, who crumbles the hardest food, who firmly protects us like a father protects his young son... Roaring loudly like the armies of the Maruts in the fertile cultivated fields and the solitary places, worshiped by us, you accept and eat our gifts... we invoke you, o Lord of all our houses, o guardian of all families." (1.127)

"The charioteer yokes seven horses to the one-wheeled chariot. He is one yet has seven names. The wheel has three spokes, strong and perpetual, on which all the inhabited worlds rest. The seven that ascend the seven-wheeled chariot have yoked horses, and the seven sisters sing together hymns of glory, where the jewel consists of the names of the seven cows. Who watched him come to existence, considering the way the one who is without bones sustain those who have bones? Where is the blood of the earth - life, spirit? Who can approach the Knower to inquire about it? My mind is immature, my spirit is confused, but I ask them about the Gods' abodes, because the Wise have woven their threads on the yearling calf, like a spider web... Two birds of beautiful wings, bound by friendship, have made their nest on the same tree. One of the two is eating the sweet fruits of the fig tree, and the other just watches, without eating... The Wise give many names to he who is the One - calling him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni and Yama... Dark is the descent, the birds are golden, they rise up to the sky clothed in waters, and then again they descend to the above of Dharma, and the entire earth is moistened by their opulence." (1.164)

From the second book or *mandala*:

"We invoke you, Lord and guide of the heavenly hosts, wisest among the wise, of supreme fame... o Brahmanaspati, listen to our prayers and help us, please sit in the sacrificial place... Just like the Sun spreads its rays in the morning, you are the father of all the sacred hymns... your excellent protection guides men. One who offers gifts to you is never overcome by suffering, enemies or deceitful creatures... O Brihaspati, for you we sing hymns of glory: we pray that those who are laying traps for us will fall down and be destroyed by their own bad actions - the evil, arrogant, rapacious enemies that threaten us although we are offenseless. Cast them away from our path and lead us to the banquet of the Gods. Crush all our enemies, leave them impotent, o devourer of the evil - you who victoriously raise your war cry, and support Dharma." (2.23)

From the third book or *mandala*:

"To Agni, Vaivasvanara, supporter of Dharma, we offer our praise like clarified butter. Human priests evoke him with deep meditation: he is our ancient Herald. Like an axe fashions a chariot, his birth gave radiance to the sky and the earth. O son of the two Mothers, praised by prayers, you who carry the oblations, always young, infallible, guest of men, created by the supreme mind of the Gods... O radiant High Priest of the Gods, the humans are here gathered around your abode, desiring to serve you and bind themselves in your friendship... Born as Lion and roaring Bull, immortal Fire of great power, in the ancient times you rose to the highest skies, welcomed by noble expert singers, creating wealth for the people: now you have returned among us." (3.2)

"O king of the forest, we asperse you with heavenly oblations for the sacrifice. Please gift us with opulence, you who stand upright as when you rested on the bosom of this Mother. Watching sentinel on the east of the blazing fire, dressed in royal clothing, consecrated by the song of religious men, please chase away poverty and famine, and bring us great fortune and opulence. O Sacred Pillars, hewn and planted into the earth to bring blessings to the fields: please take our gifts to the Gods - Adityas, Rudras, Vasus, Earth and Heaven and Antariksha (interplanetary space). O Lord of the woods, rise with a hundred branches like the antlered deer, and raise us to greatness with a thousand branches." (3.8)

"We heartily honor Agni Vaisvanara, who provides light, whose promises never fail, the generous, merry God: we invoke him with oblations... from age to age Vaisvanara, who neighs like a horse, is kindled in the presence of women." (3.26)

"Here is the requirement for the friction, here is the kindle ready for the spark. Bring the Lady of the sacrifice: we will rub the *aranis*, calling Agni according to the ancient tradition. Agni is the Jataveda ("the knower") who lies sleeping in the two *arani* sticks for lighting the fire, like the embryo in a pregnant woman... With your red radiant pillar, through our action you are born as the Son of Ila, in the center of the Earth, to take our offerings to the Gods... take your abode, o Priest, in your own house, accept the sacrifice in the temple of worship." (3.29)

"From the bosom of the mountains they come running fast like two mares racing each other... Vipas and Sutudri flow with rushing currents, they run to the ocean as on resplendent chariots, swelling with waters... the son of Kusika has evoked you. Indra,



who wields the lightning, has dug your channels, crashing down Vritra that blocked your current. Savitar of beautiful hands has guided you and increased your waters. O sisters, slow down your pace and allow easy passage to the chariots of the Bharatas, that invoke the favor of the rivers." (3.33)

"As soon as the young Bull came to existence, he desired to taste the juice of the *soma*. So drink your fill, as per your wish, from the milk of the plant nourished by the mountains, that your mother poured for you in your father's house. Already at your birth you defeated Tvastar - o powerful hero who comes to our aid in the battle, o conqueror of Vritra." (3.48)

"At the first radiance of the morning, the Great Immortal took birth in the House of the Cow. Now the laws of the Gods become active. Great is the supreme and exclusive lordship of the Gods... My desires fly to many places, I turn my eyes towards the ancient sacrifices: when the fire is kindled, we announce the truth. Great is the supreme and exclusive lordship of the Gods... The Son of the two Mothers, the Priest, the only Lord in the assemblies, comes forth striding although he remains as steady as strong foundations. Vishnu, the Guardian, has the highest position in the immortal places. Agni knows very well all these created beings. Great is the supreme and exclusive lordship of the Gods." (3.55)

"By his exhortations, Mitra calls the human beings to action: it is Mitra who sustains earth and heaven. Mitra watches men with eyes that never close. To Mitra we offer our oblations of sacred clarified butter. O Mitra, o Aditya, you who always sustain Dharma: give glory to those who worship you, because those who are assisted by you never suffer defeat or disaster. Tasting the sacred food, free from diseases, faithfully observing the orders of the Adityas, we want to remain under their protection and their favor. O great Aditya, source of all blessings and worthy of worship, Lord and King! May we enjoy your affection and kindness! To you, the Supreme, we offer pleasurable oblations in the fire. O support of human beings, by your grace give us glory and fame! Your glories spread everywhere, your power goes beyond the sky and your fame goes beyond the earth. All the Five Nations ask for your blessings, o Mitra, powerful support of all the Gods - you who give the Sacred Laws of Dharma to the human beings who honor you with the sacred herbs." (3.59)

From the other books or *mandalas*:

"Within my mother's womb I contemplated all the generations of these Gods. Surrounded by a hundred iron fortresses, I soared up quickly, as Falcon, leaving the demons behind, and by flying beyond the winds my strength increased... Crying to the sky, the Falcon rushed on, while the angry archer was getting ready to shoot his arrow: the Falcon lifted him up from the highest sky and dropped one feather." (4.28)

"From Kshetrapati, as from a friend, we obtain what nourishes our people and our animals. Such is his benevolence, that the Lord of Dharma pours sweetness for us like a cow that gives milk. Sweet like honey may the plants be for us, sweet the sky and the waters, and the space beyond the sky, may men and animals work gladly, may the plough happily dig its furrows. May the land, rich in milk, be milked for us one year after another, and may the farmer walk happily with his oxen." (4.57)

"Like a thundering storm cloud, the warrior seeks the thick of the battle: may you be victorious and protected by your strong armour. May the bow give us victory over the enemy, and may the bow string push forward like a woman who desires to embrace her lover: may it protect us in the fight, and hold the arrow like a mother holds her child next to her beloved." (6.75)

"Give us this day, o pure and cooling Waters, luminous and immaculate, that the virtuous ancient people offered to Indra as a drink... Bringing purity and joy everywhere, come forth, laying a path for the Gods and the Goddesses. The resplendent rays of Surya attract you and Indra digs a road for you to travel on." (7.47)

"O Lord of the Vastu, you who destroy all diseases and wear all forms, be a benevolent friend for us. Protect us from thieves and wild boars. May the mother sleep happily, may the father sleep, may the dog and the master of the house sleep, and all the members of the family." (7.55)

From the 10th book or *mandala*:

"May the Pitris be roused, the great and small ancestors who deserve a share of the *soma*: may those who have obtained the condition of gentle and virtuous spirits come to our aid when we call them... By the grace of Vishnu I have obtained a progeny, o good Fathers: please come often to sit on the sacred straw, to taste the pressed juice and the oblations.

Accept our offerings and bless us with health and vigor, and forgive our shortcomings, that are due to our human frailness." (10.15)

"May your spirit, that reached Yama the son of Vivasvan, return to live and stay here. May your spirit, that passed on to the earth and the sky, return to live and stay here. May your spirit, that went away to the windy seas, return to live and stay here. May your spirit, that journeyed far into the beams of light that flash and flow, return to live and stay here. May your spirit, that went alone to the high mountains, return to live and stay here. May your spirit, that went far into everything that is and will be, return to live and stay here." (10.58)

"Truth is the foundation that supports Earth, like the Sun sustains the Sky. Dharma protects the Adityas and preserves the place of Soma in the sky. Soma makes the Adityas strong and the Earth powerful, and therefore it abides in the center of all these constellations... Dressed in beautiful clothes, the daughter of Surya went to meet her spouse on a chariot decorated by hymns, accompanied by the retinue guided by Agni. Her spirit was the nuptial chariot and its covering was paradise, thought was her pillow, sight was the black collyrium for her eyes, earth and sky were her treasure, the winds were her wheels, fixed to their axis." (10.85)

"The Purusha has thousand heads, thousand eyes and thousand feet. He fills the universe everywhere, although he is ten fingers tall. This Purusha is everything that has been and everything that will be, even greater than the powerful Lord of immortality, that grows with nourishment. All the creatures are one fourth of his existence, while the three fourths are the eternal life in the world that is not subject to destruction... From him, Viraja has come to existence, and again from Viraja has the Purusha appeared... The Gods prepared the sacrifice and the sacrificial offering was the Purusha himself: they nourished him with grass, anointed him with balms. From the flesh of the sacrificial victim, clarified butter was created, the creatures of the air, the wild and domestic animals, the hymns of the *Rig* and the *Sama*, and the *mantras* and the rituals, from which the *Yajur* was born. From the body of the Purusha came forth the horses and the cattle with two rows of teeth... when they divided the flesh of the Purusha, how many portions did they prepare? The *brahmanas* were his mouth, his arms were the *kshatriyas*, the legs the *vaisyas*, and the feet the *sudras*. The moon was born from his mind, the sun from his eye, Indra and Agni from his mouth, Vayu from his breath. From his navel came the interplanetary space, the

heavenly planets from his head, earth from his feet, and the planetary systems from his body... I know this great Purusha, who resplends like the sun and transcends the darkness, and one who knows him in this way attains liberation in this very lifetime - indeed, there is no other road to liberation. The Lord of the universe lives in the universe, and he appears in many forms without ever taking birth... I offer my homage to the eternally resplendent Brahman, who gave the divine power to the Gods, who is the Guru of the Gods and their Elder." (10.90)

"I travel with the Rudras and the Vasus, with the Adityas and all the other Gods... I am the Queen, who collects treasures, thoughtful, the first of those who deserve worship, therefore the Gods have established many sacred abodes for me... Even if they do not know it, everyone abides in me. Listen, all of you, to the truth: I announce it myself and I say words that are pleasing to Gods and men. Those who receive my favor become very powerful - a wise man, a Rishi, and a *brahmana*. I am the one who bends Rudra's bow, so that his arrow can hit and kill those who hate the Brahman, I am the one who rises to command the battle, I am the one who penetrates earth and sky. On top of the world I create the Father: I have risen from the ocean, and from there I cover all the existing creatures... My breath is strong like the wind and the storm, and my power sustains the existence of everything, even beyond earth and sky." (10.125)

"Neither existing nor non-existing: there was no realm of air, nor the space beyond it. What did it cover, and where? Was perhaps there the abyss of the waters? There was no death, there was nothing immortal, there was so sign dividing day from night. The One, breathless, breathed by its own nature - nothing else. And darkness: this All was in the beginning, hidden in the undivided Chaos. Everything was empty and formless: the One was born because of the great power of Heat. Then Desire rose, the primeval seed and germ of Spirit, and the wise, examining the thoughts of their hearts, discovered that there was affinity in the non-existent." (10.129)

"O Powerful Agni, who collect everything that is valuable for us, who are your friends: please bring us treasures when you are kindled in the place of libations. Gather together, speak together: may your minds be at one, like the ancient Gods sit unanimously to consume the share that has been established for you. In the same place, in the same assembly, in the same mind happily unite your thoughts: I present to you a common goal, and honor you all with a general oblation." (10.191)

Here are some extracts from the *Sri sukta*:

"O Lord of the fire, we ask you to bring to us Sri, Lakshmi, that shines like gold and destroys all faults, who wears gold and silver ornaments: may she come to bless us... I pray Sri, who is announced by the roar of the elephants, surrounded by chariots drawn by horses, so that she may come to me and never abandon me. She is happiness personified, always smiling, full of compassion, sitting on the lotus flower and with a lotus-like complexion... O Goddess resplendent like the sun, your power created the *bilva* tree, that is the king of the forest: may its fruits filled with knowledge destroy our ignorance and everything inauspicious. I pray that Sri, that spreads her sweet scent around, who is invincible and grants prosperity, bless us with her presence... may the Lady of the waters come to live with us."

## Yajur Veda

The *Samhitas* of the *Yajur Veda* are divided into Krishna ("black") and Sukla ("white"), consisting respectively in 27 and 15 *sakhas* or branches.

As we have already mentioned, the *Krishna Yajur Veda* or *Taittiriya samhita* was entrusted by Vyasa to Vaisampayana, and by Vaisampayana to his disciples. One of these, Yajnavalkya, dissociated himself from his master and compiled the *Sukla Yajur Veda* or *Vajasaneyi samhita* receiving its knowledge directly from Surya.

The *Yajur Veda* contains many *mantras* that are also found in *Rig Veda* and the description in prose of some worship rituals. The name *Yajur* comes from the root *yaj*, meaning "to worship", "to perform worship rituals". The most famous hymns of the *Yajur Veda* are the *Sri Rudram* (dedicated to Shiva) and the *Pavamana sukta* (an important hymn of purification in honor of the *soma rasa*, the juice of the medicinal plant called *soma lata* - which, as we have already mentioned, has been identified by the Aryurvedic texts as *Ephedra gerardiana*, the Indian variety of a plant that is very widespread at world level - that has a very important role in Vedic rituals).

First *Kanda*, first *Prapathaka*: it describes the sacrifices at the full moon and the new moon. It speaks of the milking of the cows, the preparation of the offerings and the baking of the grains cakes, the building of the altar, the offering of oblations, the libation of clarified butter and the exchange of ladles.

The second *Prapataka* describes the sacrifice of the *soma rasa*, that we have already briefly mentioned.

The third *Prapathaka* describes a special sacrifice offered to Agni and Soma, while the fourth establishes the shares of *soma rasa* reserved for each of the divine guests. The subsequent *Prapathakas* describe how oblations are offered again in the sacrificial fire, the *asvamedha yajna*, the ritual offered to the sun, the chariot race, the *rajasuya yajna* and the *sakamedha yajna* - all rituals celebrated by the kings for the prosperity and protection of their kingdom.

The second *Kanda* describes specific sacrificial rituals meant to obtain particular blessings - wealth, victory, increasing herds, progeny, health, elevation to the heavenly planets, liberation from misfortune, defeat of one's enemies and so on. It also explains how to offer oblations to the various Deities, and the rules of behavior for the officiating priests.

The third *Kanda* constitutes a supplement to the description of the *soma rasa* ritual, with the three pressings, the additional cups, the invocations, special oblations and sacrifices, and the offerings to be presented to the Lord of the Vastu before starting a journey. Here we also find the famous *Pavamana sukta* (3.3).

The fourth *Kanda* explains how to prepare the container for the fire and to kindle the fire, how to offer worship to the fire, prepare the arena for the sacrifice, build the brick altar, and perform the preliminary rituals offered to Rudra. The fifth *Kanda* describes the installation of the sacred fire, the initiation of the author of the sacrifice and the *asvamedha yajna*.

The sixth *Kanda* talks again of the *soma*, of the addition of cow milk, of the *dakshina* offerings and the performance of the dancers. Finally, we find the explanation of the true meaning of the *Asvamedha yajna* or horse sacrifice, where the horse represents the cosmos: "One who knows the head of the sacrificial horse acquires a head for himself and

becomes suitable to be sacrificed. The horse's head is the dawn, his eye is the sun, the wind is his breath, his ear is the moon, his feet are the four main directions, his hair are the sun rays, the bones are the stars. The flesh of the horse is the mist, his tail are the trees, his mouth is Agni, his belly the ocean, his anus the atmosphere, his testicles are the heaven and earth, his penis is the stone to press the *soma*, and his sperm is the juice of the *soma*."

Here are some extracts from the *Pavamana sukta*:

"Gladly we salute you, o Soma, great in wisdom, who guided our Fathers in dividing the treasure among the Gods. O invincible Lord, you open the barriers: be generous with us. O drop of Soma, we offer you sacrifices, may the Fathers come to us led by Agni, and may they eat the offerings displayed on the sacred straw, those who lived in faultless virtue and now sit in the heavenly abodes... and also bring to us Yama, the Angirasas and Vivasvan - some of them answering to the call of Svadha and the others to the call of Svaha"

## Sama Veda

Only 1549 texts survived from the *Samhitas* of *Sama Veda* - the hymns that are meant to be sung rather than recited, on musical tunes that constitute the basis of classical Indian music and on mathematical combinations of the seven basic sounds or notes (*Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha* and *Ni*). These hymns, too, are meant to evoke the memory and the presence of the various divine manifestations, including Agni, Indra and Soma. In fact many of them are taken from the *Rig Veda* but have been modified with extensions, repetitions and insertion of syllables according to precise schemes. Particularly interesting is the great number of hymns dedicated to Soma (Indu) Pavamana, the personification of the juice of the *soma* plant, praised for its purifying qualities, both materially and spiritually. We find them from section 4 of chapter 2, book 5 of the first part, to the section 3 of chapter 1 of book 1 of second part, and then again (after a brief homage to Agni, Mitra Varuna, Indra and Indra Agni) from section 8 to 10, then from 15

to the subsequent sections and books, still briefly interrupted by prayers to the Gods, yet speaking about the *soma rasa* again.

## Atharva Veda

The *Atharva Veda* takes its name from Rishi Atharva, who together with Rishi Angira compiled the greatest part of the hymns, especially in books 6 and 7. Today only a small part of the original *Samhitas* survive, preserved by the Saunaka tradition, containing *mantras* and special procedures to face many practical difficulties in life. This knowledge is important not only to effect a considerable improvement in the quality of life for people, but also as a test to verify the factual qualifications of the priest, both in the pronunciation of the *mantras* and in the personal spiritual power and general knowledge of the various Vedic sciences.

A *brahmana* who proved his ability by obtaining actual practical results with the application of these procedures earned the respect of the general people and of kings. Only extremely qualified and educated individuals are actually able to properly utilize the methods of the *Atharva Veda*, because this specific collection only contains the *mantras* themselves and very brief information on procedures that is totally insufficient to achieve the desired results without additional knowledge gained from other texts.

From the contemporary western perspective we could consider it a manual of good "magic", dealing with controlling natural and atmospheric calamities, neutralizing environment pollution, fighting ghosts and hostile spirits, and alleviating the negative influence of the planets. A considerable part of the text speaks about the treating of wounds, fractures and many diseases through the use of herbs and plants, stopping bleeding by reciting *mantras*, neutralizing poisons, prolonging life and even get hair growing back.

The fundamental technique is based on the recitation or chanting of the *mantras* - sound diagrams that represent and evoke archetypal principles, connected to the energies we want to contact: for example to the medicinal powers of the plants, that in themselves



constitute a considerable part of the teachings in the *Ayur Veda*. The active principles are already effective on the medical level, but their power is increased by invoking the mystical potency of the plant in its personal form, as a manifestation of the Deity. Already in *Rig Veda* we have seen how some hymns are dedicated to the forests, the rivers and other "minor" manifestations compared to the major Personalities of the universal administration, like the Adityas for example.

It is important to understand that the vision usually defined as "animism" by western academia does not constitute a primitive, ignorant and superstitious approach to the mysterious forces of the universe, but it rather constitutes a respectful acknowledgment of the various forms of power of Nature. It is a very important thing, that contemporary western culture is just starting to rediscover after having learned a very hard lesson through the human sufferings connected to the serious deterioration of the environment. Offering respect and worship to plants, rivers and mountains certainly does not exclude the option of recognizing and worshiping the supreme Intelligence that at a transcendental level is the origin of everything and includes all other manifestations.

Quite the contrary: the awareness of one's transcendental identity with all other existence at the level of Brahman enables the human beings to tune in at a vibrational level from which they can interact more effectively, cooperating to the progress and support of the universe. These are the foundations on which we rest the knowledge of medicine, naturopathy, hydrotherapy, pranotherapy, herbal medicine, psychology and physics contained in other texts and utilized by the officiant of the *Atharva Veda*.

In fact, one needs to be able to make a correct diagnosis of the problem, know the medicinal properties of each plant, and - why not - utilize the power of the patient's mind by applying a bland form of hypnosis or suggestion that today is called "*faith healing*" or "placebo effect", by addressing prayers and requests to the medicinal plants and to the water and to the personification of the disease as well. In these favorable circumstances, the *mantra* acts on the subtle level of matter, as a vibration that is perfectly modulated, directed and supported by the particular biomagnetic field of awareness.

In one of the early chapters of the text that survived the centuries we find the invocation to the *kushtha* plant (known in the west with the botanical name of *Saussurea costus* or *Saussurea lappa*) to remove fever and diseases. The medicinal action of this plant is

particularly effective as a purifier against the accumulation of all kinds of toxins; it strengthens the liver and helps digestion. It is antispasmodic, anesthetic against any pain and antiviral; it can be used as an ointment for burns and wounds; it treats fever, colds, cough, asthma and even leprosy (which is called *kushtha roga*) and cholera. It can be utilized either fresh or as an infusion, tincture or powder. *Kushtha* is also a basic ingredient of the preparation bearing the same name, also containing various oxidized metals meant to strengthen the immune system. This plant, originally from the Himalayas but vastly known all over the ancient world, has so many virtues that it was considered the intimate companion of the famous *soma*.

It is a perennial herbaceous plant, up to 2 meters tall, very aromatic, presently in danger of extinction. In Hebrew language it was called *ha ketoret* or *koshet*, and its resinous scented root constituted one of the main offerings burned in the fire at Solomon's temple; probably it was used in Egypt, too, for the same purpose. Traditional Chinese medicine calls it *pin yin* and considers it one of the 50 most important healing plants. The botanical name *costus* (that is purported to mean "oriental" in ancient Greek) indicates that this plant was at the center of a flourishing trade between India and the countries of the Mediterranean.

Another plant called *Costus* (*Costus speciosus*) is *pushkara*, from the same family as ginger and turmeric, also traditionally used to treat leprosy, skin diseases, fever, blood diseases, diabetes, edemas and respiratory diseases, and even snake bites. Another very special characteristic is that it contains plant steroid hormones (diosgenine).

The plant called *laksha* or *arundhati* (*Costus lacea*), also known as *silaki*, *silaci* or *sparani*, is used for fractures and wounds, and also for many diseases. It is a creeper growing preferably on the banyan trees of the varieties *asvattha* (*Ficus religiosa*), *plaksha* (*Ficus infectoria*), *nyagrodha* (*Ficus indica*) as well on the trees called *khadira* (*Acacia catechu*), *dhava* (*Grislea tomentosa*) and *parna* (*Butea frondosa*).

Another plant mentioned in the text is the *munga* or *sajjina* plant (*Moringa Oleifera*), a medicinal tree with long fibers, also used to make the *upavita*, the sacred thread worn by *brahmanas* as the insignia of their social position. Modern research has shown its effectiveness in the treatment of at least 250 diseases, as well as an extraordinary nutritional value: 3 times the amount of iron contained in spinach, high percentages of

potassium and zinc, and good percentages of selenium and magnesium, 4 times more Beta carotene than carrots, more calcium than whole milk and more vitamin C than lemons. It is a general disinfectant and antioxidant, it cures insomnia, strengthens the immune system and aids digestion, metabolism and the natural elimination of cholesterol and blood sugar (diabetes). By local application, it repairs the skin damage caused by allergies, scratches, stress and ageing. The characteristically fragrant oil obtained from the plant is excellent for cooking, for massage and for aromatherapy as well.

In Chinese medicine, this plant is known as *La mu*, and is freely consumed both as a vegetable and as an infusion tea, because it has no negative side effects.

Just like the *munga* grass symbolizes the purity and nourishment associated with the functions of the *brahmanas*, the other two plants used to make the sacred thread respectively for the *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas* possess practical qualities that symbolize their functions in society.

The *kshatriyas'* sacred thread is made with the fibers of *murva* (*Sansevieria trifasciata*), an extremely resistant herb that was traditionally used to make bow strings. *Murva* is a perennial evergreen herbaceous plant, growing by propagation on the ground through the root and produces sharp leaves, shaped like swords. It is interesting to note that it is not reproduced by seeds (signifying that the royal succession is not necessarily by seminal descent). It endures very well even with very little light and water: it needs watering only once every two months. In China it is known as *Hu weilan* or "tiger tail", and in Africa it is used by shamans as protection against evil spirits. A recent study by NASA has shown that it is extremely effective in improving the quality of air in closed environments, as it absorbs toxic substances such as nitrogen oxides and formaldehyde.

The sacred thread for *vaisyas* was traditionally prepared with the fibers of the Indian hemp (*Cannabis sativa*), one of the first cultivated plants in history, that until last century was vastly used all over the world, including the west. It has been calculated that over 25 thousands types of products can be obtained from hemp, especially extraordinary textile fibers, both for clothing and for industry. In ancient times hemp was used to make wicks for lamps and candles, sails for the ships, the cloth for the sacks containing the various goods to carry and sell, suitcases, mattresses, tents for camping, canvas shoes and canvas for paintings: the word *canvas* actually derives from *cannabis*.

Hemp cultivation yields 10% more compared to cotton; the fiber has a texture similar to flax but is more efficient in blocking the sun rays and therefore it is cooler to wear. In building construction, hemp fibers are used as insulation also to seal piping, and as a component of bricks together with limestone. The extraordinary resilience of these fibers make them perfect for ropes of all types, and enabled the construction of an experimental ultra-light model of car body. The fibers can be used as bedding for animals and mulching for plants, and even as sanitary pads and diapers for babies. Unlike the paper obtained from wood pulp, hemp paper does not need to be bleached and therefore its manufacture does not produce polluting dioxine.

Another important utilization of hemp is as fuel: the biodiesel and bio alcohol produced with it has a very low level of emissions: 80% less carbon dioxide compared to normal diesel, and 0% sulphur dioxide. With the proper process, the seeds can be used for soap and a variety of detergents, paints and biodegradable plastic.

Hemp is also an excellent food source, rich in vitamins and minerals, especially calcium and iron, and gamma linoleic acid (GLA), that is also found only in human milk. At present the market in the United States offers many food products made with hemp, from the milk obtained from the seeds (similar to soy milk) to mixed cereals flakes, to nut butter (the seed contains a total of 74% fats, of which 36% polyunsaturated), to high-protein flour (containing 30% of complete proteins, that have all the aminoacids required by the human body, like soy) and even ice cream.

Among biomasses, hemp has the greatest growth speed (90 days compared to the 25 years required by trees) and produces up to 25 tons of dry material per hectare per year, compared to the 2 tons of other harvests. It does not require pesticides or herbicides (it rather protects the other plants when it is grown around other cultivations), fertilizes the soil where it is grown (by fixing nitrogen and other nutrients) and it is very effective to purify the soil that had been polluted even by industrial sewage. For this reason it is being used in Chernobyl to eliminate the nuclear contamination due to the famous disaster. It also fixes carbon by absorbing it from polluted air (carbon dioxide) and prevents soil erosion thanks to its long roots, and requires very little water for irrigation.

The contents of active principles in hemp (THC) used in medicine as a psychotropic substance can vary from 20% to 0.3% according to the variety and the conditions of

cultivation. In the last decades these active principles have been proven effective as an anesthetic free from negative side effects, especially in cancer patients, but the plant was used for this purpose already in the Neolithic in India as well as in China, Japan and Europe (as described by Herodotus), in Israel and in the middle east and even in the Americas, where it was cultivated and used by the native peoples.

The cultivation of hemp was made compulsory in the american colonies in 1619 and was encouraged by the United States government up to the end of the second world war, as shown in the propaganda film *Hemp for Victory*, stating "the army needed ropes". From 1937 to 1970 the cultivation of hemp, cannabis or marijuana started to be taxed by the United States government, then in 1970 a new law strictly banned its cultivation and prohibited even personal possession in the measure of a few grams, according to a "zero tolerance" policy that is still continuing today in most States.

*Guggul* (*Commiphora wightii*) mentioned in *Atharva Veda* was famous in ancient Mediterranean cultures as a general commodity (under the name of *bdellium*): it is a gummy resin from the same family of myrrh, used particularly as scented incense (under the name of *dhupa*), but also as a medicine. Unfortunately the plant is practically on the verge of extinction, and therefore it has become very rare.

The plant called *Varuna* (*Crataeva nurvala*) is a tree that can become as tall as 10 meters; its bark, roots and leaves have excellent medicinal properties both for internal and external use. It alleviates rheumatism and arthritis (also in case of osteomyelitis), reduces the inflammation of spleen and other internal organs, purifies the blood, improves metabolism, dissolves and eliminates stones, treats urinary diseases, abdominal pains, as well as wounds, abscesses and tumors. It is antiseptic, antimicrobial, diuretic, laxative, tonic, vermifuge, anti-amebic, anti-elmintic, cholagogue, anti-inflammatory. The bark has contraceptive properties.

Among the most important medicinal plants we find *agasringhi* (*Odina pinnata*), *asvattha* (*Ficus religiosa*), *prishniparni* (*Hemionitis cordifolia*), *virina* (*Andropogon muricatus*), *vibhitaka* (*Terminalia bellerica*), *tilvaka* (*Symplocos racemosa*), *sphurgaka* (*Diospyros embryopteris*), *haridru* (*Pinus deodora*), *avaki* (*Blyxa octandra*), *hemadugdha* (*Ficus recemosa*), *durva* or *darbha* (*Cyonodon dactylon* or *Eleusine indica*), *kusha* (*Imperata cylindrica*), *tulasi* (*Ocimum sanctum*), *bilva* (*Aegle marmelos*),

*rudraksha* (*Eleocarpus Ganitrus*) and *nyagrodha* (*Ficus indica*).

Unfortunately some of the plants mentioned in the *Atharva Veda* text are now unknown or extinct - for example the *shlakshnaparin*, *anjanika*, *madyantaka* and *nitatni*, used to stimulate hair growth. It is interesting to note that the name Nitatni is also used to refer to one of the seven stars from the Pleiades constellation. It is believed that *madyantaka* could be the *Echinochloa frumentacea* (presently *madir*), that is known to have similar effects.

A lotion considered very effective to grow hair was prepared with the juice of *chaulai* or *khada saga* (*Amaranthus caudatus*), *myrobalan* (*Prunus cerasifera*) sometimes mistakenly called myrabolan, *amalaki* (*Emblica officinalis*), *bibhitaki* (*Terminalia bellirica*), *haritaki* (*Terminalia chebula*), *arjuna* (*Terminalia arjuna*) and *aparajita* (*Clitoria ternatea*). Alternatively, instead of the juice one could use a medicated oil obtained by boiling the roots of these plants in oil, at a very low temperature.

Other plants for the health and beauty of hair were *ghrita kumari* (*Aloe vera*), *mandara* or *japapushpa* (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*), *jatamansi* (*Nardostachys jatamansi*), *gandharva hasta* (*Ricinus communis*), and *arishta* (*Sapindus mukorossi*) also known as "soap tree".

The *mantras* of the *Atharva Veda* address the personification of these medicinal herbs as well as hair itself, compared to the herbs and plants growing from earth in a sort of "subtle correspondence association" meant to impress the concept of growth and health in the individual's subconscious.

Another (now) mysterious plant is *balasa*, used in ancient times as analgesic or anesthetic according to the dosage, and also effective to drain abscesses. Lost, too, seems to be the knowledge of the plants called *jivala*, *nagarisha*, *apamarga*, *sadampushpa*, *sraktya*, *jivanti* and *pata* - this latter considered effective to protect a warrior in battle.

The *Atharva Veda* method to stop bleeding is based solely on *mantras*, especially on the *stambhana mantras*, invocations recited to create a sort of "binding" that obstructs movement. These *mantras* are used against hemorrhage, but also to slow down the hostile actions of people or animals. Recent studies, as well as the popular traditions of other cultures, seem to confirm that hypnosis, visualization and even sound vibrations have an objective effect on hemostasis. This mental power is naturally within us and plays on the

emotions and thoughts that can also be transmitted over a distance. For example, it is said that the snake "hypnotizes" the frog or the bird he has chosen as prey; sometimes we can also perceive this feeling even in the middle of a crowd, when we feel "paralyzed" or "held" by something strange we cannot explain rationally.

The fourth book is particularly dedicated to women, with love magic, propitiation for conception and birth of children, contraceptive, aphrodisiacs and so on.

Joyful and relaxed sexual relationships favor good health and energy in general, and constitute an important component of daily activities (*dinachara*) according to the Vedic civilization, as we have already seen in the *Kama sutras*. Actually ritual sexual contact, performed according to precise rules and procedures, was considered useful for spiritual realization because the prolongation and extension of orgasm (that can last up to 7 hours thanks to the techniques of breathing and neuro-muscular control) gives an experience of overcoming the ego - the physical limitations of identification with the body. On the other hand, at a lower and grosser level a mentality that is centered around sexual lust aggravates identification with the material body and therefore obstructs the attainment of liberation (*moksha*), that is the supreme purpose of the experience of human life. Unsatisfactory or perverted sexual intercourse always has a disastrous effect on health and energy levels, because it weakens the immune system and creates karmic consequences, both gross and subtle.

Love magic, also based on *mantra*, is based on the opposite principle to *stambhana* - instead of "blocking", the purpose here is "attracting". Obviously it is not some witchcraft practice that damages the faculty of free will, but it strengthens the personal charisma of the individual. The "love potions" described in details in the *Kama sutras* too, are aphrodisiac preparations, also herb-based, that stimulate and strengthen sensitivity and sensory perception.

There is also a list of foods and ingredients that favor and stimulate sexual desire - for example oats, ginger, licorice, aniseed, cardamom, saffron, roasted mustard seeds, nutmeg, garlic and even watermelon and pomegranate. There are also recipes for stimulating preparations, such as warm milk with almond powder and black pepper, or honey enriched with ginger juice and black pepper. The most famous medicinal herb in this field is *asvagandha* (*Withania somnifera*), followed by the *gokshura* or *gokharu*

(*Tribulus terrestris*), *rakta chandana* (*Picrocarpus santalinus*), and *ananta mula* (*Hemidesmus Indicus*) called salsaparilla in the West. Another remedy is the pink rock salt from Himalaya, known in *Ayur Veda* as *saindhava lavanum*.

The night hours, starting from 2 hours after dinner, are generally considered the most suitable for intercourse, because they favor *kapha*; however an aggravation of *kapha* can bring an excessive sense of possession, while an excess of *vata* causes fear and emotional vulnerability, and an excess of *pitta* causes anger and frustration. To obtain the best results, the environment should be particularly prepared to give positive stimulation to all the senses, with good scents, music and pleasant sounds, comfortable beds and couches, clothes and beautiful decorations for the eyes and objects pleasurable to the touch.

Among the natural contraceptives we find a paste made with flowers of *mandara* (*Hibiscus rosasinensis*) mixed with molasses and rice water, the powdered pomegranate peel (*Punica granatum*) which is also used as vermifuge, the seeds of wild carrot (*Daucus carota*, that work like the "morning after pill"), *satapushpa* (*Anethum graveolens*), *harmala* (*Peganum harmala*), the roots of the papaya tree (*Carica papaya*) as well as its seeds and unripe fruits, and *hing* (*Ferula assafoetida*) that is a close relative of the famous silphium (*Ferula narthex*) of Cyrene (present Libya), that in ancient times was considered the most popular birth control method in the Mediterranean region. For external use, the recommendations were the oil of *nim* (*Azadirachta indica*), the resin of acacia (*Acacia catechu*) as well a variety of preparations based on herbs and minerals.

Those who wanted to favor conception used *kapikacchu* (*Mucuna pruriens*), *bala* (*Sida cordifolia*) and various fortifying preparations described by *Ayur Veda* under the categories *vajikarana*, *rasayana* and *kumarabhritya*.

Among the methods known in ancient India to modify the shape of male genitals we can mention the local application of buffalo milk butter, or a special herbal medicated oil with extracts of *savara-kandaka*, *jalasuka*, *hastri-charma*, *valuka* or *vajrarasa* (presently not identified). For female genitalia there was an ointment made with *kokilaksha* (*Asteracantha longifolia*) for reducing, and a mixture of herbs including the blue lotus for enlarging.

The extract of *ashoka* (*Saraca indica*) was used to minimize the menstrual flow and



regulate the hormonal production of estrogen. Other medicinal plants and *mantras* were used to facilitate childbirth.

The fifth and sixth books of *Atharva Veda* are meant for the royal order, with the consecration of the king, and the *mantras* and rituals for administrative success. Equally important were the *mantras* and chants for victory on enemies and glory in battle, to become invulnerable to arrows, and to confuse and terrorize the enemy. The text also includes some hymns in praise of the powerful battle drum, that was one of the most effective instruments to sustain the level of awareness and the warrior energy of the fighters and to confuse the enemy. Other *mantras* were recited in public to bring peace and harmony among the subjects, soothe anger and quarrel, effectively manage assemblies, obtain success in debates and even influence the opinions of others.

Here is an example:

"Unity of intention and unity of thoughts, freedom from resentments: this is what I bring you. Rejoice in each others, like a cow rejoices in her newborn calf! May the son be devoted to the father, may he be in harmony with his mother, and may the wife speak gently to the husband! In harmony, dedicated to the same cause, may there be kind and affectionate words among you! Like the Gods act of common accord, helping each other and cooperating: may you work in this way. Together, let us worship the fire, uniting like the spokes of the wheel around the hub... Let there be harmony among relatives, among those who belong to the same community, and among strangers as well: this is pleasing to the Gods."

The seventh book speaks of economic development - how to build a house to bring good energy to those who will live there, keep it free from snakes and other dangers. In this case, too, the *mantras* prescribed in *Atharva Veda* are meant to be connected with the knowledge elaborated in other Vedic texts, such as *Vastu shastra* and *Artha shastra*, that will be described later.

Here is an example of such *mantras*:

"I build here a solid house, that may rest on strong foundations, blessed by clarified butter. May it be inhabited by heroic invulnerable men, wealthy with horses and cattle. O prosperity and opulence, o sap, o clarified butter, o milk, o abode of all happiness! O

house with a broad roof, you support and preserve the purified harvest of grains! To you may the calves come, to you may the children come, to you may the cows come, heavy with milk when they return in the evening! O Savitar, Vayu, Indra, Brihaspati! May you erect this house! May the Maruts asperse it with water and clarified butter, may Bhaga grow roots in the furrow that is ploughed for its foundations! O cross-beam, rise now to your throne: o king, now keep all enemies far away!"

Similar *mantras* are meant to facilitate success in the cultivation of the fields, to protect the harvest and cattle, to deviate the course of rivers for irrigation purposes, to protect dwellings and fields from fire and wild beasts, to find lost property and even to obtain success in gambling.

The specific *mantra* to keep fire away speaks of *durva* or *darbha* (*Cynodon dactylon* or *Eleusine indica*), known in the west as spear grass. The benefit of cultivating this type of grass around houses consists in the fact that it covers the ground as a soft but not too thick carpet, not taller than 15 centimeters, and at the same time it prevents the growth of other plants thanks to its widespread and strong network of roots, that propagates rather quickly. For this reason it must be uprooted when it appears in the fields where we want to cultivate wheat and other annual plants, but it is extremely useful as natural living mulching on meadows and around the trees, to avoid the undesirable development of other weeds. However, the most important benefit is that such scanty growth prevents the propagation of natural fires, that happen especially when the dried weeds and other taller plants are hit by some flying sparks. *Darbha* easily remains green even during the dry season and does not catch fire. Furthermore, it has excellent medicinal properties (especially diuretic and blood purifying) and therefore it is considered an auspicious plant, utilized also in religious rituals.

The eighth book of the *Atharva Veda* deals with the purification from faults and negative activities, including the imperfections in rituals and the stress due to nightmares, while the ninth book prays for the divine protection for the *brahmanas* and prescribes how they must be honored.

The king should never try to pressurize a *brahmana* to get support or wealth from him, and especially he should never deprive a *brahmana* of his cow, that is important as the source of the ingredients required for the religious rituals - milk, clarified butter, and so

on. Besides, a cow that is cared for by a *brahmana* can produce milk even without having given birth, and enjoys a very high quality of life. The protection of cows and *brahmanas* is one of the pillars of Vedic civilization, because it enables all the members of society to get benefit from the performance of the ritual sacrifices and from their teaching of material and spiritual knowledge.

The section of hymns in the 10th book contains both prose and poetry, including the most famous (*Prithivi sukta*) dedicated to Mother Earth. Here are some extracts:

"Truthfulness, greatness, universal order, power, sacredness, austerity, spiritual realization, sacrifice: all this sustains the Earth. May Mother Earth, the mistress of everything that was and will be, bless us with a wide home! Rich in mountains, hills and great plains, she that sustain the plants of many virtues, may Earth prosper for herself and for us, without being oppressed by men! May Earth that nourishes the sea, the rivers and all the waters, that produces food for all the nations of men, that supports all moving and breathing life, bless us by quenching our thirst and gifting us with prosperity! Earth, that in ancient times gave birth to the first men, is the place where the Devas defeated the Asuras: may she give us fortune and glory! The broad Earth that supports all, the foundation of existence, she of golden breast that gives shelter to all living creatures, that sustains Agni and mates with the Bull Indra: may she give us abundance of wealth and valuable honey, and torrents of milk and glory!"

Among the other important passages in the subsequent books we can mention the prayers to Prana ("life energy"), Kama ("the desire for pleasure"), Kala ("the flow of time"), and the explanation of the importance of *prasada*, the remnants from the offerings presented in the rituals.

The text of the *Atharva Veda* also offers us the description of the relationship between the *brahmachari sisya* (disciple) and the *guru* (the teacher), and the importance of the act of engaging in material and spiritual education. Here is an extract:

"The *brahmachari* acts by using both hemispheres (of the world/ brain) and in his actions the divine archetypes find balance and harmony. He sustains the heavens and the earth, fills the teacher with divine fervor, fills the Gods with creative fervor. The ancestors, the heavenly beings and the Gods follow him.... When the Guru receives the *brahmachari* as disciple, he puts him within his body like an embryo, and he carries him for 3 nights

inside his own belly. His birth is celebrated by all the Gods, who gather to watch it... His first piece of wood (for the fire sacrifice) is earth, the second is the sky, the third is atmosphere... The Guru shapes the two hemispheres of the world (the brain) - the great and the deep, the earth and the sky - and the *brahmachari* protects them by his creative fervour. Thus the Gods find harmony in him... The broad earth and the sky are joined by the *brahmachari* that obtains them as alms, and protects them by his concentration on spiritual power (*tapas*), totally dedicated to spiritual realization (*brahman*). Thus the *brahmachari* evokes the two Agnis in the union of the two hemispheres."

## ***Brahmanas***

As we have already mentioned, each *Samhita* (collecting of Vedic hymns, specifically *Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama* and *Atharva*) is accompanied by practical appendixes for the rituals and philosophical elaborations, respectively called *Brahmana*, *Aranyaka* and *Upanishad*. At present only 19 *Brahmana* (of various dimensions) have survived:

- The *Aitareya* (or *Ashvalayana*) *Brahmana* and *Kaushitaki* (or *Sankhayana*) *Brahmana* are associated to the *Rig Veda*,
- The *Shatapatha Brahmana* (the largest of all) belongs to the *Sukla Yajur Veda* and was compiled by Yajnavalkya, while the *Taittiriya Brahmana* belongs to the *Krishna Yajur Veda*, together with other fragments called *Maitrayani*, *Katha*, *Kapisthalakatha* and *Vadhula Anvakhyana*,
- the most important *Brahmana* of the *Sama Veda* is the *Tandya Mahabrahmana*, followed by the *Sadvimsha* ("chapter 26"), *Samavidhana*, *Arsheya*, *Devatadhyaya* (or *Daivata*), *Chandogya*, *Mantra*, *Samhitopanishad*, *Vamsa*, *Jaiminiya* (or *Talavakara*).
- the only *Brahmana* of the *Atharva Veda* still existing is the *Gopatha*.

The *Aitareya Brahmana* (from *Rig Veda*) contains 40 chapters, divided into 8 sections or Panchikas. It explains the rituals of consecration for the ceremonies and preliminary rituals, the duties of the officiating priests, the obtaining of the *soma*, the animal sacrifices, the division of the cups for the various Gods, the sacrifices called *agnistoma*, *shodashin* and *atiratra*, and the 12 days ritual called *dvadashaha*. Another ritual described here is the *aponaptriya*, related to the Soma ceremonies.

Among the specific texts contained in this *Brahmana* we can mention the *shastras* called *Ajya*, *Prauga*, *Marutvatiya*, *Nishkevalya* and *Ashvina*, the hymns called *Sampata*, *Valakhilya* and *Durohana*, the story of Sunahshepa and the story of Kavasa Ailusa. Sunahshepa, son of Agigarta, was given to Harischandra for the performance of a sacrifice, and after being blessed by the Gods, he was adopted by Visvamitra. Kavasa was beginning to perform the *Aponaptriya* ritual, when his qualifications were questioned because of his birth, and he was sent away into the desert. There he simply sat down and composed the hymn to the waters (now included in *Rig Veda*, 10.30) and the river Sarasvati came to surround him with her waters - something that certainly impressed the local *brahmanas*.

There are also consecration rituals for the King and the explanation of the qualifications and duties of the Purohita, the royal priest. The ritual called *Gavam Ayana* ("the departure of the herds") that also appears in many other texts, has nothing to do with animals but it refers to the orbits of the planets and is performed on the occasion of the winter solstice, when the movement of the Sun in the sky changes direction.

The *Kaushitaki Brahmana* describes more of the same rituals and details the ritual of *agnihotra* (daily fire sacrifice), *agnyadhana* (the consecration of the sacrificial fire), the rituals for *puṇnima* (full moon) and *amavasya* (the new moon), *chaturmasya* (the ritual that is performed every 4 months) and the rituals for the coronation of a king. The text that is still preserved in Kerala is very similar to the *Shankhayana Brahmana* found in Gujarat.

The most famous *Brahmana* is probably the *Satapatha* ("100 lessons"), belonging to the *Sukla Yajur Veda*; it survived in two slightly different versions compiled by the two Rishis Kanva and Madhyandina. One of the most important hymns is the 11.18.3, explaining how the Devas performed a *yajna* for Prajapati ("the Lord of the creatures", a

title that can be referred both to Brahma and to Vishnu) and that in turn Prajapati, pleased by their worship, offered himself as oblation and sacrificial victim. The rituals themselves appeared from the body of the Yajna Purusha, Varaha (the boar *avatara* of Vishnu): the *gyotistoma* appeared from the space between the brows and the nose, the *pancha maha yajna* from his neck, the *purodasa* (steamed rice cakes) from his brain, the *yupa* (sacrificial pillar) from his tusks, the sacred *kusa* grass from the hair of his body, and the *sruk* (the various ingredients and materials for the rituals) from his face. The three sacred fires for the rituals - called Dakshinagni, Garhapatyagni and Ahavaniyagni - came to existence from the three companions of Varaha, respectively Suvritta, Kanaka and Ghora.

In this regard we can mention that the Vedic texts speak of 400 *yajnas* or *yagas*, differentiated according to the purpose, the number of officiants, the duration of the rituals, the Deities evoked and the type of oblations. Further information can be found in the *smriti* literature described in our chapter on the *Vedangas*, where we will also speak about the revival of the Vedic sacrifices that can be observed in India during these last few years.

In the *Krishna Sukla Yajur Veda* we find the *Taittiriya Brahmana*, with detailed descriptions on various rituals such as the *agnyadana* (consecration of the domestic fire), *gavamayana* (winter solstice), *vajapeya* (ritual for health and longevity), *soma* (the offering of the *soma* to the Gods), *rajasuya* (consecration of a king), *agnihotra* (daily ritual of the fire offering), *upahoma* (minor rituals), *asvamedha* (horse sacrifice) and *purushamedha* (human sacrifice). These animal and human sacrifices are purely symbolic: by carefully reading the description and the order of the rituals we can realize that it cannot be otherwise.

The *Tandya Mahabrahmana* is also called *Panchavimsa Brahmana* (constituted by 25 chapters) or *Praudha Brahmana*, specifically dealing with the qualifications and duties of the priest in charge of chanting the hymns in their musical version. It also speaks about various rituals and especially about the *soma prayascitta*, the purification of the *soma*.

The *Gopatha Brahmana*, the only one still existing in the *Atharva Veda*, is divided into two parts - *purva* and *uttara* - constituted respectively by 5 and 6 chapters, which in turn are divided into sections. It specifically deals with the qualifications of the officiating priest.

## Aranyakas

The *Aranyakas*, like the *Upanishads*, constitute the philosophical commentary to the *Samhitas* and *Brahmanas* of the *Vedas*, and expand the deep symbolic meaning of the rituals, that is very difficult to understand with a superficial reading, especially in regard to those rituals that are considered dangerous when performed in the wrong way. For this reason they are called "*rahasya brahmanas*", or the *Brahmanas* of secrets.

The definition of "*aranyaka*" is found in *Taittiriya Aranyaka* (from *Krishna Yajur Veda*), and explains that *aranya* is a place where you cannot see the roofs of human habitations because of the scarcity of the houses and the presence of many trees. The various texts take their names from the *Brahmana* and *Samhita* to which they are connected.

The *Aitareya Aranyaka*, the largest among the surviving texts, consists of 5 chapters. The first chapter speaks of the *maha vrata* and the second of the *prana vidya* ("science of *prana*"). The third, also known as *Samhitopanishad*, elaborates on the various ways to chant the Vedic hymns, while the fourth and the fifth deal with the *mahanamni* ("of the Great Name") and the *madhyandina yajna*.

The *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, second in size and importance, includes 6 chapters dealing with the *agnichayana* (the care for the permanent sacred fire of the house), *pancha maha yajna* (here mostly consisting of the study of the scriptures), the *sandhya* ("joining" of day and night) ritual, the offerings to the ancestors, and the daily fire sacrifice (called *agnihotra*).

More important than their *Brahmana* section are the *Maitraniya Aranyaka* (of the *Krishna Yajur Veda*) and the *Brihad aranyaka* (of the *Sukla Yajur Veda*), particularly famous because of the *Upanishad* to which it gives its name.

The *Sama Veda* has only one surviving *Aranyaka*, called *Talavakara* or *Jaiminiya*, while from the *Atharva Veda* there is only the *Gopatha Brahmana*, sometimes considered as its *Aranyaka*.

## The Upanishads

Not less important or vast than the *Puranas* or *Itihasas*, the *Upanishads* have a greater wealth of philosophical teachings compared to the stories and are individually shorter, because they are appendixes to the four Vedic *samhitas* ("collections" of hymns). Together with the *Bhagavad gita* and the *Vedanta sutra* they constitute the most fundamental texts on Hinduism.

There are 108 main *Upanishads*, classified as *mukhya* ("most important"), *sannyasa* ("on renunciation"), *yoga* ("on yoga"), *samanya* ("of universal value"), *vaishnava* ("on Vishnu"), *shaiva* ("on Shiva"), *shakta* ("on Shakti or the Mother Goddess").

The *mukhya upanishads* are: *Aitareya* in *Rig Veda*; *Chandogya* and *Kena* in *Sama Veda*; *Isa* (or *Isavasya*) and *Brihad aranyaka* in *Sukla Yajur Veda*; *Katha* and *Taittiriya* in *Krishna Yajur Veda*; *Prasna*, *Mundaka* and *Mandukya* in *Atharva Veda*.

The *sannyasa upanishads* are: *Nirvana*, *Maitreya* (or *Maitrayaniya*), *Sannyasa*, *Kundika* and *Aruneya* in *Sama Veda*; *Yajnavalkya*, *Satyayani*, *Jabala* (*Yajur*), *Paramahansa*, *Bhikshaka* (or *Bhikshuka*) and *Turiyatita* in *Sukla Yajur Veda*; *Teji bindu*, *Avadhuta*, *Katha rudra*, *Varaha* and *Brahma* in *Krishna Yajur Veda*; *Parivrata* (*Narada parivrajaka*), *Paramahansa parivajaka* and *Para brahma* in *Atharva Veda*.

The *yoga upanishads* are: *Nada bindu* in *Rig Veda*; *Yoga chudamani* and *Darshana* in *Sama Veda*; *Hansa*, *Trishika* or *Trishiki brahmana* and *Mandala brahmana* in *Sukla Yajur Veda*; *Amrita bindu*, *Amrita nada*, *Kshurika*, *Dhyana bindu*, *Brahma vidya*, *Yoga tattva*, *Yoga sikha* and *Yoga kundali* in *Krishna Yajur Veda*; *Sandilya*, *Pashupata* and *Mahavakya* in *Atharva Veda*.

The *samanya upanishads* are: *Kausitaki*, *Atma bodha* and *Mugdala* in *Rig Veda*; *Maitreyani* or *Maitreyi*, *Vajra suci*, *Maha* or *Mahata*, *Savitri* in *Sama Veda*; *Subala*, *Mantrika* or *Chulika*, *Niralamba*, *Paingala*, *Adhyatma* and *Muktika* in *Sukla Yajur Veda*; *Svetasvatara*, *Garbha*, *Narayana*, *Sarvasara*, *Suka rahasya*, *Skanda* (*Tripada vibhuti*), *Sariraka*, *Ekakshara*, *Akshi*, *Pranagni hotra* in *Krishna Yajur Veda*; *Atma* and *Surya* in *Atharva Veda*.



The *vaishnava upanishads* are: *Vasudeva*, *Avyakta*, *Advaya taraka* and *Tarasara* in *Sukla Yajur Veda*; *Kali santarana* in *Krishna Yajur Veda*; *Nrisimha tapani*, *Mahanarayana*, *Rama rahasya*, *Rama tapani*, *Gopala tapani*, *Krishna*, *Hayagriva*, *Dattatreya* and *Garuda* in *Atharva Veda*.

The *shaiva upanishads* are: *Akshamalika* in *Rig Veda*; *Jabala (Sama)* and *Rudraksha jabala* in *Sama Veda*; *Pancha brahma*, *Kaivalya*, *Kalagni rudra*, *Dakshinamurti* and *Rudra hridaya* in *Krishna Yajur Veda*; *Atharva sira*, *Atharva sikha*, *Brihajjabala*, *Sarabha*, *Bhasma* (or *Bhasma jabala*) and *Ganapati* in *Atharva Veda*.

The *shakta upanishads* are: *Tripura sundari*, *Saubhagyalakshmi* and *Bahuricha* in *Rig Veda*; *Sarasvati rahasya* in *Krishna Yajur Veda*; *Sita*, *Annapurna*, *Tripura tapani*, *Devi* and *Bhavana* in *Atharva Veda*.

Other less famous *Upanishads* are listed here in alphabetical order: *Achamana*, *Advaita*, *Aranya*, *Aruni*, *Arsheya*, *Ashrama*, *Atmapuja*, *Baskalamantra*, *Batuka*, *Bilva*, *Brahma bindu*, *Brahma jijnasa*, *Chakra*, *Chakshu*, *Chaturveda*, *Chiti*, *Dasasloki*, *Dvaya*, *Gayatri*, *Gayatri rahasya*, *Gopichandana*, *Goraksha*, *Guhyakali*, *Guhya shodanyasa*, *Heramba*, *Kalaghni*, *Kalika*, *Kalimedha adikshita*, *Kamalaka*, *Kama raja kilitoddhara*, *Kaivalya*, *Kathasruti*, *Kanthasruti*, *Kathasika*, *Kathaka siksha*, *Katyayani*, *Kaula*, *Krishna uttaratapani*, *Langula*, *Laghu jabala*, *Linga*, *Maha chakra varana*, *Mahanarayana*, *Mahavajya vivaraha*, *Mantra*, *Mathamnaya*, *Mrityulangala*, *Narada parivrajaka*, *Nilarudra*, *Nirukta*, *Parayana*, *Panchabrahma*, *Parabrahma*, *Parama*, *Pitambara*, *Pinda*, *Pranava*, *Rama*, *Rama krishna*, *Rudra*, *Sadananda*, *Saunaka*, *Shaktayana*, *Satachakra*, *Srikrishna purushottama siddhanta*, *Shiva*, *Sodha*, *Srividyanmaya*, *Srividyatataka*, *Syama*, *Siddhanta*, *Siddhanta sara*, *Siddhanta sikha*, *Sumukhi*, *Suvarnadharma*, *Svasamedhya*, *Svetamritika*, *Tripad vibhuti mahanarayana*, *Tulasi*, *Turiya*, *Urdhvapundra*, *Vanadurga*, *Vastu sutra*, *Visrama*, *Vridhha jabala*, *Yajnopavita* and *Yogaraja*.

Some also mention a *Radhika Upanishad*, a *Chaitanyopanishad* and even one *Allahopanishad* (that is supposed to speak about Allah), but these are not in the traditional lists.

*Bhagavad gita*, too, is sometimes considered one of the *Upanishads* because of its rich philosophical content; in this perspective it is called *Gitopanishad*. Due to obvious space limitations we will just give a summary of the most important and famous *Upanishads* and quote some of their passages.

### **Aitareya Upanishad**

It is part of the *Aitareya Aranyaka* in the *Rig Veda* and is constituted by 3 chapters (beginning with chapter 4 of the second *Aranyaka*), and it explains the inner or symbolic meaning of the sacrifice rituals described in the previous chapters of the *Aranyaka*. Particularly famous is the *maha vakya* ("great aphorism") *prajnanam brahma* (3.3), "Brahman is perfect knowledge", considered the essence of the *Rig Veda*. Here are other extracts:

"Om! May my words be in accordance with my thoughts, and may my thoughts follow my words. O Resplendent, reveal yourself to me. May both (thoughts and words) bring the *Veda* (knowledge) to me, and may what I have heard remain (in my memory). I will join day and night in this study, and I will say what is true, verbally and mentally. May the Brahman protect me, may it protect he who speaks." (invocation)

"In the beginning there was only Brahman. The Brahman thought, 'I will create the worlds', and created *ambhas* (the "higher" or the subtle waters, also known as the ocean Karana "of the causes"), *marici* (the space), *mara* ("what is mortal", or the worlds that are subject to the cyclic destruction) and *apah* (the "lower" waters, or the gross material element of water, that is common to the bodies of all species of life)." (1.1.1.2)

From the waters of the causal ocean, the Brahman created an egg - the Virat Purusha or universal form (also called *brahmanda*, "the egg of Brahman"). The egg opened in the middle like a mouth, and Sound emerged, then from Sound Fire emerged and so on, one by one from the causal elements the material elements manifested, including the mind and the various components of the universe. The Devas (the archetypes of the powers that constitute the universe) chose the human form to express their activities, and this first primeval form of the universal Brahman was called Indra. In a similar way the human beings are born - as we find in the explanation by Vamadeva Rishi in hymn 4.28 of *Rig*

*veda* ("In the womb of my mother I contemplated all the generations of these Gods. Surrounded by a hundred iron fortresses, I soared quickly into the sky, as a Falcon, leaving the demons behind, and while surpassing the winds my strength increased...").

This Brahman manifested in the universe takes the form of Prajapati ("the Lord of the creatures"), of the Visvedeva ("all the Devas of the universe"), of the human beings and all living beings, as conscious and sentient beings. Therefore the conscious omnipresent Spirit is the beginning, the middle and the end of all life; through this awareness we can attain immortality.

### **Chandogya Upanishad**

It is the longest of the *Upanishads*, and consists of 8 chapters attached to the first part of the *Chandogya Brahmana* in the *Sama Veda*, describing ritual sacrifices. It contains (6.8.7) the *maha vakya* considered the essence of *Sama Veda*: *tat tvam asi*, "you are That (Brahman)".

It also narrates the famous story of Satyakama Jabala, a boy son of a maidservant, who was recognized as *brahmana* due to the sense of truthfulness he had demonstrated. Other *Upanishads* contain the teachings of Satyakama Jabala, but here (4.4.1) we find the story of how he entered the *gurukula* of Haridrumata Gautama. Within the text we also find many explanations on Vedic symbolism, especially in regard to the fire sacrifice and the *mantras* in relation to the life energy in the human body and in the senses, and in relation to the Sun.

"If someone offers the sacrifice to the fire without knowing these (things), it is as if he was removing the blazing embers and pouring the clarified butter into the ashes... If someone knows these (things) even the act of offering one's food leftovers to a *chandala* becomes an offering to Vaisvanara Atman (the sacred fire of the Self)." (5.24.1, 4)

"One must meditate on the syllable Om, that gives origin to the *Udgita* (the songs of the *Sama Veda*). The essence of all bodies is the earth, the essence of earth is water, the essence of water is vegetation, the essence of vegetation is the human being, the essence of the human being is speech, the essence of word is *mantra (rik)*, the essence of *rik* is *Sama*." (1.1.1)

Then the text illustrates meditation on sound and *prana* and their identity with the Sun, that is *svara* and *pratyasvara* ("coming and going", i.e. cyclic) and states that the realization of the Pranava Omkara, its subtle manifestation, awards immortality. Then it explains the symbolic meaning of syllables in vedic definitions, the power of *prana* and sound, and the subtle element known as *akasha* ("etheric space") that supports both.

The 4th chapter repeats the explanation of creation starting from Brahman (Being), that from One wanted to become many. Thus he created fire, then from fire water was created and from water the nutritious substances, and then these 3 divine essences manifested all the bodies of the beings, when Brahman entered into them, in the form of Jiva Atman. What is red is fire (passion), what is white is water (goodness or purification) and what is black is food (earth, ignorance), both in fire and in the sun and in the qualities of material nature in general.

The text also offers the conversation between Svetaketu and his father Uddalaka Aruni, rich with teachings and practical examples to understand the nature of Brahman-Atman. We also find the mystic etymology of the word *satyam*, "truthfulness" or "truth": *sa* indicates what is eternal, *ti* indicates what is temporary, and *ayam* is the connection between the two. Then the 8th chapter teaches that only *brahmacharya* ("behaving as Brahman") enables one to realize Brahman, and that the difference between Devas and Asuras is that Asuras identify with the material body and consider it the true self.

## **Kena Upanishad**

It takes its name from the first word in the first verse, *keneshitam*, "by whom it is desired", with reference to the activity of awareness. The text is short and divided into 4 parts, of which 2 are in verse (describing the *nirguna* Brahman, or Brahman "without attributes") and 2 in prose (describing the *saguna* Brahman, or Brahman "with attributes").

Here are some extracts:

"By whom is directed (by desire or will) the movement of the mind (towards the object of contemplation)? Who directs the life force that precedes each action (towards duty)? By whom the act of speaking is desired, when a person is expressing himself? Who is the resplendent being that directs (the activities of) eyes and ears? This (Atman/ Brahman) is

the ear's ear, the mind's mind, the word of speech, life's life, and the eye's eye, therefore those who are intelligent abandon (the identification with the gross body) and thus become immortal... What man does not comprehend by the mind, but by which the mind is pervaded, know that this is Brahman, and not what people worship as an object." (1.1, 2, 6)

"I do not think, 'I know Brahman well'. I think, 'It's not that I do not know it - I know it and I do not know it at the same time.' One who understand this (statement) knows (Brahman)... It is really known when it is known internally in each of the states of awareness, because in this way one attains immortality." (2.2, 4)

"Indeed it was Brahman who obtained victory for the Devas, and in that victory of Brahman, the Devas rejoiced... And he asked, 'Who are you?' and he answered, 'I am known as the Fire, as Jataveda.'" (3.1, 4).

