I HEARD IT THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE: THE VEDA

The Sanskrit word *veda* means “knowledge.” It stems from the verb *vid,* “to know, to understand,” a distant forebear of the Latin *videre*, “to see,” which in turn spawned a host of common English words like vision and view, wisdom and advice, evident, survey, history and story.

We can think of the Veda (with a capital “V”) as a big book, actually more like an anthology of mostly separate books, which was composed over the course of thousands of years by a host of anonymous authors. A Hindu might describe it, *the* Book. That’s because, like our Christian fundamentalists, who venerate the Torah and their Bible as the Word of God, Hindus believe that the Veda embodies the “breath” of their creator God, Brahma. This breath was “heard” (*shruti*) at the beginning of the world by seven or so inspired sages, who then transmitted this sacred knowledge

The Veda is thought to have a couple hundred chapters–actually mostly separate books of widely varying length–but only about three dozen of these usually get any attention from Western scholars. We can compare the arrangement of these books, rather inelegantly, to a four-layer cake. The bottom layer consists of four books or “collections” (*samhita*, “put together”), two of which–the Rig and Atharva Vedas–are anthologies of metrical hymns, technically known as mantras or *suktas* (“good speech”).

The Rig (from *ric*, meaning “praise”) is the heart of Hindu worship. It’s divided into 10 chapters (*mandala*, “cycles”) sharing just over 1,000 hymns. To give you some idea about how many hymns this is, my edition of the Rig runs to 650 pages of eye-achingly small print. While the sheer number of hymns is mighty impressive, what’s really remarkable is that the whole shebang existed well before the inception of writing in India. This means that all of these hymns were stored in the memory banks of the priests, and passed along more or less accurately for centuries from one generation to the next by word of mouth. I’m staggered by this feat of memorization every time I can’t find the keys I put down absentmindedly five minutes earlier.

The Atharva is the *samhita* family’s black sheep. Some traditionalists turn up their noses at the Atharva, and refuse to include it in the family at all. While its three siblings are the domain of the noble Brahmin priests, the Atharva is the working person’s Veda, mostly a book of magic, white as well as black, and sorcery, without any role in the sacrifice.

The other two collections–the Yajur and Sama Vedas–are closely allied with the Rig, the three together are called the “threefold knowledge” (*trayi-vidya*). The Yajur and Sama were composed specifically as liturgical guides. The former, while it includes about 700 hymns from the Rig, is a primarily a how-to manual that describes in detailed prose how to duly set the stage for and perform the sacrifice. The latter, which takes most of its hymns from the Rig, is essentially a song book, setting the hymns to melodies (*saman*), and instructing the officiating priest on the correct intonation of the words.

Most of the Vedic gods are embodiments of natural forces or elements, such as fire and water, sun and storm, heaven and earth. A few others represent abstractions, like Varuna, the guardian of *rita* (“right, proper, honest; enlightened; divine law; righteousness”), the divinely-mandated moral order of the Universe. And one god, Soma, is the personification of a *very* special plant, so special that the ninth cycle of the Rig, traditionally known as the Soma Mandala, consists of about 120 hymns dedicated to this plant-turned-god.

There are also hymns that speculate about the creation and destiny of the world, about death and the after-life, about the sacrifice, and that invoke the “blessed dead” (the *pitara*, “Fathers”). The Rig even includes various spells and incantations, and a couple of riddles, one of which, the Riddle of the Sacrifice (1.164), contains these cryptic but beautiful lines:

> Who hath beheld him as he sprang to being, seen how the boneless One supports the bony?
> Where is the blood of earth, the life, the spirit? Who may approach the man who knows, to ask it?
> Unripe in mind, in spirit undiscerning, I ask of these the Gods’ established places;
> For up above the yearling Calf the sages, to form a web, their own seven threads have woven,
> I ask, unknowing, those who know, the sages, as one all ignorant for the sake of knowledge ...

The Rig’s hymns give us a glimpse into the Vedic world, its local geography and history, its social and family structure, the peoples’ clothing and adornments, their food and drink, their occupations–warrior seems to be high on the list–and how they amused themselves. One of the most popular pastimes was gambling–see those two birds over there perched on that limb? I’ll bet you five cows the one on the right flies away first–and one of the most popular gambling games was a form of dice-throwing (the dice were made from nuts). Amid all the high-minded and enigmatic poetry in the Rig, there’s a hymn that most of us can immediately empathize with. Sometimes called the Lament of the Gambler (10.34), it reminds us that, while we’re separated by a few thousand of years from the people of the Veda, in the end we’re not so different after all:

> For the die’s sake, whose single point is final, mine own devoted wife I alienated.
> My wife holds me aloof, her mother hates me: the wretched man finds none to give him comfort. ...
> The gamester seeks the gambling-house, and wonders, his body all afire, Shall I be lucky? ...
> Dice, verily, are armed with goads and driving-hooks, deceiving and tormenting, causing grievous woe.

“Her mother hates me”! Could this be, in nascent form, the mother of all bad mother-in-law jokes?

