

# Readings in Vedic Literature: The Tradition Speaks for Itself

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Readings in

Vedic Literature

The Tradition Speaks for Itself

Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami

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Dedicated to my spiritual master

His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda

*evam paramparā-prāptam ...*

This supreme science was thus received through the chain of disciplic succession ...

– *Bhagavad-gītā* 4.2

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It is only just, in a karmic sense, that an academic scholar be asked to write the foreword for a book that rejects the views of most academic scholars on the historical development of the *Vedas*. To protect my own academic status (and perhaps incur further bad karma), I should say at the outset that I do not as a scholar accept Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami's views on the origin of the *Vedas*, and I question his use of evidence from the epics and *Purāṇas*, which I consider non-Vedic, to prove that these same sources have Vedic authority. At the same time, I recognize that such objections are mere pedantry from the standpoint of the living tradition. Much academic scholarship is like the proverbial medical example: the operation is successful, but the patient dies. Traditions that are healthy never take scholarly diagnoses too seriously, and they stay alive by staying off the operating table. There is much more than rejection of academic or "empirical" scholarship involved here, however: there is a point of view that has its own validity and, within its set of assumptions, its own high standards of scholarly study. Having indicated my own academic reservations, I must add that I am nonetheless impressed by Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami's presentation. His initial chapter is one of the best statements available on the importance of the guru in transmitting spiritual knowledge, his chapters on "Essential Elements of Vedic Thought," "Vedic Literature – *Siddhānta* and History," "The Teachings of the *Ācāryas*," and "Impersonalism Vs. Theism" are excellent summaries of devotional theology as found within the Indian religious tradition, and his chapter on "The Vedic Social Philosophy" gives a compelling vision of "the God-centered society." The point of view that runs throughout the work is one best represented textually in the *Bhagavad-gītā* and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The viewpoint is graphically portrayed in a late addition to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the *Bhāgavata Mahātmya*, where Bhakti (Devotion) is depicted as a young woman with two sons – Jñāna (Knowledge) and Vairāgya (Freedom-from-desire) – who, incongruously, have grown old and weak and must be nursed back to health by their still young and vigorous mother. Knowledge and Detachment on their own, it is explained, will wither away in this debased age; Devotion alone has the power to restore them to youth and vitality. Transferred to a theory of Vedic knowledge, this position leads directly to the thesis set forth by Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami: that the truth and impulse to spiritual discipline of the *Vedas* are maintained only where they are transformed by the vital power of devotion to the personal Lord. There is an inherent problem of communicating this viewpoint in the unfamiliar idiom of Sanskrit theological language, but the position is not unfamiliar in the West; indeed, one can argue that the vitality of Western religious traditions has depended no less on a continuing renewal of ancient authority on the basis of new spiritual insights. All Christian churches accept continuing revelation in one form or another, and saints, reformers, popes, theologians, evangelicals, and charismatic healers all claim new understanding of the unchanging truth of the scriptures through the power of the Holy Spirit. Talmudic commentaries, rabbinical interpretations, reform movements, and Hassidic mysticism have similarly given new life and meaning to ancient Torah. A religious tradition without saints and mystics, without new revelations, without the experience of the holy that gives new meaning to ancient teachings – such a tradition, no matter where in the world it may be, is spiritually dead. Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami shows us in this book that the Vedic tradition, as transmitted in its dynamic devotional aspect, is in no such danger. DR. THOMAS J. HOPKINS

Professor Emeritus

Franklin and Marshall College

Senior Associate Fellow, The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

Preface

My plan to write this book grew out of encouragement from professors in whose classes I taught while touring as a lecturer for the Los Angeles Center for Vedic Studies. In

November 1973, Dr. Alton Becker invited me to speak before the faculty and students of the Center for South and Southeastern Studies at the University of Michigan. My paper proposed a fresh attitude toward Vedic studies: an attempt to appreciate the Vedic knowledge on its own merits, as it exists apart from the interpretations of empirical Western scholarship. Dr. Becker found the viewpoint enlivening and advised me to develop it further. From conversations with college students who knew only the current Vedic textbooks, I became convinced that students of Vedic literature would be more enthusiastic if they could believe that the literature they were studying was not merely a hodgepodge of myths but could actually give them a new and coherent view of life. My travels led me to meet with Vedic scholars such as Dr. Edward Dimock (University of Chicago), Dr. Thomas Hopkins (Franklin and Marshall College), and Dr. Joseph O'Connell (University of Toronto). All these gentlemen saw my outline and confirmed that this book would be useful as a foundation for Vedic studies. My own interest in the Vedic tradition began in 1966. In that year I met His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, who in the previous year had arrived in the United States to teach Vedic culture. I had received a B.A. in English literature from Brooklyn College, and I was doing graduate work toward a career as a writer. But I decided instead to devote my life to studying the *Vedas*, and in September 1966, Śrīla Prabhupāda accepted me as his *śiṣya* (disciple). I have been a personal secretary to Śrīla Prabhupāda since 1970, and in 1972 I received the *sannyāsa* order of life (awarded for scholarship and renunciation). Overall, for the last ten years I have been studying the Vedic literature, writing articles about it, and lecturing in American colleges on behalf of the Center for Vedic Studies. The attempt herein is to present a Vedic textbook and anthology for undergraduates that allows them to hear a great tradition speak for itself.