The manifestation "with attributes" of Brahman is therefore initially perceived as Fire (Agni, from whom Knowledge is born), and as Indra (the masculine active principle called Purusha). Meditation (*dhyana*), austerity (*pratyahara*), rituals (*yajna* and *sadhana*) are its feet, knowledge (*veda*) is in all its limbs and truthfulness (*satyam*) is its abode.

### **Isa Upanishad**

Also known as *Isavasya Upanishad* from the first word in the text: *isavasyam idam sarvam*, "all this belongs to God". The preliminary invocation is very famous and is often chanted or sung in *bhajans*: *om purnam adah purnam idam, purnat purnam udacyate, purnasya purnam adayah, purnam evavasishyate*, "From this (Brahman) who is eternally complete (in itself), all complete (things) emanate, and even after that, what was complete remains complete."

The text is composed by 18 verses only, each of them is a true masterpiece deserving to be quoted in full.

Here are some extracts:

"One who properly performs his duties (*karmani*) can wish to live for hundreds of years, because he always remains free from the consequences of actions. The dark and dull dimensions are called asuric and constitute the destination for those who kill the Atman.

Although (the Atman) is immovable, it is faster than the mind and cannot be grasped by the senses, yet it sustains all activities. It moves and does not move, it is very far and very near, it is inside everything and outside everything. One who sees all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings is free from hatred, due to this realization." (1-7)

"The face of Truth is hidden by a golden disc; I pray you, o Lord, remove it so that I will be able to contemplate you. May my life energy merge with the immortal Air, and this body be turned to ashes. O Lord, remember everything that I have done (in this lifetime)." (15-16)

### **Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad**

It begins with the explanation of the meaning of the Vedic sacrifice, and states that Vac (the creative word, the Logos) is the origin of the universe. Then it explains Dharma (the ethical law), the four *varnas* (social categories) and the nature of *prana* (life energy).

The second *adhyaya* continues by speaking of the nature of Brahman and Atman, the third speaks of the process of death and the destination of the living being after death, and the nature of Antaryami (the Supreme Soul in every being's heart). Here (1.3.28) we find the famous verse *asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mrityor ma amritam gamaya*, "from what is temporary lead me to what is eternal, from the darkness lead me to the light, from death lead me to eternal life." This quote constitutes the refrain (*adhyaroha*) of the *stutis* called *Pavamana*.

At verse 1.4.10 we find the famous *maha vakya* considered the essence of the *Yajur Veda*: *aham brahmasmi*, "I am Brahman".

Next the text defines the food produced by meditation and sacrifices as composed of 7 parts: 2 are destined to the Devas (through the rituals of the full moon and the black moon), 1 is destined to the animals (through their mother's milk), and 3 are destined to oneself (the mind, senses and life energy). The Devas are Speech, the Pitris are the Mind and the human beings are the Life Energy; Speech is the Mother, the Mind is the Father, and the Life Energy is the Son. To these, there is a correspondence of Earth, Fire and Sun; the Moon, the Water and Food.

Follow (2.1.1 - 2.3.6) the conversation between Gargya (Balaki) and Ajatasatru (the king of Varanasi), the conversation between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi (2.4.1 - 2.6.3, 4.5.1 -),

the conversation between Janaka (king of Videha) and various *brahmanas*, such as Yajnavalkya and Gargi (3.1.2 - 4.4.25).

We also find the description of the three states of awareness, and the explanation of reincarnation and the symbolism of Gayatri mantra. Follows the conversation between Svetaketu and king Pravahana (6.2.1 - 6.2.16). There is also a list of the 10 grains used for fire oblations: rice, barley, sesame, wheat, beans, lentils, white lentils, fava beans, *anu* and *priyangu*; these seeds are crushed, soaked in yogurt, and mixed with honey and clarified butter.

There are suggested rituals to have a son of white complexion (and expert in one *Veda* only) or of golden complexion (and expert in two *Vedas*) or of black complexion (and expert in three *Vedas*), or a daughter expert in all scriptures, as well as the rituals to be observed at birth.

### **Katha Upanishad**

It consists in 2 parts divided into sections (respectively of 29, 25, 17, 15, 15, 18 verses) for a total of 119 verses, and contains the *katha* or "conversation" between Yamaraja and the young *brahmana* Nachiketa, son of Auddalaki Aruni also known as Vajasravasa. Nachiketa's father was performing the Visvajit sacrifice, that consists in distributing in charity everything that we possess; the boy asked his father to whom he would donate him, and irritated, his father told him he was donating him to Yamaraja, the Lord of Death. Nachiketa took this statement very seriously and left for Yamaloka, where he discussed with Yamaraja about many important teachings, and then he returned home with Yamaraja's blessings.

The opening invocation of this *Upanishad* is a famous *mantra* chanted to propitiate harmony among people: *om saha navavatu saha nau bhunaktu, saha viryam karavavahai, tejasvi navadhitamastu, ma vidvishavahai*, "May (Brahman) protect us together, may we obtain strength together, may what we study give us strength, may we remain free from hostility."

Here are some extracts from the text:

"O Nachiketa, because I know well the Fire that takes to the sky, I will speak about it to you, and you (please) understand, by carefully following my words. That Fire by which

one attains heaven, and that sustains the word, it established in a hidden place (*nihitam guhayan*)... The fools live in the midst of ignorance but consider themselves intelligent and enlightened, and they keep going around and around, following complicated paths, just like blind leading the blind." (1.1.14, 2.5)

"Of this (Atman) many never hear, many do not understand it even when they hear about it, but wonderful are those who speak and who hear about it, and wonderful is one who knows it through the guidance of a realized soul... The Self that is not born and does not die, does not have an origin and does not give origin, it is unborn, eternal, free from decay, and extremely ancient. It is not touched even by the death of the body." (1.2.7, 18)

"One who has not ceased to perform negative actions, who has not controlled the senses, who does not concentrate the mind, who has not become free from anxiety, cannot achieve the knowledge of the Self." (1.2.24)

"Know that the Self is the master of the chariot, and the body is the chariot. Know that the intelligence is the chariot driver, and the mind is the bridle." (1.3.3)

"Awaken, rise and learn by approaching the best (teachers). The wise describe this path as difficult to walk on, as sharp as a razor's blade." (1.3.14)

"He sees Brahman, who understands that Aditi, where all the Devas reside, was born as Hiranyagarbha, manifested by the contact with the elements and residing in the secret place within the heart... The Purusha that lives in the heart is one thumb tall. Knowing that he is the Lord of the past and the future, one does not fear to lose this awareness any more." (2.1.7, 12)

"Fire burns for the fear of this (Purusha), and so the Sun shines, and Indra, Vayu and Mrityu (death) perform their duties." (2.3.3)

"When the five senses of perception and the mind attain peace, and intellect stops: that is the highest state... When all the desires that were clinging to the heart fall off, a mortal becomes immortal and attains Brahman. When all the knots in the heart are dissolved even in this very lifetime, a mortal becomes immortal: this is the essence of the teachings of all the *Upanishads*." (2.3.10, 14-15)



## Taittiriya Upanishad

After an invocation to Mitra, Varuna, Aryaman, Indra, Brihaspati and Vishnu Trivikrama, the first verse addresses Vayu as the direct manifestation of Brahman, Dharma and Satya, asking for his protection. In fact, Vayu or Air is the focus of the teachings in this text, that deals about sound and pronunciation, and the letters composing the *mantras*. The verses 4.1-3 of *Siksha valli* ("section on instructions") contain a ritual prayer to receive all the required blessings for a teacher's progress. Then there is a brief description of the levels of existence, of the composition of the body and the daily duties.

The second chapter, entitled *Brahmananda valli* ("section of spiritual happiness") briefly speaks about the manifestation of the material elements, the importance of respecting food and the joy that comes from spiritual realization. Here is an extract: "Knowledge (*vijnana*) is the fundamental ingredient of sacrifice (*yajna*) and the performance of one's duties (*karmani*). It is in knowledge that the Devas meditate on Brahman; by knowing it without misunderstandings all the negative reactions are destroyed and one fully enjoys all good things. The Self (Atman) is part of the Ancient and remains in it through knowledge even when it incarnates in a body. The inner Self is constituted by pure happiness (*ananda*)." (2.5.1)

"To give an idea of such happiness, let us consider a young man, in the prime of his strength, kind, learned, expert, healthy and energetic, who has plenty of wealth: this could be the unit of measure of human happiness. By multiplying it 100 times we obtain the unity of measure of a Gandharva of the lower rank, which multiplied by 100 gives the measure of a Gandharva of higher rank. This measure, when multiplied 100 times, gives the happiness of a Pitar (resident of Pitriloka), and this multiplied by 100 gives the happiness of one who is born on the heavenly planets. A Deva of the lower rank enjoys a happiness 100 times greater, but even this must be multiplied by 100 to get the happiness of a Deva of the higher rank. Indra enjoys happiness 100 times greater than the Devas', but Brihaspati's happiness is 100 times greater than Indra's, the happiness of the Virat is 100 times greater than Brihaspati's, and 100 times greater than this is the happiness of Hiranyagarbha and a follower of the *Vedas* who is free from desires... The wind blows for the fear of this (Purusha) and for fear of him the Sun rises, and Indra, Vayu and Mrityu (death) rush to their work." (2.8.1-5)

The *Brighu valli* contains the conversation between Brighu Rishi and his father Varuna on Brahman, that is realized through food, *prana*, eyesight, hearing, the mind and the speech. One who wishes to achieve prosperity should never disrespect food, water and fire, or one who asks for help." (3.8.1, 3.10.1)

## Prasna Upanishad

It is composed by 6 chapters, each containing one question (*prasna*) asked from Pippalada Rishi by one of his disciples Sukesha, Satyakama, Gargya, Kousalya, Bhargava and Kabandhi. These sons of illustrious families approached the Rishi to obtain knowledge, and in observance of the tradition they brought firewood for the fire sacrifice that would officialize their acceptance in the teacher's school.

The Rishi asked them to live in his *ashrama* for one year before asking questions, and when the time came, Kabandhi asked the first question: "Whence come those who take birth?"

"The Prajapati ("Lord of the creatures") created a couple - Anna and Prana (food and life energy) that are the Moon and the Sun, the two halves of the year and the month, night and day. Food has two dimensions: the subtle and the gross. Knowing all this, one can give birth to worthy children."

The second question was asked by Bhargava: "How many are the Deities that sustain the existence of a creature, and which one is the most important?"

"Space, air, fire, water, earth, speech, mind, eyesight and hearing, but the most important is the *prana*, the life energy, that incarnates the manifestation of all the Devas."

The third question was asked by Kousalya: "From where this *prana* is originated, how it enters the body and how it resides within it, how it leaves it, and how it sustains the physical elements?"

"*Prana* comes from the Atman, just like a shadow is generated by the real object that projects it. Like a king instructing his officers, the Atman directs the secondary manifestations of the *prana* - Apana, Prana, Samana, Vyana and Udana. One who knows the *prana* becomes immortal."

The fourth question was asked by Gargya: "Which organs sleep and which remain

awake? Who perceives the dreams?"

"The five *pranas* are the fires of the sacrifice and the officiants. Just like the sun rays at sunset merge into the sun disc and again are emanated at sunrise, all the forms of awareness are contained within the mind; therefore when the senses are inert, we say that a person is sleeping. Actually it is the Purusha who is established in the supreme and immutable Self. One who becomes aware of it achieves omniscience."

The fifth question was asked by Satyakama: "What is obtained by meditating on the *pranava* Omkara?"

"Transcendence manifested in the *pranava* Omkara is Brahman itself. One who meditates on Om as one syllable only obtains a further human birth. The *mantras* of the *Rig Veda* grant a virtuous rebirth, the *mantras* of the *Yajur* grant birth on the Moon level, while one who meditates on Om as Purusha attains the level of the Sun. The *mantras* of the *Sama* lead to the level of Brahma (Hiranyagarbha)."

The sixth and last question was asked by Sukesha: "Where is the 16-limbed Purusha?"

"Within the human body itself. The 16 components of the Purusha are *prana*, faith, space, air, fire, water, earth, organs, mind, food, strength, self-control, *mantras*, rituals, worlds and names of the worlds."

### **Mundaka Upanishad**

It has 6 chapters and contains the teachings of Angira Rishi to Saunaka, regarding the two types of knowledge - the lower type about the material universe, and the higher knowledge about the transcendental Brahman, that cannot be described or perceived by the senses, the mind or intellect.

"Like a spider expands and withdraws its web, like earth makes the plants grow, and like the body grows hair, similarly the Imperishable produces the universe from itself. Knowledge expands Brahman, and from it the food originates (*mahat tattva*), from food the life *prana* (*hiranyagarbha*) originates, and from this the cosmic mind, then from this the 5 elements, the words, and the immortality that resides in prescribed duties." (1.1.7-8)

"Fire destroys the 7 existences of one who performs the *Agnihotra* without the proper knowledge and vision, without the correct rituals, without austerity, without offering

homage to those who should be respected, without honoring the guests and without worshipping the Deity. On the other hand, when the ritual is performed properly, the 7 tongues of fire - Kali, Karali, Manojava, Sulohita, Sudhumravarna, Sphulingini and Visvaruci - rise to the Sun and nourish it." (1.2.3-5)

"What is resplendent and subtler than the subtle, that sustains all the worlds and the creatures, the unchangeable Brahman, the living force, is the speech and the mind. It must be penetrated by the arrow of the soul sharpened by meditation: so take the bow that is Om, and by focusing your attention, become One with the target." (2.2.2-4)

"The supreme and resplendent covering is Brahman, spotless and free from duality, pure, the light or lights, and it is known by those who know the Atman. In that, there is no sun, moon, stars or lightning. Everything radiates of its light." (2.2.10)

"Two birds have always been companions and have similar names, and live on the same tree. One eats the fruits and enjoys their many tastes, and the other simply watches. On that tree, the individual soul remains entangled and laments his helplessness, but when he turns his eyes towards the other bird, the Lord, he is liberated from sufferings by his glory." (3.1.1)

### **Mandukya Upanishad**

The shortest of all, consists of only 12 verses explaining the passage of the living being through the states of wakefulness (Vaisvanara), dream (Taijasa), deep sleep (Prajna) and in transcendental consciousness (Turiya) in which it is possible to realize the Self. Here we find the *maha vakya* considered as the essence of the *Atharva Veda*: *ayam atma brahma*, "Atman e Brahman are the same".

The text of this *Upanishad* is often accompanied by the elaboration by Gaudapada entitled *Mandukya karika*.

### **Svetasvatara Upanishad**

It contains 6 short chapters with philosophical explanations on Atman, Brahman, Paramatma, and Prakriti. The text begins with the questions: "What is the cause (of the existence of the universe)? What is Brahman? From where are we coming (before birth)? Why do we live? What is our final destination?"

Here are some extracts:

"Like oil in sesame seeds, like butter in yogurt, like water in subterranean springs, like fire in wood - the Self is perceived in the Self, through truthfulness, austerity and meditation..." (1.15-16)

"Striving to control one's senses, regulating the activities of the body, one must exhale from the nostrils when the body functions slow down... One must focus the attention, living in a cave or in some other pure place where the ground is level and free from pebbles and the view is pleasing, where there is no wind, dust, fire, humidity or distracting noises. In the practice of yoga, before the manifestation of Brahman there will be the appearance of forms similar to snow, smoke, sun, wind, fire, glow-worms, lightning, crystal and moon." (2.9-11)

"You are woman, you are man, you are the boy and the girl, you are the old man who slowly walks leaning on the staff. Your face is in all directions." (4.3)

"Knowing what is the origin and the dissolution of the universe, the source of all virtues that destroys all faults, the master of all qualities, the immortal support of the universe - situated in our self, transcendent and separate from the tree of the *samsara*, from time and space - we want to realize him, the transcendental Lord of the universe, worthy of worship, the supreme Lord of all Lords, the God of the Devas, and the ruler of all rulers... Although he is One, he fulfills the desires of many." (6.6-7, 13)

Here too (4.6, 7) we find the metaphor of the two birds on the same tree, and the measure of the individual soul as a small fraction of the tip of a hair (5.8), found in *Gita* and in other *Upanishads*.

### **Kausitaki, or Kausitaki brahmana Upanishad**

The conversation between the king Chitra Gargyayani, the Rishi Kausitaki and his son Svetaketu is about reincarnation, the attainment of the heavenly planets and Brahman. The teachings of Kausitaki are as follows (2.1): *prana* is Brahman, and in order to realize it, one must leave the mental platform of aspirations. Then we find the explanation of the 5 faces of Soma Rudra (the *brahmana*, the king, the falcon, fire and time), a meditation for the protection of one's wife and children, and the ritual to leave one's family.

The third chapter speaks about king Pratardana who obtained a boon from Indra, the killer of the 3-headed Tvasti, who delivered the Arunmukha ascetics to the wolves, who killed Prahlada's people in the sky, the Paulomas in the atmosphere and the Kalakanjas on earth. The fourth chapter narrates the conversation between Gargya Balaki and Ajatasatru of Kashi regarding Brahman and the effect of meditation on its various aspects.

### **Kaivalya Upanishad**

It consists of 26 verses with the conversation between Asvalayana Rishi and Brahma - about the knowledge of Brahman and how to attain it through faith, devotion, meditation, the knowledge of *Vedanta* ("the purpose of knowledge") and renunciation.

"He is Brahma, Shiva, Indra, the unchangeable, supreme and radiant, Vishnu, *prana*, time, fire and the moon. He is everything that was and will be, the Eternal. One who knows him transcends death. There is no other way to attain liberation. Seeing the Atman in all beings, and all beings in the Atman, one attains the Supreme Brahman: this is the only way." (8-10)

### **Maitri, Maitrayani or Maitrayaniya Upanishad**

It consists of 7 short *prapathaka* (prose sections); it begins with the conversation between king Brihadratha (who had retired into the forest) and Sakayana Rishi, that illustrates the teachings of Maitreya. The text speaks of the temporary nature of the body, of the 5 *pranas*, of rebirth and the 3 *gunas*.

### **Subala Upanishad**

Divided into 10 "lessons": 1. creation, maintenance and dissolution of the universe, 2. the "fourth principle", i.e. Transcendence, the Dahara lotus that is within the heart of the human being, and the components of the body, 3. Narayana contains all universal manifestations, 4. the nature of Paramatma, 5. the Atman in the body, 6. the path upwards (to the heavenly planets), 7. *samadhi*, 8. the material elements, 9. how the elements are consumed at the time of death, 10. the knowledge of Brahman.

### **Jabala Upanishad**

It consists of 14 short prose sections on renunciation, reporting the conversations between Yajnavalkya and Brihaspati (on the *brahma randhra* as Avimukta Kurushetra), Atri Rishi

(on Avimukta Shiva residing in the *ajna chakra* Vara-nasi), his *brahmachari* disciples (the Satarudriya hymn), Janaka (on *sannyasa* and fire sacrifice) and again Atri Rishi (it is the level of awareness and not the sacred thread, to determine if one is a *brahmana*, therefore a *sannyasi* does not wear it any more; one may leave his body in a battle, by fasting to death, by drowning, by entering the fire, or by walking until complete exhaustion).

### **Paingala Upanishad**

The text consists in a conversation between Yajnavalkya and his disciple Paingala on the One without seconds, from whom the creation of the universe manifested. It explains how Brahman incarnates as Jiva Atman, speaks about the 5 coverings (*kosha*) of Atman (*annamaya, pranamaya, manomaya, jnanamaya* and *anandamaya*), of the 5 states of awareness (wakefulness, dream, deep sleep, unconsciousness and death), the *mahavakyas* (*tat tvam asi, so 'ham, aham brahmasmi*), of the metaphor of the chariot representing the body, of the last stage of *sannyasa*, of the benefits accrued from the study of the *Upanishads*, and on the meditation on Vishnu's omnipresence.

### **Vajrasucika Upanishad**

The title ("diamond needle") refers to piercing ignorance, especially about the foolish prejudice on how to identify a *brahmana*. The position of *brahmana* is not due to the material body, that is made of the same elements in all human beings, or the color of the skin, or the family of origin - Rishyasringa was born from a female deer, Kausika from a reed, Jambuka from a jackal, Valmiki from an anthill, Vyasa from a girl of a fishermen tribe, Vasistha from the Apsara Urvasi and Agastya from a pot.

Not even learning or charity are a guarantee for the qualification of a *brahmana*: only the direct realization of Brahman, demonstrated by overcoming material identification and attachments, by truthfulness and other divine qualities.

### **Kali santarana Upanishad**

This very short text reports Narada's question to Brahma: "How can one overcome the age of Kali?" and his answer: "Simply by chanting the name of Narayana: Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. The recitation of these 16 names can destroy all the inauspicious effects of Kali

yuga: there is no better method in all the *Vedas*.

They are like the sun that shines brightly after the clouds have dissolved. There are no precise rules to practice this method. Anyone who chants these names, in a pure or impure state, becomes immersed in the consciousness of the Brahman and is purified from all faulty or impure action, transcending all temporary duties and attaining liberation."

### **Krishna Upanishad**

This very short prose text narrates how the Rishis who met Rama wished they could take birth as *gopis* during the *avatara* of Krishna in Gokula. All the defects (such as greed, anger etc) appeared as Asuras, while the *Upanishads* and the other vedic texts appeared as *gopis* (cowherd girls), and the divine qualities appeared as companions of the Lord, both movable and immovable.

### **Gopala tapani Upanishad**

In the first chapter (consisting of 54 verses) Brahma speaks about Krishna, who is also called Govinda and Gopijanavallabha, and explains the *mantra Svaha*, the *Kama Gayatri* and the *Ananga Gayatri*. He describes Krishna as a cowherd boy with a black complexion similar to a monsoon cloud, who dressed in lightning yellow clothes and is decorated by a garland of forest flowers. He is standing on a red lotus flower under a desire tree, surrounded by cowherd girls and boys, and *surabhi* cows. Brahma also explains how the *Kama Gayatri* is the origin of creation, and offers his prayers to Krishna.

In the second chapter (118 verses) we find the conversation between Krishna and the *gopis* led by Gandharvi (Radha) and the *gopis'* visit to the *ashrama* of Durvasa Rishi, and the ensuing conversation. The text ends with a homage to all the Devas.

### **Narada parivrajaka Upanishad**

The conversation between Narada and Saunaka at Naimisharanya deals with the 40 *samskaras*, 4 *ashramas*, 10 dharmic virtues and especially with the rigid rules of *sannyasa*.

For example, a *sannyasi* can never insult anyone (with attitudes or words or actions) but



must tolerate all insults, he cannot tell lies, he can only possess very few personal items (a loincloth, a shawl obtained by stitching some rags together, a container for water and a staff that symbolizes his state) and nothing else.

He must always stay alone (he cannot live in a city, a village, an *ashrama* or even with one companion), he must travel alone without attracting attention, and he must completely reject the identification with the body and the care and pleasures of the body - which he must consider as a corpse. This includes the prohibition of using oils and ointments, of shaving and cutting and combing hair, as well as the prohibition of using ornaments, nice clothing etc.

He must not converse with anyone, must be insensitive to physical attraction, must always keep his eyes downcast, not looking further than 4 meters (16 cubits) in front of himself. Besides, he must only eat what he receives in charity by begging alms once a day, after lunch time, from a house of well-behaved people. He must eat while standing or walking, without attention for the taste of what he consumes.

He must avoid all entertainment (dance, theater etc), gambling, the company of women or of people he used to know in the past, attractive foods, love and hatred, intoxicating substances, discussions about women, long journeys, frequent fasting, pilgrimages, gifts of all kinds (except the food that is strictly necessary) and attachment to academic scholarship.

He stops wearing the sacred thread and cuts off his *sikha* (the tuft of hair on the back of the head, that is characteristic of *brahmanas*), he cannot have a following of disciples, he cannot attend ceremonies or functions of any kind, or belong to any organization or philosophical/ religious school. He must avoid honors and invitations, because these consume the benefits of his austerities.

He must not sleep on a bed, wear white clothes, sleep during the day or travel in a coach. He must never answer those who ask about his name, family or home, birthplace, age, or the vows he observes.

He cannot practice medicine or distribute blessings, correct the behavior of other people, invite others, ask for gifts, or visit a village for more than one day (except during the rainy season), travel by night or at midday or at dusk, swim across a river, climb on a tree

(to pick the fruits), or purchase or sell anything.

Those who want to engage in the study of Transcendence may establish themselves in some isolated place, preferably not accessible to the general people, and live under a tree or in some abandoned house, and subsist on fruits, roots, leaves and water.

### **For a further and deeper study of the Upanishads**

Due to space limitations, we have only given a brief summary and a few extracts from the most famous *Upanishads* - which cannot be considered as a complete study on such fundamental texts of Vedic knowledge and wisdom. We could call this volume a “beginner's” introductory course on the immense wealth of Vedic knowledge.

Those who are interested in expanding their knowledge and understanding on this important subject are invited to consult the upcoming publications produced by the same author, and that are totally dedicated to the study of the *Upanishads* as the “intermediate” and “advanced” levels of analysis.

The “intermediate” volume, of about 700 pages (already completed in Italian language and published in Italy), is entitled *The Upanishads in the third millennium*, and gives a concise, clear, easy to read translation of all the main *Upanishads* as listed on pages 187 and 188.

The “advanced” work on the *Upanishads* is ongoing and will require several volumes as it includes the original Sanskrit text with transliteration and word for word translation, as it has been done for a similar edition of *Bhagavad gita* and for other texts.

Research is under way to trace the most authoritative original manuscripts.

Anyone who would like to cooperate to this historical mission is invited to contact the author, Parama Karuna Devi, at the Jagannatha Vallabha Vedic Research Institute, and co-author the work or be duly acknowledged in the credits.

We take the opportunity to invite all Vedic scholars and Self-realized individuals to avail themselves of the facilities offered by our Jagannatha Vallabha Vedic Research Institute, and get their work published in their name and circulated in a cooperative way.

# **Mahabharata**

## **and Bhagavad gita**

We have seen that Vyasa, worried by the decline in the intellectual and moral faculties of the human beings, proceeded to compile collections of Vedic hymns and rituals and to write explanations to help people understanding them. The texts resulting from the work of Vyasa and his disciples were still difficult to interpret, and therefore they were meant to be studied by the most intelligent and reflective people in society, especially *brahmanas*, and in some measure also by the *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas*, who are responsible for the material and spiritual progress of the entire society. Thus, something had to be done for the *sudras*, those who do not have special intellectual capacities, and are not attracted by austerity and meditation. Besides, Vyasa knew that with the progression of Kali yuga even the people who were usually qualified as "twice born" would become degraded and that at some point the almost totality of the people would become unable to understand the deep symbolism of the Vedic hymns and sacrifice rituals.

Therefore he composed that part of Vedic literature that could become particularly popular also among the simple-minded people, and that could carry a great quantity of spiritual, philosophical, theological and moral teachings within a format of thrilling adventures.

These scriptures are called *Puranas* ("ancient stories") and *Itihasas* ("stories" or "epic poems") and contain an extraordinary mixture of adventure stories, historical facts, epic poetry and allegories, into which the writer has woven a series of philosophical and theological dialogues between the protagonists of the stories - some of whom are divine manifestations or *avatars*.

Due to the wealth of knowledge they contain, these texts are also called "the fifth *Veda*", for example by the *Chandogya Upanisad* (7.1.4) and *Bhagavata Purana* (1.4.20), and have been recognized as integral parts of Vedic literature. In his commentary to the

*Vedanta sutra* (2.1.6) Madhvacharya writes, "*Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, Atharva Veda, Mahabharata, Pancharatra* and the original *Ramayana*, as well as the *Puranas*, are all considered Vedic scriptures."

The texts known as *Itihasas* ("stories") - including *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* - are sometimes collectively called *Itivritta* ("chronicles"), *Akhyayika* ("tales") or *Udaharana* ("examples"), are also considered elaborations and commentaries to the core of Vedic knowledge. One of these collections that has become particularly famous is the *Panchatantra* (not to be confused with the *Pancharatra*, that is a *smriti* text on ritual procedures), a series of educational tales told by a wise *brahmana* to the young princes he was tutoring.

The most important text of this "fifth *Veda*" is *Bhagavad gita*, which is part of the epic *Mahabharata* (from chapter 25 to chapter 42 of the volume entitled *Bishma parva*): all the great *acharyas* such as Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva have written commentaries on this fundamental text of Hinduism.

As we have already mentioned, it is one of the *prasthanas traya*, "the 3 starting points" from which one should begin to study Vedic knowledge - the other 2 being the *Upanishads* and *Vedanta sutra* or *Brahma sutra*).

In fact, we can say that more commentaries have been written on *Bhagavad gita* than on any other philosophical or literary work in history. Famous is also the glorification of *Gita* (*Gita mahatmya*) written by Adi Shankaracharya. *Gita* has shaped the life of India on the social, ethical, cultural and political levels, contributing to the development of generations of thinkers, philosophers, theologians, educationists, scientists and writers in the West, too.

To better understand *Bhagavad gita* we should study it in its context, the *Mahabharata*, that is the most voluminous epic poem in world literature. With almost 2 millions words, part in verses and part in prose, is about 4 times longer than *Ramayana* and 10 times larger than *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined.

The only complete translation of *Mahabharata* in English is the one produced by Kisari Mohan Ganguli between 1883 and 1896, but there are numerous summaries, of which the most famous was written by Rajagopalachari. Innumerable dance and drama works,

especially in the east (including Bali, Thailand etc) are inspired by the stories of this epic, the most important being the Yakshagana (a dance-drama style from Karnataka) and Kathakali (a dance-drama style from Kerala).

In the West, the *Mahabharata* has become famous especially through the rendition by Peter Brook, a 9 hour play that was staged for the first time in 1985 at Avignon in France, and then turned into a 5 hour movie in 1989.

In this chapter we will try to give a clear and complete summary, that will enable the readers to understand the ideological dynamics of the story.

The original text, written by Ganesha under Vyasa's dictation, was given by Vyasa (also called Krishna Dvaipayana) to his son Sukadeva and to his disciples Vaisampayana and Romaharshana Suta. Romaharshana narrated it to the Rishis in Naimisharanya (a forest that was in the locality of Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh) headed by Saunaka Rishi, during a sacrifice ritual that was meant to last for 1000 years. Suta gave the text to his son Ugrasrava, who had originally heard it from Vaisampayana in the assembly of Maharaja Janamejaya, Arjuna's grandson.

The core of the story, called *Jaya* and consisting of 24,000 verses, is the dialogue between the regent king Dhritarastra and his advisor and charioteer Sanjaya, on what is happening on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. According to the *Mahabharata* itself (1.1.61) and the *Asvalayana Grihasutra* (3.4.4), the other verses have been added later. Some interpret verse 1.1.81 to mean that Vyasa's original *Jaya* only had 8800 verses (from the arrival of the armies at Kurukshetra to the end of the battle) while the version recited by Vaisampayana, called *Bharata*, was 24,000 verses and the final version, called *Mahabharata* and narrated by Ugrasrava Sauti, is the one with 110,000 verses. The text is divided into 18 *Parvas* or "books", to which more minor *Parvas* were added for a total of 100 (mentioned in verse 1.2.70). Often, as an appendix to the *Mahabharata* we find the famous text *Hari vamsa*, that describes Krishna's dynasty.

The introductory verse to the original core of the *Mahabharata* recites:

*narayanam namaskritya naram caiva narottamam*

*devim sarasvatim vyasam tato jayam udirayet*

"Before enunciating this *Jaya* we offer our homage to Narayana, to Nara (the greatest of human beings), to Sarasvati Devi and Vyasa."

The most elaborate and complete text of the *Mahabharata* begins with a "prequel" on the ancestors of the Pandavas, the relatives and friends of Krishna. It is important to understand that the Pandavas are not ordinary people, but they are direct manifestations of divine principles, descended to this planet to assist Krishna's mission, that is described in detail in the *Bhagavata purana* - to which the *Mahabharata* is directly connected.

The adventures of these characters can be read at many levels, from the deepest symbolism revealing the stages of the individual's spiritual realization and the blueprint of the cosmic manifestation, to the simplest and most immediate level showing how adharmic motivations, material attachments, personality defects and selfish choices produce disastrous results both individually and socially, while faithfulness to *dharma*, detachment and a proper sense of duty enable us to properly perform our work in this world.

Besides, just like the Pandavas were comforted in their tribulations by the Rishis telling them the stories of great personalities that bravely faced difficulties and sufferings, we can also find solace and inspiration in their story.

We will now give a short summary of the text.

The *Adi Parva* ("the book of the beginning") starts with the assembly of king Saunaka Kulapati, where the Rishis engaged in the sacrifice are sitting together to hear edifying stories about the great personalities of the past. Specifically, the son of Romaharshana Suta speaks of a similar assembly, called by king Janamejaya (Abhimanyu's son), where the story of the Pandavas was told. There are also some other short and deeply symbolical stories, such as those of king Pausya, Rishi Puloma and Astika (respectively occupying the *Pausya Parva*, *Puloma Parva* and *Astika Parva*).

The *Adi-vamsa-vatarana Parva* ("the book of the beginning of the dynasty") narrates that according to the pledge given by his father Pratip, emperor Santanu married Goddess Ganga, the personification of the sacred river, generating an extraordinary son named Devavrata, who was later known as Bhishma. Because he was unable to deeply

understand the divine motives and accept them without discussion, Santanu lost his extraordinary wife and after several years of unhappy solitary life he met a beautiful girl, Satyavati (who had already become the mother of Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata*), belonging to a community of fishermen on river Yamuna.

Satyavati's father was flattered by the emperor's interest, and anxious to procure the greatest possible advantage to his own family, gave his consent to the marriage only on the condition that Satyavati's sons would become the legitimate heirs instead of the eldest son Bhishma.

The young prince saw his father tortured by inner conflicts, and out of love for him he decided to renounce the imperial throne himself, and even pledged to remain a lifelong celibate so that there would be no descendants of his who could claim a right to the throne in the future. This terrible sacrifice (*bhishma* precisely means "terrible") did not just damage Bhishma's personal life, but also put the kingdom in great peril; therefore it constituted the first step towards the disastrous series of events that led to the final battle meant to eliminate the excess of the adharmic military forces on the planet and to inaugurate the age of quarrel and hypocrisy called Kali yuga ("the black age"). Thus the origin of all such disasters can clearly be traced to the greed and arrogance of Satyavati's father, to Santanu's lust and to Bhishma's material attachment towards his father, because of which he sacrificed the future of the kingdom. These are the real causes that created the unstable situation in the succession to the throne.

Satyavati's sons, Citrangada and Vicitravirya, did not have the qualities required for a king and were unable to rule the kingdom. Citrangada died very young without leaving any sons, and Vicitravirya ascended the throne but he was so weak and impotent that the family elders sent his stepbrother Bhishma in his stead to participate to the *svayamvara* (the traditional marriage tournament among the suitors, that allowed the *kshatriya* girls to choose a suitable husband) of the princesses of Kasi (Benares) Amba, Ambika and Ambalika.

Bhishma was a powerful warrior and had no difficulties in winning the hand of all three girls, but unfortunately the eldest sister - Amba - was not happy to learn that she was going to marry Bhishma's stepbrother and not Bhishma himself. So she decided to step back from the marriage and as Bhishma allowed her to do whatever she wanted, she went

to propose marriage to Shalva, another great warrior that had taken part in the *svayamvara* but had been defeated.

Shalva's hurt pride prevented him to accept the proposal and Amba was frustrated in her plans. She decided she would then propose marriage to Bhishma, who after all had won her hand in the tournament in front of all the warriors, but Bhishma had taken the lifelong celibacy vow. Furious, Amba swore to avenge the outrage and to have Bhishma killed. One after the other, all the great warriors approached by Amba for that purpose refused to engage in such an impossible venture, because everyone considered Bhishma totally invincible. In the end, Amba decided to take care of her business herself and created a new male identity for herself, becoming the adopted son of king Drupada and getting personally trained in combat with the sole purpose of killing Bhishma on the battlefield.

The other 2 princesses, Ambika and Ambalika, were still childless when Vicitravirya died prematurely of "weakness". Then Satyawati decided to resort to an old tradition, by which the brother of a deceased king could intervene personally to give a son to his sister in law - and she called her son Vyasadeva to the court.

Ambika's son Dhritarastra was born first, but he was blind, and therefore he was excluded from the succession as his handicap prevented him to effectively take part in the protection of the subjects. Ambalika's son Pandu was not very strong either; the name *pandu* means "pale" and is used in Ayurvedic medicine to describe the characteristic complexion of those who suffer from a liver condition.

Vyasa was therefore asked to beget another son, but the princesses had been unhappy about the proposal from the very start, and now they refused to cooperate any more. They sent their handmaiden instead, and she gave birth to Vidura, who was perfectly healthy and virtuous and later became *mahamantri* ("prime minister") of the kingdom, although he never personally occupied the throne.

Pandu was officially crowned the king, but after a short time he retired to the forest with his 2 wives Kunti and Madri, to perform austerities and atone for a hunting accident, in which he had inadvertently killed Kindama Rishi while the Rishi was engaged in sexual activities with his own wife, within the privacy of a thick grove. During his stay in the forest, Pandu had 5 sons, that became known as the "five Pandavas". The birth of these boys was truly extraordinary.



Kindama Rishi had cursed Pandu with instant death as soon as he would begin sexual intercourse, so it was impossible for him to beget an heir to the kingdom. In that circumstance, Kunti revealed that some years earlier she had received a special *mantra* from Durvasa Rishi, by which she could call a Deva and get a son from him. With Pandu's permission, Kunti evoked Yama (the Deva of death and justice), Vayu (the Deva of wind) and Indra (the Deva of lightning and rains, the king of the higher planets) giving birth respectively to Yudhisthira, Bhima and Arjuna. Pandu's second wife (Madri) borrowed the *mantra* from Kunti and used it to call the Asvini kumaras (the 2 Devas who are the heavenly physicians) who became the fathers of Nakula and Sahadeva.

However, Kunti chose not to reveal that before her marriage she had already used the *mantra* out of sheer curiosity, innocently evoking Surya (the Deva of the sun) and unexpectedly getting a son from him - Karna - whom she had immediately abandoned to the waters of the river. The baby had been found by Adhiratha, a charioteer belonging to the lowest rank of the *kshatriyas*, who together with his wife Radha had raised him modestly but with lots of affection as their own son.

When Pandu and Madri died, Kunti and the 5 boys returned to the capital, where the regent Dhritarastra yielded to the pressure of the *brahmanas* and the elders in the State assembly, and consecrated Yudhisthira as *yuvaraja*, the official heir to the throne. Besides being the eldest among all the brothers and cousins, Yudhisthira was also in the direct line of succession from his father Pandu, who had already been crowned the king.

Dhritarastra married princess Gandhari and begot his own children: 100 sons headed by Duryodhana, Duhsasana, Vikarna and Sukarna, and a daughter named Duhsala. Gandhari had been happy at the idea of becoming the queen of Hastinapura and was shocked when she learned that her future husband was blind, but because she was a real princess she decided to sacrifice herself for the good of the kingdom. To better understand and support her husband, Gandhari voluntarily renounced her eyesight and always wore a thick bandage over her own eyes - something that unfortunately must have created some emotional reactions both in her and in her brother Sakuni, who had accompanied her to her new home. This is shown by the fact that when she was informed about the birth of Kunti's first son, Gandhari - who was still pregnant - vented her uncontrollable anger against her own unborn child, hitting her own belly and causing a miscarriage. Vyasadeva was called to save the situation: he collected the immature fetus and divided it

into 100 clones, and put each one of them in a container to develop artificially till maturity.

Instigated especially by uncle Sakuni, Duryodhana grew up hating his cousins, and therefore organized many attempts at eliminating them. Unfortunately Dhritarastra and Gandhari allowed him to continue in his evil schemes because they hoped that their own temporary position at the top of the government could become permanent when Duryodhana would ascend to the throne.

Duryodhana's rage was directed particularly against Bhima, who was physically very strong and therefore regularly won all the fights and wrestling matches. The first assassination attempt was against him: during a picnic on the river Ganges Bhima was fed a poisoned cake, and when the boy lost consciousness, he was tied up with ropes and thrown into the water, so that the poisonous snakes living in that tract of the river would finish him off. However, the snakes' bites had the opposite effect, awakening Bhima from the slumber induced by the narcotic. So Bhima returned safely to the capital, while Duryodhana was torn between the rage for his own failure and the fear that Bhima would realize what had happened and take revenge.

In the subsequent years Duryodhana and his brothers were forced to live side by side with Pandu's sons, so they tried to distinguish themselves in some way from the cousins by taking the name of Kauravas ("descendents of Kuru", the great ancestor of Santanu) as opposed to the Pandavas ("sons of Pandu"), a definition that they considered demeaning in regard to hereditary rights.

The great Drona, a *brahmana* who was very expert in military sciences, settled at court to become the tutor of the princes, and his personal motivations created new seeds of tragedies. In fact Drona was an excellent martial arts teacher, but contrarily to what is expected from a *brahmana*, he had an arrogant and revengeful nature that he chose not to correct. During his childhood days in the Gurukula he had become friends with another student, Drupada, the heir to the throne of Panchala. Later, after his marriage with Kripi and the birth of their son Asvatthama, Drona found himself in financial difficulties and went to see his old school mate Drupada and ask for his help. However, Drupada had recently become king and was still inebriated by his new position, so he treated him offensively. Furious, Drona swore to take revenge and decided to train one extraordinary

student who would humiliate Drupada - and for this, he first needed to become the military Guru of the most powerful royal family of his times, the Kuru dynasty. After securing that position, Drona rejected all other students, an act that produced further negative reactions, as in the case of Karna.

Together with the 5 Pandavas, Karna is one of the main characters of the *Mahabharata*. As we have seen, he was actually their elder brother and as a direct manifestation of Surya, the Deva of the Sun, he was naturally a very powerful warrior, but as his family's position in society did not afford him to enjoy the advantages and opportunities of his true birth, he was unable to develop his real potential and he grew up torn apart by inner conflicts. Karna was keen to become a warrior and approached Drona for training, but he was rejected, so he went to see another exceptional teacher of martial arts: Parasurama the descendent of Brighu, who was still present on the planet after completing his mission of *avatara*.

Knowing that Parasurama did not like *kshatriyas*, Karna introduced himself as a *brahmana* who was interested to teach the military arts, and he was accepted as a disciple. The cover up did not last long: Karna's actual qualities and behavior manifested beyond any doubt during his training, and Karna was kicked away and cursed, too. One day Parasurama was sleeping, his head resting on his student's legs, and it so happened that an insect crawled on Karna's leg and started biting into it. Karna bravely tolerated the pain because he did not want to disturb his teacher's sleep, but the bite started bleeding and Parasurama woke up. When he saw what had happened, Parasurama realized that no *brahmana* would have been able to tolerate that pain with such determination, and knew that Karna was actually a *kshatriya*, more interested in fighting than in teaching. Offended by Karna's lie, that violated the fundamental dharmic principle of truthfulness, Parasurama cursed him to forget all the teachings he had received, and at the time when he would need them the most. This curse would take effect in the most crucial moment of Karna's life, when he finally faced Arjuna on the battlefield.

Arjuna was Drona's favorite pupil and became very expert in the science of weapons, including the Agneyastra and Varunastra, based on the control of the elements of fire and water. Pleased by his student's progress, Drona asked Arjuna to repay him for the teachings he had received, and as *guru dakshina* he ordered him to defeat king Drupada and bring him to his presence as a prisoner. Arjuna carried out the task, but showing the

utmost respect and courtesy to Draupada, so much that the king wished to have Arjuna as his son in law. Brooding revenge against Drona, Drupada returned home and started a sacrifice ritual for the birth of Dhristadyumna and Draupadi - one destined to kill Drona and the other to marry Arjuna.

The *Jatugriha Parva* ("the book of the shellac house") continues by describing how Duryodhana, Sakuni and Duhsasana devised a new plan to assassinate their cousins. Sakuni hired the architect Purochana and sent him to Varanavata to build a royal residence for the summer holidays of the Pandavas, a house that was to be made with highly flammable materials.

Vidura came to know about the conspiracy and alerted the Pandavas, who dug a tunnel under the house and then took the initiative to torch the house before Duryodhana's agent had the time to do so. The tunnel surfaced at a certain distance on the Ganges bank, where a boatman at Vidura's service ferried the brothers and their mother Kunti to a safe place. So while at Hastinapura everyone believed they were dead, the Pandavas remained hidden in the forests.

The *Hidimba-vadha Parva* ("the book of Hidimba's killing") describes how, in the place known as Hidimbavana, the Pandavas were attacked by the *rakshasa* Hidimba, who was defeated and killed by Bhima. Hidimba's sister Hidimbi fell in love with Bhima and asked him for a son: thus was born brave Ghatotkacha, the half-blood *rakshasa* who will help his father and uncles in many adventures and fight on their side at Kurukshetra.

Finally the Pandavas arrived at the village of Ekachakra, where they stayed in the house of a local *brahmana* and saved his life by killing another *rakshasa*, Bakasura, who used to demand human sacrifices from the people who lived in that area. This episode is the central story of the *Baka-vadha Parva* ("the book of the killing of Baka).

In the next book, the *Chaitraratha Parva* ("the book of Citraratha"), Arjuna meets and duels Citraratha, the Gandharvas' king, defeating him. Besides, the Pandavas learned about the imminent *svayamvara* of princess Draupadi, the daughter of Drupada king of Panchala. After their *brahmana* host had narrated the miraculous circumstances of the birth of Draupadi and her brother Dhristadyumna, the Pandava journeyed to the capital of the Panchala kingdom.

In the book entitled *Svayamvara Parva* ("the wedding tournament") the Pandavas became the guests of a potter. The tournament consisted in a classic archery test - with a huge steel horn bow, very difficult even to lift - and was accompanied by much celebration and entertainment, and great distributions of food and gifts especially to the *brahmanas*. On that occasion Duryodhana officially promoted Karna to the position of *kshatriya* of royal rank, appointing him as the ruler of the kingdom of Anga (present Bengal) so that he could take part in the tournament, which was restricted to the royal princes. Disguised as a *brahmana*, Arjuna asked the king for the permission to attempt the test claiming that he was motivated by sheer curiosity, but he won the archery test by hitting the extremely difficult target: the eye of an artificial fish mounted on a wheel rotating on the ceiling, that could be aimed at only by looking at its reflection into an oil container on the floor.

The princes attending the event, including Duryodhana, Karna, Salya and Sakuni, protested because the princess was not supposed to marry a *brahmana*, but Arjuna and his brothers easily opposed and defeated all the warriors. Arriving back at the potter's house, Arjuna called his mother out, saying that he had won a great treasure, and even before asking what kind of treasure it was, Kunti told him he would have to share it with his brothers. Perplexed, Arjuna introduced his new bride to mother and after a consultation with Drupada, Vyasa and Dhristadhyumna, it was decided that Draupadi could be the wife of all the 5 brothers, as long as she lived with one of them at the time: this is the contents of the *Vaivahika Parva* ("the marriage").

The rumor of the extraordinary events at Draupadi's *svayamvara* traveled fast, and soon it was clear to everybody that the Pandavas were still alive. In the potter's house the Pandavas met their other cousins Krishna and Balarama, the sons of Vasudeva, Kunti's brother, who had rushed to congratulate them.

In the *Vidura gamana Parva* ("Vidura's journey") Dhritarastra sent a message to the Pandavas inviting them to return to the capital and promising to give them half the kingdom, but when the 5 brothers arrived at court, they were allotted a small unhabited area within the thick Khandava forest.

The section entitled *Arjuna vanavasa Parva* ("Arjuna goes to the forest") narrates how one day Arjuna was forced by the circumstances to enter the room where Yudhisthira was intimately staying with Draupadi, and according to the rules that the Pandavas had

established for themselves, he left for a pilgrimage to atone for his violation. After visiting Prabhasa kshetra (also known as Somanatha) Arjuna went to Dvaraka and fell in love with Subhadra, the sister of Krishna and Balarama. In the section *Subhadra harana Parva* ("the abduction of Subhadra") Krishna helps Arjuna and Subhadra to elope together, because Balarama was against their marriage.

In the next section, entitled *Haranaharana Parva* ("the abduction that was not a real abduction") Krishna gave a speech in the assembly of the Yadus to pacify their anger for the abduction, and stated that women cannot be given in marriage against their own will. In the *Khandava-daha Parva* ("the burning of the Khandava forest") Krishna helped Arjuna to call Agni, who happily ate all the trees and plants of the forest, including a great quantity of medicinal herbs. The king of the heavenly planets Indra sent torrential rains to save his friend Takshaka (the king of snakes who lived in the forest) and was amazed to see that Arjuna repelled the rain with an equivalent shower of arrows. To pacify Arjuna, Indra offered him the Gandiva bow, a quiver of extraordinary arrows and a very special chariot. He also promised him some divine weapons, but he would deliver them only after Arjuna had secured the Pasupata astra from Shiva.

The *Sabha parva* ("the parliament") describes how Khandavaprastha became the prosperous Indraprastha and many residents of the old capital were happy to move into the new city of the Pandavas, thus leaving the corrupt tyrant Duryodhana. During the forest fire, Arjuna had also saved Maya Danava (the architect of the Daityas) and Maya Danava gratefully accepted to build for the Pandavas a splendid city and a wonderful royal palace, that included a special hall for the government assemblies.

In the section called *Sabhakriya Parva* ("the building of the assembly hall") we see Maya Danava engaged in the construction work, and gifting Arjuna with a war conch and Bhima with a special mace. The *Lokapala Sabhakhayana Parva* ("the government assembly for the protection of the people") describes the parliament of the Pandavas, that counted among its members also many Gandharvas residents of the higher planets. The great Rishi Narada, who is expert in all the branches of knowledge, went to visit the Pandavas in their new capital and after discussing with them about various topics on the management of the kingdom, reminded Yudhisthira that Pandu had planned to perform the Rajasuya sacrifice for the glory of their dynasty.

The section *Rajasuyarambha Parva* ("the beginning of the Rajasuya") shows the preparation for the great ceremony aimed at establishing the supremacy of the Pandava government. The main opponent to be defeated was Jarasandha, the evil king of Magadha, who had imprisoned a great number of *kshatriyas* to demonstrate his political supremacy. He had also subjugated many other kings such as Dantavakra, Karusha, Karava and Meghavahana, who had become his vassals.

Jarasandha, father in law of the Kamsa that had persecuted Krishna and all his family for a long time, had been raised by a Rakshasi named Jara and could not be killed in a fight. He had already attacked Mathura many times, so that in the end Krishna had to move the entire population to the new city of Dvaraka to protect them from the constant aggressions. Disguised as *brahmanas*, the 5 Pandavas and Krishna went to Jarasandha's capital to challenge him to a fight, and thanks to Krishna's advice, Bhima found the way to kill Jarasandha. The kings were released from their imprisonment and happily pledged allegiance to Yudhishira: the Rajasuya yajna could then be performed right away. This is the contents of the *Jarasandha vada Parva*, "the killing of Jarasandha", followed by the *Rajasuyika Parva*, "the Rajasuya".

At the inauguration of the Rajasuya sacrifice, Sahadeva performed the *agra puja*, the offering of the "first honors" to Krishna, and on that occasion an old enemy of Krishna, his distant cousin Sisupala the king of Cedi, rose in the assembly to protest, repeatedly insulting Krishna and accusing him of having conspired to kill Jarasandha and Kamsa, kidnapped Rukmini and committed a series of other actions that he considered immoral. To keep the promise that he had made to Sisupala's mother, Krishna tolerated quietly for some time, but finally he silenced him by cutting his head off with the Sudarshana chakra, as we read in the *Sisupala vadha Parva*, "the killing of Sisupala".

The third main book of the *Mahabharata* is entitled *Vana Parva* ("the book of the forest") and also contains the sections called *Aranyaka* ("in the forest"), *Kirmira vadha* ("the killing of Kirmira"), *Arjuna abhigamana* ("Arjuna's departure"), *Kairata* ("the Kirata"), *Indraloka gamana* ("the journey to Indraloka"), *Nalopakhyana* ("the story of Nala"), *Tirtha-yatra* ("the pilgrimage"), *Markandeya samasya* ("the meeting with Markandeya"), *Draupadi Satyabhama samvada* ("the conversation between Draupadi and Satyabhama"), *Ghosha yatra* ("the inspection journey"), *Draupadi harana* ("the abduction of Draupadi"), *Pativrata mahatmya* ("the glory of the women who love their

husbands") and *Aranya* ("the forest").

Duryodhana and the other Kurus had been invited to take part in the celebrations, and although they had been given tasks and responsibilities as they were members of the dynasty celebrating the sacrifice, they still had quite some free time. While he was enviously walking around to examine the palace, the Kuru prince mistook a very polished floor for a big water basin and lifted his *dhoti* to avoid getting wet, and soon afterwards made the opposite mistake, fumbling and falling into the water where he believed there was a solid floor. Humiliated by the general laughters and by the ironic comments of Draupadi, Duryodhana quickly returned to his palace, thinking of revenge.

Sakuni was a very expert gambler, and had some fixed dice that he could manipulate at will. Under the pretext of inaugurating a new hall in the palace, Duryodhana got permission from his father to organize a dice game against Yudhisthira, and with a series of insults and challenges he forced his cousin to gamble everything he had, including his own freedom and the freedom of his brothers and wife. Elated, Duryodhana sent for Draupadi to turn her into his maidservant, and when the minister Pratikami came back without Draupadi, he sent Duhsasana into Gandhari's apartments, where Draupadi had gone to plead for help: thus the queen of the Pandavas was dragged by her hair down to the assembly hall. Only one of the Kurus, Vikarna, stood up to defend Draupadi, saying that because Yudhishtira had already lost his own freedom before losing his wife's, he had no right to decide for her. Besides, Yudhisthira had not consulted his brothers, who also had a say in their own freedom and in Draupadi's. Furthermore, Sakuni had violated the rule by which each player must choose the stake freely. When Vidura and the other elders also supported Vikarna's speech and declared the game invalid, Karna stood up and said than in any case the Pandavas had lost everything they owned, including their expensive attire: Duryodhana was therefore entitled to collect their clothing. Duhsasana grabbed Draupadi's *sari* to disrobe her, but miraculously the cloth kept expanding, so that the queen still had sufficient material to cover herself.

Puzzled by the extraordinary event and scared by Bhima's oaths of revenge, Dhritarastra pacified Draupadi and annuled the game, giving the Pandavas permission to return home to Indraprastha. Duryodhana protested and called his cousins back for another game: the stake was a 12 year exile in the forest, plus an additional year to be spent incognito. Playing a second time against the fixed dice, Yudhisthira was defeated and the 5 brothers



left in exile with their wife, while Kunti remained at Hastinapura with Vidura.

Accompanied by Dhaumya and by a great number of subjects, the Pandavas reached Pramanakoti tirtha on the Ganges bank, where they asked the crowd to go back to their homes. Many, especially the *brahmanas*, decided to spend the night there anyway, and the next morning Yudhishthira was worried thinking of how he would be able to feed all his guests. On the advice of Dhaumya (the Pandavas' court priest) the king worshiped Surya and obtained an "inexhaustible pot" (*akshaya patra*), a copper casserole that once a day supplied unlimited quantities of food, stopping only when Draupadi herself had finished eating. After breakfast the Pandavas resumed their journey and reached Kamyavana.

In the meantime in the capital Dhritarastra was musing on the threats uttered by Bhima, who had said he would tear Duhsasana apart to drink his blood and remove his arms that had violently dragged Draupadi, and he would shatter Duryodhana's legs that had been shown to Draupadi with heavy sexual allusions.

The old regent sent for Vidura hoping for some comfort, but he got the exactly opposite effect, because his brother openly reprimanded him. Irritated, Dhritarastra told Vidura to go away and Vidura left the capital to go and stay with the Pandavas in the forest. Karna, too, tracked the Pandavas with the intention of assassinating them, but he was dissuaded by Vyasa, who went to talk to him while he was going into the forest.

On the third day of their stay at Kamyavana, the Pandavas killed the Rakshasa Kirmira, that had attacked them. Later on Krishna came to see them, accompanied by many Yadus. Draupadi vented her feelings, bursting into tears and telling Krishna about the offenses and the violence they had suffered: Krishna comforted her promising that Duryodhana and his allies would all be killed by the Pandavas, and that he would help them in all possible ways. "If I had been there, I would have prevented that shameful dice game," he told her, "but I was in Dvaraka fighting off Salva's attacks."

Subhadra and Abhimanyu left with Krishna to go and stay in Dvaraka, while the sons of Draupadi went with Dhristadyumna to Panchala, and then the Pandavas moved to Dvaitavana on the bank of the Sarasvati river to live in the company of the Rishis, such as Markandeya Rishi.

During that period Vyasa went to see them to discuss about the preparations for the war that would inevitably come; he told them that Duryodhana had already secured the military support of Bhurisrava, Asvatthama, Karna, Jayadratha, Bhishma and Drona, and reminded Arjuna that he still had to get weapons from Indra and the Pasupata astra from Shiva. Vyasa taught Arjuna the *pratismriti vidya*, that enabled him to evoke Indra, and while the other Pandavas returned to Kamyavana, Arjuna left for the Himalayas to propitiate Shiva.

When he arrived in that region, Arjuna was attacked by a wild boar and was going to shoot it with an arrow, when a hunter from a Kirata tribe (a mongolian ethnic group) stopped him, saying that he had been pursuing the animal first. Both arrows - the hunter's and Arjuna's - hit the boar simultaneously, and the two started to fight. Arjuna was amazed by the military skills of the hunter, and during a pause in the fight he offered a flower garland to the image of Shiva he used to worship, to ask for divine help. Immediately the garland appeared on the hunter's neck and Arjuna realized the hunter was Shiva himself, who had come to test him. Shiva was pleased by Arjuna's humility and devotion, and gifted him with his Pasupata astra, also restoring Arjuna's other weapons that had been destroyed in the fight.

Since Indra's condition had been fulfilled, Arjuna went to Indra's capital Amaravati at Indraloka and remained there for 5 years, also learning the art of dancing from Citrasena, one of the Gandhava chiefs. One of the most beautiful and famous Apsaras, Urvasi, became attracted by Arjuna but he rejected her, treating her with the respect one shows to one's own mother; irritated and frustrated in her desire, Urvasi cursed Arjuna to lose his virility - a curse that Indra modified by reducing its effect to one year only.

As they had not heard from Arjuna for a long time, the Pandavas started to get worried, but Brihadhasva Rishi went to see them and reassured them, also telling the story of Nala and Damayanti, illustrating how patience and loyalty to *dharma* finally bring success in spite of the many difficulties that one may face in life. Narada, too, went to see them and suggested they perform a pilgrimage. Another illustrious visitor, Lomasa Rishi, told them that he had recently seen Arjuna at Indraloka happily engaged to acquire new weapons. Accompanied by Lomasa and Dhaumya, the Pandavas left for a long journey, visiting Naimisharanya, Gaya (in present Bihar), Gangasagara (the Ganges delta in the bay of Bengal), the Vaitarani river and Prabhasa (Somanatha) and listening to the stories of the

great personalities connected to those places. When they reached the Himalayas they met Ghatotkacha, who helped them climb the Gandhamadana hill to visit the *ashrama* of Nara and Narayana Rishi.

One day Draupadi found a *saugandhika* lotus flower and asked Bhima to bring her more; Bhima followed the intense scent of the flowers, but on his way he found a big ape who was resting stretched in the middle of the path. That monkey was actually Hanuman, also son of Vayu like Bhima: pleased by the kind and respectful behavior of Bhima, Hanuman blessed him and promised he would join the Pandavas to help them in the upcoming battle.

During their journey, the Pandavas met Markandeya Rishi again and heard from him the story of the Fish *avatara* and the victory of Subramanya on Mahisasura.

The inspection mentioned in the *Ghoshya yatra Parva* refers to another unsuccessful plan hatched by Duryodhana. With the purpose of humiliating the Pandavas, prince Duryodhana organized a grand display of his opulence for an official journey with the pretext of inspecting the king's cows that were grazing on the pastures at Dvaitavana, not far from the place where the Pandavas lived. In this exercise Duryodhana brought all his family and friends and engaged all the royal retinue, including bejeweled wives and servants carrying a lot of luggage. Unfortunately, the courtisans set up camp in a spot that had already been chosen by Citrasena, chief of the Gandharvas, who easily defeated Duryodhana's small army and captured both Duryodhana and Karna. Informed about the events, Yudhisthira sent Arjuna and Bhima to rescue their cousins and Citrasena, who had recognized Arjuna (his former dance student on Indraloka) was glad to deliver the prisoners to him. Doubly humiliated, Duryodhana had to tolerate Yudhisthira's reprimand, and he was scolded by Bhishma too when he returned to the capital.

In a fresh attempt at revenge, Duryodhana took advantage of the visit of the irritable Rishi Durvasa and sent him to "test" the Pandavas in the forest; Duryodhana reasoned that if Durvasa had arrived there after the miraculous pot had finished its daily work, the Pandavas would have to suffer the wrath of the Rishi who could not be fed.

In that difficult situation Krishna arrived and to the greater perplexity of Draupadi, he asked for food himself. However, there was a higher purpose to that strange playful request: when Draupadi gave him the empty pot, Krishna scratched a bit of vegetables

that was stuck to the bottom and immediately ate it. Precisely at that time, Durvasa and all his followers, who were bathing in the river before lunch, had a strange feeling almost as if they had just finished eating a huge meal. It had been created by Krishna's illusory power, but still they realized they would not be able to eat even a morsel of food, and decided to just leave quietly.

Another day, Draupadi was attacked by Jayadratha (king of Sindhu and husband of Duhsala, Duryodhana's sister), but the Pandavas immediately rescued her. The episode offered the opportunity for a new conversation between Yudhisthira and Markandeya Rishi to glorify women who were extraordinarily faithful to their husband - such as Sita the wife of Rama and Savitri the wife of Satyavan.

Another famous episode in this section is the meeting between Yudhisthira and Yamaraja. The Pandavas were approached by a *brahmana* who had lost his *aranis* (the wooden sticks used to light the fire), taken away by a deer. Pursuing the animal, the Pandavas arrived at a lake and decided to rest. The Yaksha who was the owner of that land demanded adequate answers to his questions before allowing them to take any water.

As no one of his brothers had returned from the lake with the water, Yudhisthira himself finally went there and rescued his brothers by correctly answering the following questions:

- \* how can one become knowledgeable? (by studying the *shastra*)
- \* what is heavier (in the sense of "important") than earth? (mother)
- \* what is higher (in the sense of "noble") than sky? (father)
- \* what supports the sun? (truth)
- \* what knowledge does the *kshatriya* need to perform his duty? (the knowledge of weapons)
- \* what is more numerous than the blades of grass? (thoughts)
- \* what is faster than the wind? (the mind)
- \* what is the best type of wealth? (the knowledge of scriptures)

- \* what loss is not cause of sorrow? (the loss of anger)
- \* what defines a *brahmana*? (sattvic life)
- \* what is the most amazing thing? (people see everybody dies, yet they never really expect they will die, too)
- \* what are people looking for in life? (happiness)
- \* what is the highest value? (compassion)

Pleased, the Yaksha revealed his true identity as Yama and blessed Yudhisthira forecasting his victory in the war.

Indra, too, wanted to help his son Arjuna; he went to Karna and asked him in charity the armor (*kavacha*) and the ear-rings (*kundala*) that protected his life. Although he had been warned in a dream by his father Surya, Karna decided to comply with Indra's request and he asked for the Shakti weapon in exchange. Indra agreed, but warned him that it was just a loan, and he would be able to use that weapon once only.

The fourth main book, the *Virata Parva*, also has 4 minor books about the year of incognito exile spent by the Pandavas at the court of king Virata of Matsya desa. Arjuna wrapped all their weapons in a large bunch and hid them on a *sami* tree near a crematorium, shaping the bunch in such a way that it looked like a dead animal body. Then Yudhisthira took the identity of Kanka, a *brahmana* expert in the scriptures and passionate about dice games, Bhima became Ballava and was hired as chief cook. Arjuna put Urvasi's curse to a good use by becoming the transexual Brihannala and taught dancing to princess Uttara and her maidens in the women's apartments. Under the name of Granthika, Nakula became superintendent to the horses' stables, and Sahadeva as Tantripala took care of the cows. Draupadi took the name of Sairandhri and became the lady in waiting for queen Sudesna. About 3 months later, Virata organized a wrestling tournament and Bhima earned everyone's admiration by answering the challenge of a visiting wrestler, Jumuta, and defeating him in the name of the king.