In case you’re wondering, and I know you are, the Rig wasn’t in the forefront of the women’s liberation movement. Goddesses play a minor role in the hymns, the gods’ consorts being no

more than shadowy appendages with no individual characteristics of their own. The chief goddesses seem to be:

Ushas, the goddess of the dawn, who "spreads herself out, driving back the formless black abyss" (1.92);

Sarasvati ("flowing"), the sacred river, who is "Marked out by majesty among the Mighty Ones, in glory swifter than the other rapid Streams, / Created for victory like a chariot, Sarasvati must be extolled by every sage" (6.61);

Vac ("Speech"), who breathes a "strong breath like the wind and tempest," and holds "together all existence" (10.125).

The modern study of the samhitas, which began in the mid-nineteenth century, isn't without some controversy. Western scholars have tended to treat the books with a certain amount of disrespect, appreciating them mostly for the window they provide onto Vedic culture, but disparaging their spiritual content. To these men, the samhitas, in the words of Sri Aurobindo, are the product of a "primitive and largely barbaric society crude in its moral and religious conceptions, rude in its social structure and entirely childlike in its outlook upon the world that environed it" (*The Secret of the Veda*, 23). This opinion, of course, makes traditionalists bristle; for them, the Veda incarnates the Word of Brahma. Aurobindo leads the charge against this stand, arguing that the language of the samhitas has a double value, woefully misunderstood by literal-minded Western scholars. On the one hand, yes, the sages of the samhitas did worship multiple gods, and nature and natural forces; but on the other hand, at the same time, the many gods are merely faces of a single deity, and the samhitas are ultimately "intended to serve for spiritual enlightenment and self-culture" (ibid., 30).

What kind of knowledge is contained in the Veda? To be sure, not your everyday, garden variety kind. Much as our Christian fundamentalists venerate the Torah and their Bible as the Word of God, Hindus hold that the Veda embodies sacred knowledge that's "not of human origin" (*apaurusheya*). It's the "breath" of the creator god, Brahma, "heard" (*shruti*) in the beginning of the world by the first inspired sages. Because of this, the Veda occupies an exclusive niche in Hindu spiritual literature. *All* the other scriptures–and there are lots of them–take a back seat because they're "remembered" (*smriti*), in other words, authored by human teachers.

Scholars guesstimate that the Veda is somewhere between 3200 and an amazing 6000 years old, but conservatives are unimpressed. Trying to fix the Veda in time is futile, they say, because the knowledge it contains is timeless. The Veda existed before the creation of the current world, and will continue to exist after this world disappears.

While to the conservatives, the Rig's hymns ares divinely inspired, liberal scholars have a much different tale to tell about their composition. Long ago, well before the hymns were collected in one book, everyday Indians honored their gods through a fire sacrifice. The gods were invited over to the household fire-altar, given a nice comfy grass mat to sit on, offered some food and other gifts, and regaled with poetry and song, much of it made up on the spot. Of course, these sacrifices weren't always entirely altruistic. They would often end with the sacrificer soliciting some favor, typically more cows, sons, or rain.

While the pious householder continued to perform his simple domestic sacrificial chores, the public sacrifice became the bailiwick of a small group of professional poet-priests, men who were considered to be especially adept at versifying and earning the gods' good graces. Their body of work was carefully preserved and guarded–after all, it was their legacy and livelihood–and passed along in their family from generation to generation. Finally these hymns were collected in the so-called "family books" (chapters 2 through 7), which are the core of the Rig.

VEDIC YOGA

So is there any mention of Yoga in the samhitas, more particularly in the Rig? Though the evidence is rather slim, both Georg Feuerstein and fellow scholar David Frawley believe so.

Vedic (or what Feuerstein calls Archaic) Yoga, he writes, is "less individualistic [than it is today] and, like shamanism, more intrinsically linked to the weal of the community rather than the salvation of the individual. Its principal concern was to discover through inspired inner vision (*dhi*) and ecstatic attunement the cosmic order (*rita*) and then to help preserve that order in the realm of human interaction through appropriate attitudes and actions." (?)

Feuerstein bases his case for Vedic Yoga on a number of hymns from the Rig that hint at what seem suspiciously like yogic "activities." For example, he detects a potential forerunner of later generations of yogins in the wandering ascetic celebrated in the Hymn of the Long-haired One (10.136, translation by Jeanine Miller). He certainly looks and acts the part of a yogin, the way he's described:

> The long-haired one is said to gaze full on heaven, the long haired one is said to
> be that light.
> The wind-girt sages have donned the yellow robe of dust; along the wind's course
> they glide when the gods have penetrated them.

It's entirely possible that, while Yoga as we know wasn't practiced in Vedic times, many of our Yoga exercises were born in the rituals of the Vedic sages and priests. Certainly the sacrifice demanded alertness and precision of speech, breath and movement, and a mind "harnessed" intently on the god being solicited. Indeed, in the Chandogya Upanishad (1.10.8), it's said that if a priest sings a hymn "without knowing the divinity" connected with it, his "head will fall off," no doubt a powerful incentive to concentrate on the matter at hand.