**Sanskrit Pronunciation Guide** The system of transliteration used in this book conforms to a system that scholars have accepted to indicate the pronunciation of each sound in the Sanskrit language. The short vowel **a** is pronounced like the **u** in **but**, long **Ā** like the **a** in **far**. Short **i** is pronounced as in **pin**, long **Ī** as in **pinique**, short **u** as in **pull**, and long **Ū** as in **rule**. The vowel **ā** is pronounced like the **ri** in **rim**, **e** like the **ey** in **they**, **o** like the **o** in **go**, **ai** like the **ai** in **aisle**, and **au** like the **ow** in **how**. The *anusvāra* (**ạ̄**) is pronounced like the **n** in the French word **bon**, and *visarga* (**āḥ**) is pronounced as a final **h** sound. At the end of a couplet, **āḥ** is pronounced **aha**, and **īḥ** is pronounced **ihi**. The guttural consonants – **k, kh, g, gh, and ạ̄...** – are pronounced from the throat in much the same manner as in English. **K** is pronounced as in **kite**, **kh** as in **Ekhart**, **g** as in **give**, **gh** as in **dighard**, and **ạ̄...** as in **sing**. The palatal consonants – **c, ch, j, jh, and A±** – are pronounced with the tongue touching the firm ridge behind the teeth. **C** is pronounced as in **chair**, **ch** as in **staunch-heart**, **j** as in **joy**, **jh** as in **edgehog**, and **A±** as in **cañon**. The cerebral consonants – **ạ̄-, ạ̄-h, ạ̄, ạ̄-h, and ạ̄ḥ** – are pronounced with the tip of the tongue turned up and drawn back against the dome of the palate. **ạ̄-** is pronounced as in **tub**, **ạ̄-h** as in **light-heart**, **ạ̄** as in **dove**, **ạ̄-h** as in **red-hot**, and **ạ̄ḥ** as in **nut**. The dental consonants **ạ̄ḥ t, th, d, dh, and n ạ̄ḥ** are pronounced in the same manner as the cerebrals, but with the forepart of the tongue against the teeth. The labial consonants **ạ̄ḥ p, ph, b, bh, and m** – are pronounced with the lips. **P** is pronounced as in **pine**, **ph** as in **uphill**, **b** as in **bird**, **bh** as in **rub-hard**, and **m** as in **mother**. The semivowels – **y, r, l, and v** – are pronounced as in **yes, run, light, and vine** respectively. The sibilants – **ạ̄, ạ̄ḥ, and s** – are pronounced, respectively, as in the German word **sprechen** and the English words **shine** and **sun**. The letter **h** is pronounced as in **home**.

**Sanskrit Pronunciation Guide**

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Śrī Śaṅkara (788–820)

Śrī Rāmānuja (1017–1137)

Madhva (1239–1319)

Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya (1486–1534)

Chapter 1

What Are the Vedas? Madhva, one of the principal teachers of Vedic philosophy, commenting on the *Vedānta-sūtra* (2.1.6), quotes the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* as follows: ṛg-yajuḥ-sāmārtharvāś ca

*bhāratam pañcarātrakam*

*mūla-rāmāyaṇam caiva*

*veda ity eva śabditaḥ purāṇāni ca yānīha*

*vaiṣṇavāni vido viduḥ* “The *Ṛg Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sāma Veda*, *Atharva Veda*, *Mahābhārata* [which includes the *Bhagavad-gītā*], *Pañcarātra*, and the original *Rāmāyaṇa* are all considered Vedic literature.... The Vaiṣṇava supplements, the *Purāṇas*, are also Vedic literature.” We may also include corollary literatures like the *Saṁhitās*, as well as the commentaries of the great teachers who have guided the course of Vedic thought for centuries. Some scholars say

that only the original four *Vedas* – *Ṛg*, *Atharva*, *Yajur*, and *Sāma* – are genuine Vedic literatures. 1 The *Vedas* themselves, however, do not support this view, nor do the most prominent Vedic teachers, including Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Madhva. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (7.1.4) mentions the *Purāṇas* and *Itihāsas*, which are generally known as histories, as the fifth *Veda*: *itihāsa-purāṇaḥ pañcamah vedānām vedaḥ*. And the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (1.4.20) confirms, “The historical facts and authentic stories mentioned in the *Purāṇas* are called the fifth *Veda*.”

2 In any case, to be accepted as Vedic, a literature must maintain the same purpose as the original Vedic texts. The Vedic scriptures ( *śāstras*) comprise a harmonious whole with a harmonious conclusion ( *siddhānta*). Consequently, we may accept as a bona fide Vedic writing any work that expands on the Vedic *siddhānta* without changing its meaning, even if the work is not one of the original scriptures. In fact, the Vedic tradition necessitates further authoritative works that convey the Vedic message according to time and place. However, to be genuine, these extensions of Vedic literature must strictly conform to the doctrines of the *Vedas*, *Purāṇas*, and the *Vedānta-sūtra*. Vedic literature is neither dead nor archaic. Nevertheless, any literature

– be it ancient or modern – must be considered non-Vedic if it deviates from the Vedic *siddhānta*. Thus Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, though definitely outgrowths of Vedic literature, are not considered Vedic. Even the conception of Hinduism is alien to the Vedic conclusion, as we shall see later. The Vedic scriptures are vast in scope. The *Ṛg Veda* alone contains 1,017 hymns, the *Mahābhārata* consists of 110,000 couplets, and the eighteen chief *Purāṇas* contain hundreds of thousands of verses. We may ask, “Why do these writings exist? Where did they come from? Who wrote them?” The present book searches out the answers to our questions in the Vedic *śāstras* themselves.

The Purpose of the Vedic Literature As its main purpose, the Vedic literature imparts knowledge of self-realization and, therefore, liberation ( *moṁṣa*) from suffering. Generally, scholars agree that the goal of Indian thought is to attain the truth, “the recognition of which leads to freedom.” 3 “Every Indian system seeks truth, not as academic, ‘knowledge for its own sake,’ but to learn the truth which shall make all men free.” 4 Indeed, Indian thought strives not for information but for transformation. 5 The *Bhagavad-gītā* describes knowledge as “accepting the importance of self-realization, and philosophical search for the Absolute Truth.” 6 Yet if people think they are progressing on the path of material happiness, they will not seek to transform themselves. Hence, another important realization –