Trouble arrived when Kichaka, commander in chief of Virata's army and brother to the queen, became attracted by Draupadi's beauty and tried to take advantage of her with the complicity of the queen herself, who ordered her lady in waiting to go to Kichaka's room

on the pretext of an errand. Draupadi appealed to Virata's assembly for protection, but without any result; from their part, the Pandavas could not risk being recognized. That night, Draupadi lured the general to a hall in the palace where Bhima, disguised in female attire, could kill him secretly. On the next day, Draupadi said that Kichaka had been killed by her Gandharva husbands. Terrified, the queen wanted to ban Draupadi from the kingdom, but Draupadi asked for 3 more days before leaving.

The news of those strange events reached Duryodhana's spies, and the Kuru prince organized a surprise attack against Virata aimed at forcing the Pandavas out in the open, which would send them into another long period of exile. Duryodhana' ally, Susharma of Trigarta, attacked Virata's herds from south-est and captured the king who had gone to defend the cows. Ballava immediately went to the rescue, so when Duryodhana attacked the capital from the north side, the only warrior left in the palace was young prince Uttarakumara. Brihannala volunteered to accompany him as a charioteer, and when the prince panicked on the battlefield, Brihannala revealed his identity as Arjuna, recovered his weapons from the *sami* tree and handing the reins to Uttarakumara, fought the aggressors back.

Duryodhana, however, had made a mistake in his calculations and he was distraught and frustrated to learn that the incognito year had just finished when the Pandavas had been tracked. The Kauravas were not in agreement about the strategy to be followed at that point; after a discussion where insults were exchanged, half of the army with the great generals - Karna, Drona, Kripacharya, Bhishma and Asvatthama - stayed to face Arjuna, while one fourth of the army went to guard the cows and the rest returned to the capital with Duryodhana. Arjuna did not stop to fight against the great generals, but rescued the cows and then pursued Duryodhana, challenging him to a fight. Arjuna shot the Sammohana weapon, by which all the warriors became unconscious, and with Uttarakumara's help he collected all their shawls as a trophy.

Because the Pandavas had not yet revealed their true identities to Virata, the king attributed the success of the military expedition to the young prince, and when Kanka praised Brihannala, the king threw the dice into his face in anger. Sairindhri rushed in to collect Kanka's blood before it hit the ground, saying that in that way she had saved the kingdom from a great disgrace. When he learned that the 5 strange personalities at his service were actually the Pandavas, and hearing the true story of the battle from

Uttarakumara, Virata felt ashamed and tried to atone for his offensive behavior by offering them his own kingdom and the hand of his daughter. Yudhisthira accepted the alliance of the Matsya kingdom for the imminent war, and Arjuna suggested that his own son Abhimanyu would be a more suitable husband for the young Uttara, whom he had come to love as a daughter.

The *Udyoga Parva* ("the book of attempts") is about the efforts of the Kauravas and the Pandavas to get ready for the imminent war. Krishna attended the marriage between Uttara and Abhimanyu, and spoke to the various kings in attendance, officially requesting alliance pledges, while Balarama intervened to give a last chance to Duryodhana, and the *purohit* (royal priest) of Drupada was sent as a messenger, too.

Krishna returned to Dvaraka and there in the same day he received the visit of both Duryodhana and Arjuna: on that occasion Duryodhana was the first to enter the room where Krishna was sleeping, and sat near the head of the bed, while Arjuna respectfully remained at the foot of the bed.

Krishna woke up and seeing Arjuna, invited him to present his request, but Duryodhana protested, saying he had come first and therefore he had priority in presenting his request for alliance in the war. Krishna solved the problem by offering them to choose between his large army and his own personal presence; however he would just act as advisor and not as a warrior and he would abstain from fighting. Arjuna chose to have Krishna at his side as his charioteer, and Duryodhana was very happy to get the army. On the other hand, Balarama completely withdrew from the scene and left for a pilgrimage until the end of the war.

King Salya of Madra desa, brother of Madri (Pandu's second wife) went to Upaplavya camp to offer his alliance to the Pandavas, but Duryodhana rushed to the spot and organized a grand welcome for Salya and his army, pretending to be in charge of the camp. Pleased, Salya offered a boon to the camp organizer and Duryodhana immediately asked for his alliance in the war. Aghast, Salya went to Yudhisthira to consult with him, and it was decided that Salya would take Duryodhana's side in the army but he would do his best to discourage Karna during the battle.

There were many other discussions: in the assembly of the Kauravas, Bhishma was favorable to returning the kingdom to the Pandavas, while Karna proposed that they

should be sent into exile for another 12 years. Dhritarastra suggested that the Pandavas should be offered the choice between going into the forest and moving to Dvaraka with Krishna. Sanjaya and Vidura went privately to Dhritarastra reminding him of his responsibilities, and since that was not enough, they asked the great *sannyasi* Sanat sujata to talk to him and convince him to change his ways, as we read in the *Sanat sujata Parva*.

In the meantime in the Pandava's camp, Krishna decided to personally go as a messenger to the Kurus' capital: the journey is described in the section entitled *Bhagavat Yana*, "the Lord's mission". After dining and spending the night in Vidura's house instead of attending the official banquet organized by Dhritarastra, Krishna went to the Kurus' assembly for a last attempt at reconciliation. Duryodhana declared that he would not give the Pandavas even the smallest piece of land and stormed out angrily.

Dhritarastra commented that it was impossible for him to intervene in any way to change Duryodhana's decision, and Krishna replied that sometimes to save a dynasty one has to sacrifice a member of the family. Krishna suggested that the war could still be avoided by delivering Duryodhana, Sakuni, Karna and Duhsasana as prisoners in the hands of Yudhisthira, and Duryodhana was informed by his spies. Furious, the prince went to consult with his supporters and started to organize Krishna's arrest. Laughing, Krishna showed his universal form to Dhritarastra, Drona, Bhishma, Vidura and Sanjaya before leaving the assembly, and declared that now the Kauravas were the only ones responsible for the consequences of their own choices.

Before returning to the Pandavas, Krishna went to Karna to reveal him the secret of his birth and convince him to join his brothers, but Karna could not betray his loyalty towards those who had always supported him. Vidura and Kunti too tried to convince Karna, supported by Surya's personal witness, but to no avail: all Karna could do was to promise to only kill Arjuna, so that Kunti would still be left with 5 sons.

The last envoy was the king of Uluka (from whose name the *Uluka Dutagamana Parva*, or "the book of Uluka's mission"), who had become a vassal of Yudhisthira during Arjuna's *dig-vijaya*. This king of Uluka, named Vrihanta, should not be confused with Uluka the son of Sakuni.

When all the attempts at reconciliation had failed, the armies assembled at Kurukshetra, a famous holy place about 160 km from the capital of the Indian nation (anciently known



as Hastinapura). The ancient circle of 128 km includes a great number of temples and sacred lakes that were pilgrimage places even before Krishna's appearance, since the *avatara* Parasurama had gone there to bathe for purification after his military campaign against the *kshatriyas* that had revolted against Dharma. According to the *Matsya purana* this was the most sacred region in Dvapara yuga and one of the 16 *mahajanapadas* ("most important places") in Jambudvipa (planet Earth).

The precise place of the ancient battle is known as the place presently called Jyotisar, near Thanesar, Kurukshetra district, in the Indian State of Haryana, but the time of the battle is very controversial. Based on the planetary references quoted in the text of the *Mahabharata* itself, and particularly on the rare event of the 3 subsequent eclipses in one single month, various scholars have proposed different dates. According to S. Balakrishna the date is 2559 BCE, while according to I. N. Iyengar is 1478 BCE, according to B. N. Achar is 3067, according to P. V. Holey is precisely 13th November 3143, while according to P. V. Vartak it is 16th October 5561 and for K. Sadananda the 22 November 3067 - always before the Current Era.

Traditionally the hindu lunar calendar celebrates the "appearance" of *Bhagavad gita* on the day of Margasirsa sukla trayodasi, that may fall at the end of October, in November or even in early December, according to the coincidences with the solar calendar; the differences of opinion on the precise year are due to the fact that the planetary positions described in the text have occurred several times in history. Conventional historians and archeologists tend to shift the Kurukshetra battle towards 1500 BCE, if not later. Unfortunately the dating of historical events in India is subject to the confusion created by the conventional western academia, that tends to reject the idea of an antiquity greater of that afforded by the conventional calculation on the development of the ancient civilizations and the passage from a "pre-history" where all human beings were uncivilized to a "history" where mankind started to develop culturally, and more precisely in regard to Indian history from the supposed dates of the so-called "aryan invasion".

Another ideological obstacle is the disbelief of conventional historians towards the lists of kings included in the vedic scriptures. They calculate that there were 18 dynasties over 26 generations (and thus about 1050 years) between the birth of Maharaja Parikshit or his grand-grandchild Adhisimakrishna and the crowning of Mahapadma Nanda, that

historians set in 382 BCE. Of course this calculation is based on only 18 years for each reign, which is a very low estimate.

Vedic Tradition does not give much importance to precise historical dates, if not to connect the circumstances of a particular event with cyclic factors, as for example the beginning of Kali yuga or the occurrence of particular positions of the planets and the stars influencing the events on earth. More relevant factors are those referring to the political and military situation of the various kingdoms and dynasties of the times, that all participated to the battle with the only exception of Rukmi (the brother of Rukmini wife of Krishna) whose alliance was rejected by both sides.

In the Pandavas' army, besides the 5 brothers and their 5 sons from Draupadi, we also find Abhimanyu (the 16 year old son of Subhadra and Arjuna), Iravan (son of the Nagini Ulupi and Arjuna) and Ghatotkacha (son of the Rakshasi Hidimbi and Bhima). There was the entire family of Draupadi - Drupada king of Panchala, Dhrstadyumna the son of Drupada specifically born for that war, Sikhhandi(ni) the adopted son of Drupada, and the other sons of Draupada named Dhristaketu, Yudhamanyu, Satyajit and Uttamauja. There was king Virata of Matsya desa with his sons Sveta, Uttara and Sankha, Kuntibhoja (Kunti's adoptive father) and his son Purujit, Dhristaketu son of Sisupala and king of Cedi, Sahadeva son of Jarasandha and king of Magadha, and Satyaki and Cekitana of the Yadavas.

On the Pandavas' side there was also the king of Kasi (Varanasi) who was a vassal of the kingdom of Koshala (Ayodhya), Sarangadhvaja the king of Pandya (with capital at Madurai, south of the present Tamil Nadu, from river Kaveri to Kanyakumari), the king of Telinga or Telangana (presently Tamil Nadu) and 5 princes of Kekaya, headed by the eldest Brihadkshatra, who had been exiled from their kingdom. There were also the generals of Parama Kamboja (present Tajikistan) who did not have a king; they belonged to the "external" territories or Bahlikas that did not follow the Vedic system (Kirata, Gandhara, Barbara, Yavana, Saka, etc).

The Pandavas' army had 7 *akshauhinis* or batallions for a total of 1,530,900 warriors, plus a non-specified number of non-organized troops coming from the barbarians' provinces. One *akshauhini* consists of 21,870 war chariots, 21,870 war elephants, 65,610 horses and 109,350 foot soldiers.

In the army of Duryodhana, that commanded 11 *akshauhinis* (2,405,708 warriors) there were also his 99 brothers with their sons. There was the old and extremely powerful warrior Bhishma, his uncle Bahlika (Santanu's brother), Somadatta son of Bahlika and Bhurisrava son of Somadatta. There were the *acharya* Drona and his son Asvatthama, and Kripacharya the brother of Drona's wife. Sakuni (brother of Gandhari the mother of Duryodhana) was there with his son Uluka and several other relatives from the Gandhara kingdom, and there was also Sudakshina of Kamboja (brother of Duryodhana's wife). All Duryodhana's friends were there, beginning with Jayadratha the king of Panjab, Sindhu, Sauvira (Abhira) and Sibi (this is why he was also called Saibya), Bhagadatta the king of Pragjyotisha with his terrifying war elephants, Susharma of Trigarta with his brothers and their sons, Brihadbala and Vatsaraja of Kosala, king Nila of Mahishmati, the other Kekaya princes that were the rivals of Brihadkshatra, and Vinda and Anuvinda of Avanti in Madhyadesa. King Salya of Madra, brother of Madri, had been forced to join the Kauravas, while Kritavarma and his son Matrikavat had been instructed by Krishna to fight in favor of Duryodhana leading Krishna's personal army, called Narayani sena and consisting of 1 million cowherd men coming from Mathura. Among the other supporters of Duryodhanas there were the Rakshasas called Alambusha and Alayudha, the tribal king of Kalinga, and several chieftains of the barbarians' territories, such as Kamboja, Yavana, Saka, Mahishaka, Tushara, Dravida, Usinara, Pulinda and Kolisarpa.

Karna king of Anga, his son Vrishasena and the other sons of Adiratha took part in the battle only after Bhishma's fall.

The rules of the *kshatriyas'* chivalry code would be gradually broken in the course of the war, thus marking the beginning of the sad period of the Kali yuga. According to the rules of the *dharma yuddha* ("battle according to the ethical principles") the fight cannot begin before sunrise or continue after sunset. Each warrior can only engage a warrior of equal strength, both in skills and in weaponry. It is not allowed to use force against a non-fighter (human or animal) or against anyone who has no weapons, has surrendered or lost consciousness, or is looking in a different direction.

The ***Bhishma Parva*** ("the book of Bhishma") is the first section of the epic's core that we mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Before the start of the great battle, Vyasa went to meet Dhritarastra and offered him the blessing of becoming able to see what was happening at Kurukshetra; when Dhritarastra refused to accept it, saying that he did not

want to risk seeing the death of his own sons, Vyasa gave this gift to Sanjaya. In this way Sanjaya was able to describe to Dhritarastra all the events of the war.

The description starts with the list of the various armies coming from all regions of the earth and a study of their kingdoms in the sections entitled *Jambu-khanda Nirmana Parva* and *Bhumi Parva*, respectively regarding the region of Jambudvipa and Earth in general (called Bhumi).

After describing the two armies, Sanjaya watched Arjuna, who was distraught at the idea that the imminent battle would see all those people killing each others, although they were brothers, sons, friends, allies, teachers, relatives and parents. Besides, an enormous number of kings and warriors would die, thus depriving their kingdoms of the necessary protection in future.

The battle could not be avoided and was meant to protect the kingdom from bad rulers, but the demise of so many men would throw their families and kingdoms in a situation of great difficulty and suffering, and for people it would become harder to live in an ethical way and progress at individual and collective levels.

Faced with such a difficult dilemma, Arjuna wondered what was the purpose of life, the supreme principle that a human being should follow in his actions.

Krishna comforted and instructed Arjuna revealing to him the science of yoga in *Bhagavad Gita* ("the Lord's song"), consisting of 700 verses divided into 18 chapters:

1. *Arjuna visada yoga*: the yoga of Arjuna's sorrow
2. *Sankhya yoga*: the yoga of analysis and enumeration
3. *Karma yoga*: the yoga of action
4. *Jnana yoga*: the yoga of knowledge
5. *Sannyasa yoga*: the yoga of renunciation
6. *Dhyana yoga*: the yoga of meditation
7. *Vijnana yoga*: the yoga of applied knowledge

8. *Taraka brahma yoga*: the yoga of liberating spiritual consciousness
9. *Raja guhya yoga*: the yoga of the supreme secret
10. *Vibhuti yoga*: the yoga of powers
11. *Visva rupa darsana yoga*: the yoga of contemplation of the universal form
12. *Bhakti yoga*: the yoga of devotion
13. *Prakriti-purusha-viveka yoga*: the yoga of understanding nature as distinct from the personal principle
14. *Guna traya vibhaga yoga*: the yoga of distinguishing between the 3 *gunas*
15. *Purushottama yoga*: the yoga of the Supreme Person
16. *Daivasura sampad vibhaga yoga*: the yoga of distinguishing between the divine and demoniac characteristics
17. *Sraddha traya vibhaga yoga*: the yoga of distinguishing between the 3 forms of faith
18. *Moksha yoga*: the yoga of liberation

Here are some verses from *Bhagavad gita*:

"The embodied soul who lives in this body (passes from one form to the other) as from childhood to youth to old age, and similarly at the end of this body (he passes on). A wise person is not confused by this (passage). Just like a man abandons clothes that have become torn or worn out and acquires other and new clothes, in the same way one leaves the damaged body and accepts another new body. Through Buddhi Yoga one can become free already in this life from both bad and good (actions/reactions). Therefore you should engage in yoga, the best way to deal with actions." (2.13, 22, 50)

"The Prajapati originally manifested the *praja* (creatures) together with the *yajna* (the sacred action) and said, 'By these (sacred actions) you will become more and more prosperous; these (sacred actions) will supply you with whatever you desire. The Devas will be pleased/fed by you through these (sacred actions), and they (the Devas) will

bless/feed you (in return); in this way both sides will reciprocate in a positive way and you all will attain the highest benefit. Satisfied by *yajna* (sacred action), the Devas will give you whatever pleasures you desire. One who eats what is given by them without offering anything in return is just a thief." (3.10, 11, 12)

"A Yogi should constantly practice (meditation) on the Self by living alone in a secluded place, carefully keeping the mind and the consciousness under control, free from expectations and from attachments (to material acquisitions)." (6.10)

"This knowledge is supreme and deep, the purest and most sublime knowledge, and is understood through direct experience. It is eternal and in accordance with *dharma*, and its application brings happiness." (9.2)

"Humility, freedom from arrogance and hostility, tolerance, simplicity, the personal relationship with the spiritual teacher, cleanliness, steadiness, self-control, renunciation, the absence of false (bodily) identification, the perception of suffering in the cycle of deaths and births, detachment from home and family, equanimity in favorable and unfavorable circumstances, constant dedication to spiritual life, the desire to live in a quiet and isolated place, detachment from the mass of people, the understanding of the importance of spiritual realization and the effort to understand Reality: all this is knowledge, and the rest is nothing but ignorance." (13.8-12)

The text of *Bhagavad gita* ends showing Arjuna in a balanced state of mind, determined to perform his duty, but when Arjuna had become free from his doubts, it was Yudhisthira's turn to do something that amazed the warriors assembled for the battle. Casting off his weapons and armor, he descended from his chariot and walked towards the Kurus' line to offer his homage to the elders of the family and his teachers, and ask their permission to engage in the battle. After receiving the blessings of Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and Salya, Yudhisthira returned to his chariot and the battle finally started.

The *vyuha* chosen by Dhristadhyumna (commander in chief of the Pandavas' army) was the one called *Vajra*, "lightning" or "diamond", as a response to the *Garuda vyuha*, "the eagle" of the Kauravas. In the *Vajra vyuha* the speed of attack is particularly important and therefore the first line utilizes short-range weapons, while the archers are in the second line. In the *Garuda vyuha* the kings march ahead, the horsemen protect the wings and the elephants constitute the external perimeter of the body. Bhishma was on his

chariot in the middle of the battle formation, as if riding an eagle. Arjuna's son Abhimanyu, who was only 16 years old, penetrated the Kurus' formation and attacked Bhishma, while Salya was engaged against Virata's sons - Uttara and Sveta - who were finally killed also with Bhishma's help.

On the second day of the battle, the Pandavas arranged their forces in the *Krauncha vyuha* ("heron") with Draupada at the head and Yudhisthira at the tail. Like on the previous day, the Kauravas were facing west and the Pandavas east. The Kauravas, too, used the same formation, with Bhurisrava and Salya on the left wing and Somadatta and Kamboja on the right wing. Arjuna realized that the priority was to stop Bhishma and launched an attack, but Bhishma was well protected and the clash went on for many hours. In the meantime Drona and Dhristadyumna were engaged in a similar duel; at some point Bhima rushed to help Dhristadyumna, whose bow had been broken. Duryodhana sent the army of the Kalinga king to attack Bhima, but almost all these soldiers were killed. Satyaki was finally able to eliminate Bhishma's charioteer, and the uncontrolled horses dragged him away from the battlefield.

On the third day Bhishma again arrayed the *Garuda vyuha* but riding at its head, while the Pandavas' army was arranged in the *Chandrakala vyuha* ("moon sickle"), with Bhima and Arjuna respectively at the right and left points. The Kauravas focused their attack against Arjuna, who fought back by creating a fortification of arrows. Abhimanyu and Satyaki engaged Sakuni and his Gandhara army, while Bhima and his son Ghatotkacha attacked Duryodhana at the rear; when Duryodhana was hit and lost consciousness, his charioteer carried him away from the battle and his soldiers dispersed. When he awoke, Duryodhana rushed back into the fight, venting his anger against Bhishma and accusing him of not putting sufficient effort against the Pandavas. Smitten by the unjust remark, Bhishma renewed his attacks, while Arjuna was still reluctant to fight against him.

On the fourth day many of Duryodhana's brothers attacked Abhimanyu, and Arjuna and Bhima went to help him. Bhima jumped to the ground and held his mace up to face a horde of war elephants, and in the battle he killed 8 of Duryodhana's brothers, but was hit in the chest by an arrow. Ghatotkacha rushed to his rescue and defeated Bhagadatta. At the end of the day Duryodhana again complained with Bhishma, but Bhishma replied that the Pandavas could not be defeated because they were loyal to *dharma*.

On the fifth day the Kauravas took the *Makara vyuha* ("crocodile formation") and the Pandavas the *Syena vyuha* ("hawk formation"). Satyaki and his 10 sons were attacked by Bhurisrava; only Satyaki survived, rescued by Bhima. Bhishma arrived to engage Bhima, but he withdrew when Sikhandi arrived. There was also a clash between Arjuna and Asvatthama.

On the sixth day the Pandavas took the *Makara vyuha* and the Kauravas the *Krauncha vyuha*, headed by Dhristadyumna and Drona respectively. Duryodhana was seriously wounded in a clash with Bhima and in the night he had to be medicated by Bhishma. On the seventh day the *Mandala vyuha* ("orbit") of the Kauravas was opposed to the Pandavas' *Vajra vyuha*. Drishtadyumna defeated Duryodhana, Yudhisthira defeated Srutayu and Sahadeva defeated Salya, while Drona prevailed on Virata, Bhurisrava on Dhristaketu, and Bhagadatta on Ghatotkacha. Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyotisha (present Assam), was famous for his army of elephants headed by a gigantic pachiderm named Supratika.

On the eighth day the Kauravas used the *Urmi vyuha* ("ocean waves formation") and the Pandavas the *Sringata vyuha* ("horns formation"). Bhima killed 8 more of Duryodhana's brothers, while Alambusha killed Iravan, the son of Arjuna and the Nagini Ulupi, who had killed 6 sons of Sakuni and defeated Sakuni himself. As soon as he heard about Iravan's death, Ghatotkacha started slaughtering the Kaurava army and engaged in a fight with Bhagadatta who had come to face him. Helped by Bhima and Arjuna, Ghatotkacha fought back the enemies. That night Duryodhana complained again and told Bhishma he had to make some more efforts.

On the ninth day the Kauravas arranged the *Sarvatobhadra vyuha* ("good on all sides") to protect Bhishma. Abhimanyu defeated Alambusha but was attacked by Bhishma. Arjuna fought against Drona: to his Vayuvastra ("wind weapon") Drona opposed the Sailastra ("stone weapon"). Krishna encouraged Arjuna to kill Bhishma, but without much success; at some point Krishna became angry and personally rushed against Bhishma, armed with a chariot wheel, but he was stopped by Arjuna who reminded him his promise of not engaging in the battle.

Then Krishna suggested that they should go and ask Bhishma himself how the Pandavas would be able to defeat him: Bhishma simply replied that he would not fight against a



woman. Thus on the tenth day of the battle, the Pandavas put Sikhandi/Sikhandini at the head of their formation, and behind him (her) Arjuna started to shoot arrows at Bhishma. Finally the great warrior fell, his body pierced by so many arrows that it did not even touch the ground.

The fight halted and both Kauravas and Pandavas gathered around Bhishma to offer their homage to the great fallen hero. Bhishma asked Arjuna for some water and a head rest, and Arjuna complied by shooting some arrows into the ground and evoking Mother Ganges. Bhishma had the power to choose the moment of his own death and had promised Santanu that he would not die without ensuring the protection of Hastinapura, therefore he remained in that position until the end of the war, while the fight moved to another area to avoid disturbing him. That night, when everybody returned to their tents, Karna went to see Bhishma to apologize for his past enmity and offer his homage, and Bhishma reminded him that he was son of Kunti. Tormented at that thought, Karna begged Bhishma not to reveal that secret to anyone, and Bhishma promised he would only tell Duryodhana, to make him realize the extent of Karna's affection and loyalty.

The ***Drona Parva*** begins the evening of the tenth day of the war, with the consecration of Drona as commander in chief of the Kaurava army (*Dronabhisheka*) on Karna's request.

On the eleventh day the Kauravas were arranged in the *Sakata vyuha* ("cart formation") and the Pandavas in the *Krauncha vyuha* ("heron formation") with Karna and Arjuna respectively at the head of the two armies. Drona organized a plan to capture Yudhisthira as a hostage, but the attempt failed thanks to Arjuna's intervention. That night Drona and Duryodhana spoke in the assembly on how to neutralize Arjuna, and Susharma the king of Trigarta swore in front of the fire that he was determined to kill Arjuna even at the cost of his own life. Susharma was tied by a blood pact (*samsaptaka*) to his 3 brothers and 35 sons, and all of them engaged in battle against Arjuna, while Drona tried to capture Yudhisthira. Karna engaged in a fight against Virata, Bhima defeated Salya in a mace duel, Vrishasena (the son of Karna) fought against Satanika (the son of Nakula) and Abhimanyu had several duels, too.

On the 12th day the Samsaptakas (Susharma and his family) rode at the head of the *Chandrakala vyuha* ("half moon formation") to attack Arjuna, and Arjuna engaged them in battle, entrusting Satyajit (Drupada's brother) with the protection of Yudhisthira. While

Arjuna launched his Vayuvastra, Drona attacked Yudhisthira, defeating the army of Drupada and killing Satyajit, Satanika, Kshema, Dridhasena and Vasudana. Yudhisthira barely escaped while Bhima, Abhimanyu and Satyaki were busy fighting off the attack of Bhagadatta and his elephants. The 3 Pandava warriors lost their chariots but survived the attack; Bhima sneaked under the elephant Supratika, that started wheeling around trying to catch him. Fearing that Bhima had been killed, Yudhisthira launched Drupada's army to the rescue, but Bhagadatta killed Dasarna and Ruciparva. Yudhisthira too intervened but without success and finally Arjuna arrived and knocked off Bhagadatta's weapons; Bhagadatta evoked the Vaishnavastra against Arjuna, but Krishna stood up and absorbed the missile into his own chest. Finally Arjuna killed Bhagadatta and his elephant, then he turned to face Sakuni's brothers Vrishala and Achala, downing them both with a single arrow. Sakuni rushed on, but he was defeated by Arjuna. Finally there was a duel between Arjuna and Karna - Karna shot the Agneyastra ("fire weapon") and Arjuna replied with the Varunastra ("water weapon").

On the 13th day the Samsaptakas engaged Arjuna in the north corner of the battlefield, while Drona advanced against Yudhisthira. The other Pandavas were busy trying to break Drona's *Chakra vyuha* ("disc formation"), but that secret was only known to very few people: Krishna and his son Pradyumna, and Arjuna and his son Abhimanyu - who only knew how to get inside, but not how to get out.

In the section entitled *Abhimanyu-vadha Parva* ("the killing of Abhimanyu") Yudhisthira asked Arjuna's son to help them, promising they would all immediately follow him. Abhimanyu broke into the middle of the enemy formation, fighting valiantly and killing the son of Asmaka and the brother of Salya, and sending Salya himself unconscious. The Pandavas tried to follow him but their path was obstructed by Jayadratha, who closed the formation again. Abhimanyu was then surrounded: Karna hit him from the back breaking his bow, Kritavarma killed his horses, Kripacharya killed the two charioteers, and Drona destroyed his sword. When Abhimanyu remained disarmed and defenseless, he was simultaneously attacked by all the great generals - Drona, Kripa, Karna, Asvatthama, Kritvarma and Brihadbala - plus a great number of other warriors. Abhimanyu fought very bravely: he killed Brihadbala (king of Koshala), Asvaketu (son of the king of Magadha) and Lakshmana the son of Duryodhana. He fought off the attack from Duhsasana, broke Karna's bow, killed Vatsatiya, Satyasrava, Rukmaratha and

Vrindaraka, but in the end he had to succumb to the number of his assailants. Finally the son of Duhsasana smashed his head with the mace, finishing him off. One of Duryodhana's brothers, Yuyutsu, was so disgusted by this behavior shown by the Kauravas that he abandoned the war.

Arjuna returned to the camp after defeating the Samsaptakas; when he was informed about Abhimanyu's death, he was overwhelmed by the pain and swore that he would kill Jayadratha before the sunset of the next day - failing which, he would commit suicide. Duryodhana's spies informed the Kauravas, who set Jayadratha's protection as their top priority.

On the 14th day the Kauravas created a combined formation composed by the *Sakata vyuha* ("the cart") in front, the *Padma vyuha* ("the lotus") in the back, and the *Suci mukha* ("the needle") in the middle of the *Padma vyuha* to protect Jayadratha. Arjuna easily penetrated the *Sakata vyuha* defended by Durmarshana (one of Duryodhana's brothers) and defeated Duhsasana and his elephants. Krishna advised Arjuna not to stop to fight against Drona but to find Jayadratha first. Kritavarma, Sudakshina and Srutayuddha faced Arjuna to stop him and Drona joined them, but Arjuna shot a Brahmastra and wiped them away. Srutayuddha threw his mace against Krishna but the weapon bounced back and killed him instead. Arjuna penetrated more deeply into the enemy formation, and killed Srutayu and Acyutayu.

Duryodhana procured a *mantra* armor from Drona and stood in front of Jayadratha to protect him, but Arjuna launched the Manavastra ("the mind weapon"). To defend Jayadratha then came 8 *maharathis* ("great chariots", meaning generals that could each engage 1000 warriors simultaneously), supported by many military divisions. On that day Arjuna and Satyaki alone killed 7 *akshauhinis* of the Kaurava army in order to accomplish their mission.

In the meantime Drona was still trying to take Yudhisthira prisoner, and the fight became furious on both sides. Ghatotkacha killed Alambusha, Drona killed Brihatkshatra, Dristaketu (the son of Sisupala), Sahadeva (the son of Jarasandha) and Kshatradharma (the son of Dhristadyumna). Yudhisthira was worried about Arjuna and sent first Satyaki and then Bhima to help. Satyaki faced Kritavarma, Drona, Duryodhana and his brothers including Duhsasana, but although he defeated Duhsasana, he did not kill him because he

wanted to leave him for Bhima. Karna tried to stop Bhima, helped by Duryodhana's brothers, but Bhima killed 32 of them; in the end Karna defeated Bhima, but honoring the promise he made to Kunti he did not kill him.

Satyaki kept advancing and had almost reached Arjuna, but he was stopped by Bhurisrava: he fell and was about to be beheaded, when Krishna told Arjuna to intervene to stop that action, that was against the rules. Arjuna shot an arrow, cutting off Bhurisrava's hand: Bhurisrava complained about the unannounced attack, but Arjuna reminded him how Abhimanyu had been killed and Bhurisrava, recognizing his fault, stopped fighting and sat in meditation. Satyaki rushed against him and beheaded him before anyone could stop him, then he attacked Karna to distract him from protecting Jayadratha.

The sun was going to set and Jayadratha was still protected by a great number of warriors, therefore Krishna launched his Sudarshana disc to cover the sun: darkness fell and Jayadratha, thinking that night had come, finally felt safe. Then on Krishna's order, Arjuna shot the Pasupata astra he had received from Shiva: Jayadratha's head was cut off and flew away. Following Krishna's instructions, Arjuna shot a series of arrows that bounced Jayadratha's head far away and off the ground, to the place where Vriddhakshatra, Jayadratha's father, was sitting in meditation for the evening rituals in the Kauravas' encampment. Thus the head fell on to Vriddhakshatra's lap, and when he stood up it rolled to the ground: the curse aimed at anyone who would make Jayadratha's head fall to the ground rebounded on the same person who had pronounced it, and it was Vriddhakshatra's head to burst into one thousand pieces.

Krishna recalled the Sudarshana and the sun shone again before setting, and Arjuna recalled the Pasupata astra. Duryodhana panicked and Drona agreed to continue the battle in spite of the night fall. Bhima killed Bahlika and 12 more of Duryodhana's brothers, and Satyaki killed Somadatta.

Karna launched a powerful attack but Krishna prevented Arjuna from facing him, sending Ghatotkacha to fight him back: the young Rakshasa killed the horses of Karna's chariot and the Rakshasa Halayudha who protected him. Karna realized he was in serious danger and was forced to use the Shakti weapon he had received from Indra and was keeping aside with the purpose of killing Arjuna.

On his part, Ghatotkacha realized he would not be able to repel the Shakti. He accepted his imminent death, but he wanted to do as much damage as possible to the Kauravas with his own demise, so he expanded his body to such a size that when he fell, he crushed and killed over 400 thousand warriors. The death of brave Ghatotkacha gave great pain to the Pandavas and gladdened Duryodhana, who finally allowed the fight to stop. The warriors lay down to rest on the battlefield without returning to the camp, and Duryodhana took the opportunity to go and accuse Drona of favoring the Pandavas - the same accusation he had repeatedly thrown at Bhishma.

At that time Drona realized how his life and his choices had been dictated by the wrong motivations, and became disgusted with himself. Here end the two sections entitled *Jayadratha vadha* and *Ghatotkacha vadha*.

The next section, entitled *Drona vadha* ("the killing of Drona") is the most important among the books dealing with the war. Almost all the warriors on both sides are killed here. Duryodhana divided the Kaurava army in two parts, personally leading one and leaving Drona in charge of the other. On the 15th day of the battle Duryodhana and Satyaki, who used to be good friends, faced each other in a duel, both weeping on their shattered relationship. Satyaki defeated Duryodhana but left the camp and did not fight against him any more.

Drona raged on, killing Virata, Drupada and his 3 grandsons, reawakening the desire for revenge in Dhristadyumna, who had taken birth specifically to kill Drona. But how to defeat the great warrior?

Krishna suggested to weaken Drona's determination by leading him to believe that his son Asvatthama was dead. The Pandavas were hesitating to tell a lie but Krishna insisted, asking Bhima to kill a war elephant that was named Asvatthama, and to announce his death loudly. The Sapta Rishis ("seven Rishi") appeared on the battlefield and asked Drona to withdraw from the battle, because his behavior was not befitting a *brahmana*, but Drona did not listen to them. He rather approached Yudhisthira to ask him confirmation about Asvatthama's death, because he knew that Yudhisthira had never violated the principle of truthfulness. On Krishna's order, Yudhisthira repeated loudly, "Asvatthama is dead", and then murmured, *naro va kunjaro va*, "whether he was a human being or an elephant". Seeing that Drona was distraught, Dhristadyumna took the

opportunity to attack him; Drona defended himself with the Vaitasmika astra, a weapon that is used at close range, but Dhristadyumna was protected by Satyaki. Then Bhima turned against Drona, reminding him of his bad choices and telling him that his son's death had destroyed all his reasons to continue living. Drona recognized the truth of that statement and taking leave from Duryodhana, Karna and Kripa, dropped his weapons and sat down to prepare for death. Finally Dhristadyumna beheaded him with his sword and Drona died. Arjuna felt deep sorrow for that death.

When he heard about the circumstances of his father's death, Asvatthama launched the Narayanastra, a mystic weapon that creates thousands of arrows with a burning tip, and fiery metal discs. Krishna told Yudhishthira that all the warriors needed to offer their homage to that weapon by lowering their own weapons; only Bhima did not comply, saying that since the Narayanastra had been contaminated by Asvatthama it did not deserve to be respected. However, he was saved by Krishna and Arjuna. Then Arjuna challenged Asvatthama to a duel - Asvatthama launched the Agneyastra and Arjuna fought him back using the Brahmastra. At that time Vyasa appeared on the battlefield to inform Asvatthama he would never be able to kill Arjuna and Krishna, who are directly Nara and Narayana.

The next book, entitled *Karna Parva*, is not accompanied by other sections. After Drona's death, Karna became the commander in chief of whatever was left of the Kaurava army; on the 16th day the battle became a confused fight among the survivors, and there was no military strategy or arrangements any more.

Karna defeated Nakula but he let him go unscathed, to the great surprise of Duryodhana, who abstained from reproaching him anyway. Tormented by his own inner conflicts, Karna went to Duryodhana in the middle of the night and asked him to give him an exceptional charioteer, so that he would be able to kill Arjuna. When Duryodhana assigned him king Salya, Salya was outraged, but as a clever politician Duryodhana was able to pacify him with prayers and glorifications, and with the idea that he wanted to give Karna a charioteer that was even more powerful than Krishna. Salya agreed to take that position, on the condition that Karna strictly avoided any stupid behavior, recriminations, boasting, or blaming.

Thus in the 17th day Karna dueled with Arjuna, while Salya - loyal to the promise to Yudhisthira - kept sabotaging and hurting his feelings, so much that finally Karna begged him to stop talking. In the presence of Karna, Bhima attacked Duhsasana and smashed his chariot with the mace, then he grabbed him tearing his right arm from the shoulder, ripped his chest open and put his mouth to the blood that gushed forth. Collecting some of that blood, he carried it to Draupadi according to the promise he had made her when she had been humiliated in the Kuru assembly: that she would have Duhsasana's blood to wash her untied hair to purify it.

Bhima then returned to busy himself with the warriors that were still around Karna to protect him - 10 of Duryodhana's brothers and Vrishasena the son of Karna, and killed them all.

When challenged by Yudhisthira and Sahadeva, Karna defeated them but let them go, to keep the promise to Kunti. Bhima, too, attacked Karna hitting him with such a powerful arrow that Karna lost his consciousness, but refrained from further revenge because Salya told him that Karna's destiny was in Arjuna's hands. So Bhima turned against 6 more of Duryodhana's brothers that had arrived on the scene, and killed them. Again Yudhisthira came forward to face Karna and again he had to retire, wounded and bleeding, and went to lie down at the camp, his entire body in pain.

Worried by Yudhisthira's absence, Arjuna and Krishna went to look for him, and Yudhisthira greeted them happily, thinking they had come to announce Karna's death. When he learned that Arjuna had not killed him yet, Yudhisthira became so angry that he was going to attack Arjuna himself, but he was stopped by Krishna. Shocked at the pain and despair shown by Yudhisthira, Arjuna swore that he would immediately kill Karna. A terrifying fight ensued, with extremely powerful mystic weapons. Arjuna launched the Agneyastra and Karna neutralized it with the Varunastra. To dissipate the vapors produced by the clash of the two weapons, Arjuna launched the Vayuvashtra, then he shot his Aindrastra showering the enemy with arrows.

Then Karna launched the Bhargavastra he had received from Parasurama, causing even greater destruction. Encouraged by Bhima and Krishna, Arjuna launched the nuclear weapon called Brahmastra, but it was neutralized by Karna. Karna broke Arjuna's bow 11 times, and each time Arjuna replaced it at incredible speed. When Karna aimed at

Arjuna's neck to launch the Nagastra, Salya distracted him saying that he should have aimed for the chest and the shot missed, also because Krishna had the horses kneel down, sinking the chariot several inches into the ground.

Suddenly, when Karna was getting ready to launch the Brahmastra, the left wheel of his chariot got stuck in the mud: Karna lost his concentration and became confused, just as Parasurama had predicted. Depressed, Karna descended the chariot to fix the wheel and asked Arjuna for a truce, appealing to the rule by which a disarmed enemy cannot be attacked. Krishna reminded him that no relief was granted to young Abhimanyu in even worse circumstances, and enumerated the long list of adharmic actions that Karna had committed to support Duryodhana. Karna bent his head in shame and resumed the fighting, trying at the same time to get the chariot out of the mud. Throwing the Anjalika, Arjuna was able to cut off Karna's head with an arrow, and at the death of the great warrior all fighting stopped to honor him.

That night Duryodhana, tormented by the death of his most loyal friend, went to Bhishma asking for comfort, and thus he came to know the secret of Karna's birth. Overwhelmed, Duryodhana chose to die in battle as soon as possible to be reunited with his beloved Karna.

The *Salya Parva* describes the last day of the battle, when the command of the army was given to Salya. On this day Nakula killed 3 more of the sons of Karna - Citrasena, Sushena and Satyasena, while Yudhisthira killed Drumasena and Chandrasena, and finally Salya himself, using his Shakti weapon dedicated to Kartikeya. Satyaki killed Salva and Duryodhana killed Cekitana. Sahadeva fulfilled his promise to kill Sakuni and his son, and Bhima killed the last of Duryodhana's brothers. Also all 29 of Duryodhana's sons had died, and he realized that the war was finally lost. Of the 11 *akshauhinis* he had at the beginning of the war, only 4 warriors were left: himself, Asvatthama, Kripa and Kritavarma.

Filled with despair, Duryodhana fled to take shelter into a lake, and on his way he gave Sanjaya a last message for Dhritarastra and Gandhari, begging forgiveness for his bad actions and offering his respects. When his three generals came to look for him, he replied he was very tired and he needed resting. Yudhisthira was informed of the situation and went to the lake, but Duryodhana told him he had no more interest for the



kingdom after his family's death, and he was giving it to him gladly. Yudhisthira derided him

Balarama, who had just returned from his pilgrimage, arrived on the battlefield and under his supervision there was a mace duel between Duryodhana and Bhima - as he had sworn, Bhima broke Duryodhana's legs and crushed his groin as well (which was against the rules), leaving him to bleed to death. Duryodhana turned against Krishna, accusing him to have killed Drona and Karna in a manner that was against the rules, and Krishna replied accordingly. Saddened, Balarama returned to Dvaraka.

Duryodhana's fall marked the end of the war: Krishna blew his conchshell, announcing that the fighting was over. Then Krishna asked Arjuna to get out of the chariot with his weapons, and finally he descended the chariot himself: to the great amazement of everyone, Hanuman's effigy disappeared from the flag and the chariot was consumed by flames. Krishna explained that the many divine weapons that had hit the chariot had been kept at bay by his presence, but now the war was over, and the chariot could be destroyed.

That night Asvatthama, Kripacharya and Kritavarma went to Duryodhana to ask for instructions. The dying prince appointed Asvatthama as chief commander of the army and Asvatthama swore to avenge him and his own father as well. The three generals sneaked into the Pandavas' camp while everybody there was asleep, and cut the throats of the five sons of Draupadi (believing them to be the 5 Pandavas), then they also killed Dhristadyumna, Shikhandi, Udhamanyu and Uttamauja before they could wake up, as described in the section called *Sauptika Parva* ("the sleepers").

The next morning, of the two immense armies only 12 warriors were still alive: the five Pandavas, Krishna, Satyaki and Kritavarma, Asvatthama, Kripacharya, Vrishakethu (son of Karna) and Yuyutsu (a brother of Duryodhana who had retired from the war at an earlier stage). Bhima, Arjuna and Krishna were informed about the slaughter by Dhristadyumna's charioteer and pursued Asvatthama, who launched the weapon *Brahma sira*, and Arjuna responded with the same type of weapon. Vyasa and Narada personally intervened to withhold the two weapons, that would have caused a disaster of planetary level if they clashed. Then they asked the two fighters to withdraw the weapons, but Asvatthama could not do so, and was only able to direct it against the last descendant of

the Pandavas, Parikshit, who was still in the womb of his mother Uttara. Krishna intervened saving the unborn child, and Asvatthama was exiled from the kingdom.

The *Stri Parva* ("the book of women") and the 2 added sections called *Jalapradanika* and *Stri-vilapa* describe how Gandhari, Kunti and the other women (*stri*) of the two clans arrived on the battlefield to mourn the fallen warriors. Vyasa and Vidura went to Dhritarastra to comfort him, and the old regent left the palace to go to the battlefield. The Pandavas approached him to offer their respects, but when Dhritarastra said he wanted to embrace his son's killer to show his forgiveness, Krishna quickly pushed Bhima aside, replacing him with a life-size iron statue that Duryodhana had used for his fighting training. The statue was shattered in Dhritarastra's fierce grasp.

Gandhari had lost all her children and blamed Krishna for the Pandava's victory, so she cursed him to lose his entire family, too. This curse came to pass many years later, when in Dvaraka the young Yadu princes provoked the *brahmanas'* anger with a foolish disrespectful prank.

While the Pandavas were performing the funeral rites for the warriors who had died in the battle, Kunti told Yudhisthira he had to offer oblations for Karna's too, and revealed the secret of his birth. Shocked and saddened, Yudhisthira became angry with his mother, who by keeping silent had committed a terrible injustice and especially had caused a huge damage to the kingdom. So strong were his anger and his pain, that Yudhisthira retired to the bank of the Ganges refusing to return to the capital, and only one month later he could be convinced by Vyasa and Narada for the good of the kingdom and its subjects.

After appointing Bhima as *yuvaraja* ("junior king", the prince designed to become king in case of emergency), Arjuna as chief commander of the army and ambassador, Vidura as home minister, Nakula and Sahadeva as directors of security and provisions and Sanjaya as treasurer, Yudhisthira finally ascended the throne.

The time had come for Bhishma to leave his body, and the Pandavas went to the battlefield to offer their homage, while he was still lying on the arrow bed.

In the *Santi Parva* ("the book of peace") and *Anusasana Parva* ("the book of the last instructions) Bhishma dissolved Yudhisthira's guilty feelings, then on Krishna's request he gave the Pandavas many teachings in the various fields of knowledge and especially

on Dharma, on the duties of the king (*raja dharma*), on the extraordinary and temporary measures to be taken in cases of emergency and danger (*apaddharma*), on the ultimate purpose of life and on liberation (*moksha dharma*), as well as on the *varnas* and *ashramas*, on food restrictions, charity, non-violence and truthfulness.

After speeches by Brihaspati and Narada, Krishna narrated the glories of Shiva and recited the *Shiva sahasra nama* ("the 1000 names of Shiva"). In turn, Bhishma recited the *Vishnu sahasra nama* ("the 1000 names of Vishnu") offering homage to Krishna. At last Bhishma expressed his wish to finally leave his body, and after offering his worship to Krishna and contemplating his universal form, he died. The Pandavas performed his funeral rituals and then returned to the capital. These two books constitute the most voluminous part of the *Mahabharata*.

Arjuna adopted his nephew Vrishaketu and took him along in the campaign preceding the Asvamedha yajna performed by Yudhishthira to bring back order and peace in the kingdom at his coronation - as we see in the *Asvamedha Parva*, that also contains the *Anugita* ("the repeated song"), that is a repetition of the teachings of *Bhagavad gita* by Krishna. Before leaving for Dvaraka, Krishna attended the ceremonies for the birth of baby Parikshit.

The *Ashramavasa Parva* ("the book of living in the *ashrama*") begins 15 years later. Vidura felt that his life was going to end and he went to see Kunti, Gandhari and Dhritarastra, who had been living in the palace, honored by the Pandavas, and convinced them to leave the capital to retire to Satayupa in the region of Kurukshetra and build a small *ashrama* to perform austerities until the end of their days. The last instruction that Dhritarastra gave to his loyal assistant Sanjaya was to settle in a sacred place on the Himalayas. This book is accompanied by the sections *Putradarsana* ("the apparition of the son") and *Naradagamana* ("Narada's visit") in which Duryodhana's ghost appeared to his parents and Narada Rishi offered teachings about detachment from the material world.

In the brief *Mausala Parva* ("the book of maces") we read that Krishna and the Yadavas went to Prabhasa kshetra (Somanatha) in a pilgrimage to offer the yearly worship to Shiva, and that in the ensuing celebrations they consumed rice wine. In his drunkenness, Satyaki started a fight with Kritavarma as he remembered the killing of Draupadi's

children, and Kritavarma responded by mentioning Bhurisrava. Satyaki jumped on Kritavarma and cut his head off - in the furious fight that ensued, almost all the Yadus killed one another using the large bamboo canes that had grown on the beach due to a curse. Krishna and Balarama did not take part in the fight, but Balarama sat in meditation and left his body, while Krishna was shot in the foot by a hunter who thought he had spotted a deer. Before dying, Krishna sent Daruka to Arjuna with a message warning him about the imminent destruction of Dvaraka, that would be covered by the ocean waters, and asked him to move the survivors to the Kuru capital.

Yudhishthira had reigned for 36 years when he heard the news of Krishna's disappearance and the destruction of the Yadu dynasty. He left the kingdom to his grandson Parikshit and crowned Vajra, Krishna's grandson, as king of Indraprastha, where all the surviving Yadus were settled. Yuyutsu was put in charge of administrative responsibilities and Subhadra remained with her grandson Parikshit.

Together with his brothers and Draupadi, Yudhishthira left for his last pilgrimage to the Himalaya, described in the *Mahaprasthanika Parva* ("the book of the great journey"). One by one the Pandavas fell on the way and finally Indra descended with his chariot to take Yudhishthira to the heavenly planets in his very mortal body due to his loyalty to Dharma, as it is written in the *Svargarohanika Parva* ("the attainment of heaven").

Maharaja Parikshit, son of Abhimanyu and grandson of Arjuna, reigned for many years and witnessed the advent of the Kali yuga, as we see also in the first canto of the *Bhagavata purana*.

Because of the curse of a young and arrogant *brahmana*, Parikshit was killed by the Takshaka snake, and upon ascending the throne his son Janamejaya began a great sacrifice aimed at destroying all the snakes in the world. On the occasion of that ceremony, Janamejaya was told the story of his ancestors - an event that brings us back to the beginning of the text of the *Mahabharata*.

## Ramayana

The other famous epic poem of Vedic tradition is *Ramayana*. The word *ayana* means "path, story, movement, progress, activities", and *rama* refers to Ramachandra, the *avatara* of Vishnu that defeated the *rakshasa* tyrant Ravana.

The story of Rama is extremely popular and has been celebrated for thousands of years in innumerable figurative and dramatic art works in the tradition of many asiatic countries, as for example in Angkor Vat in Cambodia and in Bali.

As we have seen, *Mahabharata* and especially *Bhagavad gita* focus around Krishna, the *avatara* of Vishnu that descended a short time before the beginning of Kali yuga, to relieve the burden of the Earth and establish the foundations for the religious principles in this age of hypocrisy and quarrel. The present compilation of the *Vedas* has been prepared precisely in consideration of such mission, and we will see the apotheosis of Krishna particularly in the *Bhagavata purana* (also called *Srimad Bhagavatam*). However, we should not forget that the Kali yuga started "only" about 5 thousand years ago, and that before the present compilation of the *Vedas* there was already a wide corpus of knowledge and spiritual-religious tradition, of which the present Vedic literature is merely the continuation.

Before the appearance of Krishna described in the *Bhagavata purana*, the importance of Vishnu in the scriptural and devotional Tradition was focused on Narayana (the eternal principle that transcends the cycle of creation, maintenance and destruction of the cosmos) and his most famous *avataras*: Varaha, Nrisimha, Vamana and especially Rama, the most recent and "human" among these divine figures.

Rama is also called *maryada purushottama*, "the perfect human being", or *dharma purusha*, "human incarnation of Dharma", a man who, by his example, could inspire the lives of people and especially of the kings, the leaders of society that by their behavior establish the model that will be followed by the general public. Even more than Krishna, Rama inspires devotion and admiration in a great variety of people, also due to his

association with the extraordinary personality of Hanuman - manifestation of Shiva and Vayu - that manifests the extraordinary concept of a divine personality that takes the position of a devotee. Ramachandra himself expresses love and devotion in his worship to Shiva, and in turn Shiva takes the form of Hanuman to serve Rama with love and devotion.

Devotion to Rama is even more relevant than devotion to Krishna or Vishnu, especially in regard to the Hindu Resurgence that we have been observing in the last few decades.

There has been an international sensation about the episode of the destruction of "Ayodhya mosque", more precisely called Babri Masjid ("the mosque of Babur") on 6th December 1992, by a particularly determined group of devotees of Rama.

The mosque had been built in 1528 by the Mogul emperor Babur for the declared purpose of preventing the Hindus from rebuilding the very ancient temple that rose precisely over the birth place of Rama (*janma bhumi*) and that Babur himself had demolished, recycling some of the stones for the new islamic structure. This is a system that has been regularly applied in all the territories conquered by the Muslims (and by the Christians, too, especially in the first centuries of their history). Its rationale is the complete destruction of the ancient "pagan" holy places and even down to their memory, preventing any reconstruction and continuation of the previous tradition: this was done by forcibly occupying a sacred place that had a precise geographical importance and could not be duplicated anywhere else.

This Babri masjid never had any other religious meaning for Muslims, so much that in 1992 the mosque was not attended by anyone and was practically already in ruins, as we can see from the photos taken by the participants to the rally.

Unfortunately, the attempt by Hindu activists to reclaim one of the most sacred places of their faith and to rebuild the original temple to Rama has failed because of the islamic propaganda at international level against the "violent Hindu fundamentalists" and of the ideological structure of the Indian government. The Indian Constitution gives greater power and facilities to Muslims and Christian than to Hindus, who are supposed to be the majority of the population. In fact, the first waves of Hindu devotees that went to pay their homage to the sacred land have been "punished" with the Godhra attack, in which a train with a group of Hindu pilgrims - 55 among men, women and children - was set on

fire and left to burn completely in the middle of the railway station, under the eyes of the police that refused to intervene, because that by preventing or stopping the attack they would "disturb communal harmony".

Because Rama appeared long before Krishna, the epic poem (*itihasa*) that narrates his adventures, the *Ramayana*, was written not by Vyasa but by Valmiki Rishi, whose personal story is another small artwork of didactic symbolism, and an integral part of the text of the *Ramayana* as well. Valmiki was a contemporary of Rama, and as we will see later, on he became the tutor of the twins Lava and Kusha, the sons of Rama.

Of course neither Vyasa nor Valmiki should be considered ordinary persons, but precisely for this reason, the fact that they chose such peculiar circumstances for their birth should not be underestimated. Just like Vyasa (the compiler of all the *Vedas*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*) was born from the extra-marital union of a woman from the fishermen community, Valmiki (that was originally named Valya Koli) was born in a family of robbers, who earned their livelihood (so to speak) by hunting and robbing the travelers. One day he happened to meet the great Narada Rishi, direct son of Brahma, and as his habit was, he ordered him to hand over whatever possessions he had. Narada's wealth consisted in spiritual knowledge, and this is precisely what he gave the robber.

The meeting with Narada is not casual, either, but on the contrary, it is instrumental to explain other very important teachings. The core of Narada's teachings to his new disciple is a brief version of the story of Rama, constituted by 100 verses and known as *Sankshepa Ramayana*. Then Valya Koli engaged in great austerities to purify himself from the consequences of his past bad actions, meditating day and night on the name of Rama and remaining so still that termites built one of their tall nests around his body, as indicated by the name *valmiki*, "the one of the termites' nest".

One day Valmiki, who is known as the *adi kavi* ("the first poet") went to the Tamasa river to take bath, and noticed two *krauncha* (heron) birds playing near a tree; while the birds were engaged in mating, a hunter's arrow hit the male bird, killing him, and the female bird started to cry.

The Rishi cursed the hunter, spontaneously composing the first poetic verse (*sloka*) of Indian literature, that expressed sadness (*soka*):

*ma nishada pratishtam tvam agamah sasvataih samah  
yat krauncha mithunadekam avadhih kama-mohitam*

"O wild hunter, you will not have peace for endless years, because you killed this heron while he was engaged in love making."

Later Lord Brahma went to visit the Rishi and revealed to him that the verse could also have another meaning:

"O Sri Vishnu, sitting with Lakshmi! Your fame is eternal in all ages, because you killed that rapacious bird Ravana, always immersed in lust."

Inspired, Valmiki composed a great quantity of verses on the same *anustup* metric and taught them directly to Lava and Kusha, the two sons of Rama that had grown up under his tutelage. The original text in verses, especially the *Sundara khanda*, constituted by 68 chapters, is still recited in special private or public functions.

Just like Valmiki is known as the *adi kavi*, his *Ramayana* is called *mahakavya* ("great poem"), also because it includes a great variety of sentiments or *rasas*, defined by Vedic aesthetics as *sringara* (erotic romanticism), *vatsalya* (motherly and fatherly affection), *sakhya* (friendship), *dasya* (service), *virya* (heroism in battle), *adbhuta* (amazement), *karuna* (kindness or compassion), *hasya* (humor), *bhayanaka* (fear), *raudra* (anger), *bibhatsa* (disgust) and *santa* (peacefulness). A good literary work should be able to inspire such sentiments in its readers or spectators through the dialogues and the description of the circumstances.

We can see for example the expression of the *sringara rasa* in the meeting between Rama and Sita, during their life in the forest and in the pain of separation. The *rasas* of the other relationships (*vatsalya*, *sakhya* and *dasya*) can be observed in the interaction between the various characters, and the *virya rasa* is obvious in the many scenes of battle and courage. Valmiki is also considered the author of the famous *Yoga vasistha*, relating the conversation between Rama and the Rishi Vasistha, who was the royal priest in the palace of king Dasaratha father of Rama.

It is important to warn the readers against a superficial interpretation of the text and the story, that at times has been distorted by hostile or ignorant commentators to present it as



a justification for behaviors that are actually contrary to Dharma - such as the mistreatment of women, blind obedience to parents, passive resignation of women in the face of injustice and cruelty, acceptance of unjust social conventions, and so on. Many believe that the original text of the *Ramayana* might have been considerably modified, especially with the addition of the first and the last parts, that are obviously quite different from the rest, certainly in regard to the literary style and in some measure even in regard to the ideological structure.

The method prescribed by the Vedic tradition in such cases consists in studying each single passage in the light of the basic ideology, honestly trying to understand in which way such passage can be viewed in relationship with the rest, and choosing that interpretation that best follows the fundamental principles. We will precisely use this method in our analysis of the story.

Due to space limitations, we will not go deeply into the symbolic and initiatic meanings of the story of Rama, that like the *Mahabharata* and many ancient poems at global level (including Homer's *Odyssey*, for example) manifested a reflection of the inner journey of the human being, who must reclaim his legitimate position after a period of exile and a battle. This symbolic level does not invalidate the factual historicity of the described events, because the divine Personality plays on the sacred script already written at the level of the supreme existence, and directs it in full awareness, although sometimes appearances may lead us to think otherwise.

Not everybody is able to understand deep teachings. There are even many persons, among those who have been born in India from families that consider themselves traditionally Hindu or even *brahmanas*, that believe that Hanuman and the Vanaras were merely monkeys, and still today they offer gifts and worship to ordinary monkeys, causing huge hygienic and safety problems and especially contributing to create a very bad public image based on their degraded and distorted view of the scriptures.

The first book of the *Ramayana*, entitled *Bala kanda* ("childhood") begins with the description of the birthplace of Rama, Ayodhya (literally "that cannot be defeated in war") located on the river Sarayu ("of the lake", because it is an emissary of the Manasa Sarovara on the Himalaya) north of the river Ganges (present Uttar Pradesh) and capital of the Kosala kingdom, that was spread on most of the subcontinent. Still in the times of

the *Mahabharata*, thousands of years after the events of the *Ramayana*, the kingdom of Koshala had five provinces: the original Koshala with the capital Ayodhya, the Dakshina ("south") Koshala (Madhya Pradesh, central India), the Uttara ("north") Koshala that has been ruled by Lava son of Rama with capital at Sravasti, the Purva ("east") Koshala that had been ruled by Kusha son of Rama with capital at Kusavati, and the Paschima ("west") Koshala composed by a number of smaller kingdoms.

Prince Rama was born in the royal Suryavamsa ("Sun dynasty") and among his ancestors there were famous kings such as Ikshvaku (son of Vaivasvata Manu, son of Surya) who personally built the city at the beginning of the creation of the universe), Sagara and his descendents down to Bhagiratha, Raghu (from whose name derived other famous names of Ramachandra, such as Raghava, Raghunatha, etc), Nahusha and Yayati. The text describes Ayodhya as a great city 12 *yojana* (200 km) long and 3 *yojana* (50 km) wide, with huge fortifications and broad avenues, large gardens and parks, 7-story palaces, a great number of musicians and dancers and all comforts and arrangements, including facilities for many domestic animals of various types such as cows, elephants, horses, camels etc.

The father of Rama, by the name of Maharaja Dasaratha, had three wives: Kausalya, a woman of religious temperament, Kaikeyi, of warrior-like temperament, and Sumitra, of a peaceful and simple mind. As after many years he had not obtained a progeny yet, Dasaratha consulted Vasistha, the royal priest, and decided to perform the traditional Asvamedha yajna and the Putra kamesti yajna, specifically meant to favor the birth of a heir; the rituals required a main officiating priest, and Dasaratha invited Rishyasringa, a very powerful Rishi who had been born and raised in total isolation in the forest as the son of Vibhandaka, son of Kashyapa. Rishyasringa left his hermitage to visit king Romapada of Anga, who needed his presence to neutralize a long draught in his kingdom. Subsequently, the Rishi had married Santa, the daughter of Romapada.

The Devas evoked by Dasaratha's ritual sat to discuss the problem of the arrogance and violence displayed by Ravana, the king of the Rakshasas. Because of a special blessing, Ravana was confident that he would not be defeated by Rakshasas, Devas, Gandharvas or other celestial beings; however he did not anticipate the need to guard himself from human beings, because he considered them too weak.

Thus Vishnu decided to descend to Earth as a human being in the family of Dasaratha. At the end of the ceremony, a divine being appeared from the fire altar, holding a pot of *payasa* (sweet rice and milk pudding) and told Dasaratha to distribute it among his wives. The king offered the pudding first to his eldest queen Kaushalya, who drank half of it with the purpose of begetting a heir that was worthy of the throne. Then the pot was given to Sumitra, the sweet and peaceful queen, who drank half of what was left, and then to Kaikeyi, the young and impulsive queen, who drank half of what was left. Finally Sumitra consumed the rest. So Kaushalya became the mother of Rama, Kaikeyi became the mother of Bharata, and Sumitra became the mother of Lakshmana and Satrugna. The four brothers are compared to the quadruple emanation (*catur vyuha*) of Narayana: Vasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha.

When Rama had completed his 15th year, his father the king was visited by Visvamitra Rishi. After welcoming the great Rishi with all honors and granting him whatever he might have desired, Dasaratha was horrified to hear that the purpose of that visit was to ask the personal intervention of young prince Rama to protect a sacrifice ceremony that Visvamitra was performing and that was regularly interrupted and spoiled by two powerful Rakshasas named Maricha and Subahu. After proposing alternative solutions that were not accepted by Visvamitra as adequate, Dasaratha followed Vasistha's advice and consented to send Rama, on the condition that he was accompanied by his loyal brother Lakshmana. Visvamitra and the two princes left the capital and on the evening of their first day of traveling they camped on the bank of the Sarayu river, where the Rishi taught Rama and Lakshmana the secret *mantras* Bala and Atibala, that give the power to conquer hunger, thirst and fatigue, as well as all diseases. After another day's journey, they spent the night at Kamashrama, a village of Rishis located in Anga desa (the present West Bengal) at the confluences between Sarayu and Ganges. In that place Shiva had engaged in long austerities and had incinerated Kamadeva (the Deva of erotic love, also called Manmatha), who had dared to hit him with his flower arrows.

Visvamitra explained that in that forest lived a terrible Yakshi named Tataka, daughter of Suketu and wife of Sunda, who had been cursed by Agastya to become a Rakshasi and could take any form. Once the forest had been a thickly populated, prosperous and happy kingdom, known as Malada and Karusha, blessed by the waters of all the sacred rivers used by the Devas for the purification ritual performed for Indra after killing Vritra.

Rama hesitated to kill a woman, but Visvamitra explained to him that it was not an ordinary woman, but a blood thirsty monster, that had to be eliminated for the good of innocent creatures. Thus Rama fought against Tataka, who was extraordinarily strong and powerful, and killed her, restoring peace and joy to that region.

