

# **Introduction to Vedic Knowledge**

**second volume:**

**The Four Original Vedas  
Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas  
and Upanishads**

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# 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 *samskrita*, that literally means "perfect, highly evolved".

According to the western academy, Sanskrit is considered the mother language of the various "indoeuropean" 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.

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.

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 deduced 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: *namah sambhave cha mayobhave cha namah*.

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: *namah sambhava, iti sam-bhave cha, mayobhava iti mayah bhava cha namah*

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, mayobhava iti mayah bhava, 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  
mayobhava 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*. River Kaveri, in India, is considered her incarnation.

\* 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 aereonautics-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 viwes - 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; the presently available *Kama sutras* have been written by Vatsyayana.

\* 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, Barhish, 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 *Prasthanas traya* (“starting points”) because they



constitute the best beginning for the study of Vedic knowledge. They are:

- \* *Bhagavad gita*, also called *Sadhana prasthan*a, centered on the practical application of Vedic teachings,
- \* *Upanishads*, also called *Upadesha prasthan*a, are the most philosophical part,
- \* *Brahma Sutra* or *Vedanta sutra*, also called *Nyaya prasthan*a 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 samhitas* 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 samhita* 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 of 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 *Asclepia 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), Urvasi 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 Agnayi (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 carrying 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*), *prisniparni* (*Hemionitis cordifolia*), *virina* (*Andropogon muricatus*), *vibhitaka* (*Terminalia bellerica*), *tilvaka* (*Symplocos racemosa*), *sphurgaka* (*Diospyros embryopteris*), *haridru* (*Pinus deodora*), *avaki* (*Blyxa octandra*), *hemadugdha* (*Ficus racemosa*), *durva* or *darbha* (*Cynodon 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 *chulai* or *khada saga* (*Amaranthus caudatus*), *myrobalan* (*Prunus cerasifera*) sometimes mistakenly called myrabolan, *amalaki* (*Embllica 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* (*Cyonodon dactylon* o *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 *punnima* (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 *jyotistoma* 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*), *Paramahamsa*, *Bhikshaka* (or *Bhikshuka*) and *Turiyatita* in *Sukla Yajur Veda*; *Teji bindu*, *Avadhuta*, *Katha rudra*, *Varaha* and *Brahma* in *Krishna Yajur Veda*; *Parivrata* (*Narada parivrajaka*), *Paramahamsa parivajaka* and *Para brahma* in *Atharva Veda*.

The *yoga upanishads* are: *Nada bindu* in *Rig Veda*; *Yoga chudamani* and *Darshana* in *Sama Veda*; *Hamsa*, *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, Srividyamnaya, Srividyatara, Syama, Siddhanta, Siddhanta sara, Siddhanta sikha, Sumukhi, Suvarnadharm, Svasamedhya, Svetamritika, Tripad vibhuti mahanarayana, Tulasi, Turiya, Urdhvapundra, Vanadurga, Vastu sutra, Visrama, Vriddha 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 than 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.