*janma-mṛtyu-jarā-vyādhi-duḥkha-doṣānudarśanam*: “perception of the evil of birth, death, old age, and disease” ( *Bhagavad-gītā* 13.9). Uncompromisingly, the Vedic literature asserts that despite its apparent joys, material life means suffering. Vedic knowledge purports to free the sincere inquirer from that suffering. According to the *Bhagavad-gītā* (8.16), “From the highest planet in the material world down to the lowest, all are places of misery wherein repeated birth and death take place.” Apart from the repeated miseries of birth, old age, disease, and death, the Vedic writings describe another threefold set of miseries: miseries arising from the body itself,

miserias inflicted by other living entities, and miserias arising from natural disturbances (such as severe cold, heat, flood, earthquake, or drought). Vedic teachers argue that even if these latter miserias were absent, no one could find happiness in the material world – the forces of time and death force everyone to leave his position. Indeed, the Sanskrit description of the earth is *Mṛtyuloka*, the place of death. It is also *duḥkhālayam* (a place of miserias) and *asāśvatam* (temporary) (*Gītā* 8.15). On hearing this sweeping analysis of life in the material world, Albert Schweitzer termed the Vedic philosophy “world- and life-negation.” <sup>7</sup> Others have stated that the *Vedas* teach pessimism and fatalistic resignation. But when we view the *Vedas* closely, we can discern that they teach quite the opposite; they propose that the purpose of human life is not to resign oneself to a temporary and miserable world but to strive for permanent happiness. For people who follow the Vedic formula, life means an opportunity to attain victory over death. In the Vedic conception, a person negates life precisely when he identifies the illusory body with the self and considers the temporary world to be all in all. Such a person misses the opportunity afforded a human being – the opportunity to inquire about the Supreme. The first verse of the *Vedānta-sūtra* (*athāto brahma-jijñāsā*) is both a declaration and an invitation to everyone: “Now, therefore, let us inquire into the Absolute Truth.” <sup>8</sup> The *Vedas* urge that people take to the path of liberation. In one Bengali devotional song we find, “Lord Gaurāṅga is calling, ‘Wake up, sleeping souls! How long will you sleep on the lap of the witch called Māyā [material illusion]?’” <sup>9</sup>

The *Vedas* describe liberation as a special prerogative granted to human beings and not to the lower species. For this reason the human body is compared to a boat by which one can cross the ocean of transmigration. A good Vedic instructor who has learned the *Vedas* is like a competent captain, and the Vedic hymns are like favorable breezes. If a person doesn’t cross the ocean and attain eternal liberation, he is considered unintelligent, for Vedic philosophy denies the importance of any knowledge that does not lead to the cessation of suffering. The *Bṛhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad* advises, “He is a miserly man who does not solve the problems of life as a human and who quits the world like a cat or a dog, not understanding the science of self-realization.” <sup>10</sup>

The Origin of the Vedas The *Bṛhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad* (2.4.10) informs us, “The *Rg Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sāma Veda*, *Atharva Veda*, and *Itihāsas* [histories like the *Mahābhārata* and *Purāṇas*] are all breathed out by the Absolute Truth. Just as one’s breath comes easily, these arise from the Supreme Brahman without any effort on His part.” <sup>11</sup> According to the Vedic tradition, the *Vedas* are absolute and self-authoritative. They depend on nothing but themselves for explanation. This very principle comes from the mouth of Śrī Kṛṣṇa in *Bhagavad-gītā* (3.15): *brahmākṣara-samudbhavam*. “The *Vedas* are directly manifested from the infallible Supreme Personality of Godhead.” The commentator Śrīdhara Svāmī (*Bhāvārthadīpikā* 6.1.40) points out that the *Vedas* are supremely authoritative because they arise from Nārāyaṇa Himself. Jīva Gosvāmī notes that the Vedic scripture *Madhyandina-śruti* attributes all the *Vedas* (*Sāma*, *Atharva*, *Rg*, and *Yajur*), as well as the *Purāṇas* and *Itihāsas*, to the breathing of the Supreme Being. Finally, the *Atharva Veda* states that Kṛṣṇa, who in the beginning instructed Brahmā, disseminated Vedic knowledge in the past. Thus, as we have seen, the Vedic scriptures delineate their own origin. The scriptures describe themselves as *apauruṣeya*, meaning that they do not come from any materially conditioned person but from the Supreme (a source transcendental to mundane duality). Vedic knowledge was imparted to Brahmā at the dawn of creation. Brahmā then instructed Nārada, whose realizations appear throughout Vedic literature.

Vedic knowledge is considered eternal, but because the material cosmos is constantly in flux, Vedic teachings constantly need reassertion. Although the material cosmos is also considered eternal, it goes through stages of creation, maintenance, and annihilation. Formerly the *Vedas* came down by word of mouth, but later the sage Vyāsadeva compiled all the Vedic *sāstras* in written form. In a separate chapter we shall examine Śrīla Vyāsadeva’s role and the history of the compilation of the *Vedas*. We shall also consider how scholars try to understand the origins and history of the Vedic literature through the empiric method.

The Vedic Process of Learning We can see in the Vedic verses an inexorable link between the substance of Vedic knowledge and the means for receiving it (between the Vedic message, we could say, and the Vedic medium). In contrast with Western conceptions, Vedic epistemology

favors the process called *śabda* (hearing from Vedic literature), out of three possible knowledge-gaining processes. The first process, *pratyakṣa* (empiric sensual perception), depends on correction from outside sources. For example, to our eyes the sun may seem no larger than a coin, but from scientific calculation we learn that our senses mislead us – the sun is many times larger than the earth. The second knowledge-gaining process, *anumāna* (theories based on evidence), cannot give knowledge of what is beyond the range of proof. Charles Darwin's theories and much of archeology and anthropology rely on such inductive conjecture ("It may have been like this, or perhaps it was like this"). According to the *Vedas*, *anumāna* cannot independently lead to perfect knowledge. The *Vedas* assert that objects beyond material nature cannot be known experimentally. These objects are therefore called *acintya*. That which is *acintya* cannot be known by speculation or by argument but only by *śabda*, the process of hearing from Vedic literature. Indeed, *śabda*, the third knowledge-acquiring process, is considered the most reliable and important. For, since human beings are limited and imperfect, their perception, theories, and speculations cannot be perfect. With the exclusion of *śabda*, the *Vedas* estimate all knowledge to be defective in four ways. First, regardless how bright or precise a person may be, the *Vedas* affirm that he cannot escape mistakes: "to err is human." Second, a human being is subject to illusion. For instance, the *śāstras* mention that every materially conditioned being is under the illusion that the body is the self. Whatever his position in the world, a person is under illusion if he thinks of himself in terms of nationality, religion, race, or family. (A person's first step in transcendental knowledge, according to the *Vedas*, is realizing that his identity is beyond the temporary material body.) Third, every person has limited or imperfect senses. For instance, in a darkened room he cannot see his hand before his face. Finally, the *Vedas* maintain, everyone has a tendency to cheat. For example, a man who presumes to instruct others although defective himself is actually cheating, because his knowledge is imperfect. Vedic knowledge is *śabda*, knowledge through hearing from higher authority, and it is therefore considered perfect. The Indian scholar Mysore Hiriyanna writes, "The *Vedānta* never dispenses with reason, and the *Upaniṣads* are themselves full of arguments. All that is questioned is the final validity of reason in matters which do not come within its purview." <sup>12</sup> To cite a traditional example, if a child wants to know who his father is, he should ask his mother. He may make a survey of the male population, but much more simply, he can ask his mother, the natural authority. In other words, if a person can accept information given by an authority, he does not have to take the trouble to research independently. The *śabda* method, by which we accept authority, is imperative when we inquire about subject matter beyond the purview of the senses and reason. We may note that in the Vedic conception authority has no Western-styled negative connotations. The term refers not to a dictator but to a deliverer of primary knowledge. For instance, William Shakespeare himself is naturally the authority par excellence on the works of William Shakespeare.