Visvamitra was very pleased with Rama's behavior, so he gave Rama the knowledge of the mystic weapons, including the *chakras* ("discs") of Dharma, Kala and Vishnu, the *trishula* ("trident") of Shiva, the Brahma sira ("head of Brahma"), the Haya sira ("head of Hayagriva"), the Krauncha ("heron"), the Aishika ("straw blade") and the Brahmastra ("the arrow of Brahma"), the two Shaktis ("powers") of Vishnu and Shiva respectively, the *gadas* ("maces") called Modaki ("that beats") and Shikari ("the tower"), the *pasas* ("ropes") called Dharma, Kala and Varuna presided respectively by Yamaraja, by Bhairava and by the Deva of the oceans, the *ashanis* ("missiles") called Suksha ("drying") and Ardra ("dampener"), the *astras* ("arrows") of Pinaka (Shiva) and Narayana, and those of Agni (called Shikari, "the tower") and Vayu (called Prathama, "that blows"). Besides these divine weapons, he gave Rama also the terrible weapons called Kankala Musala ("the beater"), Kapala ("the skull") and Kankana ("golden"), the weapon of the Vidyadharas and the Pisachas, those of the Gandharvas called Mohana ("that confuses"), Prasvapana ("that makes sleepy"), Manava ("of the human beings") and Prasamana ("that calms the enemy's anger") and the sword Nanda, as well as the *astras* ("arrows") called Varshana ("that brings rain"), Soshana ("that dries up"), Santapana ("that moistens"), Vilapana ("that makes cry"), Tamasa ("that brings darkness"), Mayamaya ("that dissipates the effects of magic"), Tejaprabha ("that radiates"), Sisira ("that cools"), and many others. On Rama's request, Visvamitra also taught him how to neutralize and call back each one of those weapons.

Proceeding with their journey they reached Siddhashrama, the residence of Visvamitra, a place that once belonged to Vamana and where Kasyapa Rishi, father of Indra and the other Adityas, had engaged in austerity with the purpose of obtaining Vishnu as a son. On this occasion, Visvamitra narrated the story of the *avatara* Vamana, who appeared to take away from Mahabali all the regions that the Danava king had conquered by defeating Indra.

After reaching his home, Visvamitra started the ritual, while Rama and Lakshmana kept vigil constantly, day and night. On the seventh and last day came the two Rakshasas,

ready to bring a rain of blood: Rama threw Maricha very far, beyond the ocean, and he killed Subhahu. Finally Visvamitra was able to complete his rituals successfully.

Then Visvamitra went with Rama and Lakshmana to Mithila, the capital of king Janaka, to show them the famous bow of Shiva. During the journey Visvamitra narrated many things, including the story of his own ancestor Kusha, his son Kushanabha and his son Gadhi, who was the father of Visvamitra and Kaushiki (who later became a sacred river).

After crossing the Sona river, they reached the Ganges. There, on Rama's request, Visvamitra narrated the birth of Kartikeya, risen from the fire and the sacred waters of the Ganges, and breast-fed by the stars. Then he told how the divine sacred river had descended to the earth, thanks to the merits of Sagara, the ancestor of Rama, and his descendants Amsuman, Dilipa and Baghiratha, and how, while dropping from the heavenly planets, the Ganges fell on Shiva's head and formed the lake Bindu sarovara, from which it flows forth in seven streams.

From the north bank of the Ganges it was possible to see the city of Vishala, and Visvamitra told its story to the princes - from the times when Devas and Asuras had churned the ocean of milk to obtain the nectar, and Shiva had drunk the poison produced by its impurities. Later on in the same place Diti, the mother of the Asuras, decided to take revenge against Indra who had killed all her children; she took a vow to beget a son who would be the enemy of the king of the heavenly planets. Indra was able to sneak into Diti's womb and cut the embryo into seven parts - but those were born as the seven Maruts, who became favorable to Indra as technically he had become their "brother" as had shared the same womb. After spending the night in the city as guests of king Sumati, Visvamitra, Rama and Lakshmana left again on the next morning.

At the outskirts of Mithila, Rama noticed a very beautiful *ashrama* that was completely deserted. Visvamitra told him the story of that place: it was the residence of Gautama Rishi, one of the famous seven Rishis, descendent of Angirasa. His wife Ahalya was *manasa putri* ("daughter of the mind") of Brahma and mother of Satananda, the Purohit of king Janaka of Mithila, as well as of Vamadeva and Nodha.

A long time before, Indra had been fascinated by Ahalya, the wife of Gautama, and had approached her taking the appearance of Gautama while the Rishi was absent. Ahalya recognized Indra, but because she felt flattered by the attentions of the king of the

heavenly planets, she had intercourse with him. While he was returning to the *ashrama*, Gautama saw Indra sneaking away and cursed him to lose his virility. Furthermore, Gautama decreed that Ahalya would remain invisible, living on air only, until the day when Rama would reach the *ashrama*. Visvamitra encouraged Rama and Lakshmana to enter the *ashrama*, and Ahalya was happily reunited to her husband after her purifying austerity.

At Mithila, king Janaka welcomed Visvamitra and the two princes with all honors, and on that occasion Janaka's *guru*, Satananda (son of Gautama and Ahalya) narrated the story of Visvamitra, who had been a great *kshatriya* but had earned the position and fame of a great Rishi and *brahmana* by his intense austerities. One day he had been traveling with his army, and arrived at the *ashrama* of Vasistha Rishi (king Dasaratha's *guru*). The Rishi kindly welcomed his visitors and immediately offered a sumptuous feast to all of them. Amazed, Visvamitra asked how Vasistha had been able to get so many provisions, and the Rishi revealed that his *kamadhenu* ("cow that fulfills all desires") named Sabala had the power to supply anything one desired. Visvamitra thought that such a wonderful treasure would be very useful for a king, and asked Vasistha to give him the cow. Vasistha loved Sabala like a sister and refused to give her away. Visvamitra insisted, and in the end he ordered his men to seize the cow and take her away by force. Then the Rishi asked Sabala to create an army, that destroyed all the forces of Visvamitra and also killed his 100 sons.

Humiliated, Visvamitra went away to engage in austerities, praying Shiva for help; finally he received divine weapons from him and he returned to Vasistha's *ashrama* determined to destroy it completely. All the residents fled away but Vasistha stood his *brahma-danda* ("sacred staff") into the ground, and it neutralized Visvamitra's weapons, absorbing his *brahmastra* and radiating a great light.

Defeated again, Visvamitra realized that the power of a *brahmana* is greater than the power of a *kshatriya* and decided to become a *brahmana*.

After more austerities, Visvamitra was recognized by Brahma as *raja-rishi*, but he was not satisfied yet. One day he was approached by a famous king of the solar dynasty, named Trishanku, who had fallen into disgrace. Trishanku was so attached to his body that he had decided to ascend the heavenly planets without leaving his earthly body, but

his *guru* Vasistha had refused to help him to fulfill that absurd desire. Frustrated, Trishanku had approached Vasistha's sons, but without success, and when he had dared to say that he would find some other officiating priest, he had received a curse that transformed his body for the worse. Kicked out from the palace by his own guards, who were unable to recognize him, Trishanku had gone to search for Visvamitra.

Moved by the story of Trishanku's sufferings, Visvamitra decided to help him and started the ritual that would raise him to the heavenly planets in that same body. All the Rishis participated to the rituals because they feared Visvamitra's famous anger - except Vasistha's sons, who by mocking the rituals earned a special curse by which they would die and be reborn for seven times in a wild tribe of dog-eaters.

When the time came to evoke the Devas to come to the sacrifice, no Deva showed up. Angered, Visvamitra transferred all his religious merits to Trishanku to raise him up to Svarga even without the Deva's approval. Everybody was amazed to see Trishanku rising into the sky, up to Indraloka - but then Indra resented that invasion and cast him down again to earth, while poor Trishanku cried to Visvamitra for help. The powerful Rishi stopped his fall and Trishanku remained suspended mid air like a star, then Visvamitra started to create a new solar system just for him, with a new Indra and a new group of Devas. Scared, Indra and the Devas hastened to make peace with Visvamitra and consented to let Trishanku remain where he was, with the new stars and planets that had been created already.

Then Satananda narrated the episode of Sunashepa, to whom Visvamitra had given a *mantra* to stop death. Later Visvamitra had a relationship with the Apsara Menaka, who remained with him for 10 years. After purifying himself again with long austerities on the Himalaya, Visvamitra was recognized by Brahma as *maha-rishi*. Worried about the power that Visvamitra was accumulating, Indra decided to break his austerities and sent the Apsara Rambha to seduce him; however the Rishi could see through the trick and in anger he turned the celestial dancer into stone. Repenting for his impulsive action and realizing that he still had a lot of work to do on himself, Visvamitra resumed his austerities at Pushkara, and at last he was recognized as *brahma rishi* by Brahma and Vasistha.

After spending the night in the king's palace, Visvamitra asked Janaka to show the great bow of Shiva to the two princes. The king explained that the bow had been given by Shiva to his ancestor Devarata, the sixth of the dynasty. Then Janaka narrated the story of the appearance of Sita, his daughter, who was born from the earth: during the preliminary rituals for his sacrifice to obtain a progeny, Janaka had found the little girl in a furrow in the field that he was ploughing according to the rites. Now Sita had become a woman, and for his *svayamvara* Janaka had requested the stringing of that bow, but for one entire year all the great warriors had been unable even to lift the bow. Rama took the bow in his hand, bent it to tie the string, and pulled it with such strength that the powerful bow cracked into two pieces. Thus it was decided that Sita would become the wife of Rama. King Janaka sent ambassadors to the city of Ayodhya to inform Dasaratha about the happy news, and the royal family of Dasaratha arrived at Mithila with a great retinue. In the presence of many great Rishis and of the sacrificial fire, Rama married Sita while his brothers married the other princesses of Mithila - the daughters of Kushadhvaja, brother of king Janaka: Lakshmana married Urmila, Bharata married Mandavi and Satrugna married Srutakirti.

During the journey back to Ayodhya, Rama was confronted by Parasurama, who knew that Rama had broken the sacred bow of Shiva, and challenged him to hold the bow of Vishnu. The last chapter (77) of *Bala kanda* ends with Parasurama's defeat and the triumphant arrival of the marriage party in the city of Ayodhya.

The next book, entitled *Ayodhya kanda* (after the name of the capital city of Dasaratha's kingdom) begins with the preparations for the official installation ceremony of Rama as *yuvaraja*, meant to allow Dasaratha to quickly retire from the management of the kingdom. The king was expecting to die soon and suddenly, because there had been some inauspicious omens. Dasaratha offered Rama advice on the art of government and Kaushalya gave her blessings, and then Vasistha started the rituals with the *diksha* ("initiation to the sacrifice") to Rama and Sita, who observed fasting from the evening before the ceremony.

A palace maid named Manthara went to inform queen Kaikeyi of the imminent coronation; Kaikeyi was very happy and rewarded the maid with a gift, but Manthara refused the gift in indignation and rebuked her mistress. She observed that Rama's coronation had been organized very suddenly and at a convenient time, when Kaikeyi's



son Bharata was absent from the city, having gone to visit his maternal grandfather. This, she said, could only mean that Rama was afraid of Bharata's competition, and thus Rama's coronation would cause Bharata and his mother Kaikeyi to become mere servants in the palace. Rama's son would then ascend the throne and Bharata would be excluded from succession and even from the dynasty: all this was due to the fact that Kaikeyi had encouraged his son to remain in the company of his maternal uncle rather than staying near to his own father. In the past Kaikeyi had been the king's favorite, but now Kaushalya was officially the queen mother and she would soon get revenge. Finally Manthara succeeded in convincing Kaikeyi of her fears, and reminded her that Dasaratha was indebted with her and had promised her two boons in gratitude for having saved his life on the battlefield. If Kaikeyi asked Dasaratha to crown Bharata and exile Rama for a number of years, the people would become used to the new situation and would remain loyal to Bharata even after Rama's return.

When Dasaratha entered Kaikeyi's apartment, he found her in the *krodha griha* ("the room of anger") laying on the ground, while her ornaments were scattered around on the floor. Kaikeyi reminded him the promise of two boons, then asked him to crown Bharata and send Rama into a forest exile for 14 years. Dasaratha was shocked by that incredible and totally unexpected request, and begged her to ask for any other favor instead, but Kaikeyi did not relent. The king spent the night in agony, torn between the duty to keep his word and the injustice of exiling Rama. The next morning, when the prime minister Sumantra went to search for the king in Kaikeyi's room and found him unconscious, unable to reply to his questions, the queen ordered him to immediately fetch Rama. When Rama arrived, Kaikeyi told him about Dasaratha's promise and Rama swore that he would execute any order to save his father from the disgrace of failing to keep his word.

Rama went to take leave from Kaushalya, who begged him not to go. Seeing Kaushalya's despair, Lakshmana could not control his anger and declared that he was ready to fight against anyone and he would put Rama on the throne even if that meant imprisoning or killing Dasaratha, because even a superior should be punished if he becomes arrogant or evil, and Dasaratha and Kaikeyi were behaving like enemies under the disguise of parents. Rama pacified his brother, reminding him that Kaikeyi was no ordinary person and had always showed him the greatest affection - therefore that situation had obviously been arranged by destiny for a higher purpose.

Sita was informed about the change of plans and decided to accompany Rama into exile although she was not required to do so, and even against the order of Rama, who told her to stay back in the palace. Lakshmana, too, chose to accompany Rama, and to the great distress of all the inhabitants of Ayodhya, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana took leave from the shattered Dasaratha, got on the chariot driven by Sumantra and started to leave the city. Dasaratha ordered that the army and all the wealth of the treasury to be assigned to Rama, and when Rama refused, he said he would personally go with him. Kaikeyi, however, protested, and instead had *sannyasi* clothes brought for all the three exiled.

Dasaratha and Kaushalya followed Rama's chariot as far as they could, then when it disappeared on the horizon they resigned themselves to return to the palace; when Kaikeyi approached him, the king rejected her, repudiating her and expelling her from the family. Already invalid because of his pain, weakness and confusion, Dasaratha asked to be carried to Kausalya's apartment, where he remained lamenting the tragedy, while almost all the subjects followed Rama to the bank of the Tamasa river, although Rama had begged them to return home.

The exiled princes camped for the night, but when everybody else was fast asleep, Rama woke Sumantra and asked him to take them on the other bank of the river. On the next day Rama continued to travel and crossing the rivers Vedasruti, Gomati and Syandika, he finally reached the bank of the Ganges, where he was respectfully welcomed by the Nishadas (forest hunters) and by their headman Guha. Rama only accepted some food for the horses, although Guha had asked him to stay in that land and rule over his inhabitants, and had prepared for them a great quantity and variety of delicious foods and comfortable beds for sleeping. Rama and Sita simply lay down on the ground to sleep, while Guha remained awake to protect their sleep and had a long conversation with Lakshmana, who, too, did not want to sleep. Finally Rama convinced Sumantra to return to the capital to reassure Kaikeyi, take care of the old king and bring Bharata back home, because he was still in the city of his maternal uncle. After taking leave from Sumantra and Guha, the princes crossed the river Ganges by boat, then entered the forest on the other bank.

Next, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana arrived at the *ashrama* of Bharadvaja Rishi at Prayaga (presently known as Allahabad), at the confluence of Ganges and Yamuna. The Rishi welcomed them affectionately and recommended that they establish a residence in Citrakuta, a beautiful place a little further south. After crossing the Yamuna on a raft,

they walked along the bank and rested for the night before proceeding to Citrakuta hill. After they had visited Valmiki's *ashrama* there, Lakshmana built a beautiful log cabin with a leaf-thatched roof near the bank of the Mandakini river, Rama performed the prescribed rituals and they established their home there.

Guha and Sumantra received the confirmation that Rama, Sita and Lakshmana had happily reached Citrakuta, so Sumantra left to return to the capital and inform the king. Arrived in town, Sumantra went to Dasaratha and delivered the messages from Rama and Lakshmana, also telling the king that all the people of the city were depressed and angry for what had happened.

Kaushalya and Dasaratha tormented and consoled each other, maddened in their grief, and then suddenly the king realized that his sufferings were due to an old curse. It all went back to a hunting expedition, in which young Dasaratha was practicing archery by hitting a target guided by sound only. He had arrived on the bank of river Sarayu and heard the noise of a big animal that was drinking there. After shooting his arrow, he was shocked to find out that actually he had hit a young man, and the noise he had heard was actually the sound of water he had been collecting in a pot. Horrified, Dasaratha tried to help his victim, but the wound was lethal and the young man only had the time to ask the prince to take the water to his old and blind parents, who were waiting to drink it. Dasaratha accompanied the two old people to the river bank to perform the funeral rites, but they were crazed with despair for the loss of their only son and support, and cursed Dasaratha to die of grief for the loss of his own son, just like them.

After remembering those tragic events Dasaratha completely lost consciousness and died delirious calling Rama's name.

At dawn the *brahmanas* gathered to ask Vasistha to choose a new king, because the kingdom could not be left in a state of anarchy, and Vasistha sent messengers to Girivraja in the Kekaya kingdom to call back Bharata and Satrugna. In the meantime, Bharata had been disturbed by many nightmares and bad omens, and after quickly taking leave from uncle Kekeya and cousin Yudhajit, he left to return home. The journey lasted 7 days, and when he reached Ayodhya, prince Bharata found the city unusually sad, dark and hostile. The king was not to be seen around, so Bharata went to his mother Kaikeyi and asked her what tragedy had befallen the kingdom. Kaikeyi informed him of the king's death, and

told him to be ready to ascend the throne, but when he came to know the entire story, Bharata was horrified and disgusted, and strongly rebuked his mother for the disaster that she had brought about.

Bharata went to Kaushalya, who treated him harshly until the prince succeeded in convincing her about his innocence and genuine pain. Vasistha told Bharata to stop lamenting and to take care of his father's cremation; at the end of the 13 days of funeral rites, Vasistha asked Bharata to occupy the throne to fill the void left by Dasaratha's death and Rama's absence, but Bharata refused to become king and repeated that he was determined to bring Rama back to the capital and crown him personally. That extraordinary news brought enthusiasm to all the subjects, and as everybody wanted to go with Bharata, a huge crowd assembled and a large road was built from the capital to the Ganges, equipped with water wells and tents for resting. Guha saw the large crowd arriving and went to meet Bharata and ask him what were his intentions towards Rama. Reassured, Guha became friendly with Bharata and told him that Rama was observing all the rules of renunciation - matting his hair with tree resin, dressing in tree bark, sleeping on the ground and eating only roots and fruits. Bharata took the solemn vow to observe the same rules and to remain with Rama in the forest if Rama had refused to return to the capital and be crowned king.

After crossing the river, Bharata reached the *ashrama* of Bharadvaja, and the Rishi, too, asked him his intentions about Rama before revealing the place where the exiled prince was staying. With the Rishi's permission, Bharata brought his retinue to the *ashrama*, and introducing his mother Kaikeyi, he said she was the cause of the entire tragedy: however, Bharadvaja corrected him, saying that Rama's adventures would bring great blessings to the world.

Rama heard Bharata's party approaching. Lakshmana climbed on a tree to better see who was coming, and recognizing Bharata's insignia, concluded that Bharata had come with a large army to kill Rama; he prepared to fight, but Rama pacified him explaining that Bharata would never attack him.

Bharata asked his retinue to stop at a distance and walked alone to the *ashrama*, where Rama welcomed him with great affection. Overwhelmed by devotion, Bharata was unable to speak so he simply prostrated at Rama's feet. Rama lifted and embraced him,

then asked for news from Ayodhya. Bharata informed him about their father's death, and after performing the ritual ablutions in the Mandakini river, Rama offered water and *pindi* (the traditional food offering) to the departed soul. Bharata took Vasistha and the queens to the *ashrama*, explained the reason why he had come to the forest and begged Rama to return to the capital and ascend the throne. Everyone tried to convince Rama to accept the kingship by using various arguments but without success; Bharata finally said that he was ready to fast until death to make that happen. Rama replied that it was not possible for him to dishonor the promise given by Dasaratha, and that Bharata had to do his part by occupying the throne as requested by Kaikeyi. So Bharata went back to the capital, carrying Rama's sandals as a symbol of his presence on the throne, and solemnly declared that he was nothing more than his brother's servant, executing his orders to take care of the kingdom in the absence of the legitimate king until the end of the 14 years of exile - and in case Rama did not return, he would commit suicide. Bharata established his residence at Nandigrama, at a certain distance from the capital, and without entering the city again he engaged in strict austerity but cooperating with the ministers for the management of the government.

After Bharata's visit, Rama heard from the forest Rishis that some Rakshasas under the command of Khara had developed the habit of molesting the inhabitants of the *ashramas*. Considering that Citrakuta reminded him of the sadness of Bharata's visit, the news of his father's death, and the separation and pain of his family, Rama decided to seek another residence. He went to the *ashrama* of Atri Rishi, where he was received with honor and affection, and Sita met Anasurya, Atri's wife, who offered her good advice on married life and gifts of divine ornaments. The departure from Atri Rishi's *ashrama* ends chapter 119 of *Ayodhya kanda*.

In the *Aranya kanda* ("the book of the jungle") we see Rama, Sita and Lakshmana entering the Dandaka forest, welcomed by the Rishis who lived there. The first Rakshasa they met was Viradha, who attacked Sita and then Rama and Lakshmana. When he was brought down, Viradha recognized Rama and was liberated from the curse that condemned him to remain in that form: he then returned to his position of Gandharva and suggested Rama to visit the *ashrama* of Sarabhanga Rishi. Sarabhanga was a very old man, and was waiting to see Rama before leaving his body.

Other Rishis approached Rama and asked him to protect them from the repeated attacks

of the Rakshasas that had settled in the forest. Rama reassured them, saying he would eliminate the threat, then visited the *ashrama* of Sutiksha Rishi, where they spent the night. Sita was not very happy about those talks of war against the Rakshasas, but Rama explained that a *kshatriya's* duty is to protect the people, and this required the elimination of the Rakshasas.

While they were traveling to the *ashrama* of Agastya Rishi, Rama spoke to Lakshmana about Agastya's story, and especially about the extraordinary way in which he had eliminated a great Rakshasa named Vatapi. Agastya presented Rama with the great bow of Vishnu, two inexhaustible quivers obtained from Indra and a divine sword; he also promised that Matali, Indra's charioteer, would bring him the chariot of the king of the heavenly planets every time he needed it. Agastya Rishi praised Sita for her great qualities and recommended Rama to spend the last exile period in Panchavati, on the river of the river Godavari - a truly beautiful place, surrounded by flowering trees. During his journey to Panchavati, Rama met the great bird Jatayu, who had been Dasaratha's friend. After reaching his destination, Lakshmana chose the best spot and quickly built a log cabin with a thatched roof.

One day there came Surpanakha, a powerful Rakshasi sister of Ravana, the kings of the Rakshasas. Surpanakha's husband Vidyut Jihva had been killed by Ravana and she did not want to remain a widow, therefore when she saw the handsome prince Rama, she proposed to marry him. Surpanakha's episode is crucial in the story of the *Ramayana*, both as a prelude to the war against the Rakshasa colony of Janasthana in the forest, and as an introduction to the abduction of Sita, which will cause the destruction of the Rakshasas' capital in Lanka.

Superficially, it may seem that Rama and Lakshmana are cruelly making fun of a poor woman, who is confused and starved for affection, but this illusion is short lived, and the Rakshasi reveals herself in her true nature of brutal and bloodthirsty monster, when she decides to solve the problem by devouring Sita. Also Lakshmana's action to cut off the Rakshasi's nose and ears must be seen in its proper context: the Rakshasas are able to take any form they like, yet physical beauty is never their main concern.

Infuriated, Surpanakha rushed to her brother Khara, the commander of the Rakshasa garrison in the forest, and Khara, Trishira and Duhsana went to punish the two human

princes for that offense. Rama ordered Lakshmana to hide Sita in a cave and stay to protect her, while he would singlehandedly annihilate the entire army of 14 thousands Rakshasas. The only survivor, Akampana, rushed to inform Ravana, and advised him to avoid confronting the prince in an open fight; it would be much better to demoralize him first by kidnapping his beloved wife. Tataka's son Maricha, who had already been defeated by Rama, confirmed that the prince was not an ordinary person, and in fact it could even be Vishnu himself, that sometimes descends as *avatara*.

In the meantime Surpanakha had arrived at Ravana's palace to demand vengeance for the offense she had suffered; she entered the discussion, supporting the plan for Sita's abduction. Ravana went to see Maricha and ordered him to take the shape of a beautiful golden deer and to go grazing around the *ashrama*, to lure Rama as far away as possible. Maricha was not enthusiastic about the plan, but because refusing to execute Ravana's order would mean certain death, he decided it was better for him to risk being killed by Rama, and accepted the task.

While picking flowers in the surrounding forest, Sita saw the deer and was fascinated by it; she called Rama and Lakshmana to show it to them. Lakshmana immediately suspected a Rakshasa's trick, but Rama observed that in such a case it would be even more important to take care of it: if he failed in capturing the animal, he would kill it. Rama told Lakshmana to stay and protect Sita and followed the deer further and further away, until he decided he had passed the limit. He shot an arrow and Maricha, mortally wounded, returned to his normal shape and by imitating Rama's voice called Sita and Lakshmana for help, according to Ravana's plan.

Rama rushed back to the *ashrama*, but the damage was done: obsessed by the idea that Rama could be in danger, Sita had begged Lakshmana to go find out. At first Lakshmana did not want to disobey Rama's orders and refused to leave her alone, but from fear, Sita had moved to anger, and expressed the doubt that actually Lakshmana was hoping for Rama to die, so that he could take advantage of her. Finally Lakshmana gave in: he drew a mystic protective line (*rekha*) around the cabin, warning Sita not to step over it, and ran off to look for Rama. As soon as Lakshmana had left the scene, Ravana took the appearance of a *sannyasi* and came forward chanting some *mantras*. Sita respectfully welcomed the fake *sadhu* and left the protective circle to bring him some food. Then Ravana revealed his true identity and asked Sita to become his lover; when Sita rejected

him indignantly, the Rakshasa lifted her off the ground and carried her away on his flying chariot. Hearing Sita's cries for help, the great bird Jatayu rushed on the spot to stop Ravana, but in the ensuing battle he was fatally wounded. While flying over a mountain, Sita saw a group of Vanaras ("people of the forest") and dropped some of her ornaments, hoping they would be found and help Rama to track her.

Arrived at Lanka, Ravana took Sita to visit his palace and showed her his wealth and power, but Sita did not relent and even refused to look at his face. In the end Ravana imprisoned her in the Asoka vana, a grove of *asoka* trees inside the royal gardens, under the watchful eyes of some Rakshasis.

In the meantime, Rama was rushing back to the *ashrama* when he met Lakshmana coming after him, and their fears were confirmed when they reached the *ashram*: it was empty. Rama wept bitterly and ran here and there looking for Sita, overwhelmed by the pain for her absence, and begged the animals, the trees and the streams to give him information on his beloved wife. Lakshmana tried to comfort him, but without much success.

This part of the poem gives particular importance to Rama's loving sentiments in the *sringara rasa*. While they were wandering in the forest looking for Sita, they met dying Jatayu: the bird just had the time to tell them what had happened - his fight with Ravana and his failure to rescue Sita. His eyes filled with tears, Rama embraced the lifeless body of Jatayu and performed the funeral rites for him on the bank of the Godavari river.

Chasing after Ravana, the two princes met a Rakshasa named Kabandha, who had a strange shape: he had no head, and there was a mouth in the middle of his body. Grabbing Rama and Lakshmana, the Rakshasa started to pull them towards his big mouth to devour them, but the two princes chopped his arms off, thus liberating him from the curse that had given him that body.

After Rama and Lakshmana had cremated his body, Kabandha appeared in a divine form and advised Rama to seek the Vanara named Sugriva, who could help him to find Sita. Kabandha also told them to go to the *ashrama* of Matanga Rishi, where the Rishika Sabari, of tribal origins, had been waiting for a long time to meet Lord Rama. In her devotional enthusiasm, Sabari offered Rama some forest fruits, after tasting some to make sure they were really good. Then Rama and Lakshmana proceeded towards lake



Pampa and Rishyamuka hill, where Sugriva lived. This is the end of chapter 75 of *Aranya kanda*.

The *Kishkinda Kanda* takes its name from the capital city of the Vanara kingdom. As we have mentioned in the introduction, we need to go beyond the superficial view that identifies the Vanaras with the ordinary langur monkeys, that are still found in India. It is possible that the langur monkeys are somehow related with the ancient Vanaras, but yet again, even the contemporary human species has many genes in common with chimpanzees. The Vanaras described in the *Ramayana* have a tail but rather resemble the primates in the "Planet of Apes" movie: they build cities, have a complex social system, wear ornaments and weapons and speak expressing thoughts and sentiments that are certainly not different from the humans'. Vedic tradition describes in details many humanoid races that are reciprocally fertile, and the Vanaras are among them: we may remember that Krishna married a descendent of Jambavan, one of the Vanaras that had participated to Rama's expedition against Ravana. The other humanoid races are the Rakshasas, Yakshas, Gandharvas and Nagas, all reciprocally fertile with the human beings, and all superior to human beings in regard to the power of manipulating matter.

The book about the Vanaras begins with an elaborate description of the beauty of the lake Pampa, that intensifies Rama's feelings for the absence of Sita. This Rishyamuka hill was the place where Sugriva had taken shelter, because due a curse, his brother Vali could not come near the hill. But how had this enmity between Sugriva and Vali developed?

Vali, son on Indra and king of the Vanaras, was Sugriva's elder brother. One day Vali had gone outside the city to confront the Rakshasa Mayavi and during the fight the two entered a cave, while Sugriva remained to guard the entrance. After a long wait, Sugriva heard some screams and moaning, and saw blood flowing out of the cave: terrorized at the idea that Vali had been killed, Sugriva blocked the entrance of the cave with a boulder to imprison the Rakshasa and returned to Kishkinda with the news of the king's death. The ministers convinced Sugriva to ascend the throne for the sake of the kingdom, but Vali was not dead at all, and after some time he was able to remove the boulder blocking the passage to the cave and returned to the capital, extremely angry. Sugriva fled and Vali appropriated Sugriva's wife Ruma.

Sugriva saw the two princes approaching, and fearing they might be Vali's spies, he sent

his minister Hanuman to find out their intentions. Rama was very pleased by Hanuman's courtesy and he explained who he was and what he was looking for. Immediately Hanuman lifted the princes on his shoulders and took them to Sugriva, who was happy to become their ally. Both had a wife to rescue and an enemy to defeat, and they made a solemn oath to help each other.

Sugriva told Rama that in fact some time earlier he had seen a flying chariot from which a lady had dropped a small package containing some ornaments; Rama immediately identified them all and Lakshmana too recognized the anklets, that he had seen many times while offering his homage to his elder brother's wife.

Sugriva tried to pacify Rama, then he told him his own story, warning him that Vali was a formidable and cruel enemy, who had killed the powerful *asura* Dundubhi. To reassure Sugriva, Rama demonstrated his archery skills by shooting an arrow that pierced 7 *sala* trees, entered the ground and after going through the entire earth returned into the quiver at lightning speed. Sugriva was really impressed and decided to challenge Vali; however he was defeated. According to the plan, Rama was supposed to hit Vali while he was engaged in fighting Sugriva, but Rama was unable to distinguish one from the other, because they looked so much alike. Rama suggested Sugriva to wear a garland during the next fight so that he would be able to recognize him, so Sugriva went back to challenge his brother again.

Vali was getting ready to fight, but his wise wife Tara, descendent of Brihaspati, begged him not to accept the challenge. They knew Sugriva was not crazy, yet only one day after being badly defeated he was returning for a new fight: obviously he was counting on some other hidden factor. Besides, Tara had heard rumors that Sugriva had become Rama's ally. Maybe it was better to drop that silly enmity and make peace with Sugriva - what if he could be crowned *yuvaraja*? Vali rejected Tara's advice, and this time while Vali and Sugriva were fighting, Rama aimed at Vali and shot an arrow into his chest.

Mortally wounded, Vali fell to the ground and saw Rama approaching with his bow; he rebuked him for having attacked an unaware enemy, but Rama explained the reason of his intervention: those who believe they can freely violate the *dharma* with immoral actions, have no right to invoke the protection of *dharma*, and one who chooses to behave like a ferocious animal should be treated as such. Vali recognized the validity of Rama's

arguments and apologized for rebuking him. Then he made peace with Sugriva, entrusted him with his son Angada and asked him to take care of Tara.

Both Tara and Sugriva were distraught because of Vali's death; Rama pacified them and suggested that Angada be crowned *yuvaraja* while Sugriva occupied the throne of Kishkinda. As the orders given by Kaikeyi required him to live in the forest, Rama did not enter the city of Kishkinda but remained on the Prasravana hill to pine on Sita's absence, waiting for the end of the rainy season, when Sugriva would be able to send explorers to track down the kidnapper.

After some time Hanuman warned Sugriva reminding him of his promise to Rama, but the new king was deeply immersed into the sense gratification enhanced by the autumn season, and he lazily appointed Nila as a general and ordered him to rally the troops within 15 days. The rainy season finished but Sugriva still did not show up, so Rama sent Lakshmana into the city. Seeing that Lakshmana was very angry, Sugriva sent Tara to meet him hoping that he would be pacified, then he immediately sent messengers to gather all the Vanaras. Sugriva personally went to Rama to explain the preparations for the army that was going to leave for war against Ravana, and organized explorers' groups, sending them into various directions and explaining them the details of the geography of the regions they would have to go through while searching during the subsequent month. Because Ravana's chariot had been seen heading south, Sugriva entrusted the south group to prince Angada and his best minister, Hanuman, as well as Jambavan and general Nila. Rama gave his signet ring to Hanuman, to show it to Sita as a token.

It is interesting to note that Jambavan is listed here as a Vanara and at the same time as "bear"; this could indicate that, like the pre-celtic shamanic tribes of Europe who lived in its forests, the Vanaras had totemic clans and identified with the spirit of the animal that they choose as "ancestor". We could say that this tendency of tribal peoples is natural and intrinsic, and that many archaeological finds show a variety of hominids with ape-like features. We cannot really say whether the Vanaras' tail was actually a physical appendix of these "ancestors of mankind" (as most relics consist of very incomplete skeletons, and especially of skulls) or that it was a totemic ornament of great value. In any case, our understanding of who and what such Vanaras actually were is beginning to expand in various dimensions.

The group that was supposed to go west was put under the command of Sushena, Tara's father, and was asked to explore the entire territory from the Afghanistan mountains to Arabia, while Angada was going to search Lanka as well as the entire Indonesia, and even further east if necessary. The explorers sent north, led by Satabali, were supposed to go up to mount Soma. Sugriva explained to Rama that his vast geographical knowledge was due to the fact that while fleeing Vali's fury he had traveled extensively before he had found a suitable shelter.

The group journeying south explored the Vindhya mountains, entering the Riksha caves, where after a long and totally dark tunnel they found a wonderful place, with plenty of houses, gardens and small lakes. An elderly lady named Svayamprabha, who was guarding that subterranean world, informed the Vanaras that the cave had been created by Maya Danava and gifted to her by the Apsara Hema, then she transported the Vanaras outside by her mystic powers.

Depressed because they had not succeeded in finding anything although their allotted period had passed, the Vanaras decided to fast to death. Sampati, a great old bird who lived in that place, was happy at the idea of getting a good meal with them, because his wings had been burned by the sun and he found it very difficult to hunt to eat regularly. While the Vanaras were lamenting their bad luck, remembering Sita's abduction as the root cause of their troubles, Sampati heard that Jatayu (who was his brother) had died fighting to protect Sita. He approached them and confirmed that in fact his son Suparsva had seen a woman kidnapped by Ravana, the king of Lanka. Thanks to his keen sight, Sampati knew the location of Lanka and gave valuable information to the Vanaras; immediately Sampati's wings were healed, and to his great amazement the bird remembered that this miraculous fact had been predicted to him by Nisakara Rishi.

With renewed enthusiasm Angada and the other Vanaras went to the beach and started discussing how to cross the ocean. Who could jump farther? Jambavan stated that Hanuman, born from Anjana and Vayu, was as powerful as his father, the Deva of the wind. Once when he was a child, Hanuman had seen the sun rising and thought it was a ripe red fruit: he jumped up to the sky to grab it and Indra, scared, tried to stop Hanuman by striking him with a lightning which left a scar on the left side of his chin (*hanuman* means "broken chin").

After mentally offering his homage to his father Vayu, to Rama and Lakshmana, Hanuman took a giant leap from mount Mahendra, helping himself with his hands and tail, too. Here ends chapter 67 of *Kishkinda kanda*.

The next book, entitled *Sundara kanda* ("book of the wonders") is the most popular and is often recited during special functions; at the end of the reading, the coronation of Rama (described later in the text) is remembered.

During his flight, Hanuman encountered mount Mainaka, the last of the flying mountains (that Vayu had saved from Indra's fury) but instead of stopping for a rest he moved it aside and gracefully accepted its prayers. Then he met Surasa the mother of the Nagas and the Rakshasi Simhika, escaping from both; finally he landed on Lamba hill (also called Trikuta) and from there he watched in amazement the beauty and splendor of Lanka's capital, well protected by fortifications, moats and many soldiers. He decided to shrink his size and as the night fell he went to the main gates of the city, where he met Lankini, the personification of the city, and defeated her. Lankini abandoned the city, foreseeing its imminent destruction, and Hanuman went on to explore each street and each building, in the meantime getting an idea of the weapons and of the army of Ravana. Arrived at the royal palace he observed the wonderful aircraft of Ravana, called Pushpaka vimana, and he entered Ravana's private apartments, and was amazed by the luxury of the place and by the beauty of the women of all races and colors who lived there, especially one who was covered with jewels. However, that woman was not Sita, but Mandodari, Ravana's queen. Walking on, he found a hall with a great variety of foods and drinks, meats and liquors of all kinds, but no sign of Sita. When he had finally given up hope, he saw a large garden within the palace that he had not checked yet, and there he found a woman of Sita's description, sitting on a platform surrounded by watchful Rakshasi guards.

Dawn came and king Ravana, awakened by the praise of the court singers, went to see the prisoner, again trying to coax her into submission, but Sita plainly told him that he should give up that false hope and beg forgiveness from Rama. Ravana warned her that she had two months' time to make up her mind before he killed her; then he ordered the Rakshasis to harass her as much as possible or convince her in some other way, and he left.

Many months had passed since she had been kidnapped, and Sita's patience had come to

the end; she had decided to commit suicide when one of the Rakshasis, named Trijata, told her companions that she had a dream where Rama was victorious and Ravana was dead.

Noticing also some other good omens, Sita gathered her courage and Hanuman decided to announce himself, beginning to sing the glories of Rama with a soft and sweet voice, while he was still hiding among the branches of a *simshupa* tree. Then he showed himself in a tiny form, asking her if she really was Rama's bride. From her part, Sita too wanted to make sure it was not some Rakshasa trick. After supplying all the required information, Hanuman gave Sita the signet ring and offered to take her away immediately from Lanka, reassuring her that he was strong enough and revealing his gigantic form. Sita remarked that in this way Rama would find himself in an embarrassing position: it would be much better if Rama personally entered Lanka as a conqueror and directly avenged the offense.

To show Rama proof that he had really found her, Sita gave Hanuman the last jewel she had kept, and told him about one intimate episode that he could mention to Rama - one day while they lived in Citrakuta, a crow had attacked Sita and scratched her, and Rama had shot a Brahmastra at him.

After taking leave from Sita, Hanuman thought that before leaving he could do some damage to the city and scare Ravana a bit - something that would also keep up Sita's spirits - so he went into a rampage destroying a section of the park and easily defeated the Kinkara ("servant") soldiers that had come to face him. Then, manifesting a gigantic form and using tree trunks, pillars and iron bars from the park pavilions, he destroyed one entire garrison sent by Ravana, including Jambumali and the other sons of the minister Prahasta, other powerful warriors and even Aksha, one of Ravana's sons. Finally Ravana sent his son Indrajit, who had previously defeated Indra in a battle; Indrajit brought Hanuman down by using the Brahmastra, then while Hanuman was immobilized, the Rakshasas came and tied him up with many ordinary ropes. Although he could have freed himself quite easily, Hanuman decided to let himself be brought to Ravana, because he wanted to give him a message from Rama.

Majestically sitting in the jewelled throne hall and surrounded by his ministers Durdhara, Prahasta, Mahaparsva and Nikumbha, Ravana radiated power and splendor. Hanuman

said that he had destroyed the park specifically with the purpose of being brought to his presence because he had a message for him: Rama was extremely powerful and he was going to punish the offender, therefore Ravana needed to understand that it was better for him to surrender immediately and let Sita go free.

Angered by Hanuman's daring speech, Ravana wanted to have him killed, but Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, reminded him that according to the *kshatriyas'* ethical code, a messenger can never be killed. Ravana relented and decreed that Hanuman's tail was to be set on fire instead; the Rakshasas wrapped the tail with many oil-soaked rags and set fire to it, then they took the prisoner around the city for the amusement of the residents. Sita heard about it and prayed Agni not to harm Hanuman - who was amazed to notice that he did not feel any pain or discomfort.

When he decided he had seen enough, Hanuman loosened the ropes that tied him up and killed the guards, then he used his blazing tail to set fire to the capital's buildings, only sparing Vibhishana's house. Finally he returned to Sita, who was glad to hear about his raid and blessed him.

Hanuman climbed mount Arishta and leaped again through the ocean, landing on the opposite beach. After reporting the success of his mission to the jubilant Vanaras, Hanuman was ready to go to war alone against Lanka, but agreed to return immediately to Rama to give him the news. Arriving near Kishkinda the explorers stopped at the Madhuvana garden, property of Sugriva, and in spite of the presence of the caretaker, Dadhimukha, they pillaged the honey to celebrate the success of their mission. Informed by Dadhimukha about the exuberant behavior of the explorers, Sugriva guessed they had been celebrating, and sent immediately for Angada and his companions.

Angada reported to Rama about finding Sita, then Hanuman gave a complete description of the adventure, handed him the jewel received from Sita and mentioned the crow episode. Chapter 68 of *Kishkinda kanda* ends with Rama embracing Hanuman in gratitude and affection.

The *Yuddha kanda* ("the book of the battle") constitutes the last part of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Rama was anxious to leave for Lanka, and on an auspicious day the Vanara army began their march. Hanuman carried Rama on his shoulder while Angada carried Lakshmana, and quickly they arrived at the Mahendra mountain, from which Rama

contemplated the vastness of the ocean.

In the meantime in Lanka, Ravana summoned his ministers to discuss about the situation. The ministers encouraged him reminding him about the past victories and saying that Indrajit alone was capable of winning a war, if the situation required a fight. On the contrary Ravana's younger brother, Vibhishana, advised him to restore Sita to her husband, saying that many bad omens had already been observed. Displeased, Ravana dismissed the meeting but Vibhishana repeated his advice on the next morning.

Ravana would not listen, so he called the council again. When he was suggested to solve the problem by simply raping Sita, he replied that he was unable do that because of a curse. Vibhishana spoke up again and again requested that Sita be restored to her husband; displeased with his uncle, Indrajit rebuked him and Ravana kicked Vibhishana out of the kingdom, saying he did not want to see him any more. Vibhishana left his family, home and possessions, and crossed the ocean to join Rama.

Sugriva alerted Rama that Vibhishana, followed by four companions, was walking towards their camp and wanted to join them; at first all the army leaders suspected some kind of trick and did not want to allow Vibhishana to join them, but Rama replied that he would never abandon a person that sought his protection. Grateful for having been accepted by Rama, Vibhishana fell to Rama's feet, offering his eternal devotion, and Rama lifted him up with affection.

Then they discussed about Ravana's military strength and Vibhishana revealed all his military secrets, including Indrajit's power to become invisible in the middle of a fight, then he added that Rama's army was much smaller than Ravana's. Rama reassured him saying that he would win the war and install him on Lanka's throne, then he immediately performed Vibhishana's coronation ceremony by using the ocean's water.

After that, Rama sat on the beach to fast, praying three times a day to obtain a passage from the ocean, but he got no reply. In the end Rama became angry and shot lightning-like arrows to the bottom of the ocean, shaking the ocean and all its inhabitants; then he called the Brahmastra and threatened to use it to dry up all the water. The ocean then personally appeared with folded hands in front of Rama and suggested him to build a bridge. The Vanara named Nala, son of Visvakarma, organized the building of the bridge, that was 100 *yojana* long and 10 *yojana* wide; all the Vanaras enthusiastically carried big



boulders and tree trunks and completed the bridge within 5 days, crossing it and reaching Lanka. The remains of the bridge still exist and constitute one of the most famous mysteries of archeology. The British called them "Adam's bridge" and the modern scientific methods date them no less than 1,750,000 years ago. Recently NASA has published very interesting photos in this regard.

Ravana had been informed about the arrival of Rama's army and his spies Suka and Sarana, captured by the Vanara with Vibhishana's help, were released and sent back into the city, where they described the power and value of Rama's army. Irritated by the discouraging conclusions of his two spies, Ravana sent a third agent, Shardula, who also returned with the same report. Then he decided to go for a trick; he sent for Vidyutjihva and asked him to create a head similar to Rama's and a bow that was identical in looks to Rama's Kodanda bow, and to take them to the Ashoka vana. Ravana went to the garden and informed Sita that Rama's army had been defeated in battle and that the Rakshasas' general Prahasta had beheaded Rama in his sleep. Vidyutjihva came with the head and the bow, that were shown to Sita, with a new request for union with Ravana. Seeing the head and the bow, Sita burst into tears. In the meantime a messenger came for Ravana and the Rakshasa king went to meet him - the illusion disappeared and the Rakshasi Sarama comforted Sita, explaining that it has been a trick and that Rama was still alive and waging war against Ravana.

The time of the siege came. Ravana posted Prahasta at the east gate, Mahaparsva and Mahodara at the south gate and Indrajit at the west gate, ordered Virupaksha to lead the troops within the city, and then went to personally watch the north gate. Rama, too, organized his army, putting Nila at the head of the division that was going to attack the east side, Angada to the south wall, Hanuman to the west side, while Rama and Lakshmana would face Ravana on the north side of the city. Sugriva, Vibhishana and Jambavan were going to take care of the rear guard. Then they climbed mount Suvela, from which they could observe the city and spend the night safely. Sugriva saw Ravana and in a fit of rage he leaped towards him, knocked his crown off and attacked him. After a long fight, realizing that he was not going to win, Sugriva returned to the camp and Rama scolded him for that impulsive action, also considering that Sugriva had responsibilities to his own kingdom and was not supposed to get into unnecessary danger. Rama sent Angada to Ravana to tell him that there could be peace if he returned Sita, but

Ravana got angry and ordered his people to kill the messenger. The Vanara prince grabbed the four Rakshasas that were coming towards him and leaping into air he threw them down to the ground, then he demolished Ravana's terrace before returning to Rama.

The Vanaras started the systematic destruction of the city and the Rakshasa army descended to battle. The clash was terrifying and went on far into the night. Angada defeated Indrajit and destroyed his chariot, and Indrajit resorted to invisibility, shooting the Nagapasa ("snake ropes") that made Rama and Lakshmana unconscious. Ravana was very pleased and embraced Indrajit, but Vibhishana comforted Sugriva and the Vanaras, telling them that the Nagapasa only had a temporary effect. In the meantime, Ravana took Sita to the battlefield on his Pushpaka vimana so that she could see how Rama and Lakshmana had fallen unconscious. Sita was terrified, but the Rakshasi Trijata comforted her, saying that they were not dead, and that soon they would regain consciousness.

Rama awoke first, and seeing Lakshmana laying motionless, he thought he was dead and started to lament - but the effect of the Nagapasa was instantly dissipated by the arrival of Garuda, the divine eagle. Seeing that Rama and Lakshmana were again standing ready to fight, Ravana sent Dhumraksha against them. Hanuman killed Dhumraksha, and in a series of other clashes Vajradamstra was killed by Angada, Akampana was killed by Hanuman after a long battle, and Prahasta was killed by Nila. Ravana decided to go personally into battle and sweeping away many Vanaras from his path, he went to challenge Lakshmana to fight, hitting him in the chest and making him fall unconscious. While he was trying to lift Lakshmana to carry him away, Ravana was attacked by Hanuman, who stroke him down. Hanuman carried Lakshmana safely to Rama, who then climbed on Hanuman's shoulders and engaged Ravana into a duel, destroying his chariot and horses, crown and bow, and wounding him severely. Then Rama showed his generosity and valor by allowing Ravana to go away to take rest and revive his strength.

Returned into his city, Ravana decided to awaken his brother Kumbhakarna, who had gone to sleep a few days earlier and was supposed to remain sleeping for many months. Finally Kumbhakarna shook sleep off and descended into battle, hitting Angada and Sugriva, who were saved by Hanuman. Ordinary arrows had no effect against Kumbhakarna, therefore Rama used divine weapons controlled by Vayu and Indra, cutting the Rakshasa into pieces while he was advancing, and finally beheading him. Ravana decided to send his sons Trisira, Devantaka, Narantaka and Atikaya, and his

brothers Mahodara and Mahaparsva, all great warriors, but all these were killed in fierce battles, too.

The only son of Mandodari, Indrajit, asked permission to get into battle, and equipped with many divine weapons he killed many Vanaras and made Rama and Lakshmana unconscious with his Brahmastra. Jambavan called Hanuman and told him that to revive the two princes they needed to get the herbs called *mrita sanjivani*, *visalya karani*, *suvarna karani* and *sandhani*, growing on a particular Himalayan hill. Hanuman immediately left, but because he had the feeling he was wasting time by searching for those particular herbs, he lifted the entire hill and carried it to the battlefield. The remedy worked instantly, bringing back to life not only Rama and Lakshmana, but also all the Vanaras that had fallen on the battlefield.

The fight continued, with Kumbhakarna's sons Kumbha and Nikumbha entering the battle. Also Maharaksha son of Khara came into the battle, and Indrajit returned to fight by using all the mystic weapons; he also created a false image of Sita and cut her throat in front of Hanuman and the other Vanaras. Informed about that horrendous action, Rama and Lakshmana fell into despair, but Vibhishana exposed the fraud and said that Ravana would never be able to kill Sita. In the meantime Indrajit had started a ritual for a demoniac sacrifice in the temple of Nikumbhila. Vibhishana came to know about it and advised Rama to send Lakshmana immediately to kill him before he was able to complete the ritual. Lakshmana and Hanuman, accompanied by Vibhishana and Jambavan, disrupted the ritual and challenged Indrajit to a duel.

Finally Lakshmana shot the Aindrastra, invoking Rama's virtue, and Indrajit was struck down. At the news of his heir's death, Ravana was shocked and decided to really kill Sita, but was stopped by minister Suparsva. The last Rakshasa went into battle and Rama defeated them all. On the eight day of the war Ravana himself returned to battle, accompanied by all the ministers that were still alive. Again Ravana hit Lakshmana with his Shakti weapon, sending him unconscious, and again the prince was revived with more medicinal herbs brought from the Himalaya. Suddenly Matali came with Indra's chariot and Rama ascended it for the last attack. After a fierce fight with the divine weapons sent by Indra, Rama used Indra's Shakti to break Ravana's trident.

Agastya Rishi intervened giving Rama the *mantra* called *Aditya hridaya* ("the heart of

Surya") while Ravana was resting from battle for some time. Rama chanted the *mantra* three times, regained strength, and he returned to battle. But every time he cut off one of Ravana's heads, another one was growing in its place. Finally Rama evoked the Brahmastra and hit Ravana in the chest, striking him down. While Mandodari lamented the king's death, Vibhishana praised his fallen brother's power and valor, and asked permission to perform his funeral rites.

Rama sent Hanuman to inform Sita about what had happened; Sita asked Hanuman to tell Rama she was anxious to meet him and Vibhishana accompanied her to Rama, but everyone was perplexed when Rama treated his wife coldly, simply telling her that she was free to go wherever she liked. To prove her purity, Sita asked Lakshmana to make a big fire and walked through it, protected by Agni, and the Devas appeared to remind Rama his divine nature of Vishnu, and to tell him that Sita was actually Lakshmi Devi.

After this demonstration Rama, Sita and Lakshmana ascended the Pushpaka vimana to return to Ayodhya, and allowed Vibhishana and the Vanaras to accompany them. During the flight, Rama showed Sita the various places of their adventures. They first landed at the *ashrama* of Bharadvaja Rishi, and Rama asked the Rishi to bless the trees on the way so that they would fill with all kinds of fruits, even out of season. Then Rama sent Hanuman to inform Guha and Bharata about their arrival, and after sending a message to Satrughna, Bharata rushed to welcome Rama and return his sandals, thus indicating the return of the legitimate king.

To the great joy of everyone, Rama ascended the throne of Ayodhya, appointing Bharata as *yuvaraja*.

## Yoga Vasistha

This is another very important, albeit less known, text of 10 chapters, written by Valmiki about the story of Rama. It contains the instructions to the young prince offered by the Raja Guru (the king's *guru*) Vasistha Rishi, that was one of the 10 *manasa putras* ("sons born from the mind") of Brahma, the creator of the universe.

Vasistha had been the preceptor of the Ayodhya Surya vamsa (solar dynasty) since the times of Ikshvaku, the son of Svayambhuva Manu.

This episode is set before Rama's exile, in anticipation of his coronation, and lasts several days. The teachings of the *Yoga Vasistha* are meant to lead to liberation and Self realization, which start when a human being asks questions about his real nature. When a man asks, "who am I?", he seeks the company of the sages to obtain the answers and thus he is blessed with the essence of all scriptures. The realized teacher guides the worthy disciple, who has attained the proper level of renunciation, and dissipates his illusions.

The activities of the material world are as illusory as the idea that the painted image of a snake could move and attack one who is watching it. Creation is nothing but a play of consciousness, and the strength of the bondage - although they do not exist in reality - becomes stronger and creates more sufferings when the individual desires to exploit it to get sense gratification. One who wants to achieve happiness must reject the *samsara* of material identification and the mental fantasies and attachments, and come to the level where he can see that everything that exists is only Brahman.

Just like the snake appears in our mind when we mistakenly see it as a rope, and disappears as soon as we recognize the rope for what it really is, the world ceases to appear as material to one who recognizes the absolute existence of the Self. The same thing happens to one who awakens from a dream and finds true reality.

The characteristics of a *jivanmukta*, a person who has already attained liberation in this lifetime, are inner happiness and peace, and freedom from fear. He continues to work in

this world like inalterable gold that has sunk into mud; free from doubts and from the knots of desires, he does not become attached to his parentage and has no prejudice towards friends and enemies, treating them with equal justice.

The material mind (*cittam*) divides awareness by creating objects of desire for itself and runs after them - a faculty that derives from the omnipresent and omnipotent Lord, but it must be destroyed by using that same tendency, just like a fire created by the action of the wind is extinguished by the wind itself.

Moving the concept of "I" and "mine" from the level of material illusion to the transcendental reality of Atman-Brahman, the *purusha* mind dissolves the attachments and the dormant impressions (*vasana*). Such attachments do not reside in the body, because the same arms can encircle different objects with different mental attitudes.

Material consciousness (*cittam*) is terrifying (*ugra*) in the awakened state, peaceful (*santam*) in dreams, and dull (*mudham*) in deep sleep, but just like the powder of *kataka* seeds used to precipitate dirt in the water disappears in the water itself after completing its action, the material consciousness dissolves into the Self.

Only the fools speak of meditation when they are not even able to control their own minds. We should rather seek the company of the sages, abandon the dormant impressions (of the past), study the knowledge of the Self contained in the scriptures and control breathing: in this way we become masters of the mind.

The search for the knowledge of the true nature of the Self is the key to destroy the dormant impression and the control of breathing helps to direct the mind. By remaining in the company of the wise, ceasing to think about the material activities and attachments, and remembering that the body will have to die, the dormant impressions of the past become inactive.

Even an ignorant person is able to transform poison into nectar and nectar into poison by the power of his belief - in the same way we need to understand and deeply believe that we are not the material body.

Meditation on the Self consists in realizing our nature of pure consciousness, beyond all illusions, and that the body we are wearing does not really belong to us. The ocean of this consciousness can contain the rise and disappearance of all the imaginary waves of

personalities, actions and reactions, without being disturbed. By rendering homage to the Self that is in all creatures, the inner consciousness experiences pure and constant happiness.

In this way we must act externally by playing our role in the world but remain inwardly stable, free from all attachments and dormant impressions, abandoning all objects of contemplation and cutting, with the sword of knowledge, the illusion of being the body.

By meditating on the Self and cultivating the knowledge of the Self, illusion dissipates automatically, even if this requires a certain effort - just like we need some effort to extract iron from ore, fire from wood, butter from the cow, and oil from sesame seeds.

## **Rama charita manasa**

In the course of the centuries, the popularity of *Ramayana* has also been reflected in various versions in the popular languages of India (Hindi, Tamil, Oriya etc). The most famous of such translations (which tend to be rather "independent" in their versions) is Tulsidas' version in Hindi language (more specifically, in Awadhi dialect) entitled *Ramacharitamanasa* ("remembrance of Rama's adventures") that attained immense popularity, especially among the illiterate population of the Indian villages.

Gosvami Tulsidas was born in 1497 in Uttar Pradesh and lived in Varanasi (Benares), founding the temple of Sankatamochana dedicated to Hanuman and inaugurating the tradition of the folkloristic drama events on the story of Rama, called *rama lila*.

Both the text of the *Rama charita manasa* and the traditional stories around Tulsidas echo some of the beliefs and attitudes called *laukika sraddha* ("popular beliefs") developed in the course of time, also due to the influence of the Muslim and European domination, that compacted the lack of a solid Vedic knowledge, for example aggravating the division between "brahmins" and "low castes". It is possible that Tulsidas reflected such prejudice because he did not want to embark into unnecessary controversies with the ignorant

people of his times, but it is also possible that the manuscripts presently available have been tampered with.

We can see an example of such prejudice in a story about Tulsidas himself: the popular legend says that Hanuman had visited the *ashrama* of Valmiki Rishi to hear the original *Ramayana*, but the Rishi had kicked him out saying that as a monkey he did not have the right of attending the recitation of the sacred text (an idea that looks rather stupid, as Hanuman himself is one of the main heroes of the text written by Valmiki). So according to this unlikely story, Hanuman went to the Himalaya to meditate on Rama and wrote the *Maha nataka* or *Hanuman nataka* by scratching the text on the rocks with his fingernails. When Valmiki read Hanuman's work, he realized that it would eclipse his own poem, so he ordered him to destroy the rocks by throwing them into the ocean (another rather unbelievable act as even the mere presence of the name of Rama would be sufficient to purify the rocks - as Valmiki himself had written in his poem, when the Vanaras had created the floating bridge by writing Rama's name on the rocks). All the fuss about Hanuman being "unworthy" then came down to Valmiki supposedly advising Hanuman to take birth again as a human being and a brahmin, so that he would be allowed to compose a poetic work. One may be forgiven for wondering why Narada had not given Valmiki the same instruction (take another birth) to transform him from a *chandala* into a *brahmana*, and had instead recommended him simply to remember the name and the story of Rama - including the part played by Hanuman as his dear devotee and servant.

It is said that Tulsidas was born after 12 months of pregnancy, already with 32 teeth, and as developed physically as usually are 5 year old children. When he was only 4 days old he was abandoned by his parents, who feared the effects of the negative constellations under which the child had been born. So Tulsidas was compelled to immediately start to earn a livelihood by begging from door to door, until he was taken in by Naraharidas, a *ramanandi sannyasi*, who initiated him to *sannyasa* as his disciple. Later on, Tulsidas visited various places of pilgrimage all over India, and he claims he personally met both Hanuman and Rama several times. One day in Varanasi he met a *preta* (ghost) and after quenching his thirst with water, he obtained from him the blessing of meeting Hanuman, who was wandering around in the form of a leper to hear the story of Rama - and who after Tulsidas' insistent requests, admitted he was Hanuman and advised him to go to meditate at Citrakuta, where Rama had lived during his exile. To this ghost, Tulsidas



offers his homage at the beginning of the text of the *Rama charita manasa* (*doha* 1.7).

There are also many popular stories of miracles attributed to Tulsidas, like the episode when he was imprisoned by the emperor of Delhi, and an army of monkeys invaded the city, devastating everything including the royal palace.

Tulsidas composed his work in vernacular language remaining in the holy place of Ayodhya and completed it in 2 years, 7 months and 26 days. Then he went to recite it in the temple of Shiva in Varanasi, where according to the popular legend the brahmins of the temple allowed the book to be kept in the inner chamber of the temple; the next morning the manuscript was bearing an addition of three words: *satyam shivam sundaram* ("true, good and beautiful") with the signature of Shiva himself. According to the popular tradition, several copies of the *Rama charita manasa* were written personally by Tulsidas' hand.

As described in one of his last works, the *Hanuman bahuka*, in his last years Tulsidas was afflicted by serious pains all over the body, especially in his arms, and by abscesses that infected the pores of his skin. The last text he wrote, the *Vinayapatrika*, contains a very popular verse (45) often sung as *bhajan* in the evening ceremonies, like the famous *Hanuman chalisa*, the 40 verses in praise of Hanuman.

Particularly important, from the ideological perspective, are the conversation between Lomasa Rishi and Kakabhushundi regarding the identity between *nirguna brahman* and *saguna brahman*, the elaboration about the chanting of the holy name of Rama as the only effective religious practice in Kali yuga, and the presentation of Rama as the source of all divine manifestations - including Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma - and of the entire universe, that is his cosmic form and at the same time his *lila* ("divine play").

Similarly, in this conversation it is said that Sita is Maya - called Vidya Maya because she enables the creation and liberation of the individual soul, as well as Avidya Maya because she is the cause of illusion and ignorance. Regarding Shiva, Tulsidas describes him as the manifestation of the Guru tattva, the original spiritual master. Tulsidas' philosophical position in regard to the famous controversy *dvaita* versus *advaita* is that the world in itself is neither truth (*satya*) nor falseness (*asatya*), or the two things simultaneously (*satyasatya*), and that only by abandoning all these three illusions it is possible to attain true realization.

## Puranas

Also compiled by Vyasadeva, the *Puranas* offer valuable teachings in the form of stories and dialogues, just like the *Itihasas*.

There are 18 *Mahapuranas* ("great *puranas*") for a total of 400 thousand verses, and 18 *Upapuranas* ("secondary *puranas*").

The lists in order of importance sometimes give slightly different sequences, and there are reasons to believe that the *Bhavishya purana*, often listed as *Mahapurana*, is actually a much later text inserted in the lists in place of the ancient *Devi bhagavata purana*, that is mentioned separately.

Here is a summary of the main *Puranas*.

### ***Bhagavata purana***

Also known as *Srimad Bhagavatam* and composed by 18 thousand verses, it is certainly the most famous; the core of the narration is the story of Krishna, presented as the Supreme Lord (*bhagavan*). An ample summary study of the *Bhagavata purana*, of about 400 pages, has been presented in this series by the same author.

The text begins with an assembly of sages in Naimisharanya, discussing spiritual topics. Suta Gosvami reports the dialogue between Sukadeva and king Parikshit, who was waiting for death and asked him what is the supreme good for the human beings, according to the scriptures and the teachings of the great sages. Sukadeva narrated many stories, such as the appearance of the *avatara* Varaha, of Kapila (with his teachings on Yoga and Sankhya, and on the process of reincarnation), of Daksha's sacrifice (and Sati's death), of Dhruva (of his austerities when he was a child and his deeds as an adult), of king Vena (and his elimination by the *brahmanas*), of king Prithu, king Pracinabarhi and his sons the Pracetas, of king Priyavrata, Rishabha (and his teachings), of Jadabharata (who preserved the memories of his previous lifetimes even through an animal birth), of

Ajamila (who was saved by the Vishnudutas), of the sons of Daksha, of Indra and Vritrasura, of Citraketu (and his child who temporarily returned from death), of Indra and Diti (who was trying to have a son who could defeat Indra), of Prahlada and his father Hiranyakasipu (including the appearance of the *avatara* Narasimha), of the elephant Gajendra (who was saved by Vishnu), of the churning of the nectar of immortality (that was obtained from the milk ocean thanks to the extraordinary cooperation of Devas and Asuras), of the Vishnu *avatara* Mohini, of Bali Maharaja and the *avatara* Vamana (who asked him for three paces of land, by which he covered the entire universe), of the fish *avatara* Matsya, of Cyavana Rishi (and how he recovered his lost youth), of king Ambarisha who was a great devotee of Vishnu, of Bhagiratha (who brought about the descent of the Ganges to earth), of the *avatara* Rama (whose adventures are narrated in the *Ramayana*), of the *avatara* Parasurama, of king Yayati, of king Dushmanta (who became the husband of Sakuntala and father of Bharata), and of the ancestors of Parikshit Maharaja.