Feuerstein also ventures that the priest's need to consciously control his breath when singing the *saman* may have induced a profound shift in awareness, and foreshadowed our work with the breath in pranayama. And I found an offhand remark by one scholar that's very tantalizing. He mentions that, when singing the saman, the Udgatri emphasized various notes "by means of movements of the hands and fingers" (Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, 167). It occurred to me that these gestures be the precursors of hand seals (*mudras*), like the well-known "wisdom seal" (*jnana-mudra*), in which the practitioner touches the tips of the index fingers and thumbs, and stretches out the other fingers on each hand.

The other three layers of the Veda cake are stacked on top of these four books. Traditionally only the four samhitas (and sometimes the next layer up, the Brahmanas) are counted as the Veda,

but for our purposes we'll include the books in all four layers. I should also point out that we've been picturing the four layers as distinctly separate; but in truth the boundaries between the top three layers–the Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads–are quite fluid. Several of the Upanishads, for example, are embedded in one of the Aranyakas.

YAJUR VEDA

The Yajur (*yajus*, "sacrificial formula") exists in two versions called the Black (*krishna*) Yajur-Veda (or the Taittiriya Samhita) and the White (*shukla*) Yajur Veda (Vajasaneyi Samhita). While the Black and White are treated as separate books, there really isn't much difference in content between them. According to one scholar, the Black has some theological discussions of the sacrifices that the White doesn't.

There's a legend recounting how the Yajur was split. Once upon a time there was a *Yajur* priest by the name of Vaisampayana, the son of Vyasa, the legendary "author" not only of the Rig-Veda, but the great epic poem, the Mahabharata, the longest poem in the world. Vaisampayana had committed some offense, and asked his 27 disciples to help him with his penance. One disciple, Yajnavalkya, insisted that he expiate his sin by himself. Vaisampayana, miffed at this impertinence, cursed Yajnavalkya, who then immediately, um, *disgorged* all the Yajur material he'd learned in, uh, *tangible* form.

When Vaisampayana ordered the other disciples to clean up the mess, they transformed themselves into partridges (*tittiri*) and swallowed what Yajnavalkya had regurgitated. The resulting book was called the Black Yajur-Veda, apparently because it was "soiled" or stained with blood, or the Taittiriya Samhita, literally the "collection of the partridges." Yajnavalkya then prayed to the Sun, who appeared to Yajnavalkya in the shape of a horse (*vajin*), and imparted a new and improved version of the Yajur. So this book was called the White Yajur Veda or the Vajasaneyi Samhita, literally the "collection of the horse."

SAMA VEDA

The Sama (*saman*, "song of praise") includes a large number of melodies, many of them of ancient and popular origin. Some may date back to a time when songs were sung during solstice or national festivals; others, believed to have magical powers, may have originated with wizard-priests. In fact there's a chapter attached to the Sama that's partly a handbook of magically-potent *samans*.

ATHARVA VEDA

Atharva is a word that comes from Atharvan, the name of a fire priest, a reputed contributor to this book, and the son of the creator god Brahma. He's occasionally depicted as a randy old guy with fire-scorched skin. The spells and charms in the Atharva are divided into two groups. One is malevolent (*abhicara*), spells to unhinge your enemies with some horrible illness or impossibly bad luck–I'm sure you already have someone in mind you'd like to target. The other is remedial (*bheshajani*), charms to treat various virulent diseases, personified–maybe a better word is demonified–as flesh-eating ogres (*pishacha*) and devils (*rakshasa*). Here's one rebuking the dreaded fever demon, Takman:

And thou thyself who makest all men yellow, consuming them with burning heat...
Thou, Fever! Then be weak and ineffective. Pass hence into the realms below or vanish.

There are also charms for successful childbirth (especially for sons); for love affairs and the revival of virility, the Vedic equivalent of Viagra; for a long life, up to a "hundred autumns"; to expiate sins and create family harmony; to bring farmers rain, to protect shepherds and their herds from wild animals and merchants from robbers. There's even a charm to bring good luck to gamblers, which our woebegone friend from earlier might have tried when he visited the "gambling-house," though apparently it didn't work very well.

BRAHMANA

The Brahmanas, so named because they were written by and for Brahmin priests, are prose commentaries that, by all accounts, are nearly as titillating as modern-day law books. There are about a dozen Brahmanas, each one appended to one of the samhitas, and each with two parts: a "rule" (*vidhi*) part, which details rules or regulations for the proper conduct of the rather complex ceremonies or sacrifices; and an expository part (*artha-vada*), a what-not of explanations for the origins of the rituals and the legends connected with them.

ARANYAKA

The third layer of the Veda cake consists of the four surviving Aranyakas, the "forest" (*aranya*) books. Scholars assume these books were written by forest hermits, living rather spartan lives outside the pale not only of Vedic ritualism, but Vedic culture in general. They were, to use a modern phrase, true non-conformists. In the Aranyakas

Unlike the pedantic Brahmanas, to which they are appended, the Aranyakas are meditations on the inner or psychological and mystical meaning and symbolism of the sacrifice.