Aural reception of transcendental knowledge from authority is the Vedic standard.

Whereas material knowledge pertains to things within the material universe, transcendental knowledge pertains to things beyond this universe. The *Vedas* point to a supreme original truth unknowable either by direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) or by the inductive method (*anumāna*). When, by aural reception from authority, a person gains transcendental information, he becomes completely fulfilled and happy. He transcends the dualities of the material world. On the other hand, when he follows the empiric tradition, he comes to regard anything outside sensual perception or induction as faith, dogma, intuition, or belief. He concludes, as does A. B. Keith, "Such knowledge as is not empirical is meaningless and should not be described as knowledge."

<sup>13</sup> The Vedic philosophers claim that *śabda* (hearing from an authority) opens up a realm of knowledge beyond scientific methodology. They hold *śabda* to be the only process by which we can know what is unknowable in our present conditioned state. To know his father, a child has no other recourse than to ask his mother. This is a matter not of faith, dogma, or feeling, but simply of hearing from one who knows. If a person can learn from someone who has received perfect knowledge, he can get free from all misery. "Just try to learn the truth by approaching a spiritual master," the *Gītā* (4.34) enjoins. "Inquire from him submissively and render service unto him. The self-realized soul can impart knowledge unto you because he has seen the truth." In the

Vedic tradition, only the person who has “seen the truth” can be the ideal teacher, the guru. In addition, the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (1.2.12) enjoins that a sincere student has to approach the ideal guru to receive transcendental knowledge and enlightenment. The Guru and Paramparā

To learn more about *śabda*, we should examine the Vedic conception of the teacher (guru) and the student (*śiṣya*). Not only must the student turn to Vedic literature for perfect knowledge, but he must also receive knowledge personally from a qualified teacher with whom he has a special relationship. Technically the word *guru* means “heavy,” and the qualified guru must be heavy, or grave, with knowledge. Anyone who is bewildered by the problems of existence must approach a spiritual master for knowledge. Thus *Bhagavad-gītā* presents the ideal teacher-student relationship. Faced with doing battle against his friends and relatives, Arjuna breaks down. A noted psychologist has commented that Arjuna experiences “ontological anxiety,” that he loses sight of his identity and his duty. Therefore, he approaches his guru, Kṛṣṇa (who is accepted throughout the *Vedas* as the Supreme Person, the knower and compiler of the *Vedas* ). “I have lost all composure,” Arjuna says. “Please instruct me” (*Gītā* 2.7). Later, Lord Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that everyone should accept a bona fide spiritual master. In the *Muṇḍaka*

*Upaniṣad* (1.2.12) we find *tad-vijñānārthaṁ sa gurum evābhigacchet samit-pāṇiḥ śrotriyaṁ brahma-niṣṭham*: In order to learn the transcendental science, one must submissively approach a bona fide spiritual master, who is coming in disciplic succession and is fixed in the Absolute Truth.

[14](#) Hiriyanna writes that this Vedic view is not difficult to appreciate. “For self-effort, however valuable in itself, is not an adequate means of grasping a truth so profound.... The living voice of a teacher who firmly believes in what he teaches has certainly a better chance of producing conviction than the written word.” [15](#) Thus the message of the *Vedas* descends through the spiritual master. As we have mentioned, the *Vedas* maintain that knowledge gained by sense perception or speculation can never enable the student to reach the highest goal. Vedic truth reaches the student by the descending process, from the *Vedas* and through the guru. This chain of transmission is called *guru-paramparā*, the disciplic succession. In

*Bhagavad-gītā* (4.2) Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna, *evaṁ paramparā-prāptam*: “This supreme science [*bhakti-yoga*, knowledge through devotional service] was thus received through the chain of disciplic succession.” Thus the student’s relationship is not just with his own spiritual master but also with the spiritual master of his spiritual master and the spiritual master of that master and so on, in an unbroken chain of masters. The chain of masters in which a particular guru hears and speaks the truth is called his *sampradāya*. For instance, in the *Brahma-sampradāya*, Vedic knowledge descends from Brahmā, and in the Kumāra-sampradāya it descends from the Kumāra *rṣis* (sages). In the Vedic conception, these *sampradāyas* began at the creation of the universe and endure to the present moment in the person of the student’s own guru. Thanks to the consistency of the transmission, all the previous gurus are present in the teachings of the present spiritual master. The student receives the pure Vedic message in the same way he might receive a mango from a number of men sitting on the branches of a mango tree. The man at the top of the tree picks the fruit and hands it down carefully to the man below. Thus it comes down from man to man and reaches the man on the ground, undamaged and unchanged. One may question

whether a line of teachers can accurately pass the message from one to another without change or addition. But not just anyone can presume to speak Vedic knowledge in succession from the past teachers – only a perfect guru. The Vedic process assures that the transmission remains pure by assuring the qualifications of the transmitter. The Qualifications of the Guru Since

the guru must transmit the truths of Vedic knowledge perfectly, he plays a crucial role. Consequently, the *Vedas* admonish the prospective disciple to acquaint himself with the qualifications of a bona fide guru. Regrettably, in recent years many Indian and Western teachers at variance with the Vedic version have undermined the guru’s credibility. Now we have professional gurus who charge fees for secret mantras and allow their students to disregard all the Vedic regulative austerities, who teach yoga as gymnastic exertion and maintain that the purpose of yoga is material well-being, and who defy the *Vedas* by declaring themselves or everyone to be God, and so on. It is little wonder that when we hear the word guru, we are skeptical.