After speaking of the genealogy of the Surya vamsa ("the Sun dynasty"), the text describes the Soma vamsa ("the Moon dynasty"), in which Krishna appeared. From the 10th canto onwards, the story focuses exclusively on Krishna, from his birth in Mathura to the escape to Gokula, from the adventures in Vrindavana (including the famous *rasa* dance with the cowherd girls) to the return to his parents in Mathura, the founding of Dvaraka city, his adventures with the Pandavas, and finally the disappearance of the entire Yadu dynasty.

In the 6th canto we find the Narayana kavacha ("the Narayana armour" constituted by protective *mantras*) and the Pumsavana vrata (a ritual to have a son); in the 8th canto we have the Payo vrata (a ritual fast on milk). Among the most famous prayers there are those of Brahma (3rd canto), Shiva (4th canto), the inhabitants of Jambudvipa (5th canto), Daksha (6th canto) and the personified *Vedas* (10th canto).

### ***Skanda*** (or Kartika) *purana*

It is the largest puranic text, with 81,100 verses divided into 7 books or *kandas* named after Mahesvara, Vaishnava, Brahma, Kashi, Avanti, Nagara and Prabhasa. The text starts by describing the glories of Shiva, the story of Daksha's sacrifice and Sati's death,

the episode when Devas and Asuras churned the milk ocean to produce the nectar of immortality but had to face the problem of the *halahala*, the poison that aggregated the impurities of the ocean. Shiva Mahesvara ("the great Lord") drank this poison to save the world. Then the text introduces the main topic: the birth of Skanda, son of Shiva, who became the general of the Devas' army and killed the Asura Taraka. There is a description of the blessings obtained by observing the Shivaratri fasting - the 14th day of the waning moon of each month - with the example of the story of Dussah, who became Virabhadra.

After killing Taraka, Skanda received from Vishnu the instruction to worship Shiva in the forms of Pratijnesvara, Kapalesvara and Kumaresvara. Then there is the story of Kalabhiti ("he who feared Time"), the son of the *brahmana* Manti. For 4 years Kalabhiti refused to take birth because he was afraid of Time; Manti prayed Shiva, who sent 4 of his *ganas* ("companions") named Dharma ("ethical sense"), Jnana ("knowledge"), Vairagya ("renunciation") and Aisvarya ("lordship") to convince him. A fifth *gana*, named Adharma ("immorality") promised never to come near the child. At last Kalabhiti was persuaded to take birth. After Kalabhiti was personally visited by the Lord, who gifted him with the *jyotilinga* ("radiating form") *svayambhu* "spontaneously appeared") called Mahakala that is still worshiped today.

Here he find the conversation between Kalabhiti and king Karandham regarding the rituals to honor the ancestors, the difference between Shiva and Vishnu, the worship of the Lingam, the manifestation of the Arunachala mountain as a huge Shiva lingam, the creation of the universe, and the episode of the killing of Sumbha and Nishumbha and Mahishasura by Durga.

The *Vaishnava kanda* relates the story of Varaha and his conversation with Prithivi (Earth), including the description of the four abodes of Vishnu in the four *yugas* (respectively Anjana, Narayanagiri, Simhanchala and Venkatachala), the powerful *mantra* for the worship of Varaha, the story of Padmavati, and the explanation of the reason why Sita entered the fire at the end of the *Ramayana*.

The text continues with the story of Maharaja Parikshit and the curse cast by Sringeri son of Shamik, who condemned the king to die within 7 days by a snake bite.

Also we find the story of the story of the *brahmana* Ramakrishna who engaged in

austerity on mount Venkatachala (where the temple of Tirupati Balaji was built) and the description of an important sacred place, Akasha Ganga Tirtha, that became famous for the austerities of Anjana (Hanuman's mother) who wanted to have Vayu as his son. The text gives the precise indication of the locality.

Then we find the description of Purushottama kshetra (Jagannatha Puri) where Brahma went to meditate on the recommendation of Vishnu, the episode where Markandeya Rishi survived the destruction of the universe by taking shelter in the Kalpa Vata (the desire tree) in Puri, the description of the temples of Kapala mochana and Vimala Devi, the appearance of Jagannatha and the story of king Indradyumna, Vidyapati and Visvvasu.

The episodes of the appearance of the Jagannatha Deities, the worship to Narasimha and the Asvamedha yajna occupy most of this *kanda*. Narada Rishi comes to give detailed instructions for the worship to Jagannatha and especially for the annual celebration of the Ratha yatra.

There is a long list with the description of sacred places, such as the rivers Ganga, Godavari, Narmada, Tapti, Yamuna, Kshipra, Gautami, Kaushiki, Kaveri, Tamraparni, Chandrabhaga, Sindhu, Gandaki, Sarasvati, and the cities of Ayodhya, Dvaraka, Kashi (Varanasi or Benares), Mathura, Avanti, Kurukshetra, Ramatirtha (Ramesvaram), Kanchi, Purushottama kshetra (Puri), Pushkara kshetra, Varaha kshetra and Badarikashrama. Then it speaks of the importance of the month of Kartika, of bathing in the Ganges in the month of Margashirsha, of distributing charitable donations in the month of Vaisakha and visiting the sacred place of Ayodhya.

The *Brahma kanda* speaks about Ramesvara tirtha, where Rama, the *avatara* of Vishnu, installed a Shiva lingam, and the story of Rama's war against Ravana, the Rakshasa king of Lanka. Then it speaks of Dharmaranya kshetra, where Dharmaraja (Yama) engaged in austerities to please Shiva. After the description of Dharmakshetra we find a conversation between Vyasa and Yudhisthira, describing the degrading effects of the Kali yuga. In another conversation, Brahma explains the benefits of the *chaturmasya vrata* ("the four months vow") and the worship method called *sodasa upachara* ("with 16 worship steps") that must be performed by reciting the *Mahasukta* of the *Yajur Veda* constituted by 16 *suktas* (including the *Purusha sukta*) connected to the various parts of the body of the Deity of Vishnu.

The *Kashi kanda* begins with the episode of Narada Rishi that awakened the rivalry between the mountains Vindhya and Meru; Vindhya decided to expand and obstruct the passage of the Sun, with serious climate consequences.

The Devas begged Brahma for help and Brahma suggested to consult Agastya Rishi who lived in Kashi (Varanasi). Agastya left his city to order the mountain to shrink back to its normal size, then he traveled to Sri Shaila with his wife Lopamudra to meet Lord Kartikeya (Skanda); this chapter also contains the description of the sacred places of Prayaga, Naimisharanya, Kurukshetra, Gangadvara, Avanti, Ayodhya, Mathura, Dvaraka, Badrikashrama, Purushottama kshetra and Kashi, whose glories and history are narrated from its origin. In the Ananda vana ("the forest of joy") of Kashi, that is presently known as Manikarnika ghat, Shiva and Parvati manifested Vishnu as Purushottama; Purushottama dug a lake with his disc, the Sudarshana chakra, to remain in that place and engage in austerity.

The *Avanti kshetra kanda* begins with the glorification of Mahakala tirtha (the present Bhubaneswar in Orissa) in the conversation between Parvati and Shiva. This Mahakala tirtha is also called Ekamra vana ("the forest with one mango tree") and Vimukti kshetra ("the place that gives liberation") and is also known as a *pitha* because it is the abode of the Matrikas ("the Mother Goddesses"). One day Shiva arrived in the Mahakala forest carrying a skull (*kapala*) in his hand; the Devas performed the Pasupata vrata to honor Shiva, and as soon as Shiva dropped the skull, all the Asuras were destroyed.

Then the text speaks of Ujjain, also called Kanaka sringa ("golden horn"), Kusasthali ("the place of the sacred straw"), Avanti ("of one who protects") and Padmavati ("lotus-like"). Ujjain is also famous because in this place Shiva defeated the Tripura Asuras. This is also the place of appearance of Lakshmi, who manifested from the ocean of milk that was being churned here by Devas and Asuras.

In the region of Avantipura there are 4 sacred rivers called Kshipra, Divyanava, Nilaganga and Gandhavati, temples for 84 Shiva lingas, 8 Bhairavas, 11 Rudras, 12 Adityas, 6 Ganeshas, 24 Devis, and many temples dedicated to Vishnu such as Vasudeva, Ananta, Balarama, Janardana, Narayana, Hrishiksha, Varaha, Dharanidhara, Vamana and Vishnu resting on Seshanaga.

Then there is the story of the descent to earth of the sacred river Narmada, thanks to the efforts of king Purutkusu; the impact of the sacred waters was sustained by Paryanka, son of the Vindhyachala mountain. Later, during the Svayambhuva manvantara, Manu went to bathe in the water of the Narmada, in the place called Tripuri.

In the second half of the same age more sacred rivers manifested: Kalindi (Yamuna), Sarasvati, Sarayu and Mahabhaga.

The conversation between Markandeya Rishi and Yudhisthira, who was visiting those sacred places with his brothers, continues with the story of Jamadagni Rishi who received from Shiva a *kamadhenu* cow, who later became an object of contention with Kartavirya Arjuna, who wanted to appropriate her.

Markandeya also speaks of the hellish planets - Atighora, Raudra, Ghoratama, Dukhajanani, Ghorarupa, Tarantara, Bhayanaka, Kalaratri, Ghatokata, Chanda, Mahachanda, Chandakolahala, Prachanda, Varagnika, Jaghanya, Avaraloma, Bhishni, Nayika, Karala, Vikarala, Vajravinshti, Asta, Panchakona, Sudirgha, Parivartula, Saptabhauma, Ashtabhauma and Dirghamaya.

The *Nagara kanda* contains the story of Trishanku, who was cursed by the sons of Vasistha Rishi, and for whom Visvamitra Rishi created a special star system within this universe. The *Prabhasa kanda* contains the description of the various *Puranas* and *Upapuranas*, and explains that characteristically they all deal with 5 subjects: *sarga* (the primary creation of the universe), *pratisarga* (the secondary creation), *vamsa* (the description of the dynasties), *manvantara* (the periods of the Manus) and *manucharita* (the story of the descendants of the dynasties).

Then it describes the glories of the sacred place of Prabhasa ("radiant") tirtha, known along the various ages also with the names of Somanatha ("Lord of the moon"), Mrityunjaya ("conqueror of death"), Kalagnirudra ("he who shouts, who is fire and time"), Amritesha ("the Lord of the immortals"), Annamaya ("the foundation for the food existence"), Kritivasa ("where fame resides") and Bhairava natha ("the terrifying Lord"); its future name will be Prananatha ("the Lord of life").

In that sacred place, between the rivers Vajrini and Nyanaku, there is the ancient Somanatha jyotirlinga (installed by the Deva of the Moon) and a main temple dedicated

to each of the three Deities - Surya Narayana, Madhava and Bhavani - and also 10 million more temples dedicated to Vishnu and 15 million dedicated to Shiva.

There are also three forms of the Mother Goddess - Mangala ("auspicious") connected to Brahma, Vishalakshi ("large eyes") connected to Vishnu and Chatvari ("the fourfold") connected to Shiva, respectively representing the powers of will, action and knowledge. No pilgrimage is considered complete without a visit to them.

From Prabhasa kshetra starts the river Sarasvati, that before joining the ocean splits into 5 branches, of which 4 are called Harini, Vajrini, Nyanku and Kapila from the names of the Rishis who bathed there. In the same area we find the linga called Sarvesvara ("the Lord of all") or Siddhesvara ("the Lord of perfection" installed by the Siddhas) that along the ages was also known as Mahodaya ("the great ocean") and Jaigishavyesvara as he was worshiped by a great devotee named Jaigishavya. There is the description of the *lingas* called Gandharvesvara (installed by a Gandharva named Dhanvahan), Kapilesvara (installed by Kapila Rishi) and Dhanadesvara (installed by Kuvera, "the Lord of wealth").

The text speaks also about the tradition of shaving one's head during a pilgrimage and taking bath in the ocean, especially near Somanatha, where 50 million Shiva lingas are submerged. After the description of Prabhasa we find the *Dvaraka mahatmya* ("the glories of di Dvaraka"), speaking of the fabulous city built by Krishna in the ocean, and of the journey of the Rishis to Patala to ask Prahlada and Bali how it was possible to help the people of Kali yuga to realize Lord Vishnu. Prahlada explained the glories of the city of Kushasthala Puri, known as Dvaraka or Dvaravati Puri, where on the bank of the river Gomati there is the temple of Trivikrama ("the Lord of the three steps") where the powers of Krishna were preserved even after his disappearance.

### ***Padma purana***

Composed by 55 thousand verses divided into 5 parts called *Sristi kanda* ("the book of creation"), *Bhumi kanda* ("the book of Earth"), *Svarga kanda* ("the book of the higher planets"), *Patala kanda* ("the book of the lower planets") and *Uttara kanda* ("the higher book").

The text begins with Romaharshana Suta entrusting the *Puranas* to his son Ugrasrava and



asking him to go to Naimisaranya to present them to the sages assembled there.

Suta tells about Pulastya Rishi who went to bless Bhishma who was engaged in austerity and explained the process of the creation of the universe, the duration of Brahma's life, the cycle of the ages, the origin of the four *varnas*, the appearance of Rudra and Manu and Manu's descendants.

Then follows the appearance of Lakshmi from the milk ocean churned by Devas and Asuras, the sacrifice performed by Daksha and the death of his daughter Sati, the creation of the bodies of the various living beings, the origin of the Maruts (who were born from Diti but became Indra's friends), Svarocisa Manu in the second *manvantara*, Autama Manu in the third, Tamasa Manu in the 4th, Raivata Manu in the 5th, Chakshusa Manu in the 6th, and Vaivasvata Manu in the 7th and present *manvantara*.

Then it speaks about the future Manus: Savarni in the 8th, Ruci in the 9th, Bhautya in the 10th, Merusavarni in the 11th, Ribhu in the 12th, Vitadhama in the 13th and Visvakshena in the 14th and last *manvantara* during Brahma's day.

The conversation between Pulastya and Bhishma continues with the story of king Prithu (from whom the Earth took the name of Prithivi), of the wives of Surya (the Deva of the Sun), of the descendants of Ikshvaku, of the *avatara* Vamana and king Bali (also called Bashakali), of the *avatara* Rama killing Shambuka, and the appearance of Ganesha and Kartikeya.

Follow the explanation of the duties of the *brahmanas*, the meaning of the Gayatri mantra, the method of *nyasa* (installation of the sacred syllables), the legitimate means by which a *brahmana* can earn a livelihood, and the story of the *brahmana* Narottama.

Then the text speaks of the importance of the *rudraksha* ("Rudra's eyes" - the seeds of the *Elaeocarpus ganitrus*, used to make sacred necklaces and rosaries), of the *amla* (the acidic fruit of the *Phyllanthus emblica*) and of *tulasi* (a variety of basil called *Ocimum sanctum*) and the worship to Surya.

The *Bhumi kanda* speaks of the different types of *papa* and *punya* (negative and positive actions), of the story of king Yayati and his marriage with Asrubindumati, and of the story of the meeting between Cyavana Rishi and the parrot Kunjala - including the teachings of Kunjala to his children in regard to religious duties and the story of his

previous lifetime.

The *Svarga kanda* describes the main sacred places of India (Bharata varsha), its mountains, rivers and *janapadas* (kingdoms or "human settlements") and especially Jambumarga and the river Narmada, mount Amarkantaka, Dharma tirtha and the river Yamuna, Kashi, Kapardisvara and Gaya, and the importance of the *Puranas*. Follows the story of Rama returning from Lanka after defeating Ravana.

The *Patala kanda* continues with the story of Rama, especially with the episode where Sita retired to the forest to give birth to her two sons, the story of Kaikasi the mother of Ravana, the episode when Rama performs the Asvamedha yajna, and the story of Sita returning to Ayodhya.

The *Uttara kanda* describes the sacred place of Badarikashrama, the descent of the Ganges, the meeting between Dasaratha and the planet Shani (Saturn), the qualities of the vaishnavas, the city of Indraprastha, the abode of Vishnu called Vaikuntha, and the *avatars* of Vishnu: Matsya, Kurma, Narasimha, Vamana, Rama and especially Krishna. After the description of the end of the Yadu dynasty, we find the rituals to worship Vishnu and the story of Parasurama.

### ***Narada or Naradiya purana***

It has 25 thousand verses; the first section contains the famous text known as *Brihan Naradiya purana*, consisting of 125 chapters.

The text starts with the four Kumaras ("the young", named Sanaka, Sanatana, Sananda and Sanat) sons of Brahma, going to visit their father. Their younger brother Narada asks Sanaka to speak about Vishnu, the cause of creation, the characteristics of devotion, knowledge and austerity. Sanaka explains how Maha Vishnu manifests Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu, Lakshmi, Chandika and Sarasvati, and then the elements of the material creation.

Then the secondary creation starts, in which Brahma manifests the various planets and the bodies of the living beings, and then the various generations and dynasties. In this passage we find a description of the universe and Earth, and a famous verse declaring that

Vasudeva ("the omnipresent") Vishnu ("omnipotent") is the final purpose of Dharma and austerities, the supreme knowledge and the path to realization. Vasudeva is everything that exists, from Brahma and Shiva to the Devas and Asuras, sacrifice, the universe itself and all living beings, down to the unicellular organisms (*krimi*).

Sanaka also explains the science of Bhakti, devotion, starting from *sraddha* (faith), *satsanga* (the company of good people) and *samatva* (equanimity in front of the various situations).

Follows the story of Markandeya Rishi, son of Mrikunda son of Bhrigu, and how by his worship he pleased Vishnu, who offered him instructions on the character and behavior of a vaishnava devotee, and especially on devotion to Shiva, that is not different from Vishnu.

The conversation between Narada and Sanaka continues with the story of the Ganges, from the times of king Bahu of the Sun dynasty and his son Sagara, and how the Ganges touched the feet of Vishnu in his incarnation as Vamana.

Then the text speaks of the observance of Dvadasi ("the 12th day of the moon") especially of the waxing moon, with specific rituals for the different months of the year, described in detail.

Then the discussion continues with the real meaning of Yoga, that is *jnana* (knowledge) supported by *bhakti* (devotion) and characterized by the 8 qualities - non violence, truthfulness, absence of anger, compassion, benevolence, sexual abstinence, and freedom from greed and envy.

It continues with the various forms of Yoga, the rules to be followed, the rituals and practices, the *asanas* (sitting positions for meditation), *pranayama* (breathing control) in relationship with the *mantras* and visualization, *pratyahara* (detachment from sense stimulation), *dharana* (concentration of the mind on the Supreme Soul) and *samadhi* (complete immersion in meditation).

Here we find the story of king Bharata, who maintained the memory of his previous lifetimes even in the subsequent forms of deer and *brahmana*, and gave valuable spiritual teachings to the king of Suvira - including the story of Nidagha (son of Pulastya Rishi) and the non-difference between the *jivatma* ("individual soul") and *paramatma* ("supreme

soul").

Sanandana Kumara explained to Narada that the 6 *Vedangas* (Siksha, Kalpa, Vyakarana, Nirukti, Chanda and Jyotisha) are aimed at supporting the *sadhana* (spiritual practice) to attain liberation, and supplies detailed explanations on this extraordinary statement.

Sukadeva, son of Vyasa, was considered a great expert on all these topics, but his father Vyasa advised him to follow the prescribed socio-religious system, that he should learn from king Janaka of Mithila.

The wonderful teachings of Janaka constitute a very valuable part of this *Purana*, as confirmed by the subsequent conversation between Suka and Vyasa, where the *divya dristi* ("divine vision") of Suka, who has assimilated these teachings, is blessed by the 7 Vayus (manifestations of the wind).

On that occasion Sanat kumara talked about the *tattvas* ("the categories of reality") and *moksha* ("liberation"), then Sukadeva retired to meditate and had the vision of Vishnu, to whom he offered beautiful prayers.

In the original conversation between Narada and the Kumaras, Sanat kumara explained the details of the Shiva tantra, that enables one to understand the Supreme Lord and to worship him correctly, especially in regard to the daily spiritual practices. Sanatana kumara continued to speak about the *vratas* ("religious vows") to observe on particular days of the year for the various Deities - Lakshmi, Jagannatha, Ganesha, Matsya, Kurma, Skanda, Devi Bhavani, Krishna, Rama, Dharma, Ganga, Dasa avatara, etc.

He also spoke about Ekadasi (the 11th day of the waxing and waning moon), Dvadasi (the 12th day of the moon), Trayodasi (the 13th day of the moon), Purnima (the full moon) and Amavasya (the new moon). Specifically in regard to Ekadasi we find the story of Narada visiting Yamaraja and the activities of king Rukmanda to spread the glories of Ekadasi.

The last part of the text contains the *Yugala sahasranama* ("1000 names of the couple") of Radha and Krishna, the 10 regulative principles and a summary of the other *Puranas*, deriving from the original single *Purana* in the following order: *Brahma purana*, *Padma purana*, *Vishnu purana*, *Vayu purana*, *Bhagavata purana*, *Narada purana*, *Markandeya purana*, *Agni purana*, *Bhavisya purana*, *Brahma vaivarta purana*, *Linga purana*, *Varaha*

*purana, Skanda purana, Vamana purana, Kurma purana, Matsya purana, Garuda purana, Brahmanda purana.*

Finally, there is a list of the religious merits acquired by reading and studying the text (*phala sruti*).

### ***Vishnu purana***

It consists of 23 thousand verses, divided into 6 cantos or *amsas* ("parts").

The text begins with the description of the creation of the universe, called *brahmada* ("the egg of Brahman"). Inside each universe there is the particular manifestation of Vishnu called Garbhodakasayi Vishnu, who later manifests Brahma for the creation of the various planets and Shiva for their destruction. It is said that Brahma's day consists of 100 cycles of the four ages (*yugas*) of the universe, called respectively Satya or Krita (4 thousand years), Treta (3 thousand), Dvapara (2 thousand) and Kali (1 thousand).

This calculation is subject to various interpretations because Vedic tradition considers different dimensions of time (in the *Bhagavata* chapter 11 of 5th canto is specifically dedicated to this topic) especially in relation to the various planets. One year on the Earth is equal to one day on the heavenly planets, therefore according to this calculation Kali yuga would last 1000 celestial years, equivalent to 365 thousand Earth years, multiplied in turn to calculate the duration of the other *yugas*.

During each of Brahma's days there are 14 reigns of Manu (*manvantaras*); at every Brahma's morning the creation is repeated and each night there is a partial destruction; at the end of the cycle of Brahma's life (100 of his years) the entire universe is withdrawn into the Causal Ocean for 10 million years before being manifested again.

The creation of the universe develops from the various parts of Brahma's body: the Asuras were created from the legs, the Devas from the mouth, the Pitris from the sides. Similarly the Gandharvas, Nagas, human beings, animals, and all the other bodies of the living beings were created from the body of Brahma.

Next is the episode when Durvasa became angry with Indra and cursed him to be abandoned by Lakshmi: this was the original reason why the Devas lost the war against

the Asuras. Following Vishnu's advice, the Devas negotiated a temporary alliance with the Asuras to cooperate in churning the milk ocean, from which Lakshmi appeared, together with the nectar of immortality. In this chapter we find the famous *Lakshmi stuti* (hymn to Lakshmi) composed by Indra. Next come the stories of Dhruva, king Vena and Prithu, Pracinabarhi and the Pracetas, and Prahlada.

The story of king Priyavrata includes an extensive elaboration on the geography of the planet Earth with its seven continents and their various populations, the seven underground worlds and the hellish planets, the structure of the universe and the position of the various inhabited planets. The text continues with the story of Bharata who took birth again as Jadabharata and his conversation with the king of Subira. This canto ends with the story of Ribhu.

In the third canto we find the description of the *manvantaras*, the story of Samjna (wife of Surya), the list of the incarnations of Vyasa, the stories of Yajnavalkya Rishi, the description of how the *Puranas* were compiled starting from the *Purana samhita* given by Vyasa to Romaharshana Suta, and the 14 types of knowledge (*vidya*) constituted by the 4 *Vedas*, the 6 *Vedangas*, the *Mimamsa* (*Vedanta sutra* or *Brahma sutra*, *Karma kanda*, *Nyaya* (texts on logic), the *Puranas*, *Dharma shastra*, *Ayur Veda* (medicine), *Dhanur Veda* (military art), *Gandharva Veda* (music and dance) and *Artha shastra* (economy).

The text then speaks about Yamaraja and relates a discussion between Yama and one of his servants on how to recognize a genuine devotee of Vishnu, about the system of the *varnas* and *ashramas* with their duties and especially their ritual duties (*nitya karmani*) of family men.

Follow the stories of Mayamoha (a manifestation of Vishnu who created the *arhat* tradition to confuse the Asuras) and king Satadhanu and his wife Shaivya (and the dangers of the company of false teachers who have abandoned the original knowledge of the *Vedas*).

Then we find the stories of some particularly important persons among Manu's descendents - such as Ila/ Sudyumna, Marutta and Revata (the father of Revati, wife of Balarama), Ikshvaku and his son Vikukshi and his son Paranjaya, and Yuvanasva and his son Mandhata.

There is the story of Saubhari Rishi who married the 50 daughters of Mandhata creating an equal number of manifestations of himself, of king Purukutsa (and his role in the war between Gandharvas and Nagas), of king Bahu (and his son Sagara, who remained in his mother's womb for 7 years) and his descendent Amsuman (who met Kapila Rishi).

After Bhagiratha, who brought down the river Ganges to the Earth, there was Soudasa, also called Mitrasaha (and later Kalmasapada), who killed a Rakshasa that had taken the shape of a tiger. A friend of this Rakshasa took revenge by cheating Soudasa into serving human meat to Vasistha Rishi. Another famous descendent of Manu was Nimi, son of Ikshvaku; he too angered Vasistha because of a misunderstanding. Nimi's son was Janaka Vaidha, the father of Sita.

After the descendance of the solar dynasty we find the story of the lunar dynasty. Atri Rishi, son of Brahma, was father of Chandra (the moon), Lord of the stars and the herbs, who kidnapped Tara the wife of Brihaspati (the planet Jupiter) - an action that triggered the famous war called Tarakamaya.

With Tara, Chandra generated Budha (the planet Mercury), who married Ila and had Pururava as a son. Follows the story of Pururava and the Apsara Urvasi.

The text then speaks of how Jahnu Rishi drank all the water of the Ganges, and of Jahnu's descendents. One of them, Gadhi, had a daughter named Satyavati, that became the wife of the powerful Rishi Richika. Disobeying Richika's orders, Satyavati and her mother caused a confusion in the characters of their sons; thus were born Visvamitra (who was supposed to be a *brahmana*) and Jamadagni, whose son Parasurama should have been a *kshatriya*.

One of Pururava's son, king Raji, fought alongside the Devas in one of their wars against the Asuras, at the condition of obtaining Indra's kingdom. After the victory Raji's sons claimed their inheritance installing themselves on the throne of the heavenly planets, and could be removed only with great difficulty.

The text continues with the story of Yayati, who married Devayani the daughter of Sukracharya, whose sons were Yadu and Turnvasu. One of Yadu's descendents was Kartavirya Arjuna, who was defeated by Parasurama.

However, the most important among the descendants of Yadu was Krishna, whose adventures are narrated in the *Bhagavata purana*. Here we find specifically the story of the Syamantaka jewel, that belonged to Satyabhama's father Satrajit.

We also find the story of Sisupala, who had previously taken birth as Hiranyakasipu and Ravana, and the story of the three sons of king Pratipa - Santanu, Devapi and Vahluka (or Bahlika) and Santanu's descendants, the Pandavas.

Regarding the future, the *Vishnu purana* speaks of king Mahapadmananda, who will be killed by a *brahmana* named Kautilya (Chanakya), that will raise the *sudra* Chandragupta Maurya to the throne. Then we have the description of the conditions of life in Kali yuga and the episode of the birth of Krishna and Balarama (who appeared from two hairs of Vishnu).

Then the text narrates the childhood adventures of Krishna in Vrindavana and the killing of the various Asuras, the punishment of the Naga Kaliya, the episode of the Govardhana hill, the arrival of the two brothers in Mathura, the war against Jarasandha and Kalayavana, the adventures of Balarama, the defeat of Narakasura, the descent of the Parijata tree, the story of Usha and her father Banasura, the story of Paundraka (who had convinced himself he had become Vishnu), the marriage of Samba with Duryodhana's daughter, the episode of the Vanara Dvividya, the destruction of the Yadu dynasty and the advent of Kali yuga.

Then there is the explanation of the various types of cyclic destruction in the universe, the story of the two cousins Keshidhvaja and Khandikya, and how the ancient stories of the *Puranas* were transmitted in the past.

### ***Brahma purana***

This text of 10 thousand verses begins with the conversation between Suta and the Rishis assembled at Naimisaranya - about the creation of the universe and the story of Svayambhuva Manu and Satarupa and their descendents such as Dhruva, Pracinarbarhisat and the Pracetas, Daksha and his daughters (who married the Rishis sons of Brahma and generated all the living beings of the universe), Vena and Prithu, and the Sun God Surya, head of the Surya vamsa.



Surya married Samjna, daughter of Visvakarma, who begot Vaivasvata Manu, Yamaraja and Yamuna. From her own image, Samjna created Chaya ("shadow") to take her place for some time while she cooled herself by running in the northern lands in the form of a mare. Chaya generated Savarni Manu and Sani (Saturn).

When Surya discovered what happened, he thinned his rays by creating the Sudarshana chakra with the excess ones, then he took the form of a horse and went to seek Samjna; he generated with her the twins Nasatya and Dasra, who became known as the Asvini kumaras ("the horse boys").

The descendants of Surya were Ikshvaku, Ila/Sudyumna and Kubalasva (also called Dhundhumara because he killed the terrible Asura Dhundhu).

We also find the story of Trisanku (who was originally called Satyavrata and was the son of Trayaruni, son of Dridasva, son of Kubalasva) and how he became a *chandala*.

While Visvamitra was engaged in austerity on the beach of the ocean, his family had to face starvation because of a terrible famine, so much that Visvamitra's wife took one of her sons (Galava) to the market to sell him so that she could feed the other children. Satyavrata, who had been exiled by his father on the advice of Vasistha, decided to take action: he snatched Vasistha's cow, killed her and fed her meat to Visvamitra's children, eating some of it himself.

Furious, Vasistha cursed Satyavrata for his three sinful actions (*tri*: "three", *sanku*: "crimes"): disobeying his father, killing a cow and eating her flesh. To return Trisanku's kindness to his family, Visvamitra agreed to perform the ritual that would raise him to the heavenly planets; at the end of the entire episode Trisanku ascended his father's throne and ruled on Ayodhya. The famous Harischandra was Trisanku's son.

Another descendent of the same dynasty, Bahu, neglected his kingly duties and was defeated by an alliance of the surrounding kingdoms - Haihaya, Talajangha, Shaka, Mahishaka, Darva, Chola, Kerala, Yavana, Parada, Kamboja and Pahlava.

He retired to the forest with his wife Yadavi and when he died Yadavi took shelter in the *ashrama* of Ourvi Rishi, where she gave birth to Bahu's son. The Rishi personally educated and trained the child, who was named Sagara. Strong with the knowledge he had received from the Rishi, Sagara was able to defeat his father's enemies and win back

the kingdom. Later the two wives of Sagara turned to Ourva Rishi to get the blessing to have children, and the Rishi offered them to choose between having one single child or 60 thousand children.

Thus were born Panchajana (also known as Asamanja) and his 60 thousand stepbrothers, who accompanied the horse in the Asvamedha yajna ritual performed by their father.

However, they angered Kapila Rishi, who burned almost all of them to ashes - except Varhiketu, Suketu, Dharmaketu and Panchajana. Bhagirata, who brought the sacred Ganges river down to earth, was son of Dilipa, son of Amsuman, son of Panchajana. Bhagiratha was the forefather of Raghu, the ancestor of Dasaratha, Rama's father.

Next the text speaks about the Moon dynasty, beginning from the birth of Soma (also called Chandra), the Deva of the Moon, who was generated by the power of austerity of Atri Rishi.

He jumped up to the sky and bounced back to earth, simultaneously creating all the medicinal herbs. Brahma took care of Soma, who later engaged in great austerities and performed the Rajasuya yajna. Soma kidnapped Tara (Brihaspati's wife), which caused a war in which Shiva took Brihaspati's side and Sukracharya allied with Soma.

Then we have the stories of Soma's descendants - Nahusha and his son Yayati (who married Devayani and Sarmistha), his sons Yadu and Puru and their descendants.

The text also describes the geography of the Earth and the higher and lower planets, the regions of Mercury (Budha), Venus (Sukra), Mars (Mangala), Jupiter (Brihaspati), Saturn (Shani), Ursa major or the constellation of the Great Dipper (the seven Rishis) and the polar star (Dhruvaloka), as well as the stellar systems of Maharloka, Janaloka, Tapaloka and Satyaloka.

Then it speaks of the Sun temple of Konarka in Orissa; the name comes from Konaditya, referring to the Deva of the Sun. It also explains the method to offer worship to the Sun and the 108 names of the Sun.

Follows the story of Indradyumna, king of Avanti in the kingdom of Malva. The prosperous city of Avanti was famous for its temple of Shiva Mahakala and for the Vishnu temples called Govindasvami and Vikramasvami on the bank of river Shipra.

Indradyumna went to Purushottama kshetra, where he built a large temple with the help of the local people and performed the Asvamedha yajna.

Very quickly Visvakarma carved the sacred images from a great tree trunk that had landed on the ocean beach.

The text tells, with some variations compared to other *Puranas*, the episode in which Markandeya Rishi witnessed the destruction of the universe: here the banyan tree was floating on the ocean together with a young boy sitting in a boat.

The boy invited the Rishi to take shelter within his mouth, and by so doing the Rishi found there all the planets and the living beings exactly as they were before the destruction. The Rishi realized the boy was Vishnu, so he offered his homage and asked for the blessing to be able to build a temple to Shiva in the place of Purushottama kshetra.

Then we find the story of king Sveta, who vowed to revive the son of Kapalagautama Rishi and he succeeded thanks to Shiva's blessing. King Sveta built a great temple for Vishnu at Purushottama kshetra, calling it Sveta Madhava.

The story of Vamana and the sacrifice of king Bali narrated here coincides with the narration in the other *Puranas*, except for the continuation of the story of the Ganges descent.

According to the *Brahma purana* the water that touched the feet of Vamana divided into four branches: the west branch entered the *kamandalu* (water pot) of Brahma, the east branch was collected by the Devas and Rishis, the south branch descended onto Shiva's head and was brought to Earth by Bhagiratha, where it divides further in 7 branches - while she has 4 branches on the higher planets and 4 on the lower planets.

The main north branch was brought down by Gautama Rishi through a plan devised by Parvati: Ganesha went to live in Gautama's *ashrama* for some time, then one of Parvati's companions, Jaya, took the shape of a cow and went to graze into Gautama's rice field.

The Rishi rushed in and tried to send the cow away by poking her with a blade of grass, but Jaya gave a loud moan and dropped to the ground pretending to be dead. The other Rishis declared that the *ashrama* had been contaminated by the killing of a cow and to

convince them to stay, Gautama accepted Ganesha's suggestion and called for Ganga, asking her to descend on Shiva's head to purify the *ashrama*. From that time, that branch of the Ganges (presently known as Godavari) has been called Gautami Ganga.

The glories of this river are highlighted by a series of episodes giving their names to specific places along her course. One speaks about the hunter of Brahmagiri and the two doves who sacrificed themselves to offer him hospitality and were elevated to the heavenly planets; while departing, they advised the hunter to take bath in the Ganges waters for 15 days to become free from the reactions of his previous activities. The place where this episode happened is called Kapota tirtha ("the doves' ford").

Then there is the story of Maninaga, the son of Ananta Sesha, who prayed Shiva to protect him from Garuda. Seeing that he was not able to kill him, Garuda imprisoned Maninaga; Shiva came to know about it and sent his personal companion Nandi to set Maninaga free. Nandi approached Vishnu and asked him to give the required orders to Garuda, who complained about the apparent injustice he was subjected to, in spite of his faithful service. Vishnu replied by crushing Garuda to the ground, then he entrusted him to Nandi so that he would be cured by Shiva. Garuda was completely healed under the instructions of Shiva, by bathing in the Gautami Ganga in the place known as Garuda tirtha.

During a great draught and famine, Visvamitra arrived with his disciples on the bank of the Gautami Ganga (in the place known as Visvamitra tirtha) and the only food they were able to find was a dead dog. Visvamitra gave the order to wash and offer its meat to the Devas, but Indra decided to stop that unprecedented action and took the shape of a crow to snatch away the offering before the sacrifice. Seeing that the Rishi was going to curse him, Indra quickly returned the booty, that he had transformed into nectar in the meantime.

However, Visvamitra was not happy: "Why should I eat nectar, when all the people around me are starving?" Indra understood the meaning of that objection and finally sent the rains, relieving the famine: then the Rishi agreed to consume the nectar.

Another story on the Gautami Ganga is about Sveta, friend of Gautama Rishi and great devotee of Shiva. When Sveta died, Yama's servants came to take him away but they were unable to enter the house; after some time Yama sent Mrityu ("death") himself to

verify what had happened, and saw that Shiva was personally present to guard Sveta's body. When Death tried to grab Sveta, Shiva and all his companions defended him strenuously in a fierce battle, in which Yama himself was killed by Kartikeya.

When Yama accepted Shiva's order that all his devotees must remain free from Yama's servants, Nandi went to get some water from the Ganges and revived all those who had died in the fight.

Visrava Rishi had two wives: one gave birth to Kuvera and the other gave birth to Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Vibhishana. Kuvera was the king of Lanka, but Ravana's mother was not very happy and she ordered her sons to engage in austerity to acquire more power and take the kingdom away from Kuvera. Ravana also appropriated Kuvera's airplane and declared that anyone who would give shelter to Kuvera would be killed. On the advice of grandfather Pulastya Rishi, Kuvera went to the Gautami Ganga to pray Shiva and as a result he became the Deva of wealth.

The story of king Harischandra, too, is connected to the Gautami Ganga. On the advice of Narada and Parvata Rishi, the king worshiped Varuna on the bank of the river and obtained the blessing of a son, at the condition to offer the child in sacrifice. When little Rohita was born, Harischandra continued to postpone the sacrifice as long as possible; in the end Rohita found a substitute in Sunahshepa, the son of Ajigarta Rishi, who was going through a very difficult time, but Harischandra refused to sacrifice him.

The solution was offered by a voice from the sky, that suggested to perform another ritual on the bank of Gautami Ganga, and thus everybody was satisfied. Later Sunahshepa was adopted by Visvamitra.

Vridhagautama was son of Gautama Rishi, but he had a birth defect that made him very ugly. One day he arrived at mount Shitagiri, where an elderly lady engaged in austerities proposed him to marry her, suggesting she would pray Varuna to give him learning and good looks. Vridhagautama accepted the proposal and they lived happily.

One day some Rishis visited their home and were surprised by that strange union; on Agastya's advice the two spouses went to bathe in the Gautami Ganga (at the place known as Vridhasangama) and the old lady became young and beautiful again.

The powerful Dadhici Rishi lived on the bank of the Ganges with his wife Lopamudra and sister in law Gabhastini. One day the Devas went to see him after a fight against the Asuras and left their weapons in his custody. The years went by and the weapons started to lose their luster, so Dadhici tried to revive it by washing them with water, but the power of the weapons dissolved and passed into the water.

To preserve that power, the Rishi drank the water. When the Devas came back to reclaim their weapons, Dadhici had no other option but to leave his body so that Visvakarma could use his bones to craft new powerful weapons for Indra and the other Devas. Lopamudra, too, chose to die and entrusted her newborn child to the care of a banyan tree (*pippala*): this was how the child came to be known as Pippalada ("given to the banyan tree").

Next there is the story of Surasena of Pratisthana, who had a snake-son by the name Nagesvara, who married Bhogavati, the daughter of the king of Vijaya, that had also been his wife in a previous lifetime. By bathing in the Ganga, Nagesvara obtained a divine form, and in his gratefulness he built a temple for Shiva in the place known as Nagatirtha.

In another episode the Devas asked Shiva's help in one of their wars; from Shiva's sweat drops rose the Matrikas ("little mothers"), who defeated the Asuras. The place where the Devas gathered to wait for the end of the battle is called Pratisthana, while the place where the Matrikas took rest is called Matri tirtha.

At that time Brahma had 5 heads, including a donkey's; this rebellious head offered the Asuras help against the Devas and Vishnu agreed to cut it off, on the condition that Shiva should catch it.

The place where the head was cut is called Rudra tirtha, and there a temple to Brahma is called Brahma tirtha.

Next there is the story of the war between the doves and the owls (respectively supported by Yama and Agni, who gave their names to two more *tirthas*), the story of Veda Rishi and the hunter Bhilla (devotee of Shiva) that shows the difference between the celebration of rituals and true devotion, the friendship between the *brahmana* Gautama and the *vaisya* Manikundana (in which the *vaisya* demonstrated his loyalty to *dharma* in spite of all difficulties and was saved by Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, who administered

to him the medicinal plant called *vishalyakarani*), as well as the story of Kandu Rishi (temporarily distracted from austerities by Indra who sent him the Apsara Pramalocho) and his daughter Marisha, and the description of many other *tirthas*.

The text continues with the story of Krishna, the description of the four *varnas* and *ashramas* and their respective duties, the story of the *chandala* devotee of Vishnu who met a Brahma Rakshasa (a type of particularly powerful Rakshasa, who knows Vedic sciences) who wanted to eat him on the Ekadasi day and how both of them remembered their previous lifetimes, and finally the explanation of how to engage in Yoga - a path that requires the study of the *Puranas*, *Vedas* and *Itihasas*.

### ***Shiva purana***

Initially constituted by 100 thousand verses (divided into 12 *samhitas* called Vidyeshvara, Rudra, Vinayaka, Uma, Matri, Ekadasha-rudra, Kailasha, Shat rudra, Koti rudra, Sahasra Koti rudra, Vayaviya and Dharma) was reduced by Vyasa to 24 thousand verses; the 7 surviving *samhitas* are Vidyeshvara, Rudra, Shat rudra, Koti Rudra, Uma, Kailasha and Vayaviya.

The text starts with the explanation of the proper method to hear its recitation for the purpose of purifying the mind and attaining liberation. The assembly of Rishis where Suta narrated this *Purana* was in Prayaga kshetra (present Allahabad) and the narration starts with another Rishi assembly that was trying to determine which was the supreme form of the Deity.

There Brahma told the Rishis that Mahadeva Shiva is the origin of Vishnu, of the Rudras and all the Devas, and that the best method to realize this is to listen (*sravana*), pronounce (*kirtana*) or remember (*smarana*) the name of God in the form of *mantra* (a brief evocative formula for repeated chanting), *stotra* (elaborated prayer presented in the scriptures) or even *bhajan* (songs) in Sanskrit or in any other language.

Another method, even simpler, consists in worshiping the Shiva linga, the *nirguna* (without attributes) form of God, that symbolizes the divine pillar of fire (*analastambha*) that appeared on the occasion of a fight between Vishnu and Brahma, when Shiva intervened by getting between the two.

Vishnu took the form of Varaha ("boar") to descend to the bottom of the universe (Patala) to find the lower extremity of the pillar, while Brahma took the form of Hamsa ("swan" or better, Himalayan goose) to fly as high as possible to search for the higher end. In those regions Brahma found a Ketaki flower that had been floating there since the beginning of creation and had not been able to find the end of the fire pillar.

Brahma convinced the flower to declare in front of Vishnu that he had indeed found the end of the pillar, but Shiva exposed the lie and condemned Brahma to be deprived of ritual worship and the Ketaki flower not to be used in his own worship. When the two culprits begged for forgiveness, Shiva said that Brahma could preside the sacrificial ceremonies, and that the flower could be offered to Vishnu.

The place of this adventure of the fire pillar is Lingasthana (also called Arunachala) and its day is celebrated as Maha Shiva ratri, when devotees fast, consuming only fruits.

Then Shiva told Brahma and Vishnu about the *pancha kritya* (5 divine tasks) that sustain the world: *srusti* (creation or nature), *sthiti* (maintenance or position), *samhara* (destruction or dissolution), *tirobhava* (disappearance or sense of absence) and *anugraha* (mercy or liberation) and spoke about the sacred syllable Om, that represents the world and is the union of Shiva and Shakti.

We find also the description of the preparation of the Shiva linga, that can be shaped in clay, stone or metal, and must be installed together with its support base in a place that can be accessed daily.

It can be *chara* ("mobile") and therefore of a small size, or *sthira* ("fixed") and of large size, always in the proportion of 12 fingers (wide) and 25 (high) measured by the devotee. One's own thumb can also be considered as a representation of the Shiva linga.

The worship ritual is the *sodasa upachara* ("16 actions") and gives best results when it is performed in the middle of the night. The text lists some of the pilgrimage places dedicated to Shiva as the rivers Sarasvati, Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Narmada, Kaveri, Sarayu, Tungabhadra and Kashi (Varanasi), Naimisharanya and Badarikashrama.

Also, we find the description of the intermediate or mixed *varnas*, the specific methods of spiritual realization in the various ages, the fire sacrifice (*agni yajna*), Deity worship (*deva yajna*), the study of scriptures (*brahma yajna*), the Deities to whom the days of the



week are dedicated (Monday to Durga, Tuesday to Skanda, Wednesday to Vishnu, Thursday to Yama, Friday to Brahma and Saturday to Indra), the rules for the worship of Shiva especially on *sankranti* (the day of passage between one zodiac sign to the other, especially Tula and Mesha, that is Libra and Aries), the solar and lunar eclipses, Magha krishna chaturdasi, the month of Kartika and Sunday.

Then we find the explanation of the Pranava (the original *mantra*) that manifests as "om" and "om namah shivaya" (*panchakshara* or "5 syllables *mantra*"), of the material bondage and liberation, and of the 8 *chakras*.

The different types of Linga are described as *svayambhu* "spontaneously manifested", *bindu* "drop", *pratisthita* "installed", *char* "four-fold", *guru* "represented by the teacher", *vana* "of the forest", and *parthiva* ("of earth") that is the supreme.

The *parthiva linga* must be 4 fingers tall and be supported by a beautiful base; the devotee must face north and the offerings are mostly the leaves of the *bilva* tree and food (that should not touch the *linga*). The *svayambhu*, *siddha* and *vana lingas* accept and purify even the food offered by a *chandala* (a person who does not observe the rules of the scriptures). Those whose ancestors were struck by some curse should worship the *parthiva linga* together with the 8 personifications of earth, water, fire, air, space, sun, moon and guests. Then the texts speaks of the importance of the sacred *bilva* tree, of the sacred ashes (*bhasma*) and the rosary of *rudraksha* ("eyes of Rudra").

The *Rudra samhita* begins with the episode when Narada was boasting about conquering lust, and Vishnu presented him with a very interesting illusory experience. Vishnu suggested Narada to attend the *svayamvara* of king Shilanidhi's daughter, and Narada was so taken by the princess' beauty that he went to Vishnu to ask a form like his, since Vishnu is very handsome.

Playing on a double meaning of the expression used by Narada, Vishnu gave him a monkey face, something that caused the hilarity of all those who were attending the *svayamvara*. Enraged, Narada cursed Vishnu by saying that he would too lose a beloved wife and that on that occasion he would seek the help of a monkey.

Then we find the episode of the austerities performed by Vishnu, by which the universe was manifested, and the expansion of the *pranava omkara* in the *mantras* Gayatri Savita,

Rudra Gayatri, Mahamrityunjaya, Panchakshara, Chintamani, Dakshinamurti and Mahavakya.

Then we find more explanations on the method for worshiping Shiva and the origin of the Shiva lingas worshiped by the various Devas (made of diamond, gold, silver, bronze, crystal, copper and pearl), on the origin of Kailasha Vaikuntha, on the appearance of Rudra, on the birth of the Rishis and their descendants, and on the story of Gunanidhi - who angered his father because of his addiction to gambling, but was purified by unknowingly fasting on Maha Shiva ratri and took a new birth as the son of the king of Kalinga (Orissa) and then as the Deva Kuvera, king of Alakapuri.

The episodes of the marriage between Shiva and Sati, and the sacrifice of Daksha, are followed by Parvati's birth and her austerities to obtain Shiva as a husband, the appearance of Kamadeva and the power of his 5 arrows (*harshana* "joy", *rochana* "attraction", *mohana* "confusion", *soshana* "languishing" and *marana* "death") that Kamadeva experimented on Brahma and his daughter Sandhya ("junction between day and night"). Brahma felt offended and cursed Kamadeva to be incinerated by Shiva and to remain without a body until Shiva himself had married.

In turn, Sandhya engaged in long austerities by worshiping Shiva to obtain his blessings, then she left her body in the fire of Medhatithi Rishi's sacrifice to be reborn as Arundhati the daughter of Daksha, but she was divided by Surya into 3 expansions (*pratah*, *madhyanha* and *sayam sandhya*, i.e. dawn, noon and sunset). Arundhati later married Vasistha.

Daksha prayed Durga to appear as his daughter to fulfill Brahma's prophecy, and thus Sati was born (also known as Uma). Pleased by the long austerities of Sati, Shiva agreed to marry her and the divine couple settled on mount Kailasa, where nobody would disturb them. Shiva and Sati had many conversations, especially on the importance of *bhakti* (devotion) in Kali yuga and on the story of Rama. Then the disastrous sacrifice of Daksha caused Sati's death and the appearance of the avenger Virabhadra.

Next we find the story of Dadhici Rishi and king Kshuva (in which the Rishi was wounded and asked help from Sukracharya and Shiva, obtaining the Mahamrityunjaya mantra and three extraordinary blessings), then the story of the marriage between Himalaya and Maina (mother of Dhanya mother of Sita and Kalavati mother of Radha)

and Parvati's birth, the birth of Bhauma (planet Mars), the austerities of Parvati, Kamadeva's incineration, the story of Tarakasura, the marriage between Shiva and Parvati (against the wishes of Parvati's parents), the story of king Anaranya (father of Padma the wife of Pippalada), the meeting between Padma and Dharmaraja (who was cursed with the gradual loss of legs in the four ages), the extraordinary birth of Kartikeya (Skanda), the fight between Kartikeya and Indra (and the manifestation of his expansions Sakha, Vishakha and Naigama), the killing of Tarakasura, the episodes of Pralamba and Banasura, the birth of Ganesha and how he received an elephant's head, Ganesha 's marriage with Siddhi and Riddhi ("perfection" and "prosperity") and the birth of Kshema ("patience") and Labha ("gain").

The *Yuddha kanda* narrates the story of how Shiva killed the three Asuras sons of Taraka (the "Tripurasura" Tarkasha, Vidyunmali and Kamalaksha) each possessing a flying fortress made respectively of gold, silver and iron, all built by Maya Danava.

To confuse these Asuras, Vishnu created a strange character called Arihan, who manufactured a new ideological system based simply on action in this world, without any reference to spiritual life, and with four followers he entered the fortresses of Tripura. Weakened by that deviant philosophy, the inhabitants of the fortresses were easier to defeat.

In another episode, Shiva tests Indra by meeting him in the form of a *sadhu* and refusing to answer his questions. Indra was going to punish the hermit when he revealed his true identity, opening his third eye that was blazing with such fire that when he turned it on the ocean it created a child of enormous power, called Jalandhara. When he became adult, Jalandhara married Vrinda, the daughter of the Asura Kalanemi, and became the king of the Daityas.

One day Brihaspati went to see Jalandhara and told him the story of the churning of the milk to obtain the nectar. Jalandhara became furious, thinking that the Devas had misappropriated the riches belonging to his father the ocean, and went to war against Indra.

Lakshmi, who was born from the ocean like Jalandhara and therefore considered him like a brother, asked Vishnu not to kill him but to make peace with him instead; therefore Vishnu and Lakshmi went to live in the ocean with him.

In order to bring about Jalandhara's fall, Narada suggested him to seduce Parvati, Shiva's wife; Jalandhara first sent Rahu (who surrendered to Shiva) and then he directly attacked the Kailasha. Creating a diversion with several Apsaras, Jalandhara sneaked into Shiva's house and directly approached Parvati, who rejected him in indignation and went to seek Vishnu's help, suggesting him to do the same thing and try to seduce Jalandhara's wife.

Thus Vishnu took the form of Jalandhara and went to Vrinda, with whom he had intercourse: in this way Jalandhara could be killed during the battle. When Vrinda discovered she had been deceived, she cursed Vishnu and committed suicide.

Vishnu was saddened by Vrinda's death, and after getting some seeds from Parvati, Lakshmi and Sarasvati, sowed them on Vrinda's burned body and from there three plants sacred to Vishnu grew: Amla, Tulasi and Malati.

Then we have the episode of the Asura Sankhachuda, who in his previous lifetime was Sudama (the cowherd friend of Krishna), born as Daitya because of a curse by Radha. Thanks to Brahma's blessing, Sankhachuda became very powerful and married Tulasi, king Dharmadhvaja' daughter, and then he appropriated Indra's throne.

In this case, too, Vishnu weakened the Asura by seducing Tulasi and Shiva was able to kill Sankhachuda. Again Vishnu was cursed by Tulasi to become a stone; this is explained as the origin of the Salagrama sila, a special sacred stone considered a form of Vishnu and is worshiped by offering *tulasi* flowers and leaves.

Also Hiranyaksha's episode is presented here under the shaivite angle, by introducing a character called Andhaka, who was created by Shiva and given in adoption to Hiranyaksha as a reward for his austerities. After killing Hiranyaksha, Vishnu put Andhaka on the throne of the lower planets.

Later Hiranyaksha's brother Hiranyakashipu engaged in austerities with the purpose of acquiring more power to avenge his brother.

Blessed by Brahma, he was granted that he would not be killed during the day or the night, on earth or in the sky, by weapons, by Devas, human beings or animals.

However, Vishnu appeared in the form of Narasimha, half man and half lion, and killed the Asura at dusk, with his own claws, by holding him on his own lap.

Then we have the episode of the long austerities performed by Sukracharya to propitiate Shiva and to obtain the Mritasanjivani vidya ("the science of how to resurrect the dead"), the story of the battle between Shiva and Andhaka (in which Chandika drank the Asura's blood to prevent him from multiplying himself, and Shiva swallowed Sukra to prevent him from resuscitating the Asuras), the killing of Gajasura (Mahishasura's son, whose skin was used by Shiva as clothing), the killing of Nirhadatya (Prahlada's maternal uncle, who had decided to avenge the death of his brother in law by destroying the *brahmanas* of Kasi), and the story of Vital and Utpal (killed by Parvati with the ball she was playing with).

Then we find the story of five of Shiva's incarnations: as Sadhojat (with his disciples Sunanda, Nandana, Visvanandana and Upanandana, all of white complexion), Namadeva (of red complexion like his disciples Viraja, Vivaha, Vishoka and Visvabhavana), Tat Purusha (dressed in yellow clothes), Ghoresha (of black complexion like his emanations Krishna, Krishnasikha, Krishnamukha and Krishnakanthadhari), Ishana (and his emanations Jati, Mundi, Sikhandi and Ardhamundi).

We find the explanation of the 8 forms of Shiva - Sharva, Bhava, Rudra, Ugra, Bhima, Pasupati, Ishana and Mahadeva, representing the elements of nature (earth, water, fire, air, space, soul, sun and moon), of Shiva Ardhanarishvara (half man and half woman) and various other incarnations of Shiva along the ages of the universe, the birth of Nandikesvara, the appearance of Bhairava, the incarnation of Shiva as Sarabha (on the occasion of Narasimha's appearance), the blessing to the *brahmana* Visvanara, the incarnation of Shiva as Grihapati and Yakshesvara and 10 more incarnations of Shiva and Shakti, the origin of the 11 Rudras, Durvasa Rishi, Hanuman, Mahesha and Vrishabha, the killing of Vritrasura, the incarnation of Yatinatha and Krishna darshana, the episode of Satyaratha's son and Upamanyu, the conversation between the Pandavas and Vyasa, the fight between Arjuna and Shiva in the form of the Kirata hunter, the description of the 12 Jyotirlingas (Somanatha in Saurashtra, Mallikarjuna at Sri Shaila, Mahakala at Ujjain, Amaresvara at Omkara, Kedar on the Himalaya, Bhimashankara on river Bhima, Visvanatha at Varanasi, Trayambakesvara on river Gautami, Vaidyanatha at Chitabhumi, Nagesha at Dvaraka, Ramesvara at Setubhanda and Dhushmesha at Shivalaya) and the Upalingas ("secondary *lingas*") generated by the Jyotirlingas, such as Somesvara, Rudresvara, Dughdesha, Kardamesvara, Bhutesvara, Bhimesvara, Guptesvara,

Vyaghresvara and many others.

Then we find the description of the austerities of Atri and Anasuya, the stories of the *brahmana* Suvada, of the Shivalinga Mahabala and of Vatukanatha. We also find the story of how Vishnu obtained the Sudarshana chakra, the description of many devotees of Shiva, the austerities of Maha Shiva ratri and the different levels of liberation, the conversation between Krishna and Upamanyu, the classification of the criminal activities and their punishment, the explanation of the importance of charity, the description of Earth and the planets, the categories of austerity, the process of development of the body at birth, control over death, the descent of the Ganges, the austerities of Vyasa, the incarnations of Mahakali, Mahalakshmi, Mahasarasvati, and Sakambari.

The *Kailasa samhita* speaks of the classifications of Yoga, the behavior of a *sannyasi*, the Pranava Omkara, and the initiation and the funeral of a *sannyasi*. It follows with the description of the origin of knowledge, the calculation of time and *yugas* (the ages of the universe), meditation, the Pasupata vrata, the duties of a *brahmana*, the installation of the Deity within one's own body, the mental worship to Shiva, the performance of *havana* (fire sacrifice), the auspicious days for special rituals, the installation of the Shivalinga, the classification of Yogas, the obstacles in the practice of Yoga and the attainment of mystic powers.

### ***Varaha purana***

It has 24 thousand verses. After being rescued by the *avatara* Varaha ("boar") Mother Earth had a conversation with him and asked him many questions, especially on creation, on the descendants of Manu and on the 10 main *avataras* of Vishnu. The narration includes an episode where Narada is confused by Maya in the presence of Savitri, a previous lifetime of Narada when he was a *brahmana* by the name of Sarasvata, the story of king Asvasira, the story of king Vasu and Rishi Raimya, the story of the *avatara* Matsya, the story of king Durjaya and the explanation of the Sraddha ritual (honoring the ancestors).

The text also speaks about Agni, the Asvini kumaras, Parvati, Ganesha, the Naga Devas and the meaning of Naga panchami, Kartikeya, Aditya (Surya), the Ashta Matrikas

("eight Mothers"), Durga, the Digapalas (protecting the 6 directions: Purva, Dakshina, Paschima, Uttara, Urdhva and Adhara), Kuvera, Vishnu, Dharma, Rudra, the Tanmatras (the subtle forms of matter), Chandrama (the Moon), the observance of Dvadasi (the 12th day of the moon) for Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Nrisimha, Vamana, Jamadagni, Kalki, Padmanabha and Buddha.

The Dharani vrata is dedicated to the Earth and is observed in the month of Kartika, while the Subha vrata is observed on the first day of the month of Margasirsa, the Dhanya vrata in the month of Aghana, the Kanti vrata in the month of Kartika; the Saubhagya vrata is observed for one entire year, the Avighna vrata for 4 months, the Shanti vrata for one year, the Kama vrata for 15 days. The Arogya vrata is observed on the 7th day of any month, the Putra prapti vrata in the month of Bhadrapada, and the Shaurya and Sarvabhauma vratas in the month of Asvina.

The Til Dhenu dana consists in gifting a *brahmana* with the image of a cow made with sesame seeds, the Rasa Dhenu dana requires the gift of sugarcane juice and sesame, the Gud Dhenu dana requires brown cane sugar, while the Sarkara Dhenu dana requires white sugar.

Also there is the description of the holy places called Kokamukha tirtha, Haridvara (also called Mayapuri), Kubjamraka tirtha (Rishikesh), Badarikashrama, Mandara tirtha, Prabhasa (Somanatha), Salagrama kshetra, Ruru kshetra, Gonishkramana tirtha, Stutasvami tirtha, Dvaraka, Sanandura tirtha, Lohargala tirtha, Mathura, Chakra tirtha, Kapila tirtha, Govardhana tirtha and Gokarna tirtha.

Then the text explains the various types of sacred images made with wood, stone, clay, copper, bronze, silver and gold; it follows with the funeral rituals and the story of Nachiketa, the purification from negative activities, the description of Gokarnesvara, the realization of Vishnu, Gautama Rishi's curse, the geography of Earth and Trishakti (the threefold form of the Mother Goddess).

### ***Garuda purana***

It has 19 thousand verses in the form of a dialogue between Vishnu and Garuda; it mainly speaks of the funeral rituals lasting 12 days, the categories of criminal activities, Yoga

and liberation. Traditionally it is recited only during funerals. In the introduction, we find a list of 22 *avatars* of Vishnu.

### ***Agni purana***

It has 15,400 verses in 383 chapters, with an appendix of 6 more chapters. After the traditional auspicious invocation we find the description of the 10 *avatars* of Vishnu, the creation of the universe, the process for the worship of Ganesha, Shiva, Chandi, Vishnu and Surya, the *Lakshmi stotra* and its benefits, the *Vishnu panjara stotra*, the *Marjana Apamarjana stotra*, a general summary of Vedic scriptures and the *Puranas*, and instructions on building temples.

Then we find the *Tirtha mahatmya*, the description of the Bhuvana koshas ("the coverings of the universe"), the explanation of the system of *varnas* and *ashramas*, the various traditions, dreams and omens, the *Papa nashaka stotra*, the *Gayatri mantra* and the *Sandhya vidhi*. It follows with an introduction to Sanskrit literature and grammar, the practice of Yoga, *Dhanur Veda*, the duties of the king, property rights, the knowledge of Atman, and finally an introduction to the *Bhagavad gita* and to *Yama gita*.

### **Brahmanda purana**

The title means "the egg of the Brahman", and the text is constituted by 12 thousand verses divided into 3 parts: *Purvabhaga*, *Madhyabhaga* and *Uttarabhaga*. Brahma speaks about the creation of the present universe and future creations, the dimension of time and the cycles of ages, the description of Earth and the planets, the descendants of Rudra, the glories of Shiva and the birth of Nilalohita; it describes the creation of the Rishis and Agni, the descendants of Priyavrata, the explanation of the name of Nilakantha, the origin of the Shiva linga, the curse of the Daruvana Rishis, the meeting of Pururava with the Pitris, the annual Sraddha ceremony, the system of *yajnas*, the four *yugas*, the characteristics of the Rishis and the *mantras*, Vyasa and his disciples, the story of Yajnavalkya, the descendants of Manu and the various *manvantaras*.

In the text we also find a description of the *Vedangas*, an elaborate version of the story of



Rama (known as *Adhyatma Ramayana*), Nachiketa's instructions, the glories of Pinakini, Viraja kshetra and Kanchi.

### ***Brahma vaivarta purana***

Composed by 18 thousand verses, it is divided into *Brahma khanda*, *Prakriti khanda*, *Ganesha khanda* and *Krishna Janma khanda*. Like the *Bhagavata Purana*, it gives particular importance to the figure of Krishna - not as one of the *avatars* but as Parabrahman, the origin of everything. The *Brahma kanda* describes the creation of Brahma and the descendants of Manu, the story of the Pracetas and the sons and daughters of Daksha, Prithu, the *manvantaras*, Kuvalasva and Brihadasva, Trisanku, Bahu and Sagara. Moving to the lunar dynasty, it speaks about Chandra and Yayati, then it describes the geography of Earth and of the planets.