Nevertheless, according to the Vedic version, the *guru-śiṣya* relationship is an eternal verity that a

person can realize only if he sincerely approaches a bona fide guru. It is therefore necessary to first understand the symptoms of a bona fide guru – that is, of a spiritual master who has received and can impart pure knowledge. Rūpa Gosvāmī, a sixteenth-century Vedic philosopher and disciple of Kṛṣṇa Caitanya, lists in his *Upadeśāmṛta* six symptoms of a guru: “Any sober person who can tolerate the urge to speak, the mind’s demands, the reactions of anger, and the urges of the tongue, belly, and genitals is qualified to make disciples all over the world.” [16](#) The spiritual master is also an *ācārya*, one who teaches by personal example. Intellectual brilliance notwithstanding, a man of dubious personal character, who is attached to selfish gratification and self-interest, cannot be a spiritual master. Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya stated, *āpani ācari’ bhakti karila pracāra*: “First become perfect, and then you can teach.” [17](#) In other words, the guru must be a *svāmī*, or master of the senses, and not a slave to their dictates. No one should assume the titles of guru, *svāmī*, and *sannyāsī* (renounced monk) whimsically. The candidate must actually demonstrate the qualities of guru, *svāmī*, and *sannyāsī*. By definition, the guru imparts instructions consonant with the teachings of Vedic literature. He does not deviate from Vedic teachings through mental speculation, nor is he an atheist, a mundane politician, or a humanitarian. He maintains that spiritual knowledge is the ultimate welfare for humanity; therefore he himself lives a life that demonstrates detachment from material pleasure. In other words, he must be blissfully united with the Supreme. Vedic literature admits that such a person is *sudurlabha*, very rarely found (*Gītā* 7.19). For his part the guru himself has to be a *śiṣya* (student) of a genuine spiritual master in the disciplic succession. There is also a checks-and-balance system called *guru-śāstra-sādhu*. [18](#) The teachings of guru must correspond with the teachings of *sādhu* (the previous spiritual masters in the disciplic succession), which in turn must all correspond with the direct meanings of *śāstra* (the scripture).

The Qualifications of the Disciple A student must also be qualified, and his basic requirements come to light in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. The disciple must “inquire from the guru submissively and render service unto him” (*Gītā* 4.34). Faith in the guru is of utmost importance and qualifies one for initiation. The *Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (6.23) [19](#) states: *yasya deve parā bhaktir*

*yathā deve tathā gurau*

*tasyaite kathitā hy arthāḥ*

*prakāśante mahātmanah* “Only unto those great souls who have implicit faith in the Supreme and the spiritual master are all the imports of Vedic knowledge automatically revealed.” Faith in the guru is the subject matter in a narration about Śrī Kṛṣṇa from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (10.80). When recalling His boyhood pastimes, Kṛṣṇa recollects that when He once went to collect fuel for His guru, He and His friend were lost in the forest during a great rainstorm and spent all night wandering about. In the morning, when the guru and other disciples finally found Kṛṣṇa, the guru was very pleased, and he blessed Kṛṣṇa: It is very wonderful that You have suffered so much trouble for me. Everyone likes to take care of his body as the first consideration, but You are so good and faithful to Your guru, that without caring for bodily comforts You have taken so much trouble for the satisfaction of the spiritual master. It is the duty of the disciple to dedicate his life to the service of the spiritual master. My dear best of the twice born, I am greatly pleased by Your action, and I bless You: may all Your desires and ambitions be fulfilled. May the understanding of the *Vedas* which You have learned from me always continue to remain in Your memory, so that at every moment You can remember the teachings of the *Vedas* and quote their instructions without difficulty. Thus You will never be disappointed in this life or in the next. [20](#)

Kṛṣṇa recalled the incident in this way: Without the blessings of the spiritual master, no one can be happy. By the mercy of the spiritual master, and by his blessings, one can achieve peace and prosperity and be able to fulfill the mission of human life. [21](#) Obviously, the faith described herein is not simply intellectual agreement on some theological matter. Rather, the disciple must completely surrender himself bodily and mentally as the servant of the guru and take

up the guru's instructions as his life's mission. It is, then, no overstatement that "selection of a guru is more significant than the selection of a spouse." [22](#) The *Vedas* stress the need for such complete commitment. After all, the guru acts as the disciple's savior. He alone can impart Vedic knowledge and thus liberation. The disciple therefore owes a debt to his guru, who has personally lifted him out of conditioned ignorance and blessed him with the perfection of eternity, bliss, and knowledge. In his turn, the guru must execute his duties humbly as a servitor of the Supreme and of his own guru in the disciplic succession.

If one satisfies his guru by sincere service and actually understands the Vedic conclusion, he receives initiation as a *brāhmaṇa*. A *brāhmaṇa* is a learned person who is responsible enough to enlighten others. In India there are many *smārta-brāhmaṇas*, or caste-conscious *brāhmaṇas*, who insist that one cannot be elevated to brahminical status unless he is born in a *brāhmaṇa* family. This *brāhmaṇa*-by-birth conception is decidedly non-Vedic. One scholar writes, "In the *Śrīmad Bhagavad-gītā-parvādhyāyāḥ* of the *Mahābhārata*, Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa says in very clear terms that the classification of the people into four *varṇas* (castes) is based on *guṇa-karma*, i.e., spiritual quality and conduct." [23](#) There is a popular story in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* about a boy named Satyakāma who approached a guru for enlightenment. "Are you the son of a *brāhmaṇa*?" the guru asked. The boy said that he didn't know who his father was. The guru then asked him to inquire from his mother, but the boy's mother frankly told him that since she had known many men, she wasn't sure who his father was. The boy then returned to the guru and said, "My mother doesn't know." Pleased with the boy's honesty, the spiritual master concluded, "You are a *brāhmaṇa*." [24](#)

According to the Vedic standard, anyone can be elevated by training. In the *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* of Sanātana Gosvāmī it is stated that one who is properly initiated certainly becomes a *brāhmaṇa*, just as bell metal can be turned into gold when mixed with mercury. In the Seventh Canto of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (7.11.35), Nārada tells King Yudhiṣṭhira that if one has the qualities of a *brāhmaṇa*, he must be accepted as a *brāhmaṇa*. Thus birth in a particular family, race, or religion is not an essential qualification for a *śiṣya*. Most important among a disciple's qualifications are faith, service, and submissive inquiry. Yet the disciple should not follow his guru blindly. In the *Bhagavad-gītā* Arjuna asks a series of probing questions, and Śrī Kṛṣṇa replies with philosophical reasoning and references to *śāstra* and *sādhu*.

In the Vedic tradition the importance of the *guru-śiṣya* relationship cannot be exaggerated. Indeed, the *Padma Purāṇa* stresses that it is impossible to gain spiritual knowledge without a guru: "Unless one is initiated by a bona fide spiritual master in the disciplic succession, the mantra that one has received is without any effect." Continually the *śāstras* accentuate the inestimable value of association with a saintly person. A moment's association is said to be more valuable than thousands of lifetimes without that association. A *śiṣya's* eagerness to hear from the guru is itself a great qualification. After hearing, if he obediently carries out the instructions of the spiritual master, the disciple automatically advances beyond liberation, to the ultimate stage of love of God.

It is necessary that the *śiṣya*, like his guru, live according to the high moral standards set forth in the *śāstras*. Śaṅkara states that a student of philosophy must meet the following essential conditions: the student must have the strong will to inquire into the difference between matter and spirit, he must renounce all personal demands and self-interest, and he must restrain his mind and senses. [25](#) Unless he can give up all material pleasure and be detached from sorrow as well, he cannot qualify for transcendental life. As Kṛṣṇa confirms in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (2.41), "Those who are on this path are resolute in purpose, and their aim is one.... The intelligence of those who are irresolute is many branched." Traditionally, a disciple must give up the "four pillars of sin": meat-eating, illicit sex, gambling, and intoxication. [26](#)

**Summary** We have described the purpose, the origin, and the process of Vedic knowledge according to the statements of the *Vedas* themselves. The Vedic follower accepts the *śāstras* as the words of the supreme person ( *īśvara*, Nārāyaṇa), hence as axiomatic truths. In other words, there is no need to verify those truths the *Vedas* have already set forth. Further, the follower should understand the cause of all causes not by material knowledge or independent mental conjecture but by hearing faithfully from an authorized spiritual master. The sublime secrets of spiritual life passed on from guru to *śiṣya* are open to everyone regardless of social caste or

birth. To become a candidate for spiritual knowledge the follower must observe the regulations for purification set forth by the guru. These are the basic precepts of the *Vedas* regarding the acquisition of transcendental knowledge.

## Chapter 2

**The Empirical Approach to Vedic Literature** In chapter one we discussed some of the principles of Vedic learning handed down by the disciplic succession of Vedic teachers. We should also note that in the last two hundred years virtually all Western universities have taken a critical-historical, or empirical, approach. Hinduism and Indian philosophy have become popular subjects in many colleges, and there has arisen a community of established Sanskritists and Indologists. However, if we compare the empirical version of Vedic knowledge with the version of the *Vedas* themselves, we often find the two at opposite poles. Empiric scholars rarely discuss this conflict. They assume, usually correctly, that readers will accept the empiric version because of the scholar's reputation for probing research and analysis. When discrepancies become obvious, the empiric scholars usually represent their own views as the objective picture of Vedic civilization.

Yet these conflicts raise a number of questions. Why do some scholars reject the explanations of the Vedic literature's origin, purpose, and transcendental nature as received from both the texts themselves and the traditional Vedic scholars? Why is the Vedic literature's description of itself necessarily unacceptable? Is it simply that the empiric scholars doubt that the *Vedas* or the *ācāryas* are what they say they are? The *Vedas* claim divine origin, and the scholars deem their origin mythological. The *Vedas* propose to elevate man from suffering and grant him liberation, but the scholars suppose that studying the *Vedas* for spiritual purposes is unscholarly. Although the *Vedas* warn that the Vedic teachings are transcendental to material investigation, scholars reject such injunctions as esoteric taboos and proceed to analyze the *Vedas* in an empirical spirit. They frankly regard the *Vedas* as mythology and assign themselves to the task of demythologizing. The *Vedas* affirm that Vedic knowledge must be heard from a spiritual master in the disciplic succession, but the scholar who writes books about the *Vedas* is not a guru, nor does his scholarly conscience allow him to accept such an approach. Moreover, the scholar surveys the guru from what he considers a superior, more objective, and academic vantage point. The *Vedas* maintain that one must observe strict moral standards and perform austerities before understanding Vedic literature, but scholars consider such things to be unnecessary.

What is the best way to study the *Vedas*? Should we give credence, after all, to what the *Vedas* say about themselves? Before deciding, we should know something about the substantiality of empiric Vedic scholarship.

**Empirical Tools** The tools used by empiric Indologists are the scientific standards of history, anthropology, archeology, philology, and related disciplines. Since Indological studies began in the eighteenth century, the research in every field has become increasingly sophisticated. However, the scholars agree that their critical reconstruction of the origin and nature of Vedic culture is highly uncertain.

**History** Empiricists generally place great importance on understanding historical development, but for the Vedic period there is no history aside from the *śāstras*. For thousands of years the early Indians kept no such histories, and as O. L. Chavarría-Aguilar writes in his book *Traditional India*, "A more unhistorical people would be difficult to find." <sup>1</sup> *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* informs us, "A historical treatment of Indian philosophy has not been taken up by the great Indian thinkers themselves." <sup>2</sup> Ancient Rome had its Livy and ancient Greece its Herodotus, but India had no great historian to record the Vedic period. According to modern Indologists, the Indian's lack of interest in history was not due to a primitive inability to keep records; rather, he accepted the historical version of the *śāstras* as sufficient.