The text continues speaking about Utkala (present Orissa) and the temple of Konarka dedicated to the Sun, the method of worship to Surya, and the expansions of Surya as the 12 Adityas - Indra (the warrior aspect), Dhata (the creator and destiny), Parjanya (rain), Tvasta (trees and herbs), Pusha Aryama (in food grains), Bhaga Vivasvana (in fire), Vishnu (omnipresent), Amshumana (in wind), Varuna (in water) and Mitra (in the moon and in the ocean) - that preside over the 12 months of the solar year. It follows with the 108 names of Surya.

Then the text narrates the story of Indradyumna, the description of his capital Avanti (in the kingdom of Malva, present Kashmir), the description of Purushottama kshetra (Jagannatha Puri), the story of the construction of the temple with the help of the kings of Kalinga, Utkala and Koshala, and the installation of the Deities of Jagannatha.

Follows the episode of Markandeya Rishi who witnessed the destruction of the universe, the story of the king Sveta and Sveta Madhava, the story of Bali and the descent of the Ganges, the two Brahmagiri doves, Garuda and Maninaga, Visvamisra and Indra, the *brahmana* Sveta, Deva Kuvera, Harischandra, Vriddha Gautama, Pippalada, Nagesvara, the 5th head of Brahma, the owl and the dove, Bhilla and Veda, Gautama and Manikundala, Kandu Rishi, the description of the *varnas* and *ashramas*, and the story of the *chandala* and the *brahma rakshasa*.

The text also speaks about how Narayana emanated from Krishna, and how Krishna and Radha manifested all the cowherd boys and girls and the cows of Goloka Vrindavana. Then it glorifies Radha as the origin of Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Durga and Savitri.

It follows with the stories of Savitri and Satyavan, Surabhi, Svaha and Svadha, the descendants of Suratha and the story of the Ganges, many stories from the *Ramayana* and Durvasa's curse to Indra, as well as instructions for worshipping Lakshmi. The *Ganesha kanda* speaks mostly about the story of Ganesha but it also contains parts of the story of Jamadagni, Kartavirya Arjuna and Parasurama.

The *Krishna kanda* speaks about the story of Krishna in Vraja and Mathura, and how Radha was reunited with Krishna and all the inhabitants of Gokula returned to Goloka.

### ***Kurma purana***

Its name comes from the tortoise *avatara* of Vishnu and the present text consists of 17 thousand verses of the collection called *Brahma samhita*. The other 3 *samhitas* - *Bhagavati*, *Gauri* and *Vaishnavi* - have been lost.

The text tells the story of the subsequent life of Indradyumna, the description of the system of *varnas* and *ashramas*, the creation of the universe, the calculation of time, the story of Varaha, the importance of Ananta Sesha Naga (presented here as Sankarshana), the appearance of Rudra, the 1000 names of Parvati, the descendents of Uttanapada, the stories of Daksha, Narasimha, Varaha (that in this version is presented as after Narasimha's), and a different version of the story of Gautama Rishi and the faked death of the cow.

Follow the stories of Andhaka, of king Bali and the *avatara* Vamana, and the story of Bana Asura - in a different version than the *Bhagavata* and *Vishnu puranas*: here Bana is defeated by Shiva and not by Krishna, and when he surrenders he becomes one of the *gana patis* or "leaders of the companions" of Shiva.

We also find descriptions of the descendants of Surya (who in this version has not 2 wives but 4 - Samjna, Rajni, Prabha and Chhaya - and a greater number of children), of Vaivasvata Manu and his son Ikshvaku. After the Sun dynasty we find the Moon dynasty,

with Pururava, Yayati and his sons Yadu, Tursavu, Druhya, Anu and Puru.

Follows the story of Kartavirya Arjuna and his son Jayadhvaja, that includes the interesting discussion between Jayadhvaja and his brothers on worshiping Vishnu rather than Shiva: as a general tendency the kings worship Vishnu and Indra, *brahmanas* worship Agni, Aditya (Surya), Brahma and Shiva, while the Devas worship Vishnu, the Asuras worship Shiva, the Yakshas and Gandharvas worship Chandra, the Rishis worship Brahma and Shiva, and women worship Parvati. But the best thing for human beings is to understand that Shiva is non-different from Visnu, therefore Shiva and Vishnu must be worshiped simultaneously.

The text continues elaborating on Durjaya and Urvasi, Krishna's austerities and his conversation with Upamanyu Rishi, the description of the 4 *yugas*, the importance of the Shiva linga, the 12 Jyotirlingas and the *tirthas* or pilgrimage places of Ganga, Yamuna and Prayaga. It describes the geography of the Earth, the various *manvantaras*, the cyclic manifestations of Vyasa in the various Dvapara yugas, the *avataras* of Shiva, the *Isvara gita* and the Yoga of the secret knowledge, the rituals and *samskaras*, the rules of cleanliness, atonement and fasting.

It reveals the story of the Maya Sita ("illusory Sita") that was kidnapped by Ravana, the removal of one of Brahma's heads, and the story of Kalabhairava and Nandi.

### ***Matsya purana***

It has 14 thousand verses, in the form of conversation between Vishnu and Vaivasvata Manu; it tells the story of the fish *avatara* (Matsya), the creation of the universe, the descendants of Manu and Daksha, the story of the Maruts, the list of the *manvantaras*, the story of Prithu, the dynasty of the Sun (here Surya has 3 wives), the dynasty of the Moon, the story of Sati the daughter of Daksha and her 108 names and 108 *tirthas* ("places of access").

Follow the instructions for funeral ceremonies, the story of Brahmadata, the description of many sacred places, the story of Chandra's birth and the war for Tara, the stories of Pururava, Yayati, Puru, Bharata, Kacha and Devayani, the quarrel between Sarmista and Devayani, the story of Sukracharya and Jayanti (daughter of Indra), a general description

of the *Puranas* (the version for the human beings and the version for the Devas that comes to a total of 1 billion verses), the story of Tripura Asura, the calculation of time, the characteristics of the *yugas*, the story of Vajranga son of Diti, the austerities of Taraka, the war between Devas and Asuras, the appearance of Kausiki from Parvati's body, the birth of Kartikeya, the story of Hiranyakasipu and the descendants of the Rishis Bhrigu, Angira, Atri, Visvamisra, Kasyapa, Vasistha, Parasara and Agastya.

Follow the story of Savitri and Satyavan, the description of the duties of a king, the interpretation of dreams and omens, the story of Bali Maharaja and the *avatara* Vamana, the story of the *avatara* Varaha, the episode of the ocean churned by the Devas and Asuras, and the appearance of Lakshmi.

The text includes a treatise on the science of architecture compiled by 18 great Rishis - Bhrigu, Atri, Vasistha, Visvakarma, Maya, Narada, Nagnajita, Vishalaksha, Puranadara, Brahma, Kartikeya, Nandishvara, Saunaka, Garga, Vasudeva, Aniruddha, Sukra and Brihaspati - and the auspicious moments to start building a house.

### ***Linga purana***

It has 11 thousand verses divided into two parts of 108 and 55 chapters respectively; it begins with the traditional invocation.

Vyasa starts speaking in the assembly of the Rishis, explaining the composition of the Omkara, the subtle mechanism of creation, the appearance of the Rishis known as *brahma manasa putras* ("sons of Brahma's mind"), the nine Prajapatis, Svayambhuva Manu and Satarupa and their descendants. Here Sati is described as *manasa putri* of Brahma, entrusted to Daksha with a warning about her special position as Mother of the Universe. In this regard we also find the prayers of Brahma to Shiva.

Follows a description of the Astanga Yoga, with particular instructions on the places suitable for practice, meditation and visualization, on the *mantras* to be chanted, the difficulties to be faced and the 64 *siddhis* or "perfections" to attain. Then the text elaborates on Shiva tattva and the meaning of the 5 faces of Shiva, the meaning of Omkara, the *Shiva stuti* chanted by Vishnu, the description of the rituals called Linga archana ("worship to the Linga") and Pancha Yajna ("five sacrifices"), the explanation of

the *Tryambika mantra*, the origin of the Shiva linga and the meanings of *atitya* ("hospitality"), *pativratya* ("loyalty to one's husband"), *bhakti* ("devotion for God") and *bhasma* ("sacred ashes").

Follow the *Apara stuti* for Shiva chanted by the seven Rishis, the conversation between Dadhici Rishi and king Kshupa on Shiva's superior position, the birth of Nandesvara, the universal form of Shiva, the worship to Shiva by Parasara Rishi, the story of the Tripurasuras, the Pasupata Yoga, the rules for ritual worship, different *vratas* ("ritual observances") and specifically the Pasupata vrata, the monthly Shiva vratas and the Uma Mahesvara vrata.

The text also contains the *Pancakshara japa mahatmya* ("the glories of the chanting the 5 syllable *mantra*"), the description of the Dhyana Yajna ("sacrifice of meditation"), the interpretation of dreams and omens, the stories of Andhaka, Varaha, Narasimha and Jalandhara, the *Shiva sahasra namavali* ("the 1000 names of Shiva") recited by Vishnu, the death of Sati, the marriage of Shiva and Parvati, the appearance of Ganesha, the Shiva Tandava ("cosmic dance of Shiva"), the description of the various *mantras* for Vishnu and Shiva, the story of Dhunduma, the definition of *pasutva* ("animal character") and *pasu* ("animal"), the *vibhutis* ("powers") of Shiva, the 8 forms of Shiva, the *mandala* ("circle") of *puja* ("worship"), the universal form of Shiva, the installation of the Shiva linga and the various forms of Gayatri.

### ***Vamana purana***

It has 10 thousand verses. The story of the *avatara* Vamana is narrated by Pulastya Rishi to Narada, after a series of other episodes such as the sacrifice of Daksha, the story of Andhaka, the story of Sukeshi (including the description of the virtuous and criminal activities, the geography of Earth and the 10 parts of Dharma), the story of Nara Narayana Rishi and their meeting with Prahlada, the story of Mahishasura (including the episodes of Rambha and Karambha, mount Vindhya, Chanda and Munda), the new incarnation of Durga, the story of king Kuru and Kuru kshetra, and the story of Bali before his meeting with Vamana.

After Vamana's episode we find the story of the river Sarasvati, the geographical position

of Kurukshetra (with its 7 forests and 9 rivers), the prayers of the Rishis to Shiva, the description of Sanihitya Sarovara and Sthanu tirtha, the origin of the 4 heads of the *linga* called Brahmesvara, the description of Prithudaka tirtha, the birth of Uma (daughter of Mena and the Himalaya) that originally was named Kali and had one brother by the name of Sunama ("beneficial name") and two sisters called Ragini (red) and Kutila (white), her marriage with Shiva, the palace built by Visvakarma for the newly weds, the killing of Sumbha and Nishumbha, the birth of Kartikeya, the killing of Taraka and Mahishasura, the story of Ritudhvaja and Patalketu, the austerities of Shiva, the killing of the Asura Mura, the story of Andhaka Asura (including the story of king Danda and the episode in which Visvakarma becomes a monkey), the origin of the Maruts in the various *manvantaras*, the episode of Vishnu killing Kalanemi, the victory of Bali Maharaja, the story of Pururava, the description of the constellations, the story of Upamanyu and Sridama, the story of Gajendra and the crocodile, the *Sarasvata stotra*, the conversation between Bali and Prahlada, the atonement austerities of Indra, and the benefits of listening to the *Puranas*.

### ***Markandeya purana***

Composed of 9 thousand verses. It is famous especially because it contains the *Devi mahatmya* ("the glories of the Goddess"), the most popular text for the worship to the Mother Goddess. The recitation of the *Devi mahatmya*, also called *Chandi patha*, is traditionally required during the observance of Navaratri and many *shaktas* ("devotees of Shakti") perform it every day.

The text begins with the conversation between Jaimini and Markandeya Rishi, in which Markandeya speaks of Drona's bird sons, all expert in Vedic knowledge. This Drona was the son of the *brahmana* Mandapala and married Tarkshi, daughter of Kandhara (of Garuda's family); the 4 eggs of Tarkshi were collected by Shami Rishi and thus Pingaksha, Vibodha, Suputra and Sumuka learned Vedic knowledge by listening to the recitation of the Rishis in his *ashrama*. This happened because in their previous lives they had been the sons of Rishi Sukrisha, son of Rishi Vipulasva. Jaimini went to meet these extraordinary birds and asked them many questions about the incarnation of Krishna and the story of the Pandavas. The answers also speak about the various incarnations of

Vishnu, such as Narayana, Sesha, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. It is Pradyumna who manifests in the form of the *avatars* such as Varaha, Nrisimha and Krishna.

The story of Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, begins with the episode in which Indra killed Trishira and his father Tvasta Rishi created Vritrasura; instead of honoring the friendship with Vritra, favored by the Seven Rishis, Indra treacherously killed Vritra and thus provoked the Asuras' anger.

Later on the Devas took birth on Earth, and the Pandavas are precisely manifestations of Dharma, Vayu, Indra and the Asvini kumaras. Follows the story of Balarama's pilgrimage, the killing of Suta Gosvami and its atonement by a 12 year fast in the pilgrimage place known as Pratiloma Sarasvati.

Then again the story of Draupadi's sons is traced back to the episode when king Harischandra insulted Visvamitra and Visvamitra asked him to surrender everything he possessed. At that time 5 Devas of the directions showed indignation at how Visvamitra was mistreating Harischandra's wife and he cursed them to take birth as human beings. Visvamitra continued to test Harischandra's virtue to the extreme consequences, then Harischandra was blessed by the Rishi Visvamitra, by Indra and by Dharma. Follow the story of Sumati and the description of how a human being goes through death and in the cycle of reincarnation.

### ***Vayu purana***

It has 24 thousand verses, divided into 4 parts entitled *Prakriya pada*, *Anusanga pada*, *Upodghata pada* and *Upasamhara pada*, plus an appendix entitled *Gaya mahatmya* ("the glories of Gaya", the famous place of pilgrimage in present Bihar).

The text begins by declaring that the knowledge contained in the *Puranas* was originally enunciated by Brahma and constitutes a very important part of Vedic literature. After the description of creation, Romaharshana Suta speaks about the story of Varaha, the cycle of the *yugas* and the characteristics of the various ages, the descendants of the 10 *manasa putras* of Brahma and Daksha's daughters, and the appearance of Rudra and the science of Yoga, for which detailed instructions are given.

The text also speaks of the interpretation of dreams and omens, of the list of the 34 *kalpas* (days of Brahma) that passed from the beginning of creation, and of the birth of Lakshmi as daughter of Brighu Rishi and sister of Dhata and Vidhata.

Then we find the sacrifice of Daksha, the description of the geography of the Earth and the regions assigned to the sons of king Priyavrata, the various planets of the universe, the episode in which Shiva swallowed the poison, the compilation of the *Vedas* and various stories about the Rishis, such as the episode of the *asvamedha yajna* by king Janaka.

It narrates how the groups of Devas and Rishis incarnate in the various *manvantaras*, the story of king Vena and Prithu, and narrates about the Pracetas, the descendants of Daksha, Hiranyakasipu and Hiranyaksha the sons of Diti, the Maruts, the Danavas and the Pitris.

The dynasty of the Sun begins with the birth of Surya from the cosmic egg - by which he was given the name of Martanda. After the birth of Yama, Yami, Vaisravata Manu and the Asvini kumaras, the next generation sees the progeny of Vaivasvata, starting with Ila/Sudyumna, Ikshvaku, Brihadhasva, Trishanku and Sagara. In the Moon dynasty we see the birth of Chandra, Pururava and Urvasi, Yayati, Kartavirya Arjuna, and the episode when Brihaspati took the form of Sukracharya and cheated the Daityas for 10 years.

Follows a brief summary of the main *avatars* of Vishnu, in a list that is slightly different from usual: Matsya, Narasimha, Vamana, Dattatreya, Bhavya, Parasurama, Rama, Vedavyasa, Krishna and Kalki, and the line of transmission of *Vayu purana* from Vayu to Ushana, to Brihaspati, Savita and so on, down to Vyasa and Romaharshana Suta.

### ***Bhavisya purana***

The *Apastambha Dharmasutra* mentions a *Bhavisya purana*, but it is possible that the text presently available has been drastically modified in very recent times, because its contents are very doubtful and drastically different from the other *Puranas*.

The first section of the text speaks of the glories of Vishnu, Shiva and Surya, then Romaharshana Suta goes to sleep for 2000 years, and on returning he presents his



prophecies for Kali yuga (which is supposed to have started in the times when Romaharshana originally received the Vedic texts from Vyasa). These belated prophecies include the advent of Buddhism with descriptions of terrible wars between Buddhists and Hindus, with millions of casualties (that never actually happened). It mentions Zarathustra, Adam and Eve (called Adama and Havyavati, pictured under a Papa vriksha or "sin tree"), Noah's ark, Moses, Jesus Christ (called "Isha Messia") and his journey to India, Muhammad and Islam, Nimbarka, Madhva, Jayadeva Gosvami, Kutubuddin and the Delhi sultans, Tamerlan, Nadir Shah, Akbar, the British colonial rule, queen Victoria and the city of Calcutta. The "*mleccha dharma*" is described as devotion to God, worship of fire, nonviolence, austerity and sense control.

In the list of *Upapuranas* the most famous are named after *Samba*, *Nandi* (or *Nandikesvara*), *Surya*, *Adi* (or *Aditya*), *Parasara*, *Kapila*, *Narasimha*, *Kalika*, *Nilamata*, *Varuna*, *Durvasa*, *Manu*, *Sanatkumara*, *Ushana* (*Sukra*), *Maricha*, *Bhargava*, *Lakshmi*, *Shiva rahasya*, *Shiva dharma*, *Vasistha*, *Ganesha*, *Kalki* and *Hamsa*.

Some sources add the *Devi bhagavata* and the *Brihan naradiya purana* to the list, while others add the *Vayu*, *Shiva* and *Skanda puranas*, that generally are considered *Mahapuranas*. There are also other *Upapuranas* called *Asamavya*, *Aunasa* (*Ausanas*), *Basava*, *Bhanda*, *Brihaddharma*, *Harivamsa*, *Kotyaka*, *Kuvera*, *Limbaja*, *Magha*, *Malla*, *Medasani-vari*, *Mudgala*, *Peria* (*Periya*), *Sarasvati*, *Sthala*, *Svayambhuva*, *Tula*, *Vaisakha* and *Vishnu-Dharma Purana*.

### ***Devi bhagavata purana***

Also known as *Devi purana*, it has 18 thousand verses in 12 chapters or cantos and is attributed to Vyasa, who called it *Mahapurana*. The introductory invocation offers a meditation on Brahavidya, "spiritual knowledge", that is *sarva chaitanya rupa*, "the form of all awareness", so that she will awaken *buddhi*, "intelligence".

The text begins with the Rishis' questions to Saunaka and continues with the glorification of the various *Puranas*, the incarnations of Vyasa in the various Dvapara yugas, the classification of the scriptures and their essence.

The *Vedanta* (also called *jnana kanda*, "the section of knowledge") is characterized by

*sattva*, the collections of *sutras* that deal with the ritual ceremonies (*karma kanda*, "the section of the prescribed activities") are characterized by *rajas* and the *Nyaya shastra* ("the texts on logic") are characterized by *tamas*, and similarly the *Puranas* too are divided into 3 categories according to the predominant *guna*, but the *Bhagavata Mahapurana* and the *Devi Bhagavata Mahapurana* are above them all. As it is characteristic of the *Puranas*, also this text speaks of the creation of the universe, the secondary creation, the dynasties, the periods of the Manus and the stories of the various kings.

The original Devi Shakti is called Vidya, "knowledge", her nature is *turiya chaitanya* ("transcendental awareness") and she is the Mother of all the worlds. Her unfathomable waters sustain Vishnu, who is the support and the origin of Brahma, the creator of the universe. Maha Lakshmi is her *sattva shakti*, Maha Sarasvati is her *rajas shakti* and Maha Kali is her *tamas shakti*.

The text continues with the story of Hayagriva, the *avatara* of Vishnu "with a horse head": the Devas were performing a sacrifice ritual, but they discovered that Vishnu had gone to sleep after fighting against the Asuras for many years, so trying to awaken him indirectly, they cut the string of his arc, producing a strong noise. Unexpectedly the snapping bow string cut off Vishnu's head, that rolled away and became lost in the ocean. The *Vedas* then prayed Mahamaya, who revealed the purpose of that particular *lila* ("playful pastime") of Vishnu: there was an Asura called Hayagriva because he had a horse head, and who had obtained the blessing to remain unconquered by anyone except a person who looked exactly like him. Thus, Vishnu was going to take on a horse head in order to deal with the Asura.

Two more Asuras, named Madhu and Kaitabha, appeared from Vishnu's ear wax while he was sleeping, and started to afflict the universe. Brahma went to offer his prayers to Vishnu and ask for his help, but as he was unable to wake him up, he addressed Mahamaya, who was covering Vishnu's heart in the form of sleep (Nidra). With the help of Mahamaya, who confused the minds of the two Asuras, Vishnu eliminated Madhu and Kaitabha, thus liberating Brahma and the entire universe from that menace.

Then the text speaks of the birth of Budha (the planet known as Mercury), son of Chandra (the Deva of the Moon) and Tara ("star", wife of Brihaspati, who is known as

the planet Jupiter) who had fallen in love with Chandra and had eloped with him. Budha married Ila, daughter of Manu, and from their union the king Pururava was born. Actually Ila had been a male at birth and until the moment of transformation - which happened when he entered without permission into the forest where Shiva was enjoying with Parvati. Later Pururava married the Apsara Urvasi, but Indra wanted her to return to his court, so he devised a plan to force Pururava to fail to keep his word, with the result of angering his wife.

Vyasa too met an Apsara, Ghritaci, who took the form of a parrot and indirectly became the mother of Sukadeva. Suka was born from the fire of the ritual and immediately became an adult, as it is the norm with the children of the Devas; he went to Brihaspati's house for his studies and then returned to his father, who advised him to marry and thus comply with his family duties.

However, Sukadeva was free from all material desires and attachments and he feared that marriage would create unnecessary problems for him; to help him understand the truth, Vyasa sent him to meet king Janaka of Mithila, a famous *jivanmukta* ("liberated soul still living in the body") who was a great example of detachment and perfection in the performance of duties.

Then we have the description of Sukadeva's journey to Mithila, his arrival at the palace, and his conversation with Janaka about renunciation and family life, and the gradual evolution of the individual. In the end Janaka openly declared that the constant awareness of the Self as different from the material world is the key to attain a healthy and natural renunciation from attachments.

Convinced, Sukadeva returned to his father's house and married Pivari, the daughter of a Rishi; he had four sons - Krishna, Gauraprabha, Bhuri and Devasruta - and a daughter, Kirti. Later Kirti married Anuha and begot the powerful king Brahmadata, who was perfectly realized in the transcendental Self and simultaneously endowed with great wealth and prosperity.

Finally Sukadeva left his father's house and went to mount Kailasa, where he meditated for a long time, finally attaining the perfection of Yoga. Vyasa went to search for him, calling him with great affection and sadness, and was pacified by Shiva himself. Then Vyasa went to the birthplace of his own mother Satyavati and finally to the city of

Hastinapura, where Satyavati had married Santanu and begot two heirs to the throne.

The next canto speaks about the birth of Satyavati, the birth of Vyasa, the birth of the Vasus, and the birth of the Pandavas, then about the extinction of the Yadu family and the life of Maharaja Parikshit, and the Sarpa yajna performed by his son Janamejaya.

In the 3rd canto we find the questions of Janamejaya to the Rishis, the hymns to the Devi composed by Shiva and Brahma, the powers of the Devi, the characteristics of the *gunas*, the story of Satyavrata, the fight between Yudhjit and Virasena, the story of Visvamisra, the marriage of Sudarshana, the installation of the Devi at Varanasi and Ayodhya, the explanation of Navaratri, the tradition of honoring young girls as representatives of the Goddess, and the story of Rama observing Navaratri.

In the 4th canto we find the story of Krishna and the conversation between Nara and Narayana Rishi. In the 5th we find the birth of the Apsara Urvashi, the explanation of the importance of pilgrimages, the curse of Brighu and the truce between Devas and Daityas, and the stories of various *avatars* of Vishnu. Then the story of Krishna is resumed with the marriage of Devaki, the birth of Krishna and the kidnapping of Pradyumna.

The 5th canto also compares Shiva and Vishnu, speaks about the birth of Mahisha Asura, his war against Indra and the appearance of the Devi to defeat the Asura, the battle against Tamra, Vaskala, Durmukha, Ciksura, Vidalaksha, Asiloma, and finally Mahisha himself.

Then the Devi tackled another danger for the Devas - the Asuras Sumbha and Nisumbha, with their generals Dhumralochana, Chanda, Munda, Raktabija, and killed them all.

The narration of the deeds of the Devi is a source of great blessings for those who hear it, as demonstrated by the story of king Suratha and the *vaisya* Samadhi.

The 6th canto speaks about the story of Trishira, Vritra and Indra's escape, then narrates the story of king Nahusha, the war between Adi and Baka, the birth of Vasistha, the Haihayas and Bhargavas, the story of Ekavita, the war between Haihaya and Kalaketu, and the illusory experiences of Vyasa and Narada.

The 7th canto speaks of the two dynasties of Surya and Chandra, the story of Chyavana Rishi and Sukanya, the stories of Revata, Satyavrata, Trisanku and Harischandra. Then it

speaks about the form of the Goddess "that has 100 eyes" (Satakshi Devi), the birth of Parvati, the Virata rupa, Yoga and perfection in *mantras*, the knowledge of Brahman, *bhakti* and worship of the Devi.

In the 8th canto we find the story of Varaha that lifts the Earth, the description of the family of Manu and Priyavrata, mountains and rivers, Ganges and the regions of Earth (*varsha*), continents (*dvipa*) and the structure of the universe.

The 9th canto describes the origin of Prakriti and Purusha, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and the Devas, the appearance of Lakshmi, Ganga and Sarasvati, the power of Kali, the punishment prescribed for offenses against Earth, the story of Tulasi and Sankhachuda, the story of Savitri and her dialogue with Yama, the 86 *kundas* ("basins") and the various forms of the Devi - Maha Lakshmi, Svaha, Svadha, Dakshina, Sasthi, Manasa and Surabhi.

The 10th canto speaks about Svayambhuva Manu and the conversation between Narada and Vindhya, after which Vindhya blocked the passage of the Sun, then we find the story of Manu and the story of king Suratha, and the appearance of Bhramari Devi. The 11th and 12th cantos describe the morning duties and specifically the cleanliness rules, the glories of the *rudraksha*, the rules for the Sirovrata, the 3 types of *bhasma* (sacred ashes), the rules of the *sandhya upasana* (the spiritual practice at the day's junctions), the *brahma yajna* (the pursuance of transcendental realization), the *mantra gayatri*, the Vaisvadevas, the Tapta kricchra vrata, *sadachara* ("good behavior"), *diksha* ("initiation") and the mystic Mani Dvipa.

## Vedanga and Upaveda

The secondary Vedic texts called *Vedangas* ("limbs of knowledge") and *Upavedas* ("secondary knowledge") or even *Upangas* ("secondary limbs") are also considered *shastra* ("sacred scriptures") and sometimes are called *sutra* ("aphorisms").

Many among the most ancient texts have gone lost and we have only quotes related in more recent books (which of course, are still centuries old).

The traditionally recognized *Vedangas* are:

- *Siksha* (rules for pronunciation)
- *Vyakarana* (grammar)
- *Chanda* (intonation and metric to ensure proper understanding)
- *Nirukta* (derivation and meanings of words)
- *Jyotisha* (astrology)
- *Kalpa* (practical details of rituals)

Traditionally, the *Upavedas* or *Upangas* (subsidiary parts of the *Vedas*, required for the good performance of rituals) are:

- *Ayur Veda* (medicine) connected to the *Rig Veda*
- *Dhanur Veda* (military science) connected to the *Yajur Veda*
- *Gandharva Veda* (music, dance and figurative arts) connected to the *Sama Veda*
- *Artha shastra* (sociology, politics and economy) connected to the *Atharva Veda*

In turn, these include more subsidiary texts. Sometimes the *Sulba shastra* (mathematics and geometry) is considered a part of the *Vedanga* called *Kalpa* because it is required to calculate the measurements of the altars, and sometimes it is considered part of the *Jyotisha* to make the astrological calculations, or part of the *Artha shastra* as it is a basic knowledge for many social occupations.

The *Kama shastra* (sense gratification and quality of life) and the *Krishi shastra* (agriculture and care for animals) belong to the field of *Ayur Veda*, while the *Vimanika shastra* (construction and utilization of airships) is considered part of the *Dhanur Veda*.

Within the field of *Artha shastra* we can mention the *Niti shastra* (good behavior), *Silpa shastra* (architecture and crafts) and the *kalas* or arts.

The scriptures that deal with the *darshanas* ("perspectives of vision") on the *Vedas* are:

- *Nyaya* (the science of logic)
- *Yoga* (control of body and mind)
- *Sankhya* (analytical philosophy)
- *Vaisesika* (cosmology and physics)
- *Purva mimamsa* (commentaries to the *Kalpa sutra*)
- *Uttara mimamsa*, also known as *Vedanta sutra*

Sometimes Yoga, Sankhya and Vaisesika are considered parts of the Nyaya because they are logical and philosophical interpretations of the Vedic knowledge.

These are the 6 *darshanas* called *astika* ("orthodox") or faithful to the authority of Vedic knowledge.

There are also 3 more *darshanas* called *nastika* ("heterodox") that do not recognize the authority of the *Vedas*, although in a certain measure they deal with the fundamental knowledge presented in the *Vedas*. The *nastika darshanas* are the systems of Charvaka (atheistic materialism), the system of Buddha (Buddhism in its forms *sunyata*, *madhyamaka*, *yogachara*, *sautrantika* and *svatantrika*) and the system of Mahavira (Jainism both *anekantavada* and *syadvada*).

## Siksha

The most famous and complete texts on this subject have been written by Panini and Yajnavalkya.

The *Samana siksha sutra* (in appendix to *Rig Veda*) specifically focuses on *visarga* (the letter represented by aspirated *h*), the *Bharadvaja siksha* contains an alphabetical index of the definitions used in *Yajur Veda*, the *Narada siksha* discusses about the accents in *Sama Veda*, and the *Manduki siksha* about accents in *Atharva Veda*.

Other texts, known as *Pratisakhya siksha*, are in appendix to the four *Samhitas* and explain the modifications in chanting or reading the *samhita* (or *mula*) *patha* (the original form of the Vedic text) into the *pada patha* (the reading that separates words) and the *krama patha* (reading with the words and their meaning), as we have seen in the 3rd chapter of this book speaking about Sanskrit.

Two more modalities of recitation of the same hymns, called *jata* and *ghana*, are considered particularly powerful and are used in rituals proper rather than in the learning exercises. The secret of this power resides in the rhythmic tone, combined with the awareness of the meaning of the *mantras*; the tonic sequence of the *jata* ("braid") is 1-2, 2-1, 1-2, while the tonic sequence of the *ghana* ("cloud") is 1-2, 2-1, 1-2-3, 3-2-1. We have already mentioned these in the chapter about the 4 main *Vedas*.

The word *siksha* refers to the technique for teaching the scriptures, based on phonetics and memorization.

These are the other fundamental definitions:

\* *varna* refers to the pronunciation of the individual letters, classified as guttural, palatal, lingual, dental and labial according to the physical point of articulation in the vocal apparatus.

\* *svarah* refers to the tone - *anudatta* ("low" that is low frequency), *udatta* ("high" or high frequency) and *svarita* ("medium") - in the pronunciation of vocals; in the manuals used for study and practice these three signals are represented respectively by a horizontal line under the vocal, and by one or two vertical lines above the vocal.

Other very specific tones, that are not used any more, were called *prachaya*, *hrasva*,



*dirgha* and *pluta*.

\* *matra* is the duration of vocalization in reference to time, that is short (*hrasva*), long (*dhirga*) or echoed (*plutam*), consisting of 1, 2, or 3 units of time (*matra*); the *ardha matra* or "half time" refers to consonants that are not accompanied by vowels.

\* *balam* refers to the forcefulness of pronunciation, to the vocal effort, both internal (*abhyantara prayatna*) and external (*bahya prayatna*) - that is before pronunciation and during pronunciation.

\* *samah* refers to the correct space between letters during pronunciation, which must not be too short or too long.

\* *santanah* is the pronunciation flow obtained through the correct combination in the union (*sandhi*) of letters.

Sanskrit is an extremely complex and precise language, and each small intonation and difference in pronunciation and accent can change the meaning of the sentence, even substantially. The *Siksha* of Panini tells a story from *Taittiriya samhita* (2.4.12) in which Tvasta performed a ritual to evoke an Asura who could destroy Indra (*indra satrur vardhasva*) and because of a pronunciation mistake (emphasizing "*tru*" instead of "*dra*") he obtained an Asura (Vritra) who could be destroyed by Indra.

On the other hand it is well known (and it has also been demonstrated even in our own times) that the correct pronunciation of the Vedic hymns has a considerable influence on atmospheric phenomena, and especially it brings rains. It is even said that the repeated and correct recitation of the *apratiratha sukta* is able - by itself - to repel aggressors and even hostile armies, while the *akamathya sukta* produces a feeling of peace, harmony and cooperation.

Recent studies on the chanting and singing of Vedic *mantras* have shown a close relationship with mathematics and geometry, as well as with the binary logic used in computers.

## Vyakarana

This term is defined as *vyakriyate anena iti vyakarana*: "grammar is what enables us to form and examine words and sentences". In Sanskrit there is a precise and logical system to form declinations, conjugations, composed words and derivatives, which enables us to systematically understand the deep meaning of the words.

The nine traditional grammatical systems are those compiled by Indra, Chandra, Kasakritsna, Kumara, Sakatayana, Sarasvati Anubhuti Svarupa acharya, Apisali and Panini.

The text entitled *Astadhyayi* ("8 chapters") written by Panini is certainly the most famous, and has commentaries written by Patanjali (the author of the famous *Yoga sutras*), Katyayana and Bhattoji Dikshita. It is said that the basic 14 aphorisms of Panini's grammar, called *Mahesvara sutra*, were originated by the same number of fast beats of the *damaru*, Shiva's hand drum, during his cosmic dance. They contain the basic 43 Sanskrit letters, organized in their precise esoteric meaning.

## Chanda

It is the science of intonation and metrics, required to ensure the correct understanding of the text.

The most important traditional text is Pingala's *Chandoviciti*, in 8 chapters, followed by Kedara's and Gangadasa's work.

Sanskrit poetic compositions are made of *pada* ("verses") each with a specific number of *aksharas* ("letters-syllables") each with a precise length (*matra*).

These are the main Vedic metrics:

- \* Gayatri, with 3 *padas* of 8 syllables each
- \* Ushnika, with 4 *padas* of 7 syllables
- \* Anustubha, with 4 *padas* of 8 syllables

- \* Brihati, with 4 *padas* of 9 syllables
- \* Pankti, with 4 *padas* of 10 syllables
- \* Tristubha, with 4 *padas* of 11 syllables
- \* Jagati, with 4 *padas* of 12 syllables

## **Nirukta**

This work by Yaska is the most famous text dealing with development and meanings of the words; however, it quotes passages from a previous text called *Nighantu*, that is presently lost except for the 5 chapters copied in the *Nirukta*. Besides *Nirukta* there are other *koshas* ("vocabularies") and *anukramanika* ("indexes").

*Nirukta* has 12 chapters: from chapter 1 to 3 there is an explanation of synonyms (words of different forms but having the same meaning), from chapter 4 to 6 we find the homonyms (words with identical forms but different meanings), and from chapter 7 to 12 there is the explanation of the names of the Deities. Words are categorized as *nama* (nouns), *akhyata* (adjectives), *nipata* (adverbs) and *upasarga* (prepositions).

To examine the origin and meaning of the words, it is important to consider the pronunciation characteristics and the grammatical formation.

All nouns develop from a "root" (*mula*). For example, the word *karma* comes from the root *kr*, which means "to do". Sometimes a superficial similarity can be deceitful; for example the word *hasta* ("hand") does not originate from the root *has* ("to laugh") but from the root *han* ("to strike"). The root *has* instead forms the words *hasa* ("smile, laugh") and *hasya* ("amusing"). To establish the precise meaning and the formation of the various families of words we need a dictionary.

## **Kalpa**

Visualizing the *Vedanga* as the various parts of the body of the Virata Purusha, the *Kalpa sutras* represent the hands - while *Siksha* are the nostrils, *Vyakarana* the mouth, *Chanda*

the feet, *Nirukta* the ears, and *Jyotisha* the eyes.

In fact the word *kalpa* ("intention, desire") expresses the passage by which after acquiring the knowledge of the ritual we take the initiative of performing it practically.

There are two types of *Kalpa sutra*: the *Srautas* explaining the rituals and ceremonies for the kingdom, and the *Smarta* (or *Grihya*) explaining the daily rituals for individual families.

The two names derive from the fact that the first category is prescribed in the texts known as *Sruti* (the 4 main *Vedas* and their direct commentaries, such as *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas*, *Upanishads*) while the rituals of the second category are only mentioned in the *Sruti* but they are prescribed in the *Smriti*.

Apart from the simple *agnihotra* (that should be performed as a daily practice), the majority of the traditional sacrificial rituals have been abandoned in Hindu society, because the rampant degradation of Kali yuga makes their correct performance almost impossible.

In the 1800s the British scholar Martin Haug convinced some *brahmanas* in Pune (Maharashtra) to perform a Soma Yajna as described in the ancient texts; he took a lot of photographs and brought the used utensils in Europe.

In 1969 there was a Soma Yajna in Shivapuri, under the direction of Sri Gajanan.

In 1975 (from 12 to 24 April) the indologist Fritz Stal financed and documented one Agnichayana yajna performed by the Nambudiris (traditional *brahmanas* from south India).

These episodes awakened the interest in the orthodox Hindu community of Kerala, that was inspired to continue with an Agnistoma in 1984 at Trivandrum, an Agnichayana in 1990 at Kundoor, an Agnistoma in 2003 at Trichur, an Atiratra and an Agnistoma in 2006 at Sukapuram, a Soma yajna in 2009 (from 25 April to 1 May) at Aluva, and an Atiratra in 2011 at Trichur.

Furthermore, in 1996 (from 11 to 22 December) a Pravargya yajna was performed.

The traditional *Srauta sutras* are:

- \* *Asvalayana* and *Sankhyayana* (*Rig Veda*),
- \* *Apasthamba*, *Baudhayana*, *Hiranyakesi*, *Bharadvaja*, *Vaikhanasa*, *Vadhila*, *Manava*, *Varaha* (*Krishna Yajur Veda*)
- \* *Katyayana* or *Paraskara* (*Sukla Yajur Veda*)
- \* *Khadira*, *Latyayana*, *Drahyayana*, *Jaiminiya* (*Sama Veda*)
- \* *Vikhanasa* (*Atharva Veda*)

The traditional *Griha sutras* are:

- \* *Asvalayana* and *Sankhyayana* (*Rig Veda*)
- \* *Apasthamba*, *Baudhayana*, *Hiranyakesi*, *Vaikhanasa*, *Manava*, *Katha* (*Krishna Yajur Veda*)
- \* *Katyayana* or *Paraskara* (*Sukla Yajur Veda*)
- \* *Khadira*, *Gobhila*, *Gautama*, *Jaiminiya* (*Sama Veda*)
- \* *Kaushika* (*Atharva Veda*)

The traditional *Dharma sutras* are:

- \* *Vasishtha* (*Rig Veda*)
- \* *Apasthamba*, *Baudhayana*, *Hiranyakesi* (*Krishna Yajur Veda*)
- \* *Gautama* (*Sama Veda*)

Naturally this classification of the *Dharma sutras* is only indicative, because this definition can be applied to a great variety of texts, as they deal with religious or social

duties. Thus some scholars list even *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* among the *Dharma shastras*.

There are other *Smriti* scriptures that further elaborate the topic of rituals, in the categories called *Pratishakhya*, *Padapatha*, *Kramapatha*, *Upalekha*, *Anukramani*, *Daivatsamhita*, *Parisishta*, *Paddhati*, *Karika*, *Khila* and *Vyuha*.

The *Prayogas* deserve a special mention because they are in turn sub-divided in *hotru* (on practical details), *adhvaryu* (on general organization) and *udgatru* (on the chanting of *mantras*) depending on the type of officiant that will utilize them.

Always within the *Smriti* category, but on the topic of personal and social duties, we have the 18 main texts such as *Manu Smriti*, also known as *Manu samhita* or *Manava Dharma-Shastra* (meant for the Satya yuga), *Yajnavalkya Smriti* (meant for the Treta yuga), *Sankha-Likhita Smriti* (meant for the Dvapara yuga) and *Parasara Smriti* (meant for the Kali yuga), as well as the texts written on the subject by the Rishis Vishnu, Angirasa, Daksha, Yama, Samvarta, Shanka, Ushanas, Katyayana, Devala, Brihaspati, Narada, Vyasa, Harita, Satatapa, Vasishtha, Yama, Apastamba, Gautama, Atri and Saunaka.

Because it is not possible here to analyze these texts one by one, we will simply offer a general view on the topic of the rituals that are described in the *Kalpa sutras* and in the *Smriti* literature.

The rituals of purification and auspiciousness (*samskaras*) that create "good impressions" of *sattva* and *dharma* in the mind of the individual and the collectivity are 40, of which 14 are performed for the benefit of society at large (*srauta yajnas*) and 26 for the benefit of the individual (*smarta yajna*).

"Just like a painter creates an image by using various colors, the correct performance of the *samskaras* develops the character that is typical of the *brahmanas*." (*Parasara smriti*, 8.19)

These rituals are aimed at eliminating the negative tendencies (*dosa apanayana*), to create an affinity (*gunadhana*) towards the spiritual qualities (*atma guna*) such as compassion (*daya*), tolerance (*kshanti*), absence of envy (*anasuya*), purity of body and mind (*sauca*), inner peace (*anayasa*), a positive attitude (*mangala*), absence of greed and

miserliness (*akarpanya*), and absence of attachments (*asprha*).

Here are the 40 *samskaras* listed in the *Kalpa sutras*:

1. Garbhadhana, for conception.
2. Pumsavana, for the beginning of awareness in the embryo.
3. Simantomnayana, to reassure the fetus before birth.
4. Jatakarma, at birth.
5. Nama karana, the ceremony in which the newborn is given a name.
6. Annaprasana, the first meal consisting in food grains.
7. Chuda karana, the first hair cut.
8. Upanayana, the awarding of the sacred thread (*upavita*).
9. Prajapatyam, the beginning of the study of Vedic scriptures.
10. Saumya, the recognition of the student's personal progress.
11. Agneya, when the student begins the practice of the *samidha dhana*, the offering into the fire (the special firewood for the sacrifice is called *samidha* or *idhma*) .
12. Vaisvadeva, the first direct offering to the Devas.
13. Samavartana, the completion of the studies (a sort of graduation ceremony).
14. Vivaha, marriage (4 days of rituals); the sacred fire for the ceremony is brought from the house of the husband's father.

After marriage, a family man regularly performs the Pancha Maha yajna ("5 main sacrifices"):

15. Brahma yajna: the study and the teaching of the scriptures (*svadhyaya*) and the spiritual practice (*sadhana*) for the realization of Brahman - to repay one's debt towards the Rishis and the *Vedas*.

16. Pitri yajna, or the offerings to the Pitris (ancestors) during the Agnihotra, the *tarpana* etc.

Besides these rituals, the Pitri yajna include the duty to beget at least one son who will continue the family line, and to behave in such a way to bring glory and good name to the family.

17. Deva yajna, or the offerings to the Devas (the administrators of the universe) during the Agnihotra, the ritual worship to the family Deities (*upasana*), the Sandhyavandana etc.

18. Bhuta yajna, or the offering of food to the animals and the living beings in general; this consumes one's past negative karmic reactions.

It includes the regular practice of nonviolence, compassion and harmony with nature, and even good relationships with ghosts.

19. Nri yajna, that consists in assistance to guests (*atithi*), a category that includes all travelers, as well as in the regular practice of charity, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness towards other human beings.

Another group of sacrifices is called Sapta Paka yajna ("the 7 cooked sacrifices"):

20. Astaka anvastaka, to the ancestors, 4 times a year.

21. Parvani, to the ancestors, once a month.

22. Sravani, to the snakes (on the day of Naga panchami).

23. Agrahayani, at the end of the Sravani ritual.

24. Chaitri, to the Mother Goddess, during the month of Chaitra.

25. Asvayuji, offering the first products of the harvest.

26. Sthalipaka, the regular offering of rice to the family Deity.



These rituals are based on oblation of food grains, alone or boiled with other ingredients, especially milk, butter, yogurt, fruits or rice pudding, and sometimes special steamed cakes called *purodasa*. Especially for the departed ancestors, the family prepares balls of cooked rice called *pindi*.

The next group of *samskaras* consists of the Sapta Havir yajna ("7 sacrifices to the fire"):

27. Agnyadhyana, the consecration of fire (that is "installed" as the personal presence of Agni) both for the public rituals and the house rituals.

The first installation of the fire for family is performed at the marriage ceremony, and the fire is solemnly carried into the new house of the married couple and is subsequently divided into Garhapatya agni (for the *srauta yajnas*) and Aupasanagni (for the *smarta karmas*), from which the family kindles the fire for the daily cooking of meals.

The Aupasanagni is further divided into Akshinagni and Ahavaniyagni, that kindles the lamp (*dipa*) and the fire for the daily Agnihotra ("offering to the fire").

28. Agnihotra, the daily ritual of oblations that constitutes the first step for the public rituals as well as for the home rituals.

29. Darshapurnamasa, performed at each *paksha* (moon fortnight) for Agni and Soma, with the offering of the *purodasa* cakes, milk, yogurt and butter.

30. Agrayana, with oblations of the first products of the harvest (barley and rice) 2 times a year, in spring and autumn.

31. Chaturmasya, every 4 months.

32. Nirudha pasubandha, in which one acquires a cow.

33. Sautramani, the offering to the *kshudra devatas*: Indra, Sarasvati and the Asvini kumara.

In these *yajnas* the ritual focuses on the sacred fire, in which one offers *ghi* (clarified butter), firewood chosen from specific trees, and a mixture of uncooked whole grains (especially rice, barley and wheat).

The Agnihotra is performed at dawn and sunset (together with the Sandhya rituals) and consists in the offering of pinches of uncooked rice, mixed with a small quantity of clarified butter (from cow milk), that are put in a small fire within a copper container in the shape of a half pyramid.

The next group of *samskaras* consists of the Sapta Soma yajna ("7 sacrifices of *soma*"):

34. Agnistoma, a purification and "new birth" for the *yajamana* (the author of the ritual), of which the Jyotistoma is a variation for the *vratyas* ("those who take the vows") who enter Vedic society by leaving their *anarya* society of origin.

The Jyotistoma also includes the Prayascitta ("atonement") that generally consists in consuming the *pancha gavya* ("the 5 pure substances from the cow").

35. Atyagnistoma, with the recitation of the 16 *suktas* of *Soma* after the Agnistoma.

36. Ukthya, accompanied by other *mantras* of *Sama Veda*.

37. Sodasi, accompanied by other *mantras* of *Sama Veda*.

38. Vajapeya, for health and longevity; it requires 40 days of rituals.

39. Atiratra, accompanied by *mantras* of *Sama Veda*.

40. Aptoryama, accompanied by *mantras* of *Sama Veda*.

In these ceremonies, that are usually long (from 5 days to several years) and complex, with the participation of many officiating priests (up to 16 *ritvikas*), the main offering consists in the juice of the *soma* plant, of which we have already discussed in the chapter on the 4 main *Vedas*.

Some of these *samskaras* are performed every day (such as the Agnihotra, the Pancha maha yajnas and the Sthalipaka), others twice a month (such as the Darshapurnamasa and the Sthalipaka), once a month (the Parvani) or once a year (Sravani, Agrahayani, Chaitri, Asvayuji, and Sthalipaka).

The others are generally performed once in a lifetime, obviously for those who can afford them from the financial point of view. All these rituals, from marriage up to this point, are meant for family men as *nitya karmas* (regular duties), *naimittika karma* (occasional

or "instrumental" duties) and *kamya karma* (duties performed to satisfy a particular desire, or "optional" duties).

The *naimittika karmas* also include the daily bathing and purification activities, the cleaning of the temple and house, and the performance of one's professional/occupational duties and family duties.

At the age of 50, when the family man retires entering the order of *vanaprastha* and leaves his home to travel in the pilgrimage places or to live in solitude in the forest, his religious duties are sized down to the study of the *Vedas*, the chanting of *mantras* (*japa*, *patha* etc) and to the worship of the Deities with the simple ingredients he can find.

These practices are described as *Kakshagni yajna*.

One who enters the order of total renunciation, called *sannyasa*, further reduces the religious ceremonies to the *Jnanagni yajna*, the "sacrifice in the fire of knowledge".

Actually according to the *Bodhayana Grihasutra* (1.1.18.21), the performance of sacrifices gives better results when it is done mentally, as long as it is done with the proper concentration and knowledge.

The *bahir yajna* (external sacrifice) of *svadhyaya*, *japa* and *karma* (each with benefits 10 times greater than the previous one) has a lesser effect compared to the *manasa* or *bhitar yajna* (inner sacrifice), for which it simply functions as a practical support.

Other important factors are *bhavana* (good motivation), *tyaga* (detachment from the sense of possession of what is offered), *deva* (the actual presence of the Devas, that manifests in different ways) and *phala* (the effect, that must be actual and verifiable).

The funeral rites, called *Antyesti karma*, are not considered *samksaras* but rather *naimittika karmas* (as it is for example the daily bathing process).

The public sacrifice ceremonies for the benefit of collectivity are performed by the king and involve a considerable number of officiating priests or *ritvikas* (up to 16), with the distribution of food and gifts of various types to all the participants, public lectures and readings. Usually they last several days and require the temporary building of a series of structures that are specifically meant for the rituals - something that already constitutes an important ritual in itself, called *Atiratra Agnichayana* that lasts for 12 days.

The most famous ritual in this category is the *asvamedha*, performed by kings on the occasion of the *rajasuya yajna*, which officially establishes their position of power. The ritual proper, that lasts for 3 days but requires a preparation that lasts for one entire year, has a deeply symbolic meaning that superficial translators motivated by biased considerations have sometimes presented as a mere animal sacrifice. Actually, in all the sacrifices of this type (*asvamedha*, *gomedha*, *purushamedha*), the main "sacrificial victim" (the horse, the cow or the human being) and the secondary ones (goats etc) are released at the end of the ceremony, and are purified and strengthened by the ritual.

In the *sarvamedha yajna* one sacrifices all one's possessions, by distributing them to those who attend the ritual, in order to enter the order of *sannyasa*. The *pitrimedha yajna* constitutes a permanent offering to the Pitri, that liberates one from all obligations towards them. Finally the *pravargya yajna* grants a subtle body of a higher quality, by which one can access the heavenly planets.

## **Jyotisha**

The science of astrology/ astronomy is required for the correct study and application of the Vedic hymns, because the success of a complex and delicate ritual also depends on the proper moment for its performance.

Surya himself, the Deva of the Sun, is considered the original author of the texts on astronomy, that have reached us especially in the compilation by Garga Rishi.

The *Jyotisha shastra* can be divided into 3 categories:

\* *Siddhanta*, with particular importance to mathematics, geometry, trigonometry and algebra for the precise calculation of the positions of the planets, from which one must build the altars and the temporary structures for the sacrifice rituals, as well as the permanent buildings such as houses, temples etc.

\* *Hora*, with particular importance to the evaluation of the individual's karmic journey, also indicated by the position of the planets at the time of birth and at the important passages of life. This factor, too, has some importance in the performance of the ritual ceremonies, because it helps in stabilizing the procedures and the auspicious moments in

a personalized way.

\* *Samhita*, with various useful information, such as the localization of subterranean springs and water bodies, the agricultural calendar, the rules for the construction of buildings and the methods to prepare extracts that are influenced by the season and the position of the planets.

The Vedic astrological calendar is called *panchanga* ("composed by 5 parts) or *panjika* or *panji*, because it considers 5 different astronomical movements of the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, and the Earth itself (as the inclination on its axis).

Like in the western system, the solar month lasts about 30 days and is marked by the passage of the Sun in the 12 signs (*rasi*) of the Zodiac - called Mesha (Aries), Vrisha (Taurus), Maithuna ("the couple", or Gemini), Karkata (Cancer), Simha (Leo), Kanya (Virgo), Tula (Libra), Vrishchika (Scorpio), Dhanus ("bow" or Sagittarius), Makara ("crocodile" or Capricorn), Kumbha ("vase" or Aquarius) and Mina (Pisces).

The day of passage from one sign to another is called *sankranti* ("change") and is different from the day calculated by western astrology, because it considers the precession of the equinoxes. For example the winter solstice, called Makara sankranti, falls around the 15 January instead of 21 December.

Just like in western astrology, the week days are connected to the planets - Sun for Sunday (Ravi-vara), Moon for Monday (Soma-vara), Mars for Tuesday (Mangala-vara), Mercury for Wednesday (Budha-vara), Jupiter for Thursday (Guru-vara), Venus for Friday (Sukra-vara), and Saturn for Saturday (Sani-vara).

The lunar month however lasts about 2 days less than the solar month, because the lunar day (*tithi*) and the solar day (*vara*) do not correspond exactly. The festivals are calculated generally according to the lunar calendar, that is easier to observe directly in the sky by following the phases of the moon.

Each lunar month is divided into 2 fortnights (*paksha*) called *sukla* ("white", or waxing) and *krishna*, ("black" or waning moon) ending respectively with the full moon (*purnima*) and the new moon (*amavasya*).

The lunar days are simply called first (*pratipat*), second (*dvitiya*), third (*tritiya*), fourth

(*chaturthi*), fifth (*panchami*), sixth (*sasthi*), seventh (*saptami*), eighth (*ashtami*), ninth (*navami*), tenth (*dasami*), eleventh (*ekadasi*), twelfth (*dvadasi*), thirteenth (*trayodasi*), fourteenth (*chaturdasi*), to which we must add the days of full and new moon, for a total of 16 lunar days, corresponding to 14 solar days.

Precisely because the lunar day is 4 hours shorter than the solar day, sometimes a solar day overlaps on two lunar days. To adjust the lunar calendar to the solar year and to the earth cycle of seasons, we regularly add a lunar month called Purushottama adika masa, considered particularly favorable to spiritual life, that may fall at different times of the year.

In the Vedic system, seasons (*ritu*, "regulation", from which the word "ritual" derives) are rather different from the western system. They are 6: spring (*vasanta*), summer (*grishma*), monsoon (*varsha*), autumn (*sarad*), winter (*hemanta*), and cool (*sisira*).

Both the solar and earthly year begin with Mesha sankranti, known in the west as spring equinox.

Actually in the Indian calendar it opens the summer season around the middle of April, connected to the first sowing of the grains. The first month (April-May) of the Vedic calendar is called Vaisakha, the second (May-June) is Jyestha, then come Asadha (June-July), Sravana (July-August), Bhadra (August-September), Asvina (September-October), Kartika (October-November), Margasira (November-December), Pausha (December-January), Magha (January-February), Phalgun (February-March) and Chaitra (March-April).

These names come from the stars with which the Moon associates, and are considered particularly important in the calculation of the personal horoscope of an individual or of the auspicious moment to begin a specific activity - something that is very interesting because this concept does not exist any more in western astrology (that considers practically only the members of our solar system) although the popular language still preserves some sayings in regard, such as "being born under a good/bad star", "what the stars say", and so on.

While examining the names of the stars, we need to consider the modifications due to the grammatical declinations of Sanskrit; for the correspondences with western astronomy

we have chosen to use the Latin name that constitutes the standard international reference.

Visakha corresponds to the star Alpha Librae, Jyestha is Antares, Purva asadha is Delta Sagittari and Uttara asadha is Sigma sagittari, Sravana is Alpha Aquilae, Purva bhadra pada is Alpha Pegasi and Uttara bhadra pada is Gamma Pegasi, Asvina is Beta Arietis, Kritika is Eta Tauri (associated with the constellation of the Pleiades), Mrigasira is Lambda Orionis, Pushya is Delta Cancri, Magha is Regulus, Purva phalguni is Delta Leonis and Uttara phalguni is Beta Leonis, Chitra is Vegas or Spica Virginis. Other important stars are Rohini (Aldebaran), Revati (Zeta Piscium), Anuradha (Delta Scorpio), Dhanishta (Beta Delphinum), Ardra (Alpha Orionis/ Betelgeuse), Satabisha (Lambda Aquarius), Aslesha (Alpha Hydrae), Punarvasu (Beta Geminorum), Hasta (Delta Corvi), Svati (Arcturus), Mula (Lambda Scorpionis), Bharani (35 Arietis), Asvayuja and Punarvasu (Castor and Pollux), Abhijit (Vega) etc. On the other hand, it is not clear which contemporary astronomical names correspond to the stars called Radha, Sunrita, Sravistha and Prostha pada.

The 28 main stars are mentioned in the *Atharva Veda* (19.7); each one of them is ruled by one of the 9 *grahas* ("celestial bodies") - Ketu (Cauda draconis), Sukra (Venus), Ravi or Surya (Sun), Chandra (Moon), Mangala (Mars), Rahu (Caput draconis), Guru or Brihaspati (Jupiter), Sani (Saturn) and Budha (Mercury). These determine the periods called *dasa*, that are very important for the development of the circumstances in the individual's life.

Rahu and Ketu are particularly important in Vedic astrology/ astronomy because they are connected to the solar and lunar eclipses, that are calculated with great precision.

The  *jyotisha*  offers various solutions for the unfavorable situations and defects (*dosha*) in the birth horoscope and in the important moments in an individual's life; the simplest remedy consists in chanting *mantras* and offering prayers to the Lord of the concerned lunar mansion. It is also recommended to cultivate a specific sacred plant for each of the *grahas* and perform ritual ceremonies (the *grahas* are always offered oblations during all fire sacrifices as well).

Another traditional remedy is gemmology, that utilizes precious and semi-precious stones (as well as corals and pearls) to strengthen the required influences. Vatsyayana Rishi's

*Ratna pariksha*, considered one of the accessory texts or *kalas* ("parts") of Vedic knowledge, describes 24 types of gems with their specific characteristics and 32 methods to verify their genuineness.

Another practice connected to astrology is palmistry, on which there is a classical text entitled *Samudrika shastra*, attributed to the personification of the ocean (Samudra raja) who observed the auspicious signs on Vishnu's body (and especially hands and feet) while Vishnu was laying on Sesha naga over the waters.

The text also includes teachings of Varaha, Kartikeya, Narada and Mandavya.

Kartikeya (Skanda) is considered the author of the *Kala shastra*, dealing with the classification of the various periods of time, and especially auspicious and inauspicious moments.

## **Ayur Veda**

Literally "the science of life", it traditionally includes the *Kama shastra* or *Kama sutra*, that we will examine separately.

The Ayurvedic system is closely connected to the other forms of Vedic knowledge, such as Yoga (especially the practice known as *surya namaskara*), music (applied as music therapy), ritual ceremonies, astrology, gemology, etc.

Famous *mantras* for health are the *Maha mrityunjaya*, the *Aditya hridaya*, the *Shiva kavacha*, the *Indrakshi kavacha* and the *Dhanvantari mantra*. The Deity that presides over this science is Dhanvantari, the Vishnu *avatara* who appeared to give the nectar of immortality to the Devas.

*Ayur Veda* gives great importance to what is called today "spiritual healing", or the psychological wholistic aspect that enables healing and health already at a subtle and mental level, which normally brings excellent results also on the physical level.

According to the tradition, the original *Ayur Veda* came from Brahma, who taught it to the Asvini kumaras (the physicians of the Devas) who through Indra transmitted it to the Rishis Bharadvaja, Punarvasu Atreya and Agnivesa. Later, this original knowledge was



elaborated in the compilations of the Rishis Charvaka and Sushruta, and in a famous commentary by Vagbhatta.

The *Charvaka samhita* is the fundamental and most famous text among those that still survive.

It deals especially with the *kaya chikitsa* (general medicine) and explains about the *pancha bhuta* ("five elements" or earth, water, fire, air, ether or space) that by combining and interacting produce the *tri dosha* ("three components" of the body) and precisely *vata* (movement, nervous system, wind), *pitta* (heat, digestive system, bile) and *kapha* (solidity, lymphatic system, phlegm or mucus). In turn, these three components combine in various ways forming 7 types of different physical constitutions.

There are also 7 *dhatus*, or substances that compose the body - plasma, blood, muscle tissues, fat, bone tissue, marrow and reproductive fluids.

The secret to good health consists in maintaining the proper balance among all these elements, first of all by following a diet that is suitable to one's constitution, to the climate and the season, and to one's personal and occupational needs, by choosing appropriate life habits (including going to sleep and waking up, the hours and circumstances of the meals, personal hygiene, abstention from damaging behaviors etc), by facilitating the elimination of primary and secondary waste (*ama* and *mala*), practicing regular massage and external applications of natural substances (oils, plant extracts, infusions etc), by regularly exposing oneself to the sun rays especially in the hours when they are milder, by stimulating the immune system with periodical rejuvenation treatments called *pancha karma*, and when required by applying pharmacology, with the internal use of vegetal, mineral or even animal substances, especially clarified butter and honey, that are used mostly as vehicles for the active principles.

There is a great number of medicinal plants listed in the Ayurvedic texts, that constitute the most ancient existing evidence of herbology.

Special attention is given to the knowledge defined as *kumarabhritya tantra*, uniting gynecology, fertility treatments, midwifery and pediatrics, that offer the best possible beginning to the life of a human being, and to the *rasayana tantra*, that includes geriatrics, detoxification, and special techniques for rejuvenation.

The *agada tantra* is the category of toxicology, while the *vajikarana tantra* is the category of sexual stimulants.

The *Sushruta samhita* (also known as *Salya tantra*) deals with the same topics and with surgery, too.

The *Astanga hridaya samhita*, compiled by Vagabhatta, constitutes the third important text in the study of this discipline.

These two texts also deal with reconstructing surgery, cataract removal, and 121 different surgical instruments, treated with a carbon process to make them stronger and sharper. This carbon process consists in applying a coal paste to the blade and to heat it until it becomes incandescent red, and then to suddenly immerse it in cold water to temper the blade.

It also speaks about controlling infections by using antiseptics, about anesthetics and anti-haemorrhagics, toxicology, classification of burns, psychiatry and medical ethics. Specific sections are dedicated to the restoratives of the immune system, fractures and wounds, bites and stings of poisonous animals, and to the diagnosis through the examination of the 3 different types of pulses that can be felt in the wrist. It speaks about digestion and metabolism, circulation of the life energy (*prana*) and its energy meridians (*nadi*) and crucial points (*marma*), sexual dysfunctions and insufficiencies, the treatment of ears, nose and throat (*salakya*), the sense of taste, ophthalmology, the extraction of foreign objects from the body, the complications that can develop during therapies and so on. Less known are the texts called *Bhela samhita*, *Madhava nidhana*, *Chikitsa sara sangraha*, *Nava nitaka*, *Roga vinischaya*, *Siddha Yoga* (that contains formulas for mercury-based preparations), *Rasa ratnakara*, *Rasa arnava* (that explains how to reduce gems and metals into ashes for medicinal use), *Saranga dhara samhita* (specifically dealing with the pulse examination) and *Bhava prakasha*, all compiled by various authors.

The *Visha shastra* attributed to the Asvini Kumaras deals with poisons, listing 32 types with properties, preparation, effects and antidotes. Nagarjuna, author of the treatises called *Arogyamanjari* and *Yogasara*, is considered an expert of alchemy applied to medicine.