Scientific historians choose not to accept the historical validity of the *śāstras*; their alternative is to begin the official history of India with the death of Buddha in 483 B.C. In any case, this is the earliest date empirically settled. Scholars concede that the Vedic period began thousands of years before Christ, but as for the dating of even approximate periods, "everywhere we are on unsafe ground." <sup>3</sup> Nevertheless,

scholars have reconstructed various historical periods, which they theoretically assign to the thousands of unaccounted years. Pioneer Indologist Max Muller devised a system of classifying the Vedic civilization into periods called "*Chandas, Mantra, Brāhmaṇa, and Sūtra*," and a number of scholars have concurred. <sup>4</sup> Others have also given their own divisions. Radhakrishnan, for instance, looks upon the broad divisions of Indian history as Vedic, Epic, Sūtra, and Scholastic. <sup>5</sup> Handbooks on Vedic history differ on specific dates by as much as one or two thousand years. Indeed, Moriz Winternitz, one of the most respected chronologists, argues that any attempt to reconstruct the Vedic period is unscientific. He writes, "The chronology of the history of Indian literature is shrouded in truly terrifying darkness." <sup>6</sup> Winternitz somewhat pointedly notes that it would be pleasant and convenient, especially when preparing a handbook on Vedic literature, to divide the literature into three or four periods and assign dates and categories. "But every attempt of such a kind is bound to fail in the present state of knowledge, and the use of hypothetical dates would only be a delusion, which would do more harm than good." <sup>7</sup> He states that it is even better not to assign dates to the oldest period of Indian literary history. Using discoveries by related field workers and conducting further research into the texts, successive generations of historians continue to develop new pictures of the Vedic past. However, Winternitz quotes a pioneer American Sanskritist who years ago said, "All dates given in Indian literary history are pins set up to be bowled down again." <sup>8</sup> Winternitz remarks, "For the most part this is still the case today." <sup>9</sup> We may thus conclude that there is simply no history of the original Vedic civilization in India, at least none that is acceptable in the strict sense of empiric history. Archeology

Archeology, of course, is especially suitable for finding out about ancient cultures. But what was true for Vedic historical records is also true for archeological finds, which to date give us no clear picture of Vedic civilization. Of course, many of the geographical sites mentioned in the scriptures are still known, and according to tradition many of the temples in India have been maintained for thousands of years, but these sites have not yielded solid archeological evidence.

Archeologists and anthropologists cannot accept the śāstric version that Vedic civilization flourished in India long before fifty thousand years ago – the date which scientists assign as the earliest possible appearance of Homo sapiens on earth. Consistently the *śāstras* mention that Vedic literature was written down at the beginning of the Age of Kali some five thousand years ago, and that philosophers, yogis, and *ṛṣis* lived many millions of years ago. Although empiricists most often discount such sophistication in ancient humanity, they do admit that "the history of the human race is being rewritten with new dating processes and with exciting discoveries around the world." <sup>10</sup> The general trend in the rewriting of human history is to push the theoretical date from the beginning of advanced human civilization further and further back into what has become known as prehistory. As far as the archeology of India is concerned, the excavations of cities and temples have produced no conclusive empirical data about the Vedic culture's first appearance.

Western archeology got its start in India early in the nineteenth century, when the surveyors of the East India Company found many temples, shrines, old coins, and inscriptions written in dead scripts. In the 1830s the edicts of Emperor Aśoka were deciphered, and thus Indian civilization was dated at 300 B.C. In the twentieth century, work began on a large scale. The most famous archeological discoveries relating to the prehistoric period took place under the supervision of archeologist Sir John Marshall, who in the 1920s uncovered the cities of Harappa and Mohenjaro, located in what is now Pakistan. These were the cities of an efficient, urban social community, now called the Indus civilization, which has been dated at 3000 BC. <sup>11</sup> Though a fabulous find for archeology, Harappa has contributed but little to our understanding of the ancient Vedic period. If it was hoped that the discoveries at Harappa and Mohenjaro might throw some light on the *Vedas*, that hope was not fulfilled. Among the artifacts found at Harappa was a small figure of a seated man who might be Śiva, but this is not definite. Linguistic research and

interpretation of the *Rg Veda* have given rise to a hypothesis linking the Indus civilization with the origin of the *Vedas*. As the story has it, the peaceful Dravidians (the name of the original people of Harappa) were invaded by Aryan barbarians, who brought with them tales of Indra (*Rg Veda*). This account enjoys wide currency in books, but it is by no means a scientific conclusion. <sup>12</sup> Rather, it is a hypothetical creation set forth to explain what would otherwise be inexplicable.

About the Indus civilization, one Indologist comments, "We do not know for certain who the authors of the remarkable civilization were; it is another of those mysteries that make the scholar's life at once interesting and somewhat frustrating." [13](#) As for the theory that the Dravidians met their demise under Indra's hordes of plundering Aryans, H. P. Rowlinson writes, "A number of scholars have pointed the finger of accusation at the Aryans ... but the guilt of those immigrants is far from established." [14](#) Thus although scholars favor various theories, archeological finds like those of the Indus civilization have to date given evidence insufficient for reconstructing the period in which the Vedic scriptures were composed.

Archeology gains considerable scientific veracity by allying with other disciplines such as atomic physics (which produced the carbon-14 dating process). Will archeologists one day find something that will actually solve the Vedic riddles once and for all? Anthropologist Julian H. Steward writes, "Facts exist only as they are related to theories, and theories are not destroyed by facts – they are replaced by new theories which better explain the facts." [15](#) In other words, we might say, although archeologists intend to find out much more, they may never know for sure.