There is also one *Supa shastra*, compiled by Sukhesha Rishi, that deals specifically with the science of gastronomy, analyzing the ingredients and presenting 108 different type of preparations (including condiments, preserves, sweets etc) to obtain 3032 different recipes, characteristic of different geographical and cultural regions.

Finally, the *Vriksha ayur veda* is a treatise written by Surapala on the application of medicine to the cultivation of plants, and that can be classified both under the category of the *Ayur Veda* and the category of the *Krishi sutra* ("texts on agriculture").

Similarly there are specific veterinary texts for horses, elephants and cows - the *Asva ayur veda*, *Gaja ayur veda* and *Gava ayur veda*.

The knowledge of Ayurvedic medicine has been introduced in western countries since 1978 by pioneers such as Dr. Vasant Lad, Dr. Deepak Chopra, Santosh Krinsky, Dr. Sunil Joshi, Dr. Pankaj, Smita Naram, and Len Blank.

## **Kama shastra**

Many people have heard about the *Kama sutra* or *Kama shastra*, but the ideas that circulate are rather distorted and confused, because the majority of the texts published in the west are actually books written in very recent times on the topic of sexual unions, by utilizing some material from the original *Kama sutra* (by Vatsyayana Rishi) and more often, from commentaries to the *Kama sutra* compiled during the middle ages as sex manuals by courtiers of the muslim sultans that dominated India.

The proof is that such manuals generally contain many illustrations of evident persian and mogul style, that have very little relation to the original *shastra* except for the sexual theme.

A careful reading of the original Vatsyayana text (compiled from the teachings of Nandikesvara, the same author of *Gandharva Veda*) reveals that the main topic is not sex in itself - which constitutes only a part of the subject - but rather the quality of life in general.

The first part of the text (*Sadharana*) explains that sense gratification (*kama*) constitutes one of the 4 primary purposes of human life (after *dharma* and *artha* and before *moksha*),

then mentions the 64 arts (*kala*, "parts") that we listed in the chapter of the study of Vedic knowledge in India, particularly in relation to the academic education of women. The text continues with useful teachings on home management, interior decoration, maintenance of gardens and kitchen gardens, and on the daily life of a city dweller (*nagarika*).

After examining all the aspects of home comforts and leisure activities that are considered appropriate to a civilized life, the text defines the categories of friendship and social relationships that one should cultivate, and also those that are to be avoided. It clearly explains which women one can legitimately try to approach for a relationship with sexual implications, and the civilized way to make friends with them and to manifest one's desires. Only the second part of the text (*Samprayogika*) deals with the sexual union proper, starting with physical compatibility and elegant and refined preliminaries and finally conclude the encounter in a satisfying way.

The third part of the text (*Kanya samprayuktaka*) explains how one should find a wife; it speaks about reciprocal courtship, engagement and the various types of marriage, including very "free" situations such as the Gandharva type of marriage, which although perfectly legal and legitimate, simply consists in exchanging garlands and mutually accepting the couple relationship.

The fourth section of the text (*Bharya dhikarika*) constitutes a sort of marriage manual for a good married life even in polygamous situations. The fifth section of the text (*Pari darika*) speaks about the wives of other people, and particularly of how to understand which women are willing to have extra-marital relationships, and which women are not.

The sixth section (*Vaishika*) is meant for the various categories of women who are normally willing to have promiscuous sexual relationships, listed in more or less respected categories.

The *ganikas* ("society women") were educated and refined, had a place of honor in the city assembly and at the religious functions where their presence was considered auspicious, and maintained friendly relationships - both socially and personally - even with kings, royalty members and religious authorities at the highest level. Their company did not necessarily entail sexual contacts, but it was rather about an atmosphere of very civilized sophistication. The *ganikas* were highly appreciated as teachers for boys and girls from good families (including princes and princesses) in the subjects of good

manners, elegance, attitude, refinement and fine arts, because their behavior and their life style were considered the highest example of quality of life. Sometimes they were requested to manage and administer public or private properties, or to perform diplomatic missions, and their home was often visited by those who wished to improve their social status and to meet important and influential people.

The "independent women" (*svairini*) that are not capable of getting a livelihood from activities at such a high level, could engage in the occupations of *nati* (dancer), *silpa karika* (crafts woman), *kumbhadasi* (water carrier), *dasi* (housemaid in a large mansion), *kliba* (masseur or beautician) or *paricharika* (house help). In the course of their professional activities they had the opportunity to accept lovers in a more or less casual way, and this enabled them to receive gifts in cash or valuable objects as a token of appreciation for their beauty and sexual skills. Such gifts were always offered and accepted in a civilized and respectful way, and the personal relationship was always based on friendship, something that is generally very difficult to understand for those who are used to the present concept of "prostitution".

Those who make a livelihood exclusively by sexual services were defined, in decreasing order of social position and level of personal culture, as *veshtya*, *rupajiva*, *kulati*, *prakashavinasta*, or *pumschali*. Such definitions also applied to the *hejira* (transsexual or transvestites) because in Vedic society there is no homophobia.

The section called *Vaishika* in the *Kama shastra* explains the advantages of the use of sexual relationships to obtain personal advantages - which include money, favors or even revenge. It also illustrates how to balance romantic and friendly sentiments with profit, and even how to choose a suitable husband among the worthiest habitual customers.

There are also instructions for stylish dressing and ornaments, beauty and personal hygiene, interior decoration and ornamentation of the house, witty and refined conversation, the exchange of small gifts to develop friendship, the offering of garlands and perfume oils, refreshments and mouth-fresheners, psychological attentions and even modesty, "because excessive exposure will give the impression of a lesser value".

The last section of the text, entitled *Apamshadika*, deals with potions of aphrodisiac and stimulating effects.

It is important to understand that Vedic culture does not consider sexual acts (as long as they are free and based on mutual consent) as illegal or immoral, even when they are performed with the intent of gaining some monetary profit. Actually, sex (*kama*) is considered a positive value (*artha*) as long as it is not contrary to the universal and fundamental principles of *dharma*: truthfulness, compassion, cleanliness and self control. So, as long as a relationship is not based on physical or psychological violence, on betrayal or hypocrisy, on some type of psychological or physical perversion, or on mere animal lust, it is considered legitimate from the moral point of view.

We need to clarify here that this scenario refers to the original Vedic civilization, not to the present situation in India, where these ideals and values have been much distorted by the cultural superimposition forced by the invaders, to the point that they have been forgotten or turned upside down. The same consideration applies to the next topic - the *Veda* of military science.

## **Dhanur Veda**

The *Veda* of military science, attributed to Visvamitra Rishi, presently contains 4 chapters entitled *Diksha*, *Sangraha*, *Siddhanta* and *Prayoga*. It speaks of the preliminary qualifications for the students, the moral, mental and physical discipline, about weapons, how to make them and use them, but also about strategy and sociology, that may be considered "preventive" methods, preferable to violent action.

In Vedic logic there is no space for imperialistic or religious wars; when we speak of "empire" (as in the case of the *maharaja* who celebrates the ritual of the *rajasuya yajna*) the authority of the emperor is based on a system of tributary alliances rather than on direct domination. Under no circumstance the emperor can arbitrarily replace the local monarch of a vassal kingdom, or give him orders. If during the *rajasuya* a local king refuses to ally with the emperor and opposes him with weapons, and is killed on the battlefield, his legitimate heir ascends the throne and in turn he can choose whether to accept the alliance or reject it.

Usually he will accept it, because the defeat of his father's army has already demonstrated that it is better to establish a good relationship with the emperor, who has a stronger army

and a greater power. The purpose of the imperial structure is to facilitate trade, transportations and cultural exchanges, and especially to better protect the various kingdoms, building a common front against external aggressors.

The emperor utilizes the allies' tributes to build and protect the roads between the kingdoms, to organize and perform great ceremonies and rituals of sacrifice for the prosperity of the entire land, for the benefit of all the concerned kingdoms. However, he never interferes in the internal matters of the allied kingdoms, and especially he is not interested in introducing or imposing his own way of life or his cultural or religious beliefs.

For example we see in the *Mahabharata* that many among the kings who allied with the Pandavas or Kurus belonged to non-Vedic cultures, but they were never pressurized in that direction.

A *kshatriya* has the duty to protect the kingdom and the subjects from internal and external aggressions, and while engaging in such activities he must follow a very strict ethical "chivalry" code that binds him to the use of the minimum required force. We have mentioned these rules in our summary of the *Mahabharata*. However, the *kshatriya* must always be prepared for any emergency, and therefore he has the duty to train himself constantly to the use of weapons and military expeditions.

The simplest method consists in hunting those wild animals that belong to the category of "aggressors" towards the human beings and their means of livelihood - tigers and lions who eat people and cattle, but also deer and rabbits that (without an adequate number of natural predators) multiply and spread outside the forests, damaging the cultivations. On the other hand, Vedic ethics condemn the hunting for birds and other inoffensive animals, and the killing of animals that are friendly and useful for human society, and in any case all those actions that produce unnecessary physical or psychic suffering in animals, including the wild animals, such as imprisonment or non-lethal wounds.

The most common conventional weapons (*manava sastra*) are described as *dhanur* (bow), *kunta* (spear), *khagda* (sword), *churika* (knife), *gada* (mace), *chakra* (disc), and the same importance is given to the training in hand and body wrestling (*bahu*), that survives in some styles presently called Gatka, Kabadi, Thang-ta, Kuttu varisai, Varma kalai, Adithada, Kalaripayat, Malyutham and Mallayuddha. In the battles with the

participation of many warriors, the generals utilized the *vyuha* or battle formations of which we discussed in the *Mahabharata*.

We have already mentioned, speaking about *Ayur Veda*, how surgical instruments were carbon-treated to make them more durable and sharper. Obviously the same process was used to temper and sharpen conventional weapons, thus giving them legendary quality and value, and making them practically indestructible. The process is described in details in the *Loha shastra* by Patanjali Rishi and in the *Brihat samhita* by Varahamihira.

As demonstration of this extremely ancient science, we still have today some extraordinary pieces, such as the famous Ashoka pillar at Mehrauli (pure iron of superior quality), the Kodachadri pillar in Karnataka, the Dhar pillar in Madhya Pradesh, and the beams from the Sun temple in Konark, Orissa: all made of iron and all extraordinarily free from rust, in spite of the many centuries of exposure to the atmospheric elements. In the case of Konark, the environmental atmosphere is particularly destructive for ordinary iron because of the high level of saltiness and humidity in the air.

The second category includes the chemical or mechanical weapons including explosives, called *agnibana* ("fire arrows") because they were generally shot with the bow.

In *Niti Cintamani* the gunpowder, with its effects and composition, is called *aurvagni* from the name of Aurva Rishi (preceptor of emperor Sagara, a forefather of the *avatara* Rama) who is said to have invented or discovered it.

Other mysterious "arrows" are the *Kamaruchi*, that can change direction during its course, and the *Sabdaveditva*, that can hit a hidden target by following sounds.

Among the "arrows" that attack the enemies' nervous system we find the *Naga pasa*, which acts on human consciousness by rendering the adversary senseless, and the *Nadana* and *Murchadhana*, that create confusion and loss of psycho-physical control.

It is important to explain here that the bows mentioned in the Vedic texts are extremely powerful instruments, very large and heavy, that can shot a great variety and often a great quantity (simultaneously) of projectiles with a speed and penetration force that supersede our contemporary firearms.



The third category of weapons (*divya astra*) is even more difficult to understand, as it entails the conscious control of vibrational frequencies and electro-magnetic fields that are able to alter the state of matter.

For example the Brahmastra is described as a nuclear weapon that seems to be much more controllable than the nuclear weapons of the modern western science. The properties and power of the Brahmastra may appear legendary to those who do not know the precise and deep explanations on atomic and subatomic reality of matter offered by Yoga and Vaiseshika, that enable those "paranormal powers" that modern western science is still unable to explain and that reside in the considerable percentage of the brain that most modern people never utilizes (from 70 to 85% in different individuals).

At the level called *chittakasha*, or the vibrational space where human awareness can operate, sound (*mantra*) can be modulated and applied with a logic that is similar to the logic of the laser instruments, that focus simple rays of light into a truly terrifying weapon. Already ordinary sound is more powerful than ordinary light, so much that some tones are able to shatter the glass and move objects even for a considerable distance; we can just imagine what can be produced by a scientific modulation (of which *Siksha* and *Chanda* have given us some preliminary examples) when it is applied with the required knowledge and practice to the modification of the simplest and most primary elements.

Thus we have the Agneyastra that produces the phenomenon known as self-combustion (presently considered as possible even spontaneously, although in extremely rare cases) and the Varunastra that condensates atmospheric humidity causing sudden rain in the absence of clouds. The descriptions of the Vayuvashtra seem to suggest a telekinetic manifestation where a sort of "wind" throws the opponents to the ground. However, we need to understand that such "wind" is not necessarily the ordinary physical manifestation that naturally moves the windmills, but it could be that kinetic energy (*chi*) of which the martial arts from the far East still have some cognition.

Particularly famous in this category are the *Narayana astra*, *Pasupata astra* and *Naga astra*. Obviously such techniques require extreme preparation and tireless practice. The *mantras* of the *astra* require a minimum of 50 billion correct repetitions in order to be brought to perfection.

In his *Doomsday 1999 A.D.*, Charles Berlitz comments various passages of the *Mahabharata* (in the translation by Protap Chandra Roy), recognizing in the description of the Brahmastra the effects of an extremely sophisticated nuclear weapon: "... an incandescent column of flames and smoke, as bright as 10 thousand suns, a gigantic messenger of death that incinerated the entire race of the Vrishnis and Andhakas. The bodies were burnt beyond recognition, hair and nails falling, and to escape from this fire the warriors dived into the water to wash themselves and their equipment".

Also Oppenheimer (1904-1967), the protagonist of the famous "Project Manhattan", was convinced that the Brahmastra was a nuclear weapon. To a student of Rochester University who asked him whether the bomb detonated in the locality of Alamogordo, New Mexico, was the first of its kind, Oppenheimer replies, "Well, yes. In modern times, naturally."

Another text that is considered a part of the *Dhanur Veda* is the *Malla shastra*, dealing with 82 types of exercises in gymnastics and sports that are required to keep the body in perfect shape, and 24 types of close combat, "hand to hand".

A treatise attributed to one Agnivarma illustrates the knowledge about horses - physiology, breeding, training and so on - and another attributed to Kumarasvami illustrates the same knowledge but about elephants.

One Virabahu, lieutenant of Kartikeya, is said to have written a treatise on *Mahendrajala*, the science of magic, that explains how to walk on water, fly in the air on a stick, and so on.

Another practical-mystic text, compiled by Agastya Rishi, is the *Shakti tantra*, consisting in 8 chapters illustrating the 64 *shaktis* or *yoginis* of the natural elements (air, fire, sun, moon etc) and how their knowledge enables one to modify the structure of matter. Matanga Rishi is the author of the treatise called *Soudamini kala*, that explains the subtle connection between thought and ideas, and the etheric blueprint of their tangible manifestation. It also includes an elaboration on how it is possible to utilize the perception of the subtle level to see inside the mountains or within the subterranean strata.

Garga Rishi is the author of the *Sakuna shastra*, dealing with the auspicious and

inauspicious omens that we can read in the environment, as for example from the flying and crying of birds, from the conversations of the human beings etc.

## **Vimanika shastra**

The knowledge of the construction and utilization of space ships can be considered a branch of the *Dhanur Veda*.

The most famous text presently available is the *Vimanika shastra* or *Brihad vimana shastra*, that is part of the *Yantra sarvasva* by Bharadvaja Rishi. The text illustrates 339 types of land vehicles, 783 types of boats and ships, and 101 types of airplanes and space ships - of which 25 types (including the Puspaka vimana) are *mantrika vimanas* and are used in Treta yuga, 56 types (including the Bhairava and the Nandaka) are *tantrika vimana* and are used in Dvapara yuga, and 25 types (including the Sundara, Sukana and Rukma, of which the schematics are given) are *krtitaka vimana* (engine based) and are used in Kali yuga.

Airplanes are described in 8 chapters for a total of 3 thousand verses; the text explains how to make the vehicle unbreakable (*abhedyā*), fire resistant (*adahya*) and invisible, and how to intercept the conversations from the cockpit of another airplane (*para sabda graha*). The chapters called *vastra adhikarana* and *ahara adhikarana* explain the type of clothing and food for the pilots and the passengers.

Bharadvaja also quotes a bibliography of 6 texts that preceded his work: *Vimana Chandrika* by Narayana Muni, *Vyoma Yana Mantra* by Shaunaka, *Yantra Kalpa* by Garga, *Yana Bindu* by Vachaspati, *Kheta Yana Pradipika* by Chakrayani, and *Vyoma Yanarka Prakasha* by Dundi Natha.

The *Agastya samhita* describes a *chatra* ("umbrella") flying on hydrogen extracted by electrolysis from water, and a *vimana dvigunam* ("secondary airplane") resembling our contemporary para-gliders, and that can be opened and closed by using cables.

We find innumerable passages mentioning airships in a great number of Vedic texts, starting from *Rig Veda*, that lists the categories of vehicles as *jalayan* (running both in air and in water, 6.58.3), *kara* (land-water, 9.14.1), *tritāla* (3 tier vehicle, 3.14.1), *trichakra*

*ratha* (airplane with 3 wheels, 4.36.1), *vayu ratha* (jet airplane, 5.41.6) and *vidyut ratha* ("power" airplane, 3.14.1). Flying vehicles are also mentioned in the hymns 1.116.3-5, 1.112.20, 1.117.14, 1.119.4.

The *Artha shastra* by Kautilya (also known as Chanakya Pandita) mentions the professional category of the *saubhikas*, "pilots of air vehicles" (a name that echoes the name of Saubha, the flying city of king Harischandra), and the *akasha yodhinah*, "air fighters". Several passages mentioning flying machines are found in *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and *Puranas*.

Based on the information supplied by the *Vimanika shastra* prof. Dongre, of Benaras Hindu University, has conducted some experiments, obtaining a glass-like material that is not perceived by radars.

Besides, already in 1895 (8 years before the historical flight by the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina) Shivakar Bapuji Talpade and his wife gave a public demonstration on Chowpatti beach, Mumbai, with the flight of a vehicle run by a ionemotor (a type that would be invented in the west by Goddard in a future not earlier than 1906) that was also exhibited in the city hall by the Bombay Art Society.

The event, attended by the Maharaja di Baroda Sri Sayajirao Gaekwad and Justice Govind Ranade, was reported by the daily paper *Kesari* (in marathi language).

The flying machine rose up to about 500 meters, then descended again automatically; later it was sold by Talpade's relatives to the British organization Reilly Brothers.

## **Gandharva Veda**

Music must naturally have a primary role in a civilization based on harmony, on the careful and precise modulation of meanings and expressions, and on the communication of knowledge through sound, that gives such importance to beauty and pleasure.

The main texts, the *Vedas*, consist in hymns to be chanted harmoniously (*Rig*, *Yajur*, *Atharva*) or even sung with a polyphonic musical accompaniment (*Sama*) in 5 stages - *prasthava* (performed by the Udgata called Prastotha) with a basic sound for tuning (*hun kara*), *udgita* (performed by the main Ritvik) beginning with *om kara* and continuing

with the first part of the *rik* ("hymn"), *pratihara* or the chant of the middle part of the *rik* (performed by the Pratiharita), *upadrava* (taken up again by the Udgata Prastotha) and *nidhana* or the final part of the hymn (performed by all the 3 priests together).

The repetition of these passages for 3 times is called *stoma*, a definition that gives its name to many rituals.

Also Vedic cosmogony highlights the fact that *nada* or *sabda*, sound, is the first manifestation from which all the rest is created. Not only that: sound is the force that is able to penetrate awareness most effectively, even during sleep and in conditions of minimal evolution, as in the case of children and animals, who are therefore fascinated by it. Even plants respond to different types of sounds or music with a more luxuriant growth, and even the water molecules considerably modify their shape. Sound, chanting, and music get through the conscious level and easily touch the subconscious, instantly reprogramming it, as it is demonstrated by the effectiveness of music therapy, also considered a part of *Ayur Veda*.

*Yoga*, too, gives importance to the modulated and musical sounds, as we can see from the syllables assigned to the various *chakras* during meditation, and especially to the sacred vibration of the *pranava omkara*.

The Deities play musical instruments and dance - especially Shiva Nataraja ("king of the dancers") with his *damaru* drum and Krishna in the *rasa* dance with his flute.

Ganesha is often portrayed dancing and playing *mridanga* (2 headed drum) and Kartikeya (also called Skanda) is famous for his dances, including the *kudai* and the *tudi*.

The Goddess of knowledge Sarasvati holds the *vina* (a kind of lute with a long handle), the characteristic instrument of the *udgatas*, the officiating priests in charge of singing the hymns of the *Sama Veda* with musical accompaniment during the sacrifices. The *vina* is also the preferred instrument of Narada Rishi, son of Brahma, who constitutes an important link in the chain of transmission of knowledge to mankind.

Tradition says that the knowledge of *Gandharva Veda* was transmitted by Brahma to Sarasvati, who taught it to Narada; Narada transmitted the knowledge to Kasyapa, who instructed Bharata Rishi, the author of the text of about 36 thousand verses, dealing not only with singing and instrumental music (*gita*) but also with the rhythm created by

percussions (*vadya*) and dance (*nritya*). Bharata Rishi explains the origin of the 7 notes (that in the Vedic system are called *sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni*) from the 3 primary tones *udatta, anudatta* and *svarita* (that we have seen in the *Upaveda* on the *mantra* pronunciation, and are also called *udara, mudara* and *tara*).

*Udatta* originated *ni* (*nishada*) and *ga* (*gandhara*), *anudatta* gave origin to *re* (*rishabha*) and *dha* (*dhaivata*), while *svarita* was the origin of *sa* (*sharja*), *ma* (*madhyama*) and *pa* (*panchama*), when the sound is anatomically produced from above or under the palate (*talv*).

The observation of the sounds in nature has associated notes with the calls of animals who also have a deep symbolic meaning - the elephant, the goat, the bull, the horse, the peacock, the heron and the cuckoo.

The number of musical instruments is limited because the greatest importance should be given to the sound modulated by the human voice, while the instruments should be just an accompaniment.

Besides the Indian lute (*vina*) in its different forms having 3 to 100 strings, the flute (*vamsi*), and the small drum (*damaru*), the Vedic system utilizes a drum proper (*karkan*), a metallic flute (*nali*), a sort of trumpet (*nadesvara*) and a sort of harp (*ksheni*). All ritual ceremonies also utilize a small bell (*ghanti*) and a conchshell (*sankha*), and the *kirtana* or *bhajana* is traditionally accompanied by cymbals of various dimensions (*karatala, jhanja, ghanta* etc).

Some musical instruments are used especially on the occasion of battles, royal processions and other occasions where the *kshatriya* element predominates - for example the *dundubhi* (a large drum), the *panava* (a smaller drum), the *dhola* (tamburine), the *tanava* (trumpet), and so on. The great variety of instruments used by our contemporary Indian music developed from these ancient basic instruments, that have been joined by "imports" such as the typically western (British) violin and harmonium.

The different types of music are classified as:

\* *uha gana*: sacred music or song meant for the celebration of ritual ceremonies, especially the *soma yajna*

\* *grama geya gana*, ordinary music or song, meant for the life in the city of village

\* *aranya gana*: contemplative music or song, meant for meditation, especially in the forest

\* *uhya gana*: spontaneous music or song, meant for oneself, secret or in any case personal

The text that deals specifically with dance, called *Natya shastra*, is part of the *Gandharva Veda*. Panini Rishi, who also wrote a commentary to the *Gandharva Veda*, mentions some earlier texts called *Sailali* and *Krishasva*, that unfortunately have been lost.

The first chapter of the *Natya shastra* speaks of the origins of dance, and tells how Bharata Rishi organized a theatrical entertainment for the Devas, entitled *Lakshmi svayamvara*, and on that occasion Shiva requested his companion Tandu (Nandikesvara) to help Bharata in developing the art of dance. In turn, Bharata instructed the Apsaras, beginning with Rambha. The Apsaras are the heavenly *ganikas* or courtesanes, that sometimes are sent to Earth to seduce some Rishi or some powerful king: for example Menaka had a daughter (Sakuntala) from Visvamitra, and Urvashi had a relationship with king Pururava.

Other heavenly beings dedicated to dance and music are of course the Gandharva (after whom this *Veda* is named) and the Kinnaras, that are part men and part horses (like the centaurs) and part woman and part bird (like harpies) respectively.

The chapters from 2 to 5 deal with the stage and the preparation, chapter 4 speaks of the movements of the body (*angahara*), of the postures (*karana*) and hand movements (*rechaka*).

Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the *sattvika abhinaya*, or the facial expression of the various poetic emotions and sentiments (*bhavas* and *rasas*) that the actors want to communicate to the public.

Chapters 8 to 13 teach how to express these emotions and sentiments through the body language (*angika abhinaya*) to tell stories. This includes the study of the main limbs (*anga*) and the secondary limbs (*pratyanga*), the use of the *hasta mudras* (hand postures), *chari* (leg movements), *gati* (steps) and *ahangara* (combination of expressive gestures).

Chapters from 14 to 19 deal with the *vacika abhinaya*, or the verbal expression, dialogues, intonations, dialects and pronunciations, etc.

Chapters 20 to 22 speak of the different types of drama and 4 types of presentations, chapter 23 speaks of costumes and ornaments (*aharya abhinaya*) and their symbolic meanings, chapters 24 to 25 of the various feminine characters, chapters 26 and 27 of the duration of the show and the factors for success with the public, chapters 28 to 33 about the music and musical instruments accompanying the show, and the chapters 34 to 36 explain the roles within dramatic performances.

One of the most ancient popular theater events was the Indra dhvaja maha, also called *jarjara puja*, focused on the celebrations around the "sacred pole" (similar to the *jupa* present in most classic ritual ceremonies) topped by the flag that represented Indra's presence.

It was also a general habit among the residents of cities and villages to gather in the *samitis* ("clubs" or "associations") and dancing constituted a much appreciated pastime.

The *Ramayana* says that the city of Ayodhya had 4 *mandapas* or dancing halls, one of which was reserved for women only.

In the *Virata parva* of *Mahabharata* we see that Draupadi entices Kichaka into the dancing hall to have him killed by Bhima, and that Arjuna in the garb of Brihannala taught dancing to the princess Uttara in her private apartments.

Specifically the *Shiva purana* recommends, regarding temple construction, to provide to the needs of a group of sacred dancers (*devadasi*) "married" to the Deity, that will take care of the personal aspects of worship (bathing, decorating, fanning etc) and dance for his pleasure. It is important to understand that the tradition of the sacred dancers has been terribly distorted and damaged during Kali yuga and especially during the centuries of Muslim invasion and domination, so much that it does not exist any more, in any temple.

More recent treatises on dance are the *Dasarupaka*, *Abhinaya darpana* and *Sangita ratnakara*. Some great poets, such as Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Visakhadatta, Asvaghosa, Sudraka and Bhasa have written some famous works, such as *Sakuntala*, *Uttara rama charita* and *Mudrarakshasa*.



Let us examine some of the technical terms that are most frequently used in this field.

The word *natya* includes all the aspects of dance, while *nritya* defines pure dance without any expression of meaning.

The *tandava* style is the energetic, "masculine" style of Shiva's dance at the time of the destruction of the universe (in its 108 versions, such as *sandhya*, *samhara*, *tripura*, *urdhva* and *ananda*), but may normally be executed also by female dancers. In contrast, the *lasya* ("languid") style is characteristic of female sentiments, and as such it is traditionally depicted in the temple decorations as an auspicious decoration.

The word *raga* indicates the particular type of melody created by the combination of notes, while *tala* indicates the rhythm of music, and *laya* indicates the velocity. There are *ragas* that are suitable for the various moments of the day - from early morning to deep night - that underline the natural energies we can perceive.

We take this opportunity to explain the iconographic symbolism connected to the dance of Shiva, which is rather difficult to interpret.

The image of Shiva Nataraja is at the center of the worship in the temple of Cidambaram (Tillai), where Shiva manifested his *ananda tandava* to attract the attention of a group of Rishis who lived in that area and were spreading teachings that are contrary to the fundamental principles of *dharma*.

The tiger, the snake and the black dwarf represent the negative forces evoked by these deviant Rishis - cruelty, deceit and attachment to the lower pleasures - and Shiva neutralized them and then wore two of them as trophy ornaments, and danced on the third.

The hand holding the *damaru* represents creation (that originates from sound, word, harmony) while the hand holding the fire represents dissolution; the foot standing on the dwarf represents the submission of the lower instincts, while the raised foot symbolizes the elevation towards the higher levels of awareness.

One of the other two hands shows the *bhaya mudra*, a symbol of protection, and the other points at his raised foot, symbolizing surrender to the Divine.

The snakes that decorate his body represent the primeval forces that are channeled for a

higher purpose, and the 3 eyes symbolize the past, the present and the future, as well as the sun, the moon and the fire.

The two ear rings are different from each other: one is masculine style, and the other is feminine, to symbolize the androgynous nature of the Divine.

Among those who were present at Shiva's dance there was Sesa Naga, who expressed the wish to see it again; thus Sesa Naga took a partially human form as Patanjali Rishi and remained at Chidambaram in the company of Vyaghrapada Rishi, a great devotee of Shiva. Both are usually depicted at Shiva's sides, in the act of offering their homage.

### **Artha shastra**

This *Upaveda* dealing with sociology, politics and economy also includes the *Niti shastra* (pedagogy, social ethics etc), the *Shilpa shastra* (handicrafts and architecture) and many other minor texts known as the 64 *Kalas* ("parts").

The word *artha* literally means "something valuable" and includes everything that contributes to a high level of quality of life.

In the Vedic system there are no banks, and money consists in coins made with valuable and useful metals, bearing a seal or mark that guarantees the genuineness of their physical value on the word of the jewelers that make them. In this way the ornaments made with those metals, that constitute the normal "savings" system can be easily fractioned in pieces of smaller value to purchase essential commodities at a moderate price.

This is the origin of the dowry tradition - a certain capital in ornaments and valuable object was given by the father to the girl when she left for her new home after marriage, and remained strictly the girl's property as emergency reserve. In fact the scriptures very explicitly condemn anyone - husband or in-laws - who dares to touch this wealth. Presently the system has been completely turned upside down and the dowry is paid directly to the future husband and in-laws even before the marriage, and it often the girl is harassed or physically abused by her new family to force her parents to pay more.

There are also many cases when the girl is "suicided" or falls victim to some "kitchen

accident" or goes "missing" so that the husband's family can organize a new marriage with another girl and obtain more dowry. This is a typical example of adharmic mentality born from ignorance and degradation, that becomes "normal" and is even outrageously presented as the traditional system.

We have seen that the genuine Vedic system is very much different, and that simply by returning to its genuine and honest application we will be able to solve all the present social problems. The same principle applies to the other problems that contemporary societies of a western model are facing today - exploitation, poverty, class frictions, unemployment, existential confusion, consumerism, psychological imbalances, and so on.

The *Upavedas* illustrate the occupational duties of the social categories.

We have seen how the *brahmanas* (the head of society) perform the ritual ceremonies for the kings, for the benefit of the entire population, maintaining harmony between the various levels of existence - the Devas, the human beings and the universe in general - also caring for the health and individual and collective progress of people, through teaching and consultancy in all the fields of knowledge.

We have seen how the *kshatriyas* (the arms of society) constantly engage for the benefit of the kingdom and the subjects, protecting the innocent and all those that cooperate to the prosperity of the social system, both human beings and animals.

In the *Artha shastra* we will see how the *vaisyas*, the entrepreneurs in all fields of activity (the belly of society) work to nourish the social body and circulate the goods that are necessary for a high level of the quality of life. As jewelers and merchants of precious metals, the *vaisyas* minted the coins and made valuable objects fructify by using them to produce considerable quantities of clarified butter, food grains, spices and other goods, to increase the cattle herds and manage mining expeditions. With these metals they also made weapons, pots and plates, containers, instruments for agriculture and specialized tools of many kinds, and of course the personal ornaments that are suitable for the different types of individuals according to the recommendations of the *brahmanas*.

They also used precious metals (gold, silver, copper) and gems (pearls, diamonds etc) to finance their trade in distant regions, where they traveled preferably by river or sea, or by

utilizing the roads protected by the imperial garrisons, and brought back useful goods.

In ancient times Indian *vaisyas* normally traded with China, Egypt, Arabia, Greece and Rome by using the monsoon winds and brought back incense, olive oil, medicinal substances, arsenic (used not only as a poison but also to make explosives, as an ingredient for paints and tanning agent for leather, and even as hair remover for personal hygiene) and antimony (that extraordinarily has both fire-resistant and explosive properties in its different manipulations, and was used as a cosmetic as black eye liner as well as to make ink and medicines), vases made from silica glass, wool and blankets, flax linen, amber, purple dye, copper, tin, lead, storax (a resin used as fixative in perfumery), wine, melilotus (a plant also known as sweet clover, containing a powerful blood anti-coagulant used both as medicine and poison) and so on.

But especially they sold spices, sandalwood, myrrh, cosmetics, Chinese and Indian silk, valuable and embroidered clothes (we may mention here the famous brocades originated at Kanchi in south India), ivory (both Indian and African), ebony, lapislazuli and turquoise (especially from the regions now known as Iran and Afghanistan), jewels and special artefacts (such as valuable weapons), indigo (an excellent dye, that remained a very popular commodity until the times of the East India Company), nard oil (intensely scented, used as sedative incense and royal ointment for the priests in the temple of Jerusalem, as well as anesthetic medicine especially for child birth, added to wine or beer), costus (a medicinal plant containing vegetal progesterone, also used as special fodder for silk worms), *gulgulu* (a resin known in the Mediterranean as bdellium and used in perfumery and medicines - in Rome and in Greece it was mixed to the wine for the offerings to the Gods), lycium (a plant from the nightshade family, with berries known as the "longevity fruit"), rice and sugar, and even exotic fruits.

They brought back fabulous quantities of silver, gold and gems, especially the corals, that are typical of the Mediterranean.

As they lived between China and the Mediterranean, they also acted as intermediaries between the two markets, because rarely the Chinese ships reached the Mediterranean, or the Mediterranean ships reached China.

Merchants often welcomed paying passengers both on ships and in caravans, because many people wanted to go to India to study and sometimes even to start a new life,

individually or collectively, establishing a small colony in a country that was legendary for its tolerance and hospitality, as well as for its prosperity and high level of knowledge.

These exchanges and journeys to Europe started to decline during the first plague epidemics in Europe in 542, that coincided with the final establishment of Christianity in the entire area of the ancient roman empire. We will discuss more of these events in a separate publication, focused specifically on the history of the development of Abrahamic cultures.

The Islamic conquest of the middle east, that followed about one century later, became a new good reason to avoid traveling to the west, but Indian merchants continued to commerce with China and the region that was called Indo-China until last century.

Still today on the east coast of India, especially in Orissa, there is a popular ceremony at the end of the rainy season; people put small lamps in rudimentary boats made with banana tree bark and send them to float into the ocean. In the old times when sea trade was very active, this sweet tradition constituted for sailors a first sign of the approaching coast, a message of welcome from the families that were anxious to see their husbands, brothers and sons again.

Originally Vyasa composed a work on *Artha shastra*, constituted by 3 chapters, illustrating 82 ways to produce wealth, but unfortunately this text is now lost.

The *Santi parva* (12.59.80-86) of *Mahabharata* says that the knowledge manifested by Brahma on the subject consisted of 100 thousand chapters that extensively illustrated *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*, but Shiva reduced the collection to 10 thousand chapters known as *Vaisalaksha shastra*, to which another text was added, composed by Indra and known as *Bahudantaka*.

Later on, Brihaspati summarized the work reducing it to 3 thousand chapters known as *Barhaspatya shastra*, and finally Sukracharya (also known as Usana) compiled a compendium of 1000 chapters called *Ausanasa shastra*. Unfortunately, all these texts are now lost.

There are various passages in different scriptures, as in the teachings of Vidura and Bhishma in *Mahabharata*, in the conversation between Rama and Bharata in *Ramayana*, in the *Agni purana* (218-242) and in the *Smritis* of Manu and Yajnavalkya, but what we

have today as *Artha shastra* is merely a text that has been compiled much later (about 2500 years later) by Kautilya, also known as Vishnugupta or Chanakya Pandita, who lived in the times of Chandragupta Maurya (contemporary of Alexander the Macedonian) and became his prime minister. Chanakya is especially famous for his *Niti shastra*, a treatise on government ethics.

Kautilya's *Artha shastra* is meant primarily for the king, who by distributing wealth and protecting the subjects enables the *vaisyas* to produce sufficient prosperity for all. A solid and dynamic economy is the most important foundation for a good government.

In Kautilya's times, the role of the government had already shifted from the celebration of ritual ceremonies to the collection of taxes and the control of economic power, therefore his treatise elaborates especially on these topics. Nonetheless, his instructions are generally in accordance to the Vedic principles, especially in regard to the ethical norms for the behavior of the king towards the subjects.

The text speaks about the discipline and self-control that the king must observe in his personal life, the choice of honest and capable ministers (*mantris*) and their supervision, the division and utilization of lands, the construction of villages and cities, the work of subordinate officers engaged in public law and order, law and magistrature, assistance in case of national calamities, training and supervision of informers, alliances with neighboring kingdoms, war management, and the duties of the four *varnas* and *ashramas*.

Economic development is based on trade and cattle raising, food grains, gold, the products of the forest and manpower: for all these enterprises, the protection supplied by the king is essential.

The future king must be trained through a strict discipline. He must study sciences and scriptures, and the art of government that consists mostly in administering the right punishment (*danda*) and supporting the cultivation of prosperity (*vatra*).

The *danda niti* (the ethical rules for the punishment of evil doers) is as important as the *raja niti* (the ethical rules that the king must observe in his personal behavior).

The king must strive to conquer his inferior tendencies - lust, anger, greed, vanity, arrogance and intoxication - that are his worst enemies, and must be available to the subjects and do good to everyone.

He must always be faithful to truthfulness and to the principles of ethics, avoid waste, respect the counselors that warn him against negative ideas and behaviors, and recognize those who are capable administrators. Similarly he must choose the general (*senapati*) of his army based on ethical principles and skills.

The choice of the *purohita* or court priest must be based on the character, scriptural knowledge and morality of the candidates; if this *brahmana* refuses to teach the *Vedas* to a person of humble origin or to perform a ritual for a person of a lower social condition, the king will immediately sack him.

The ministers should be offered opportunities for treason and corruption, so that those who are dishonest and unfaithful will be exposed. The king will also employ informers chosen among religious persons of solid principles, orphans raised by the State and trained for this purpose, widows of *brahmana* families who entered the order of renunciation, servants of lower rank, traveling actors and other people who do not have strict responsibilities and ties, or familiar or social duties. Each information must be separately collected from 3 different sources, and if the versions coincide in meaning and details, they are considered reliable. When the versions are different from each other, the informers are sacked.

The meetings of the king's counselors must be secret, and each time only a maximum of 4 trusted and intelligent people can take part in them. The total number of ministers can vary from 12 (according to Manu) to 16 (for Brihaspati) or 20 (for Sukracharya) or even more, according to the need. It is said that Indra has 1000 Rishis as ministers, and this is the meaning of his name "he of the 1000 eyes". The king must listen to everyone because a wise man is able to accept good advice even from a child.

The text also speaks about messengers and ambassadors, of their qualities and training, the rules they must follow during their mission, the protection of the royal family, the evaluation of the factual qualifications of the heir to the crown for the purpose of ensuring a good succession. A prince that has fallen out of favor with his father can ask his permission to go and live in the forest or take shelter at a neighboring king who is virtuous and honest, and there build himself a solid position, then acquire gold and wealth working as a merchant until he is strong enough to win the respect and reconciliation with his father.

Follows the ideal program for the king's day. The king should directly administer justice and personally receive all those who want to see him, without making them wait, especially if they are learned *brahmanas*, women, very young or very old people, or people who are suffering or desperate.

There is the description of the royal palace, where the king lives with his wives; how its walls must be built with clay mixed with the ashes produced by lightning and hail water.

The building must be surrounded by plants that repel snakes - *jivanti*, *sveta*, *mushkaka pushpa*, *vandaka*, *pejata* and *asvattha* - and have a certain number of cats, peacocks, mongooses and spotted deer, that naturally keep away both rats and snakes. Also parrots and the birds known as *mina* and *bhringaraja*, herons, pheasants, quails and cuckoos are useful, because they reveal the presence of snakes.

The palace should be well equipped with medicine supplies, have a large kitchen garden and sufficient water tanks, apartments for princes and princesses, an area for body care (practically a beauty and wellness center), a council hall, a court hall, the sitting room of the crown prince and the officers' rooms. Nearby there must be the quarters for the garrison of the royal guards and the queens' body guards.

There are several ways to protect oneself from poisons, especially by observing the behavior of servants and other people around, by the marks appearing on metal plates and cups (for the poison added to the foods), on fresh fruits and vegetables, on the surface of drinks, in smoke and fire within the braziers and in their luminosity, on clothes and by the death of small insects in the environment.

The danger of assassination also lurks in all weapons, even non-conventional ones, carried on the bodies of servants or unfaithful wives. Musicians and actors must do their work without using fire, weapons or other dangerous instruments, and all musical instruments and the accessories and equipment of chariots, horses and elephants must always be kept inside the palace under strict guard. Furthermore, the king will approach the chariots and the animals only after they have been personally checked by his charioteer, and will only board a ship that is equipped with safety boats.

He will not bathe or swim in waters infested by crocodiles, serpents or large fish, and will go hunting only with a sufficient escort. He will meet ascetics and ambassadors from



other kingdoms only in the presence of his ministers, and will go to attend the sacrificial ceremonies and public festivities escorted by his body guards.

It is important to understand that Vedic monarchy is not absolute, but it is subject to the popular consensus, both of the *brahmanas* and of the subjects in general. A king who behaved badly could be removed at any time by the assembly of the *brahmanas* and a worthier ruler was crowned in his place.

The ideal king is the *raja rishi* ("wise among the kings") wise and virtuous, expert in the scriptures and detached from material gratification, always concerned only about the well being and the happiness of his subjects. He is always active and dynamic, cultivates his own intellectual faculties in the company of evolved persons and constantly tries to increase his culture, he always gives a good example to the subjects with his public and private behavior, and wins the love of the people by treating his subjects with kindness and affection.

He practices non-violence, that consists in remaining free from all negative sentiments towards other living beings. He does not desire to acquire the wives of other people or the properties of others, he avoids unnecessary luxury and whimsical pursuits, he does not waste time in fantasies and avoids the company of degraded or wicked people.

He is always honest and truthful, he always keeps his word, he is resolute and never postpones his work, he shows gratitude to those who helped him, he is always enthusiastic and positive, he listens carefully and reflects properly.

He takes his decisions without hesitations and acts in a considerate way, he is eloquent and has good memory, he knows how to face the moments of crisis and patiently goes through the routines. He is always dignified, he does not laugh loudly, he speaks gently, looking directly in the face of his interlocutor, and he avoids frowning.

In foreign affairs, the king must first of all invest sufficient resources in the work of collecting information, sending both official ambassadors and secret agents that will present themselves as merchants or travelers. Once they have sufficiently understood the customs, the mentality, the resources and the strong and weak points of the foreign kingdoms, the king will negotiate with their rulers according to a strategy that is suitable to the situation, choosing among the actions defined as *upeksha* (showing lack of

interest), *sanmana* (non-aggression pact), *dana* (sending gifts and offerings of friendship), *maya* (illusion, especially pretending to have greater military strength than what it actually true), *bheda* (creating divisions between enemies), and only in extreme cases he will resort to *danda* (military force and war).

## **Sulba shastra**

We have already mentioned the fact that the *Sulba shastra*, or the science of mathematics and geometry, constitutes the most important among accessory sciences. Various historical sources confirm that Vedic culture was the first to adopt the decimal system that superseded the Babilonian system (based on the number 60) which survived into the contemporary cultures only in the calculation of time (hour, minute, second). The decimal system is mentioned in the *Taittiriya samhita* of *Krishna yajur Veda* and was already used in the urban settlements of the Indus valley, such as Mohenjo daro and Harappa.

Another characteristic of Vedic mathematics is the concept of zero (*sunya*) as opposed and complementary to the concept of infinite (*ananta*), with the description of the relative properties and their connection (division by zero gives infinity). Even the present symbol that represents infinity, that is a kind of 8, corresponds to the serpentine form of Ananta Sesa coiling on himself.

The first text of modern arithmetics is Bhaskacharya's *Lilavati*, followed by the treatise by Aryabhata, that also explains algebra and gives the rules to find the area of the triangle, which creates the basis of trigonometry. Aryabhata also calculated the moments for upcoming eclipses, and had very clear ideas about the movements of the heavenly bodies. Here, too, we see the natural connection between the various fields of Vedic knowledge - which makes different categorization more difficult - because mathematics is needed not only for astrology, architecture, construction of altars and the correct chanting of *mantras*, but also to navigation (to triangulate the positions of the stars and establish the ship course). It is also closely connected to the knowledge of physics and cosmology, that are normally classified as texts of the Vaiseshika darshana, but also concern the experts of other fields.

Varahamihira clearly states that Earth is a sphere and rotates on its own axis - which is described by the mathematician Latadeva in his *Surya siddhanta* as the Sumeru. The spherical shape of Earth is depicted in many iconographic representations of the *avatara* Varaha, who specifically appeared to lift up the planet that had deviated from its proper orbit.

In his *Siddhanta siromani*, Bhaskaracharya speaks about the "attraction" force described as gravity.

Many teachings on physics and cosmology are also found in other texts that we have already mentioned. For example, the *Aitareya Brahmana* (3.44) states: "The Sun does not set and rise as people think. At the end of each day it produces two opposite effects, creating the night under itself and the day in what is on the opposite side. Actually the Sun never sets."

The *Markandeya Purana* (54.12) states that the Earth is not a perfect sphere, but is slightly flattened at the poles and swelling at the equator, and that the Sun is at the center of the solar system (106.41).

The *Puranas* (for example the *Bhagavata*) speak of atomic time and calculate the age of Earth (a complete day of Brahma) at 8.64 billions years, a figure that is rather close to the one proposed by our contemporary western scientists. Not only that: the vision of time offered by the *Vedas* goes even beyond that and calculates the entire lifetime of Brahma, that constitutes the complete cycle of one universal manifestation, as 311,040 billion years, considered as a mere breathing cycle of Maha Vishnu.

Vedic scriptures speak of *ritu* ("rule") as the "cosmic law" of the cycles that regulate the universe, and of the law of gravity as *sankarsana* ("that attracts") sustaining all the planets.

Brahmagupta (that according to western academia lived around 628 CE) clearly commented, "All things fall to the ground according to the law of nature, because it is the nature of earth to attract and retain things."

## Shilpa shastra

Connected to the *Sulba shastra* (the science of mathematics) is the *Shilpa shastra* (the science of architecture, sculpture, painting and crafts) that utilizes the mathematical calculation and rules of geometry to make building precise and stable, and give harmony and symmetry to useful images and objects.

The presently available text is attributed to Kasyapa Rishi and consists of 22 chapters, illustrating 307 varieties of buildings or constructions; however it gives references to a more ancient knowledge compiled by Visvakarma, Maya Danava, Maruti and Chayapurasa.

The word *shilpa* derives from the root *shil*, "to focus" and refers to the concentration required to visualize the final result of the work already from the very beginning of the process. The block of stone already contains the complete image, and the chisel must only eliminate the excess material. The eyes are completed last, to symbolize that the Deity is still sleeping in the form that is developing, like a fetus in the stone's womb.

When the material has been chosen, the ritual called *ankurarpana* is performed, consecrating it for that specific work, and before starting to sculpt, the artist meditates on the form of the Deity described in the *dhyana slokas*, with the position of the body, the number of arms, the different symbols in the various hands, the clothes and the ornaments, and the *vahana* or vehicle on which the Deity travels.

The measures and proportions of the Deity are codified with great precision in unities of measure called *angula* ("finger", about 2 cm), *yava* (a fraction of *angula*) and *tala* (equal to 12 *angulas*).

Traditionally the images of Vishnu and Shiva are 10 *talas* tall, while the images of their companions are 9 *talas* and those of their devotees are 8 *talas* tall. The images of the Mother Goddess standing alone are not subject to these measures. Often the dimensions of the sacred image are calculated on the basis of the height of the *yajamana* (the person who establishes the installation and the worship of the Deity) and especially of the temple room where it will be installed. The proportions of the sacred images are detailed carefully, to shape a body that is "aesthetically perfect" and symmetrical.

The sacred images (generally called *murti*, *vighraha*, *archa-vighraha* etc) can be fashioned out of stone, gems, metal, wood, clay, or in a painting or in sand. Each of these materials has a specific duration in decreasing order of time, and therefore the image will have to be "un-installed" within a certain period of time and replaced with a new one. The process of installation and un-installation is rather simple, as it constitutes a respectful and affectionate request to the Deity (that is not limited to any material form) to manifest personally and to withdraw his/her presence respectively.

This withdrawal of the direct and personal presence of the evoked Deity happens automatically when the image is damaged or defiled, as in the case of the iconoclastic aggressions by Muslims and Christians to Indian temples in the course of centuries.

Stone is described as good quality, medium quality and mediocre quality according to the grain, the color and the hardness. For the images of the Deities the best choice is a stone that produces a metallic sound when it is hit with an iron bar, even better if sparks are produced. This description corresponds to the classification of igneous rocks. For general decorations, less valuable stones can be used.

The most frequently utilized stone is a variety of basalt, magnetite or iron silicate, that in India can be found in a black color and becomes shiny and even blacker with the application of scented oils and clarified butter that are used in ritual worship.

The color is similar to the Salagrama sila (fossil ammonite), a special stone that is found only in the bed of river Gandaki in Nepal and is considered a direct manifestation of Vishnu, and as such it does not need to be installed. Often ordinary stones (that do not have the characteristic *chakras* or "discs" spontaneously embedded in the stone) are passed for Salagrama silas, when they could actually and genuinely be Shiva lingas. A Salagrama sila is never carved artificially. The same principle applies to all the sacred *silas* ("stones") characteristic of some specific places, such the Dvaraka sila, Govardhana sila, etc.

On a separate note, the Shiva lingam can be carved or in a natural form (*svayambhu*, "manifested spontaneously") in a considerable variety of forms.

In the last few centuries there has been a growing popularity for sacred images sculpted in marble, especially white or black, that can be colored easily and have a realistic look.

In the same way, there has been an increase in sacred images that are "naked", i.e. sculpted or modeled without clothing or ornaments, that are easier to wash and clean, and that a devotee can dress and decorate with outfits and jewelry in a more realistic way. The most ancient images are rather different, although the offering of clothes and ornaments has always been part of the ritual of worship.

The reason for this change should be traced to the fact that in the last centuries the emphasis in Deity worship has moved towards the most intimate form of *bhakti*, the sentiment of devotion that prompts the worshiper to contemplate the Divine in an "inferior" position compared to him/herself, as a child or an intimate friend that depends on the worshiper for the basic activities such as bathing, dressing etc. This tendency is found especially in krishnaite devotion, that in the medieval period (subsequently to the Muslim invasions) became widespread among the popular masses playing on the simplest and most immediate sentiments of the human soul, without having to develop on the deep and expert cultivation of spiritual knowledge or Self realization.

The sacred images installed in private houses and those that are taken to procession outside the temple during the festivals (called *chalanti pratima*, "mobile representatives") as substitutes for the Deity that is installed permanently in the temple, are traditionally made from metal. The materials recommended for this purpose are gold, silver and copper, but more often bronze and brass are used (as they are much more economically viable) or special alloys such as the *panchaloha* ("5 metals" - copper, gold, silver, brass and lead) or *ashta dhatu* ("8 materials" - gold, silver, copper, mercury, iron, aluminium, lead and brass).

In this case the fashioning of the image is based on the system of "lost mould": the original image is prepared with bee wax mixed with coal powder, and then it is covered with a thick layer of clay. When the clay has dried properly the mould is heated and the liquid wax is collected; its place is taken by the molten alloy of metals, and when this has cooled completely, the clay mould is broken. The weight of the metal to be poured into the mould is carefully calculated on the basis of the weight of the used wax and considering the specific weight of the required metals.

The images fashioned in clay are installed and worshiped on the occasion of annual festivals. At the end of the festival period, traditionally the images are immersed in a

water reservoir, so that the clay can melt and return to the environment.

Traditionally the colors were natural (mineral or plant based) and the internal support structure (that is essential for an image made with non-baked clay) was completely biodegradable (made with straw and wood). The clothes and ornaments were recovered and recycled after the dissolution of the image, to be used by the devotees as *prasada*.

Unfortunately in the last centuries the craftsmen working with clay have become ignorant and arrogant, and they consider themselves as "free artists", not subject to any rule or limitation. Therefore the images are often made with baked clay, that does not dissolve in water and thus remains around even after the end of the festivities - damaged, broken, dirty and torn - sometimes abandoned in a garbage dump, or on the beach together with other waste: a terrible testimony of cultural degradation that has totally lost the meaning and purpose of the original tradition.

The same disastrous tendency is also demonstrated in the type of activities that are performed around the temporary temples or *pandals* ("canvas pavilions") that are erected during the festival for these temporary clay Deities: often the collected funds are mostly misappropriated by the organizers or utilized to purchase alcoholic drinks (that Vedic ethics consider impure, inauspicious and detrimental to physical, mental and social health) or to procure the services of prostitutes, and above all provide a noisy loudspeaker background of materialistic songs (generally Bollywood "filmi" songs) that have nothing to do with religion or spirituality, and other similar entertainment products that do more damage than good both to the individuals and to society.

The advent of plastics in its various forms has created a proliferation of cheap sacred images made from this material; these cannot be installed in the traditional way and are simply considered "decorative". It is possible to consider them "genuine" only by remembering that the Deity can also manifest in a form simply made from "mental" material in the contemplation of the devotee: in this case the Deity manifests, but not in plastic itself (which is not a suitable material) but in the mental projection that the devotee superimposes (consciously or unconsciously) to the plastic form. As in all forms of *manasa puja* ("mental worship"), this practice can be very effective and meritorious, but only if the awareness remains honestly and solidly consistent in a genuine meditation. Wooden images are rather rare and are sculpted by specialized artists, while the images

made of sand or ordinary earth (provided it is clean and collected from a pure place) are worshiped in very short rituals, especially by those who live in the order of *vanaprastha* or those who cannot afford anything more expensive.

Painted images (*chitra*) are considered on the same level with those made from clay or mental substance, and they are generally worshiped on particular occasions, such as annual festivals or as temporary substitutes of the main Deities of the temple when these remain hidden from the public of devotees, as in the case of the Jagannatha Deities in the period called *anavasara*. During these 15 days the main *vigrahas* of Jagannatha get a fresh coat of paint away from public view, and the temple visitors offer their homage to the *patta dia* ("the painted Deities") that replace them in the temple hall.

Painted images are mentioned in many texts - *Vishudharmottara*, *Citralakshanam*, *Silpa ratnam*, *Aparajita priccha*, and especially *Chitrakarma shastra*, that in 12 chapters explains about 200 types of drawings, including the reconstruction of the looks of a person of whom only a small particular is known. The colors to be used for the painted sacred images must be natural, vegetal or mineral, and usually are the primary colors - red, yellow, black, white and green or blue - each one filled with symbolic meanings. For example black is the color of beauty (*sringara*) or opulence (*aisvarya*), red is the color of anger (*raudra*) or power (*virya*) or energy (*prana* or *shakti*), while white is the color of merriment (*hasya*) or purity (*sveta*).

In time, when artists lost the awareness and understanding of this symbolism, they started to mix the primary colors in a more and more complex way, sometimes with very distorted results, as in the depictions of Krishna or Vishnu with a complexion of a very pale turquoise or even white, or the Mother Goddess (Radha, Durga etc) with a pink hue, or Shiva with a blue complexion

The *Samarangana sutradhara* is an encyclopedic treatise on classic Indian architecture, compiled by king Bhoja of Dhar in relatively recent times (about 1000 of the Current Era). Its 83 chapters deal with city planning, temple architecture, palaces and ordinary housing, as well as sculpture and painting, and mechanical vehicles (called *yantra*). Chapter 31 is totally dedicated to the *yantras* or "machines" and speaks about *vimanas* ("airships") in the form of birds, and robots or mechanical men used as security guards.

According to this text, the *sthapati* ("architect" or "artisan") must be expert in planning



and preliminary design, in the field measurements, both vertical and horizontal, in the making of maps, in the 14 types of technical drawing, in the cutting of stones and wood, in the 7 types of circular sections, in the 4 fields of engineering, in the 8 specializations within the building work, including carpentry and metal working.

The *Dhatuvada*, attributed to the Asvini kumaras, deals with the materials (*dhatu*s) both natural and artificial, of their combinations and transmutations and the science of alchemy.

### **Vastu shastra**

The *Shilpa shastra* also includes the *Vastu shastra*, that has become rather famous in western countries during the last decades, together with its more recent offshoot that developed in the far east - Feng shui.

The word *vastu* derives from the root *vas*, "to dwell", and specifically applies to the knowledge that enables us to choose the land, the orientation and utilization of the buildings, to align human settlements in harmony with the energy of the environment.

According to the *Brihat samhita*, Brahma manifested the original knowledge of the Vastu, that was later elaborated by 18 Rishis including Brighu, Atri, Vasistha, Sukracharya, Brihaspati, and especially by Maya Danava and Visvakarma.

The *Matsya purana* says that the Vastu purusha, the personification of human settlements, was born from a drop of Shiva's sweat. This Vastu purusha is honored before the beginning of constructions and at the moment of inaugurating the completed building, and also in case some signs of disharmony or imbalance become apparent.

In the planning stage, the land plot is divided into 64 or 81 squares, within which the body of the Vastu purusha is designed, with the head in the north-east corner and the two feet in the south-west corner, while the knees are in the other two corners.

The various parts of the Vastu body are related to 45 guardian Deities and to the various human activities that will be performed when the building will be utilized.

Beginning from the north-east corner (the head of the Vastu purusha), we first find the

*isana kona* or "corner of Isa", guarded by Shiva. This area should be dedicated to the worship of the house Deities and the sacred fire; it consists of a wide space, almost completely empty, where energy can circulate freely. Besides, in this direction one should dig the well or build the main water tank.

The east side (*purva*) is guarded by Surya and should be utilized for ablutions and all the activities for cleanliness and purification. The next corner, in the south-east, is called *agni kona* or "the corner of fire" and is guarded by Agni. This is the ideal place for the kitchen.

The south side (*dakshina*) is guarded by Yama, the Lord of Dharma, and should be utilized as bedroom or study room.

The south-west corner is called *nirriti kona* or "corner of consumption" and it should be used for storage; it is presided by the Pitris or forefathers. The west side (*pascima*) is guarded by Varuna and is used as dining room.

The north-west corner called *vyavaya kona* is guarded by Vayu, the God of Wind, and is the best for the cow's shed.

The north side (*uttara*) is guarded by the Lord of wealth Kuvera, so it's the best place to keep one's valuable things.

The *Vastu shastra* also deals with city planning; it describes 20 types of cities with specific characteristics in regard to layout, location, number of streets, size, utilization of neighborhoods, and so on. It describes residential areas for the different *varnas* or professional categories, explains the optimum proportions between the various buildings, the construction of water tanks, parks and gardens. It also describes lecture halls and cultural centers and markets. It has areas for cow grazing, for the threshing of food grains and for the pressing of oil - all activities that were performed locally.

The temples were located in the center of the city and also in the suburbs, preferably on a river bank, at the foot of some hill or mountain, near a forest or a park - so that they could be easily located even for foreign pilgrims. For a medium-sized city the calculated number of temples was 25, each one of them in a specific area, dedicated to various forms of the Deity.

The *Silpa ratnam* and the *Aparajita priccha* explain the symbolism in the building of a temple, that as a dwelling for the Divine represents the *Virata rupa* (universal body) as well as the body of the *yajamana* (the devotee who built or financed the temple; the *garbha griha* (inner chamber of the Deity) represents the head, on which the *sikhara* (the tower) stands like a head-dress, while the *mandapas* (halls or pavilions) are the arms and the *gopura* (entrance arch) represents the feet.

After walking through the *gopura*, the visitor arrives at the *bali pitha*, the place where the external sacrifices are offered, marked by the presence of the *dhvaja stambha* ("pillar or pole for the flag") on top of which in the last centuries images of the *vahanas* (vehicles) of the Deity have been installed in place of the traditional flag that was raised especially during the festivals. Then the visitor enters one of the *mandapas* (pillared halls) for the sacred dances and the *kirtana* (singing or *mantra* chanting) and arrives at the *mukhya mandapa* (main hall) in front of the *garbha griha*, which traditionally is small and enclosed, to avoid distractions and to make the experience more dramatic.

The *garbha griha* can only accommodate one or two persons besides the images of the Deities, so that the devotee can have a very intimate and personal relationship with the Deity.

Generally there are no side windows, and the circulation of air is provided only through the large front opening, that is closed with suitable doors for the night and at the times when the Deities are not to be seen by the public - as for example during meals, and for the bathing and dressing of the Deity.

During the construction of the temple, a process that is solemnized with several rituals, there is the installation of a copper vase containing various auspicious substances, called *garbha* ("embryo"), that is later covered by a slab of stone before the foundations are filled with soil. The position of this "temple embryo" is directly under the Deities' room, at a depth that can vary according to the foundations system.

Sometimes the "embryo" is "guarded" by the image of Ananta Sesha or another similar protective personality. Then the *garbha griha* is built, and then the tower, topped by a *kalasa* (copper vase for water).

Often there is a secret subterranean passage that leads to a closed chamber guarding some

treasures, or where private rituals are performed, or where we find a tunnel or several tunnels that lead to a royal palace or other particularly important places.

Lighting is dramatic, because it is produced by a limited number of lamps burning oil or clarified butter, hanging from hooks by the ceiling or standing on a high stem that keeps them at a certain height from the floor. The hooks on the ceiling may also be used to suspend a royal umbrella or the traditional water container constantly dripping down to bathe the Shiva lingam.

During the times of *darshan* the lighting is increased by the offering of temporary lamps of *ghi* and camphor presented by the priest (in the *arati* ceremony) and often by the devotees in the public, each one putting a small clay lamp on a specific structure in front of the Deity room. Around the *garbha griha* there is a corridor for the *pradakshina*, the ritual homage that consists in walking around the object of worship, proceeding clockwise.

Finally, after the construction of the various smaller shrines for the *parsva devatas* (the "companion Deities" for the main Deity in the temple), the artisans build the *prakara* or general enclosure of the entire area of the temple.

Besides the *Griha vastu* for houses, palaces and housing buildings in general, including the temples that are the house of the Deity, there is a section called *Silpa vastu* dealing on the nature of the materials in relation to the environment, the *Jala vastu* about the springs and the water bodies including the subterranean ones (it explains how to locate them, evaluate their depth, pressure and quality of the water) and the *Garbha vastu* that deals with the geological formation of the soil and gives important instructions on the mining work.

## **Krishi shastra**

The most ancient and famous text on the science of agriculture, consisting on 243 verses, is attributed to Parasara Rishi, who is also considered a great expert on astronomy, astrology and climate science, all fields that are required to understand agriculture.

In this regard, we would like to note that the present discipline of biodynamic agriculture

developed by Rudolf Steiner has its roots in the contact that theosophists had with Vedic culture in the British colonial period and that a rigorous, direct, serious and careful study of the original Vedic knowledge would certainly lead to greater and more important improvements to the knowledge and practice of organic and biodynamic cultivations in the west.

The main subject in agriculture is obviously about tilling the fields. The traditional plough used for hand tilling or with the help of oxen is considered the symbol of power over the land, and therefore it is connected to the iconographic image of the king, especially in regard to the function of forceful action.

Vedic culture respects and honors Earth as the Mother of all beings, and the traditional daily rituals include a prayer to Mother Earth, that she may forgive us the inevitable offense of touching her with our feet.

The symbol of the plough and tilling naturally evokes the inevitable suffering that we inflict not only to the earth that is "lacerated" by this action, but also to the small animals that live in the soil and on the ground, and are wounded or killed in the process. So much that the Jains, extreme supporters of the sentiments of non-violence towards all living beings, abstain from all agricultural work and all types of work connected to agriculture, and prefer to engage in the trade of inanimate objects, especially precious stones and gems. Still at present, the great majority of jewelers in India are members of the Jain community. However, this does not stop them from eating agricultural products, albeit with a certain sense of guilt - in fact Jain philosophy considers voluntary fasting to death as a meritorious action on the religious level.

The original Vedic concept is much more consistent and logical, because it prescribes the daily *pancha maha yajna* in which the living beings in general are honored by offering them some food, it recommends offering one's food to the Deity before consuming it, and orders to perform one's duty within society and within the universe by supporting the material and spiritual progress of everyone.

According to the system of karmic accounting, when one performs a good and meritorious action, all those who have cooperated to it, more or less consciously, are benefited.

Because the human body must support itself by consuming foods produced by agriculture, each human being who works in favor of the universal community has the right to take the share of food that has been assigned to him/ her and that s/he needs. The same rule applies to all living beings, including more or less ferocious and fearsome carnivorous animals: Vedic ethics and logic do not condemn tigers for their natural instinct to kill to feed, and do not strive to turn them into vegetarians at all costs, because that would be contrary to the proper natural universal order.

When the *kshatriya* fights and kills the animals that damage human society, he does not do so with the idea of "punishing" them or to prevent some "horrible action", but to protect those who - humans and animals - have taken shelter in the king to live a prosperous and happy life. Vedic sensitivity embraces both the sweet and the terrible aspects of life and thus of the Deity that represent life and constitutes its very foundation, and the ferocious and dangerous animals like tigers, lions, snakes, etc, are even depicted as vehicles for the Deity.

The Vedic vision of agriculture can be summarized in the aphorism *annam bahu kurvitha, tad vratam* expressed by *Taittiriya Upanishad* (9.1): "we vow to produce abundant food for everyone", and the more the food is delicious, attractive, beneficial and healthy, the more merits it produces on the religious level, too.

According to the classification under the 3 *gunas* or qualities of nature, the sattvic or virtuous food, is "satisfying, energetic, pleasant, juicy or succulent, fatty, sweet and attractive" (*Bhagavad gita*, 17.8). Obviously such food must be consumed with great moderation by accepting only what is strictly needed and by purifying it according to the prescribed rituals, but the fact remains that contrarily to what happens in other ideologies, the pleasures of good food (like the other natural and beneficial pleasures) are celebrated and not condemned by the Vedic religion.

## **Kalas**

The encyclopedic text known as *Akshara laksha* contains the description of 325 arts or sciences, including mathematics, geometry, algebra, trigonometry, physics, mineralogy, the measuring of air, heat and electricity, geography, and also the science of sound

(propagation and characteristics), of the structure and balance of energies in the various animate and inanimate beings, down to the art and technique of making garlands of flowers, female head-dressing in floral style and even love messages written on flower petals (as for example found in the *Malini shastra*, compiled by Rishyasringa Rishi).

## **Darshanas**

Other famous texts in classic Vedic literature are the *Vedanta sutra* (also known as *Uttara mimamsa*, *Vedanta* or *Brahma sutra*), the *Yoga sutras*, *Nyaya sutras*, *Vaisesika sutras* and *Sankhya*.

Together with the *Purva mimamsa* (a general definition that includes all the texts dealing with the traditional ritual ceremonies, that we have already examined), these Vedic texts constitute the *Sad darshana*, "the six perspectives of observation" of knowledge or reality - knowledge and reality that the Vedic system considers one reality only: Brahman.

As we have already mentioned, these six perspectives of observation or "philosophical schools" as they are defined by western academia, are *astika*, or based on the acceptance of the authority of Vedic scriptures. On the contrary, the *nastika darshana* separate themselves from such authority by denying some of its principles - as for example the existence of God or the soul, the value of ritual ceremonies or Deity worship, and even dedication to the benefit and progress of human society.

It is interesting to note that the Vedic system has never tried to eliminate any ideology, not even agnosticism, atheism or materialism, because it considers them as legitimate and respectable points of view... of course as long as such ideologies do not require their followers to act on some criminal type of behaviors that damages innocent and good people who are under the authority of the king. Here lies the boundary line between the legitimate freedom of thought and religion on one side, and the danger from which the *kshatriya* is duty bound to protect the people and the kingdom.

Even in such case, however (as we have seen in the second chapter regarding the difference between *arya* and *anarya* communities) the duty of the *kshatriya* is not to persecute, imprison or physically eliminate those who profess doctrines of the criminal type, but to ensure that such people will not damage the civilized population... and this is

obtained easily by organizing separate settlements that have little or no contact between them, to guarantee the maximum freedom and happiness possible to all.

## Nyaya

We start the study of the Darshanas with *Nyaya* ("logic"), that according to some also includes the philosophy called *Vaiseshika* ("of the universal variety" that covers cosmology and physics) formulated by Kanada Rishi and the *Sankhya* ("analytic enunciation of categories") formulated by Kapila Rishi.

In a more indirect way, *Nyaya* is connected to the science of *Yoga* ("union") and to the elaborations of the *Uttara mimamsa* or *Vedanta sutra*, with which it shares some categories.

First of all it is necessary to understand that these philosophical systems, although apparently different, are not considered opposed or contradictory to each other, but they are rather complementary as perspectives of the same truth or reality. According to the Vedic ideology, the Absolute Truth is that multi-dimensional harmonious vision of Reality that includes and reconciles all the various perspectives or relative truths.

The purpose of the existence of the variety of perspective is to allow the philosophical debate (*vagvada*) that helps to widen and deepen the vision and to expand the mind, thus making people *mahatmas* ("great minds") and leading them to *prakasha* ("enlightenment") and then *moksha* ("liberation").

The *Nyaya shastra* ("text on logic") is attributed to Akshapada Gautama Rishi and contains 538 *sutras* or aphorisms divided in 5 sections or books. After this texts, a number of commentaries have been written, such as the *Nyaya bhasya* by Vatsyayana, *Nyaya varttika* by Udyotakara and *Nyaya varttika tatparyatika*, *Nyaya suchinibandha* and *Nyaya sutraddhara* by Vachaspati Mishra. Other later texts have been compiled by Udayana: *Nyaya tatparyaparisuddhi* (commentary to the work of Vachaspati Mishra), *Nyaya kusumanjali* (demonstration of God's existence), *Atma tattva viveka* (analysis of the nature of the spiritual Self), *Kiranaivali* and *Nyayaparisistha*.



An important ramification is the Buddhist tradition, that developed a system of logical debate meant to propagate its doctrine independently from the Vedic authority, that Buddhism does not accept (being a *nastika darshana*).

Later, the traditional Hindu school of *Nyaya* merged with the *Vaiseshika* school and therefore the two Darshanas have practically become one only.

We need to spend a few words also to clarify the difference between the concept of logic in the Vedic system and the concept of logic in the contemporary academia of western type.

Vedic logic does not start from the hypothesis or opinion but from a real substance or reality, whose existence has never been questioned, and aims at understanding this reality on a level that transcends logic itself, with the result of attaining identification with pure reality, that is eternal and happy. In other words, knowledge and reality are one and the same.

*Nyaya* classifies reality and the experience of reality in 16 *padarthas* or categories: *pramana* (proof or evidence), *prameya* (objects of knowledge), *samsaya* (doubt), *prayojana* (purpose), *dristanta* (example), *siddhanta* (conclusion), *avayava* (syllogism), *tarka* (hypothetical reasoning), *nirnaya* (compromise), *vada* (discussion), *jalpa* (shallow argument), *vitanda* (specious argument), *hetvabhasa* (illogical argument), *chala* (changing the topic), *jati* (elegant rebuttal) and *nigraha sthana* (point of defeat).

The valid methods to obtain knowledge are *pratyaksha* (direct perception), *anumana* (deduction), *upamana* (comparison) and *sabda* (verbal testimony). The fallacious arguments are *smriti* (memory), *samsaya* (doubt), *viparyaya* (error) and *tarka* (hypothetical reasoning).

The meaning of *pratyaksha* refers to the immediate awareness of a factual reality, that can be ordinary - as the evidence presented by the senses or the mind - or due to generalization (*samana*), the knowledge acquired through study or by special perception abilities that have been developed through the practice of Yoga. It can also be a precise feeling that can be defined with a name (*savikalpa*) or indetermined or "without name or description" (*nirvikalpa*).

*Anumana*, or deduction, can be spontaneous (*svārtha*) or attained through a specific

method (*parartha*) of 5 passages. It can refer to the effect of a known cause or the cause of a known effect, or a simultaneous existence where there is no relation of cause and effect.

The 5 passages of the deductive method are the initial declaration (*pratijna*, "what must be demonstrated"), the reason that sustains the declaration (*hetu*, or the reason why we believe that the initial declaration is true), the reason by which we connect the two ideas (*udaharana*), the application to the first statement (*upanaya*) and the conclusion (*nigamana*).

To make an example: 1. there is a fire on the hill, 2. because we see some smoke, 3. smoke is always associated with fire, 4. therefore the presence of smoke demonstrates the presence of the fire, 5. therefore there is fire on the hill.

In this case the hill is the minor term of comparison (*paksha*), the fire is the major term of comparison (*sadhya*), and the relation between smoke and fire is the connection (*vyapti*). For the reasoning to be valid, the reason (*hetu*) that supports the reasoning must be present in the minor term of comparison, it must be universally valid (it must be always present in the positive case and absent in the negative case ), must not be incompatible with the minor term of comparison (for example, if we had a lake instead of a hill) and must be free from any contradictions.

The reasoning must be free from defects (*asiddha*), that would manifest if the minor term of comparison is unreal in itself (for example if instead of a hill we have a cloud formation that looks like a hill), if the reason is incompatible with the minor term of comparison (for example, the presence of the hill must be perceived by the sound and not by the image) and so on.

*Upamana* can be defined as comparison or parallel, and it refers to the recognition of something that we have heard about in the past.

Verbal evidence, *sabda*, is defined as the declaration of a trustworthy person, preferably from the *sruti* or original scriptures (*sabda brahman*).

Declarations from other persons (*laukika*) are considered questionable or anyway of lesser value compared to the teachings of the scriptures.

The objects of knowledge are: *dravya* (substance), *guna* (quality), *karma* (activity), *samanya* (similarity), *visesha* (difference), *samavaya* (connection or union) and *abhava* (non-existence).

In the category of *dravya* we find the Self (*atman/ brahman*), the mind, time, the 8 directions, space, air, fire, water and earth. The first 2 elements are subjects, and the others constitute the world of objects. The last 4 elements have an atomic structure, where the atom is defined as an invisible and non-divisible particle. Space is characterized by sound, air by touch, fire by heat, water by the cold feeling, and earth by smell.

*Guna* and *karma* are the qualities and activities that are found in substances (*dravya*). Qualities are described as taste, dimensions, fluidity and pleasure, while the activities are defined as contraction, expansion and movement.

The category of *samanya* defines objects according to their common qualities, for example the definition of "human being", while the category of *visesha* defines the differences among the various substances.

The meaning of *samavaya* (connection or union) refers to a relationship that exists in a permanent way, as for example between fire and heat, while *abhava* indicates a state of non-being, something that does not exist, as for example light in darkness.

## **Vaiseshika**

The "study of differences" compiled by Kanada Rishi is based on the material composition of the universe, that can be reduced to a calculable number of atoms. Because it is a philosophical system based on Vedic authority, *Vaiseshika* recognizes a transcendental reality constituted by a supreme and universal awareness.

Besides the original *Vaiseshika sutra* and other texts that have gone lost, there was a treatise entitled *Dasa padartha shastra* compiled by Chandra, of which an ancient Chinese translation survives. The objects of experience and the methods for acquisition of knowledge contemplated in this philosophical system are very similar to the *Nyaya*, and we cannot elaborate much on these subtleties because that would entail a long and

complex elaboration that cannot be done within this book.

The special peculiarity that we should mention here is about the definitions of *paramanu* (atom endowed with specific individuality) and *trasarenu* (groups of 3 dyads of atoms, that are the smallest visible particle of matter).

## Sankhya

Unfortunately the original *Sankhya sutra* by Kapila Rishi is now lost, and we only have its commentaries written by Isvarakrishna (*Sankhya karika*), Gaudapada (*Sankhya karika bhasya*), Vachaspati Mishra (*Tattva kaumudi*) and Vijnana Bhikshu (*Sankhya pravachana bhasya*).

The focal point of this philosophical system is the interaction between *purusha* (spirit) and *prakriti* (matter), that gives origin to all the things manifested in the universe both at a gross and at a subtle level.

*Prakriti* is absolute, eternal, independent and original; it is composed by the 3 subtle elements called *gunas* - that are *sattva* (reality), *rajas* (desire) and *tamas* (ignorance) - three inseparable powers compared to the flame, the wick and the oil in a lamp.

*Sattva* is light, radiant, lively and illuminating; it produces pleasure, happiness, satisfaction, power for reflection and movement upwards.

*Rajas* has a sanguine (blood-based) character and produces suffering, restlessness, excessive stimulation, constant movement and lack of peace.

*Tamas* is darkness, the principle of inertia, and produces apathy and indifference, ignorance, confusion, and negativity. It is heavy and envelops the consciousness, covering and extinguishing its light.

This is the process of manifestation of the 25 elements listed and analyzed in detail by the Sankhya: *prakriti* or *mahat* ("the great", or the non-differentiated principle of matter), *ahankara* ("identification with matter"), *manas* (the mind), the 5 senses of perception, the 5 senses of action (or movement organs - mouth, hands, feet, anus and genital organ), the 5 *tanmatra* (sense perceptions), the 5 *mahabhuta* (gross elements), and the *purusha*, the

spiritual Self, that is never touched by matter.

Sankhya teaches that knowledge can be obtained through *pratyaksha* (direct perception), *anumana* (logical deduction) and *sabda* (verbal testimony).

The fundamental characteristics of the Self (the *purusha*) are *dharma* (ethical virtue), *jnana* (knowledge), *vairagya* (detachment) and *aisvarya* (power). Under the influence of ignorance, these qualities turn into their opposites, producing the 3 types of sufferings (*klesha*) called *adhyatmika* (caused by one's own body and mind), *adhibhautika* (caused by other living beings) and *adhidaivika* (caused by the natural elements).

## Yoga

Among the Sanskrit words that have entered the global vocabularies in the last decades, *yoga* is probably the most famous, yet the original knowledge and the real meaning of Yoga are generally unknown.

The most famous text on the subject is Patanjali's treatise entitled *Yoga sutra* and composed by 4 chapters or *padas*, with a series of aphorisms illustrating *samadhi* (perfect contemplation), *sadhana* (spiritual practice), *vibhutis* (the faculties that are acquired through the practice) and *kaivalya* (liberation). *Bhagavad gita* is a still wider and more practical source, and each chapter deals with a step in the understanding and the practice of Yoga.

The word *yoga* literally means "union" and derives from the root *yuj*, that means "to unite, connect, control, discipline", exactly as yoking horses or oxen to a cart to pull it. In this sense, *yoga* has the same primary meaning of the word "religion", deriving from Latin *re-ligare*, or "to connect, unite" the human being to God.

The various "yoga paths" are actually complementary aspects of the same discipline. They are classified as *karma* (action), *jnana* (knowledge), *bhakti* (devotion), *buddhi* (awareness), *sankhya* (analysis of reality), *hatha* (balance of energies in the body and the mind).

The various steps of Yoga are described as *yama* (abstention), *niyama* (prescriptions), *asana* (control of the body), *pranayama* (control of breathing), *pratyahara* (withdrawing

the senses from the sense objects), *dharana* (mind concentration), *dhyana* (active meditation) and *samadhi* (constant absorption, where ignorance and illusion are completely vanquished).

Specifically, the abstentions are: *ahimsa* (non violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (honesty), *brahmacharya* (sexual abstinence), *aparigraha* (detachment). The prescriptions are *saucha* (cleanliness), *santosha* (contentment), *tapas* (self control), *svadhyaya* (study of the scriptures) and *isvara pranidhana* (dedication to God).

We take the opportunity to inform our readers about the upcoming publication of a text focusing specifically on Yoga.

## Vedanta sutra

As we have already mentioned, the 3 basic texts of Vedic knowledge are *Bhagavad gita*, *Upanishads* and *Vedanta sutra*.

The *Upanishads* are known as *sruti pramana* ("authority transmitted by listening" as part of the *sruti* scriptures), *Bhagavad gita* is known as *smriti prasthan* ("authority transmitted by remembering" as part of the *smriti* scriptures) and *Vedanta* is known as *nyaya prasthan* ("authority transmitted by logic" as part of the *nyaya* scriptures).

The text of the *Vedanta* is not very large - it is only 555 aphorisms divided into 4 chapters (*adhyaya*), each consisting of 4 sections (*pada*), containing groups of sentences (*adhikarana*).

The first chapter is entitled *Samanvaya* ("concurrence") and explains that the common harmonious purpose of all the texts of Vedic knowledge consists in the realization of Brahman - the transcendental universal awareness.

The second chapter is entitled *Avirodha* ("absence of conflict") and examines the possible objections, resolving apparent contradictions. This is the chapter on which the various commentators have focused more extensively; Adi Shankara's commentaries are meant especially against the Buddhist and Jainist philosophies that were preached in his days, but also against the distorted perspectives of the late followers of *sankhya*, *yoga*, *pancharatra* and so on.

In turn, the *vaishnava* commentators that appeared later have analyzed those philosophical and logical distortions they were facing in their time, including those produced by those followers of Adi Shankara who had already lost view of the original meaning and purpose of the discussion: to re-establish the original Vedic authority.

The third chapter, *Sadhana* ("the method") describes how to attain the transcendental realization, and the fourth chapter, *Phala* ("the fruits") speak about the results of liberation.

The *Vedanta sutra* is also called *Vedanta*, *Brahma sutra*, *Uttara mimamsa*, *Brahma mimamsa*, *Bhikshu sutra*, *Sariraka mimamsa* or *Nirnayaka shastra*.

*Vedanta* means "the conclusion of the *Vedas*", *brahma* refers to the Supreme Brahman, *mimamsa* means "pursuit", *bhikshu* refers to *sannyasis*, *nirnaya* means "investigation", and *sariraka* means "of the body", intended as a body of knowledge or *jnana kanda*, as opposed to the treatises on ritual procedures or *karma kanda*.

It is a deeply philosophical text based on the logical method (*nyaya*), consisting in very condensed aphorisms, difficult to understand because they can be interpreted in many ways. Actually it is not easy to find editions of the *Vedanta sutra* that are not accompanied by one of the commentaries of the various *acharyas*.

The first and most famous commentary is the *Sariraka bhasya*, written by Adi Shankara, in turn elaborated and commented upon in very famous texts such as the *Panchapadika* by Padmapada Acharya, *Bhamati* by Vachaspati Mishra, *Nyaya nirnaya* by Anandagiti, *Bhasya ratna prabha* by Govindananda and *Bhasya bhava prakasika* by Citsukhacharya. These commentaries, too, have been commented in subsequent times, thus creating a considerable amount of philosophical material - which however does not constitute an objective scriptural evidence to be accepted as *apaurusheya*, "above the human level"

like the *Vedanta* and the other original texts.

The *vaishnava acharyas* too have written commentaries to the *Vedanta*: Ramanuja is the author of the *Sri bhasya*, while Madhvacharya wrote the *Brahma sutra bhasya*, *Nyaya vivarana*, *Anuvyakhyana Brahma sutra anubhasya*. Vallabha wrote the *Anu bhasya* and Nimbarka the *Vedanta parijata saurabha*. Less famous commentaries to the *Vedanta* have been written by Bhaskara, Yadavaprakasha, Vijnanabhikshu and Baladeva Vidyabhushana. Among the commentaries to the commentaries in the *vaishnava* field, the most famous author is Jayatirtha, who analyzed Madhva's commentary.

The process of analysis on the *Vedanta sutras* is based on logical discussion composed by *vishaya*, *samsaya* or *sandeha*, *purvapaksha*, *siddhanta* and *sangati*.

*Vishaya* is the "object" of discussion, for example (as in fact in the *Vedanta*) the pursuit of the knowledge of Brahman.

*Samsaya* or *sandeha* means "doubt" - in this case if it is actually possible to know Brahman, considering that our original awareness is already Brahman, and that the existence of Brahman does not depend on the result of our research.

After the statement of "doubt" we find the *purvapaksha* ("objection" or "discussion"); *Vedanta* answers that the pursuit of the knowledge of Brahman is necessary, because by dissipating the ignorance and illusion that cover the eternal and independent awareness of the Brahman takes us to the level of liberation, that is the natural and happy state of Self realization, to which everyone spontaneously aspires.

Follows the *siddhanta* or "conclusion": the perfected form of the initial statement, that through the process of discussion has been liberated from all possible misconceptions, and finally we come to the agreement or *sangati*, "common goal", where all the participants to the debate recognize the objective truth and share it.

The conclusion of Adi Shankara's *Sariraka bhasya* is summarized by the famous declaration (in the *Brahma jnanavali mala*): *brahma satyam jagan mithya, jiva brahmaiva na parah, anena vedyam sat sastram, iti vedanta dindima*, "Brahman is reality, the universe is illusion, and the living being is non-different from Brahman. By understanding these (three points) (we understand) the scriptures: this is the message of the *Vedanta*."



The fundamental difference between the two existences - Brahman and material universe - consists in the fact that Brahman is consciousness (*chit*) while matter is inert and devoid of consciousness (*jada*). While consciousness is unitary, or free from duality, matter manifests in innumerable different forms and elements.

By utilizing logic applied to the understanding of the ultimate reality, we can demonstrate that the material objects, devoid of awareness (that are a temporary variable) depend for their existence on the transcendental Reality, that is a constant and permanent substance.

It is important to understand what we mean by "illusion" (*mithya*).

Some believe that this definition indicates the complete falsity of matter, that simply "does not exist", but this is incorrect. Matter "is not" (*maya* precisely means "what is not") what it seems to be, but it exists (it is real) as a projection of the transcendental Reality, the Brahman.

It is like the shadow of an object, that manifests in some particular circumstances of lack of light, and disappears when the light is present on both sides of the object - that is, when duality has been overcome.

We cannot say that the shadow is completely devoid of existence: its existence is secondary because it depends on the object proper, but when it manifests we observe a perceptible effect, as for example a drop in temperature in the area that is covered by the shadow.

Another classical example is the cloud, that is a temporary manifestation created by the energy of the sun, that evaporates water from the surface of the planet. The existence of the cloud depends on the existence of the sun, that is permanent and independent, and manifests in a cyclic way moving humidity from the surface of the land up to the sky and then down to earth again. In other words, it is a temporary transformation (*vivarta*) that appears to be different from the substance that creates it, and that is always the same.

If we want to use the language of atomic physics, matter is simply a temporary manifestation of energy, that is eternal and all-pervading. Even though our senses perceive matter as having a solid existence while energy escapes sensory perception and may seem to be an abstract concept, the facts are exactly the opposite: energy is permanent, while matter is always in a transient condition. Everything that exists in this

world consists of various forms of condensation and manifestation of energy, and the supreme reality is constituted by the primary energy of consciousness - Brahman.

Translating this concept into the vedic language, we will say that *pradhana* (matter) is nothing by Maya, the divine illusory manifestation that constitutes the inconceivable potency of Brahman. By overcoming duality we can understand that Maya, illusion, is nothing but the "hidden face" of Vidya, knowledge. Just like electrical energy produces apparently different effects in a fridge and in an oven, in a fan, a radio, a computer and a light bulb, the primeval Shakti of Brahman, that is non-different from Brahman itself, manifests many forms that appear to be different.

In the same way, Brahman ("transcendence") is one but manifests as Atman ("Self"), that appears to be localized as Jiva ("individual being"). It is not easy to understand how this happens, and in fact the entire *corpus* of Vedic scriptures has been compiled to help the sincere researcher who wants to attain this sublime and fundamental realization.

The "missing link" of this mysterious equation is the figure of Shiva, of whom Adi Shankara is considered a direct incarnation, precisely appeared to re-establish the authority of Vedic knowledge after several centuries of Kali yuga.

In fact Shiva is the supreme Guru, the personal manifestation of Brahman in the material world, and occupies an intermediate position between Brahman and Atman, as Param Atman (Supreme Self).

Here we need to understand that Shiva and Vishnu are the same Person, but they simply have different Personalities. Vishnu or Narayana is the Personality of Godhead that is the One without duality and is in a completely transcendental dimension called Vaikuntha ("without anxiety"), while Shiva manifests in a form that appears to be dualistic - the androgynous *ardha-naresvara* ("the Lord that is half woman").

Adi Shankara states, *narayanah aparo avyakta*, "Narayana is Supreme and non-manifested", precisely because he completely transcends matter. When Narayana manifests in the material world in the form of Maha Vishnu, lying on the Ocean of Causes (Karanodakasayi Vishnu), is called Sadashiva, "the eternal Shiva". This immense divine form simply remains lying on the waters (that are the Prakriti) and while he is immersed in his mystic sleep (also called Yoga Nidra, that is another name of

Mahamaya) Maha Vishnu emanates all the unlimited universes that appear as seeds from the pores of his body. At each exhalation of Maha Vishnu all the Brahmandas ("the Brahman eggs") are emanated and at each inhalation they are absorbed again into Maha Vishnu's body, again through his pores. Therefore the entire cycle of cosmic manifestation of the universe, lasting for billions of our years, is included in one mere breathing cycle of God.

During the cosmic manifestation period, within each Brahmanda or "universal egg" there is the manifestation of a secondary form of Vishnu called Garbhodakasayi Vishnu, who is "pregnant" with Brahma (the first created being), who is born from the lotus flower growing from Vishnu's navel. *Garbha* precisely means "fetus, embryo". From his own body (that is very different from the human bodies of this planet), Brahma manifests the 14 planetary systems or galaxies of this universe, and Vishnu appears inside each atom of creation and in the heart of each living being.

These three manifestations of Vishnu are called Purusha avatara ("manifestations of the Self principle descended into the universe") and are the Param Atman (supreme Self) of material manifestation (Prakriti). The devotees of Vishnu call them "Vishnu" while the devotees of Shiva call them "Shiva", but they are exactly the same Person, just like a human being can be called in different ways by different persons (for example by his mother, his wife or his son), although he remains the same person.

The third element of the divine Triad that constitutes the focus of the Vedic of hindu tradition is Prakriti, Nature, the Mother Goddess, who is power and form through which Vishnu/Shiva manifests both in the material and the spiritual worlds. In the spiritual world it is known as Para ("supreme") Prakriti, while in the material world it transforms and manifests also as Apra ("non supreme") Prakriti in the form of the material elements.

Here, too, we must be very careful to understand this transformation of Prakriti, because in the material universe Prakriti appears both as Para Prakriti (in the form of *chit shakti*, the awareness of the living beings) and as Apra Prakriti (in the form of the *pradhana*, the 8 elements that are merely material or *jada*).

Therefore the living beings in this world are both Jiva Atman (individual sparks of Brahman) and Prakriti (marginal potency of Brahman); we could say that they "possess

the genetic chromosomes both of the father and the mother of the universe", that is to say the masculine identity or modality and the feminine identity or modality at the same time.

To summarize these deep technical concepts, we can say that:

- \* Brahman includes all beings and all things.
- \* The Atman (the "Self") is of the same nature and existence of Brahman - pure consciousness, pure existence.
- \* The Jiva ("living") or Jiva Atman ("living Self") is the Atman that by taking birth has become individually localized - not in a geographical or spatial sense, but at the conceptual level.
- \* The Supreme Brahman, Narayana (Vishnu), is the transcendental, non-manifested Reality.
- \* Shiva is the Brahman that descends in this world and enters the heart of each living being as their Param Atman ("Supreme Self" or "Self of the Self").
- \* Prakriti ("Nature") is the inherent potency of Brahman, and also manifests in the Atman. She is described as *sat*, "existence", *cit*, "awareness" and *ananda*, "happiness". But she is also *rupa*, "form", *shakti*, "power", *vidya*, "knowledge", *buddhi*, "intelligence", *trishna*, "aspiration", *tushti*, "satisfaction", *kshanti*, "benevolence", *daya*, "generosity", *shanti*, "peace", *jala*, "water" and *matri*, "the Mother".

Due to abrahamic ideological infiltration, some people have come to think that the cause of the problems of the conditioned soul is Mahamaya, the Divine Mother in her function of illusory projection, and therefore we find some confused people who delude themselves of having the power to conquer illusion "by waging war against it" and disrespecting Prakriti in her various manifestations. This offensive approach cannot work, and in fact brings disastrous results because it only amplifies the illusory tendencies of *ahankara* (false ego) and bends the mind towards the lower *gunas* of *rajas* (passion) and *tamas* (ignorance).

This program is not recommended by any scripture.

To understand the futility and foolishness of this attitude, we can bring the example of a

person who is keeping his eyes tight shut and tries to "wage war against darkness" by trashing and beating around in the environment where he lives, instead of simply opening his eyes to the light.

The problems due to illusion are created by ourselves only, by our own perception, and it is only by working on our own perception ability, by eliminating mistakes and misconceptions, that we will be able to overcome them effectively.

The problem of illusory perception is caused by the superimposition (*adhyasa*) of two distinct concepts, as for example a rope and a snake: this makes us see a rope as a snake, and the other way around. It is a false perception, not a "false reality", because the two concepts of falseness and reality are exactly opposite to each other. Mistaking a rope for a snake is *maya*, "what is not", but the rope exists in front of us, and the snake exists, too, albeit in some other place.

Thus the Atman is perceived as the material body because of the material identification (*ahankara* or false ego) and material attachments (*mamatva* or sense of possession). This superimposition of the two concepts - Atman and matter - is due to ignorance (*avidya*), which is merely lack of knowledge (*vidya*) in one's awareness. Ignorance is therefore the cause of mistakes and misconceptions (*apavada*) and must be removed by the proper knowledge received from the scriptures and from the Guru.

This is the main purpose declared by *Vedanta*, beginning from its first verse: "now we enter the study of Brahman".

The four objectives expressed in the text are defined as:

1. *adhikari*, the person who engages in action or study,
2. *vishaya*, the nature or subject of action or study,
3. *prayojana*, the effect or result of action or study,
4. *sambandha*, the relationship between the object of action (or study) and its effect.

The first 4 aphorisms of the text, known as *Chatu-sutri* ("of 4 *sutras*") directly elaborate on these topics and in fact are considered the most important. The answers to these 4 objectives are known as *jijnasa* ("the pursuit of knowledge"), *janmady asya* ("since

birth"), *shastra yonitva* ("being the origin of the scriptures") and *samanvaya* ("the general conclusion"). Such conclusion is the "end of the *Vedas*" indicated by the word *Vedanta*.

Here is the first *sutra*: *atha atah brahma jijnasa*, "Therefore, this is the moment to try to understand Brahman." (1.1.1)

A person who engages in the study of the *Vedanta sutra* is one who wants to know Brahman; this desire is sufficient to qualify a human being as worthy of seeking the knowledge, because it cannot manifest in someone who has not attained the required level of evolution.

To dissipate illusion and ignorance, and to qualify to attain knowledge, one must engage in the following practices (*sadhana catushayam*):

1. *viveka* ("ability to discriminate between *sat* and *asat*"),
2. *vairagya* ("renunciation" to the subjective ego and to the attachments that prevent us from seeing objectively),
3. *satka sampatti* (the "six qualifications of the mind", that are *sama*, "equanimity", *dama*, "self-control", *aparathi*, "detachment from sensory distractions", *titiksha*, "tolerant perseverance", *sraddha*, "faith" in the scriptures and in the teacher, *samadhanam*, "peacefulness") and
4. *mumukshutva* ("strong desire to attain liberation").

This is the second *sutra*: *janmadi asya atha, tat brahma*, "Brahman is what originated all this" (1.1.2)

Brahman has been described in various *Upanishads*.

*Taittiriya upanishad* states: "That from which the world has been created, in which the world exists and in which the world will re-enter at the time of dissolution, is known as Brahman."

*Kena upanishad* declares: "That which cannot be expressed by words, but from which words themselves obtain the power to express - know that is Brahman."

*Brihad aranyaka upanishad* tackles the subject by the *neti, neti* system - by explaining

what is not Brahman.

The *acharyas* explain that this method is called *vyavritta lakshana* ("by elimination").

The second method, *tatastha lakshana* ("intermediary") consists in explaining Brahman as the witness of all the activities in the world. The word *kutastha* derives from *kuta*, "anvil", and offers the image of a stable, solid, unchangeable support on which all things take shape. Brahman is therefore the existence that sustains the three changing phases (*avastha*) of wakefulness, dream and deep sleep.

The third method for explaining Brahman is *svarupa lakshana* ("direct") and consists in understanding its components of *sat*, "existence", *chit*, "consciousness" and *ananda*, "happiness".

Unlike the two previous methods, that are considered instrumental (*nimitta*) for the preliminary elimination of misconceptions, this method takes us directly to the contemplation of the Absolute.

These qualities that constitute Brahman are not its "parts" but they are its very nature, that is inseparable (*akhanda*). They also are the same fundamental qualities of our real Self (*atman*), that can be directly perceived as soon as ignorance and illusion are dissipated.

Here is the third *sutra*: *shastra yonitvat*, "it is the origin of the scriptures". (1.1.3)

Brahman is the sum total of consciousness and therefore omniscient, and this complete knowledge originated the expression of knowledge that we find in the scriptures. At the same time, the knowledge contained in the scriptures is the testimony or evidence of the existence of Brahman, that can be known through the scriptures.

Here it is important to understand that the definition of *shastra* does not refer specifically to a certain number of written texts compiled in particular historical periods - because these can be tampered with, distorted, or lost in the events of this world.

This idea, that is rather widespread in some milieus, derives from the mistaken concept of authority according to the followers of the so-called "historical religions", by which the existence of the text itself (irrespective of its contents) constitutes evidence of the validity of their faith.

In the Vedic system the concept of "scriptural evidence" is rather applied to the *original knowledge* of which such text simply constitute a record. The texts that were compiled "historically" come and go, but Knowledge itself remains, eternal and always attainable independently by any self-realized soul in any time and place.

For this reason, a person who tries to know Brahman should study the scriptures through the direct contact with a genuinely qualified Guru - a person who has actually realized the Self.

Without this fundamental qualification, any other favorable quality (disciplic lineage, scholarship, birth in a good family, ability to attract many disciples, fame etc) becomes irrelevant and can even constitute a detrimental factor when it causes an increase in material identification and material attachments. These can be easily seen in the public and private behavior of the person who wants to pass as Guru.

An important note to this effect is about the physical presence of the Guru. In the initial stage of his/her search, a neophyte generally needs a guide that s/he can clearly hear. Such guide must carefully watch the progress of the student, and therefore the traditional method consists in physically approaching a Self-realized soul and residing in his/her *ashrama* for a certain period, directly interacting at a personal level especially with questions and answers and engaging in his/her service.

Later, the relationship with the Guru becomes established at a deeper level and the disciple becomes able to directly connect to the Guru in his/ her own heart. Because the relationship with the Sat Guru ("the spiritual teacher") is eternal and continues lifetime after lifetime, we can see that some people seem to be "beginning their spiritual life" without having any direct visible interaction with a physically present Guru or with the official representatives of the disciplic succession founded by such Guru.

Actually these people are simply resuming their spiritual journey that began in previous lifetimes, where they already met the Sat Guru and therefore they do not need to accept "a new eternal Guru to whom they will remain faithful lifetime after lifetime".

It is not easy to understand the nature of the concept of Guru - the *guru tattva* - especially because in Kali yuga there are many dishonest people, who are unqualified and greedy for fame and followers, and who confuse the ideas of less knowledgeable people, ruining



the lives of their followers and creating enormous damage to society in general.

Actually all genuine and qualified Gurus speak and act exclusively as representatives of the supreme Guru, the Param Atman, who resides in the heart of every being. A realized soul does not have "his own personal material" (created by the egotism of *ahankara* and *mamatva*) that obstructs the pure transmission of knowledge by inserting some material motivations. Therefore s/he is simply a "transparent medium" or a "messenger" of the supreme Self.

Thus all the genuine Gurus must say the same thing... there cannot be genuine Gurus who do not agree with each other and/or with the conclusions of the scriptures.

When such contradictions appear, the disciple has the duty to ask all the necessary questions until s/he is fully satisfied, and the Guru must continue to explain, also using examples and practical applications, how apparent contradictions are merely differences of vision, due to the particular space-time perspective of the observer.

If the Guru refuses to give such explanation by claiming a dogmatic authority, or even by resorting to silence or intimidation, s/he is simply demonstrating his/ her own lack of qualifications.

Here is the fourth *sutra*: *tat tu samanyayat*, "but through the agreement (of the statements of the scriptures)".

Studying the scriptures and hearing the Guru's teachings we find a great quantity and variety of statements, that sometimes may seem contradictory. In the original scriptures and in the genuine Guru such contradictions are only apparent and are meant to widen our field of understanding, eliminating the mental barriers consisting of prejudiced and limiting patterns.

For example, we read that Brahman is both *nirguna* ("without attributes") and *saguna* ("with attributes"), that it is unlimitedly small and unlimitedly big, very far and very near, and so on.

By widening our understanding we see that such apparent contradictions are reconciled in a multi-dimensional vision - for example, when we understand that the attributes of Brahman are not the ordinary material type that can be observed in matter, but they are of

a spiritual type, transcendental and absolute. In other words, Brahman possesses both the specific quality and its opposite. For this reason, it is important to become detached from mental patterns and identifications, and overcome the limitations of duality.

Here is the origin of the long controversy between the supporters of the *advaita* ("non-dual") philosophy and the *dvaita* ("dual") philosophy, generally described as "impersonalists" and "personalists" respectively. Actually the contradiction between the two perspectives is simply due to a lack of understanding of the subject. The great *acharyas* of the Indian middle ages have amply elaborated on this problem to help us overcome the limitations of the dualistic material logic.

Adi Shankara has explained the nature of Brahman simply as *advaita*, "non dual", which is amply confirmed also in *Bhagavad gita* and *Upanishads*.

However, it is not easy to understand that this non-duality possesses unlimited qualities, although having no qualities.

The great *acharyas* who appeared later have continued the teaching work by presenting the same Knowledge in perspectives that are slightly different from each other, so that we can have a vision that is as multi-dimensional as possible.

Ramanuja, who appeared a few centuries after Adi Shankara, proposed the vision called *visista advaita*, "non-duality characterized by variety".

More than one century later, Madhva presented his perspective called *visista dvaita*, "duality with variety", that constitutes an extreme vision, at the opposite side of the *kevala advaita* ("pure and simple non-duality").

The perspectives called *dvaita advaita*, or "simultaneous duality and non-duality" and *suddha dvaita*, or "spiritual duality" have been presented respectively by Nimbarka and Visnusvami, the other two *vaishnava acharya* that are most famous for their teachings on *Vedanta*.

Still more recently we find Chaitanya's perspective, defined as *acintya bhedabheda*, or "inconceivable simultaneous diversity and non-diversity (duality and non-duality)" that rightly puts the issue of Brahman realization on a level that goes beyond mere intellectualism, in which the students of *Vedanta* risk falling because of the fascination of

logical debate in itself.

In fact Chaitanya preached the primary importance of *bhakti*, devotion towards the Supreme Brahman in its forms of Paramatma and Bhagavan, that enables us to cross the abyss of intellectual elaborations beyond which we can find the pure perception of Reality. In turn, the basic teaching of Chaitanya has been elaborated by his followers, especially by the six Gosvamis of Vrindavana - Rupa, Sanatana, Jiva, Raghunatha dasa, Raghunatha Battha, Gopala Bhatta - who compiled a great variety of philosophical texts on the subject, commenting the teachings of the original Vedic scriptures in the light of Chaitanyas' vision.

More specifically it was Baladeva Vidyabhushana, with his *Govinda bhasya*, who applied Chaitanya's vision to the interpretation of the *Vedanta sutra*, albeit in relatively recent times - in the 18th century.

It is important to understand that according to the perspective of the genuine *acharyas*, the differences of opinions expressed in their commentaries are meant to offer a variety of perspectives on the same reality(*tattva*), that are not in competition between themselves, but rather should help us to widen our field of understanding by reconciling apparent differences, exactly like the statements of the various genuine scriptures. Of course this applies only to the teachings of the realized souls, not to the mental speculations of those "empirical" philosophers that are simply grappling for answers or want to establish their beliefs in a dogmatic form, as an "absolute truth", considered as such only because it destroys other truths by stamping them as falseness *a priori* because they are presented by the "opponents".

Unfortunately this negative tendency is supported by the western-type mainstream academia, where the study of philosophy has completely lost the view of the purpose of the acquisition of knowledge of reality, and has become a "history of hypothetical speculation" that leads the students to conclude that reality does not exist, that the knowledge of reality is not possible and that anyway nothing really makes sense.

According to this perspective a seeker of reality must choose a "school of thought" founded by a "great thinker" and become a faithful follower, strictly uniforming his mental structures to adapt them to the dogmatic boundaries established by the "ideological authority", a typically abrahamic concept that has nothing to do with the

search for knowledge in its original meaning.

This same tendency to classify speculative opinions as "different philosophies" that are equally worthy of being studied but incompatible among themselves and totally relative, is then applied by the so-called "academic indology" also to the Vedic *darshanas* ("perspectives of vision"), with devastating results. Instead of leading to a greater understanding, the fragmentary and sectarian study of the Vedic philosophical perspectives creates a schizophrenic confusion and directs the energies of the sincere seekers towards a never ending partisan struggle between factions, that become engrossed into the only occupation of abusing each other out of a perverted sense of loyalty for their own "camp", something that is certainly not prescribed by the Vedic texts and that does not help to better understand Vedic knowledge.

The subsequent aphorisms, from 5 to 11, confirm that according to the scriptures only Brahman, the intelligent and conscious principle, can be the cause of the manifestation of the universe.

Here is the famous aphorism 12: *anandamayah abhyasat*, "its nature is constant happiness".

Here *anandamaya* refers to the description of the *Upanishads* by which the living being is "a body" made of happiness, *anandamaya*, surrounded by "bodies" that are increasingly grosser, made respectively of intelligence or knowledge (*jnanamaya*), mind (*manomaya*), life energy (*pranamaya*) and gross matter (*annamaya*) assimilated to the food. This Atman, made of pure happiness, is non-different from Brahman that is the complete and absolute Reality, except for being apparently and temporarily covered by material identification.

The subsequent aphorisms up to 19 further elaborate on the concept of Atman-Brahman in the light of the declarations of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*.

Aphorism 20 presents a new argument: *antah tat dharma upadeshat*, "(Brahman) is within and its essential nature (that supports existence) is (manifested) by teachings".

This description presents Paramatma, the localized manifestation of Brahman that is inside each being as the supreme Self. The same supreme Existence is worshiped in the Sun, in the Devas and in the *Vedas*. The next aphorisms present it as the life energy

(*prana*), light ( *jyoti*) and etheric space (*akasha*).

In the second chapter (aphorism 11) we find that Brahman and Atman (*atmanau*, "the two Atmans") enter into "the cave" (*guhama*) of the material body or the cosmos, that is the material body of the Virat Purusha, and Brahman in the form of Paramatma (*antaryami*, "that is inside", aphorism 1.2.18) supports the existence of the body and of all the elements, although it remains invisible to the human eye.

The text further explains that the knowledge of Brahman can only be achieved by the human beings that have purified themselves through the performance of the *samskaras* and the observance of the Vedic rules in life habits. It is important to understand here that the definition of *sudra* does not refer to a birth condition, but to the qualities, the tendencies and the activities that a human being has developed at the time of maturity.

In this regard, we can refer to chapter 2 of this book on the history of the study of Vedic knowledge in India.

After refuting all the misunderstanding created by the distortion of the original doctrines of the scriptures, the text of the *Vedanta sutra* continues to explain the difference and non-difference between Brahman and Atman, stating that Atman is a reflection (*abhasa*) of Brahman (aphorism 2.3.50).

The text speaks also about *prana* and the senses, and the development of the various elements of creation, the incarnation and reincarnation of Atman, the different states of consciousness, and the practical examples to meditate on Brahman.

It explains the rules for the *ashramas* and the condition of those who have fallen from the level of behavior required for their position, the determination needed to attain Self realization and liberation, and existence on the liberated level.

## Agama and Tantra

Another group of traditional scriptures in Vedic knowledge is the *Agamas*, that include *Tantra*, *Mantra* and *Yantra*.

These names have filtered into western culture in the last decades but often the artificial superimposition of different cultural concepts has caused even serious misunderstandings - many of the so-called "courses on Tantra" boil down to a sort of sex counseling to improve couple relationships, often in combination with what passes as "Yoga", but is a system of exotic gymnastics, with a strong tendency to contortionism.

Reality is different, and much deeper and more complex.

The word *tantra* means "power" and refers to the divine power that is directly contacted by the *sadhaka* ("adept, spiritual practitioner") through the precise and scientific technology of archetypal resonance.

Vedic culture teaches the concept of direct correspondence and connection between the macrocosm and the microcosm, offering a specific knowledge that enables one to go beyond theory and to apply the equation also, and above all, to practice.

As we have seen (in the first chapter of this book) in the declarations of the scientists that approached Vedic knowledge, western empirical physics has only recently started to understand this extremely ancient science that constitutes the "instruction manual" of the universe.

The power of *tantra* rests on the two concepts of *mantra* and *yantra*, that are closely connected to it, and equally deep and sublime.

A *mantra* is a very specific sound vibration, while the *yantra* is a very specific geometric diagram.

It is important to understand that these are not artistic creations based on fantasy or aesthetic sense, or on a literal meaning or on the imitation of "natural sounds" as some people imagine.

The aesthetic product of musicians, linguists or painters that whimsically take liberties in freely or vaguely imitating the original *mantras* and *yantras* of Vedic tradition can never have the same results, just like a mathematic equation created by a person who does not know the mathematical rules and the meanings and functions of the various components can never be considered valid and correct, and cannot bring effective results.

On the other hand, there is a greater freedom of interpretation in the meaning and utilization of the *mandala* ("circle", equivalent to the Tamil word *kolam* and the Prakrita word *rangoli* or *alpana*), that is used to circumscribe the space where the *yantra* or geometrical form of the Deity will manifest. Although it is always better to follow the scientific geometrical shapes of the traditional *mandalas*, it is possible to apply creative modifications by combining the basic schemes.

However, this is impossible when drawing *yantras*, which simply "will not work" when they are traced in a way that is not perfectly correct.

The philosophers-scientists of ancient Greece (especially the Pythagoreans) considered music and geometry (and mathematics) as the foundation for the knowledge of the universe, a secret knowledge accessible only to few initiates. In India this knowledge constituted the main foundation of Vedic culture, and was brought to a very complex level.

Galileo took up these studies in the middle ages, as he explains in his *Dialogo dei due massimi sistemi del mondo* (*Dialogue on the two greatest systems in the world*, banned by the Inquisition but published in Holland), a work that was continued by Robert Hooke (1680) and Ernst Chladni (1787).

In 1967 Hans Jenny called this science *kymatik* or cymetics ("science of vibrations"), or the study of the visible form of sound and sound vibrations. Experimental observations of this science are conducted on a suitable surface, ideally a "Chladni plate" or a membrane covered with a thin layer of particles in the form of solution, paste or powder. The different sound frequencies immediately create perfect and complex geometrical forms.

In 1999 Masaru Emoto published his research, connecting cymetics with the human biomagnetic field and observed its results on water molecules (crystallized through freezing). As we know, water is the main component of the human body and of the

structure of the majority of living organism, both animal and vegetal.

In the light of such information, we will be better able to understand the meaning of *mantra*, *yantra* and *tantra*, whose knowledge is detailed in the *Agamas*.

There are 3 main categories of *Agamas* - called Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta - dealing respectively with the worship of the Deity in the forms of Vishnu, Shiva e Shakti.

Each of these *Agamas* contains 4 parts, dealing respectively with the philosophical and spiritual knowledge of the Deity (*vidya* or *jnana*), the method of contemplation or *sadhana* (*yoga*), of the ritual aspects (*kriya*) and the general behavior and lifestyle of a devotee (*charya* or *achara*).

The *Agamas'* place within the *corpus* of Vedic knowledge has been a subject of controversy, because they are generally listed separately. However, it is evident that the knowledge contained in the *Agamas* is directly connected to the Vedic texts and more precisely to the *Atharva Veda*, maybe even constituting its original form.

In fact it is the *Agamas* that originally contain the *bija mantras* ("seed sounds") that is the basis of the ritual worship and the recitation of all *mantras*.

The *Vaishnava Agama* are the *Pancharatra*, *Vaikhanasa*, *Pratistha sara* and *Vijnana lalita*. In turn, *Pancharatra* is divided into 7 groups of texts, attributed respectively to Brahma, Shiva, the Kumaras, Vasistha, Kapila, Gautama and Narada. In all, these are 215 texts, of which the most important are the *Samhitas* known as *Isvara*, *Ahirbudhnya*, *Paushkara*, *Parama*, *Sattvata*, *Brihad-Brahma* and *Jnanamritasara*.

The *Pancharatra* system is specifically followed in the temple of Venkatesvara at Tirupati and in the temple of Parthasarathi at Chennai (Madras), while the *Vaikhanasa* system is followed especially in the temple of Ranganatha ar Srirangam and in the temple of Varadaraja at Kanchi.

The traditional *Shaiva Agamas* were originally 28, of which the most important is the *Kamika*, and each of them has some *Upa-Agamas* or secondary texts; in all only about 20 texts have survived.

This knowledge has given origin to the Shaiva siddhanta in south India and to the Kashmiri Shaivism (also called Pratyabhijna) in north India.



There are also 3 other agamic traditions that focus on the worship of Shiva - called Kapala, Kalamukha and Pasupata - that are also connected to the worship of Shakti.

The *Shakta Agamas* are also known collectively as *Tantras* and are considered particularly important because the ritual worship and meditation offered to Vishnu and Shiva cannot be separated from those offered to their Shaktis.

Presently there are 77 *Shakta Agamas*, of which 64 are listed in the *Vamakeshvara* in this order: *Mahamaya, Shambhara, Yoginijala-shambhara, Tattva-shambhara, Bhairavashtaka (Asitanga, Ruru, Chanda, Krodha, Unmatta, Kapali, Bhishana, Sanghara), Bahurupashtaka (the 8 Tantras of the 7 Matrikas and Shivaduti), Yamalashstaka (Brahmayamala, Vishnuyamalam, Rudrayamala, Lakshmiyamala, Umayamala, Skandayamala, Bhaskara or Jayadrathayamala), Ganeshayamala, Grahayamala, Mahochchushya, Vatula, Vatullotara, Hridbheda, Tantrabheda, Guhyatantra, Kamika, Kalavada, Kalasara, Kubjikamata, Tantrottara, Vinatantra, Trodala, Trodalottara, Panchamrita, Rupabheda, Bhutoddamara, Kulasara, Kuloddhisha, Kulachudamani, Sarvajnottara, Mahakalimata, Mahalakshminimata, Siddhayogeshvarimata, Kurupikamata, Devarupikamata, Sarvaviramata, Vimalamata, Purvamnaya, Pashchimamnaya, Dakshinamnaya, Uttaramnaya, Niruttara, Vaisheshika, Jnanarnava, Virabali, Arunesha, Mohinisha, Vishuddesvara.*

In the tradition of Tantra the Mother Goddess is called Dasa Mahavidya, "the 10 forms of Great Knowledge":

1. Kali or Kalaratri ("the black night"), Time that devours everything, the rhythmic cycle of the universe and the destruction of all obstacles,
2. Tara ("the bright star" or "she who liberates"), guiding the devotee in his/ her journey and research,
3. Sodashi ("16 years old"), also called Rajarajesvari ("the Lady of the kings of kings") or Lalita Maha Tripurasundari ("the beautiful and playful"), the power of Beauty in the universe,
4. Bhuvanesvari ("the Lady of the universe") or Maya ("energy"), the power of Creation that generates everything,

5. Chinnamasta ("the beheaded"), Intuition or Inspiration: that immediate and direct intelligence transcending the logical and rational mind,
6. Bhairavi ("the terrible"), the divine Wrath that destroys the negative powers; she is also called Chidagni ("the fire of awareness"), Tejas ("splendor or power") that controls the subtle forms of the senses, and Tapas ("austerity") or the power of the desire to obtain a higher purpose,
7. Dhumavati ("smoke-like") is the Crone, and represents the knowledge gathered through a long and painful experience,
8. Bagalamukhi ("that bridles the mouth"), is Control, the enunciation of the final truth, the hidden presence of opposites one inside the other, the power to turn defeat into victory,
9. Matangi ("whose body is made of thought") is Knowledge, the secret form of Sarasvati, the power of the primeval creative sound,
10. Kamala ("lotus flower") is the secret form of Lakshmi, who fulfills all desires.

In the practical application of the Tantra of Shiva and Shakti there are 3 schools, called respectively Dakshinachara ("of the right hand"), Vamachara ("of the left hand") and Mishra ("mixture").

Another sub-division considers the 7 categories of Vedachara, Vaishnavachara, Shaivachara, Dakshinachara, Vamachara, Siddhantachara and Kaulachara.

The Dakshinachara or Samayachara path follows the Vedic rules and is generally practiced by *brahmanas*; the form of the Mother Goddess worshiped in this tantric system is Maha Tripura Sundari.

The Vamachara or Kaulachara path (followed for example by the famous Aghoris) observes rules that are diametrically opposite to the Vedic (*arya*) rules, especially in regard to the concept of cleanliness or contamination, and utilize the raw power of the senses and matter to access the heart of material energy and overcome one's limiting identifications. The form of the Mother Goddess worshiped in this system is Bhairavi.

The path called Kaulachara is particularly famous for the worship method called *Pancha Ma-kara* or *Pancha tattva*, "of the five Ms" or "of the five realities" - *Maithuna* or sexual union, *Madya* or psychotropic substances including alcohol, *Mamsa* or animal meat, *Matsya* or fish and *Mudra* or roasted grains.

Its followers liberally use these elements of sense gratification during the ritual ceremonies to "feed the tiger" of the inner energy with the qualities of *rajas* and *tamas* (passion and ignorance) of which they feel the power.

By worshiping this "raw" power in the form of the Divine Mother, they can attain the realization of their own transcendental identity by overcoming the identification with the limitations of body and mind.

However, this is a dangerous path on which any shortcoming in knowledge or awareness can cause a downfall into degradation and put one in touch with lower (and not higher) entities, just like we risk being electrocuted by an electrical discharge when we work at a high-voltage transmission line.

When we take Tantra lightly, we may end up depending not on the inner divine power within ourselves, but on the powers of some evil ghost or spirit, that can certainly show up during rajasic or tamasic rituals, and develop a bond with us, of which we may not clearly understand the terms and the rules.

In this category of "black" Tantra we find the 6 arts of control - *shanti* to avoid accidents and diseases, *vasikarana* to keep the minds of other people under control, *stambhana* to obstruct the movements of other people, *vidveshana* to create quarrel and misunderstandings among other people, *ucchatana* to repel or send people away and *marana* to kill.

It is important to understand that the exercise of such arts is based on the exploitation of a power that does not come free of charge, and especially when one tries to harm innocent or even good people, the karmic reactions are very heavy.

On the other hand, the Dakshinachara and Mishra path replace these lower energies with more sattvic or even transcendental elements. Thus at an ordinary level the ritual ceremonies include the "five realities" in the form of flowers, green coconut juice, ginger, radishes (or spinach) and boiled grains respectively.

At the level of the Yoga practice, these five realities consist of the mystic union between the male and female energies within one's body, by the liquid that is produced with the tongue tip when it is rolled back and upwards in the Kechari mudra, by the Kechari mudra itself (by which one "swallows" one's own tongue, that is "flesh"), by the activation of the two currents Ida and Pingala within the spinal cord (that move like two swimming fishes), and by the gestures or positions of the body that facilitate the passage of Kundalini in the spinal cord.

At the inner level, they are constituted by the union of the individual ego with the Absolute, by the nectar of the contemplation on the Divine, by silence, breathing control and concentration techniques. These "pure" options are certainly recommended, because in Kali yuga it is extremely difficult to channel and ride the raw energies of matter without being devoured by them: this is precisely the meaning of traditional iconography showing the tiger as the symbol of Tantric practice.

In any case the tradition of Tantra also includes a practice called *dig bandha* ("binding the directions"), a system of *mantras* that, when pronounced correctly, form a protective barrier that cannot be penetrated by negative energies.

A similar effect is given by the *kavacha* ("armour"), also composed by *mantras*, that creates a specific protection for the person rather than for the space as in the *dig bandha*.

Cleanliness and purity are considered very important factors. Each procedure begins with ritual ablutions (complete bath and change of clothes or at least washing hands, face, mouth and legs), then follows the *asana suddhi* ("purification of the sitting place"), the *achamana* (ritual purification with water and specific *mantras*) and only after these, one can begin the ritual proper, in the following order: *anga nyasa*, *kara nyasa* and *dig bandha*, *pranayama* ("breathing control") connected to the *mula mantras*, and then *dhyana* ("meditation"), *bhuta suddhi* ("purification of the gross elements of the body"), *pratishta* ("installation" of the Deity in the body of the worshiper and in the image to be worshiped) and finally *puja* ("worship" proper) with the offering of various articles expressing affection and respect.

Other very important concepts in the tantric tradition are the *bija mantras* ("seed *mantras*"), *mula mantra* ("root *mantras*") and the process to install the Deity into the body of the devotee, constituted by the two practices called *anga nyasa* ("consecration of

the body") and *kara nyasa* ("consecration of the hands"), also performed by applying *mantras*. These practices are utilized universally and daily by all the Hindu traditions for personal worship as well as temple worship, including the fire rituals.

There is a great variety of *mantras* (and connected *yantras*) in all these categories - *bija*, *mula* and *nyasa* - because there are many specific archetypal manifestations or personalities of the Deity.

Within the 3 main categories of Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti we find a great number of Divine Personalities, each with their own *yantra*, *bija mantra*, *mula mantra*, and series of *nyasa mantras*.

The most famous text collecting all these series of *mantras* and *yantras* is the *Sarada tilaka*, compiled by Sri Lakshmana Desikendra from a great number of ancient scriptures, many of which no longer exist.

The most important and famous text in tantric literature is the *Mahanirvana tantra*, describing in details the process of *anga nyasa* and *kara nyasa*, and focuses on *sadhana* ("spiritual practice") of worship to the Supreme Brahman in his personal form of Isvara, or Hari-Hara.

The central *mantra* of the *Mahanirvana tantra* states *Om sat chit ekam brahma*, "Om is the eternal and conscious Brahman, that is the only reality".

From this *mula mantra* derives the particular *gayatri* ("to be chanted") *mantra* reciting, *Om paramesvaraya vidmahe paratattvaya dhimahi tan no brahma prachodayat*, "Om! We meditate on the supreme Reality, that is known as the supreme Lord; may Brahman inspire and guide us." In this case, the *bija mantra* is the *pranava omkara - om*.

To make a comparison with the Gaudiya vaishnava tradition (that is relatively known in the west thanks to the work of Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada) we can quote Krishna's *mula mantra* that is *Klim krishnaya govindaya gopijana-vallabhaya namah*, and the Krishna Kama *gayatri* accompanying it - *Klim kamadevaya vidmahe pushpabanaya vidmahi, tan no ananga prachodayat*, "Klim! We meditate on Kamadeva, that is known as he who has flower arrows: may Ananga ("he who has no body") inspire and guide us."

The particularity of the Gaudiya vaishnava is the fact that it grows from the roots of the

mystic love in the erotic sentiment (*sringara rasa*) of the soul towards God, visualized as Krishna, the all-attractive cowherd boy of Vrindavana.

Back to the *Mahanirvana tantra*, here are some very interesting extracts:

"This *mantra* is the supreme among the *mantras*, that immediately grants *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. Its practice has no negative side effects and does not require a particularly auspicious astrological moment to be started, or the performance of the 10 *samskaras* (preliminary purification ceremonies) or other circumstances. The only required condition is the purity of the heart - that transcends the rules of external cleanliness, fasting and rituals. It is sufficient to meditate on the Lord and to consume (personally and in the company of friends and family) the consecrated food offered to the Lord.

One who practices this *mantra* has already performed, in previous lifetimes, all the prescribed ritual ceremonies, has already studied all the scriptures and is honored in all the worlds. His parents and ancestors are benefited and do not need any more to receive the traditional offerings (*sraddha*, *pinda* and *tarpana*) or the results of pious activities such as pilgrimages, charity and performance of rituals. A person who practices this *mantra* in full knowledge is always protected against all aggressions or negative influences, and is not perturbed by the power of hostile planets or evil spirits.

Those who may try to harm this person can only damage themselves."

Other extracts from tantric literature:

"A demoniac mentality will consider the Guru as a mere mortal human being, the *mantra* as a mere word or ordinary sound, and the image of the Deity as a stone statue." (*Kularnava tantra*)

"The names of the various Goddesses are actually different attributes of the only one Goddess, and this also applies to the masculine aspects of the Divine." (*Matrikabheda tantra*)

"Shiva said: Tara is the blue form (Matsya), Bagala is the tortoise (Kurma), Dhumavati is the boar (Varaha), Chinnamasta is Nrisimha, Bhuvaneshvari is Vamana, Matangi is Rama, Tripura Lalita is Parasurama, Bhairavi is Balabhadra, Mahalakshmi is Buddha, Durga is

Kalki, and Kali is Krishna." (*Todala tantra*)

"Krishna is Durga, and Durga is Krishna. One who sees them differently will not be liberated from the cycle of repeated births and deaths." (*Gautamiya tantra*)

"I am Durga, I possess all virtues. I am not different from Radha, the eternal Goddess of fortune." (*Sammohana tantra*)

## Conclusion

In the course of the centuries the original Vedic scriptures have generated a great amount of commentaries in Sanskrit classified as *bhasyas* (original text, word to word translation, literary translation and commentary), *vritti* (analysis and critique of the text besides the *bhasya*), *tika* or *vyakhyana* (study on the style of the text), *anuvada* (summary study) and *tippani* (glossary).

There is also a variety of other texts that our readers might find interesting, and that we will try to present in future publications.

The *alankaras* are texts of rhetorics and aesthetics on the art of language, while the *subhasitas* are collections of educational stories, both in poetry and in prose: the most famous examples are the *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha*.

Among the *kavyas* (poetical works) in Sanskrit we may mention the *Raghuvamsa* and *Kumara sambhava* by Kalidasa, *Kiratarjuniya* by Bharavi, *Sisupalavadha* by Magha and *Naishada* by Sri Harsha. There are also *kavyas* in prose (for example *Kadambari* and *Harshacharita* by Bhattabana) and texts that are composed by poetry and prose, like the *Champu Ramayana* and *Champu Bharata*.

The *natakas* are theatre works, composed to express the various *rasas* or sentiments through stories. The most famous are the *Sakuntala* by Kalidasa, *Uttara Rama charita* by Bhavabhuti, and *Mudrarakshasa* by Visakhadatta.

*Brihad aranyaka Upanishad* (2.4.10) summarizes this great scenario in the following verse: "Just like the fire kindled with damp firewood produces different types of smoke, similarly the supreme Self emanates, through its breathing, the *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Atharva Veda*, *Itihasaa*, *Puranas*, *Vidyas*, *Upanishads*, *Slokas*, *Sutras*, *Anuvyakhyanas* and *Vyakhyanas*."

The ocean of Vedic literature is unlimited, and has innumerable waves, just like the innumerable divine manifestations (*avataras*) that appear in this world to re-establish the proper knowledge and the principles of religious ethics (*dharma*) according to time, place and circumstance.

According to the Vedic parameters it is also possible that the eternal knowledge continues to be manifested and expressed in all ages, not only in the past but also in the present and the future. However, it is imperative that the next texts must strictly be in accordance to the fundamental teachings of the *Vedas*, and that they express a genuine vision (*darshana*) that can easily be harmonized with all the other previous scriptures.

This is the reason why Vedic scriptures can only be compiled by *rishis* ("those who directly see reality") and not by ordinary people, who could only invent and fabricate imitations of little value.