Whatever facts and theories the future may hold, archeology, the empiricist's main hope, has thus far failed to penetrate the darkness that shrouds the Vedic period; the prime record of Vedic culture is, of course, oral tradition. Hence, in the very area where archeology alone can give the empiricist knowledge, we can seriously question whether archeology is even relevant. "Religion is a mental or spiritual phenomenon in which the sacred or supernatural word plays an important part. Obviously this essential expression of religion cannot be investigated archeologically – the remains are wordless." [16](#)

Linguistic Research As we would expect, research has spread to still other disciplines. In fact, among the most important tools in Indological research is the study of linguistics. In the late eighteenth century, linguists in India made a comparative study of Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin and concluded that the languages were so similar in vocabulary and grammar that they must have come from a common ancestral tongue. In 1786, Sir William Jones theorized that Sanskrit and other languages had "sprung from some common source which perhaps no longer exists." [17](#) This language received the name Proto-Indo-European. Although there is no clear evidence that this language was ever spoken, linguists reconstructed a Proto-Indo-European language with the help of archeologists, who contributed evidence on who might have spoken it and where. Stuart Piggot writes: "The location of a possible Indo-European homeland and the identification of the culture implied by the linguistic evidence with a comparable archeological phenomenon, has been a matter of debate since the idea was first formulated in the last century." [18](#) From a hypothetical language, a hypothetical human community emerged, its members called Indo-Europeans. Because words like "horse" and "father" were prominent in the vocabulary of Proto-Indo-Europeans, the scholars constructed a community of farmers who had domesticated the horse and in whose society the father was dominant. [19](#) Also, the scholars ascribed to them a religion and rites, although no one can say for certain where these people lived. In a recent history of India we find this assessment:

The aboriginal home of the Aryans [the Indo-Europeans are supposed to be the predecessors of the Aryans who invaded India] is again a controversial point, and in the face of the hopeless chaos of conflicting views, it seems impossible to come to any definite conclusion. The most probable theory seems to be that the Aryans migrated into India from outside, the exact region from where they came being still a point of discussion. [20](#)

Professor of linguistics Ward Goddenaugh pointed out that chauvinism and racism definitely entered into historical European interpretations of Indo-European origins. Thus scholars arbitrarily compiled data to prove that the Aryan forefathers came from Europe. [21](#) Despite limited information, linguists tend to construct hypotheses. The prominent Sanskritist A. B. Keith once remarked that by taking the linguistic method too literally one could conclude that the original Indo-Europeans knew about butter but not milk, snow and feet but not rain and hands. [22](#)

Already, it appears, the discipline known as linguistic paleontology has fallen out of favor with scholars. In 1971, the eminent linguist Winifred Lehmann asserted, "Clearly, the linguistic paleontologists had overextended themselves to the point of elimination." [23](#) Dr. Lehmann insists that language cannot be used as a primary source for reconstructing an earlier culture. Still, linguistic theories about the origin and cultural background of the *Vedas* continue to figure

prominently in academic accounts of the Vedic period. In order to date ancient languages, in recent decades Morris Swadesh has devised a linguistic method known as glottochronology. This method arose from the theory that over the millennia, changes in the vocabulary of a language tend to occur at a regular, measurable rate. Scholars have used this method to date the oral tradition of the *Vedas* as well as the appearance of specific literatures. However, linguists themselves report that “no matter how much the technique is refined, the only dating that it can yield will be of the likelihood variety.” <sup>24</sup> Glottochronologists have worked out graphs indicating areas in which there is a 90% likelihood that a particular specimen of language can be assigned a correct date. The greater the time period in which the literature might have appeared (thousands of years for Vedic literature), the greater the variance in ascribing the approximate date. The variance grows so great as to be no more than an educated guess. Linguistic critic Charles Hockett writes, “Obviously it is not helpful to find that, though the most likely date of an event is forty thousand years ago, the nine-tenths confidence level defines a span running from ninety thousand years ago to a date ten thousand years in our own future.” <sup>25</sup> Although regarded as highly imperfect, glottochronology is the best working tool available today for dating ancient languages. It has not, however, revealed anything definite about the origin and real purport of the Vedic literature.

Summary

As we have marked, empirical evidence for the Vedic period seems scanty and fragmentary; the scholars have few hard facts on which to base mature or reliable conclusions. Accordingly, their full and elaborate picture of Vedic history seems hypothetical and conjectural. Of course, drawn as it is from arduous historical, archeological, and linguistic research, the hypothetical picture surely merits consideration. At the same time, it appears, Indologists would do well to remember that an official photograph is one thing, a hypothetical picture quite another. Actually, Western scholars have never assessed the Vedic *śāstras* on their own merit. The first studies of the *Vedas*, for example, were clouded by less than objective motivations. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, pioneer Indologists such as Sir William Jones, Horace H. Wilson, Theodore Goldstucker, and Sir M. Monier-Williams approached the Vedic culture with a view to replacing it with Christian culture. <sup>26</sup> This naturally tainted their investigation of Vedic literature. While the missionary motive declined, an effort was made by the American transcendentalist school (Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, etc.) to appreciate the *Vedas* as they are. It would be fair to say, however, that the empirical-historical method eclipsed this endeavor before it could shine forth. And because the Vedic system is intrinsically beyond the range of empirical investigation, modern Indologists have also been unable to study the *Vedas* on the literature’s own terms. Thus it may be appropriate to hear what the *Vedas* say about themselves. As opposed to the fragmented, highly theoretical, or at best partial appreciations of the *Vedas* by Western scholars, this approach will aid us in understanding the wide range of Vedic literatures as a sublime and cohesive whole.

### Chapter 3

Essential Elements of Vedic Thought

Although he may be unacquainted with Sanskrit, a new student of Vedic literature needs to understand many Sanskrit terms. Simply memorizing words in a glossary cannot fill that need; the *Vedas* themselves prescribe that to understand the meanings of such terms as Bhagavān, Paramātmā, and Brahman, the student must become transcendently situated, or realized. He must know from personal experience the distinction between matter (*jada*) and spirit (Brahman), and the nature both of illusion (*māyā*) and the supreme controller (*īśvara*). Since some words, such as *dharmā* and *rasa*, have no real English equivalents, the student’s need for personal experience and realization becomes so much greater. To get a clear understanding, the student should first learn the simple, literal meaning of the Sanskrit terms. By avoiding allegorical interpretations and speculation, he will avoid needless confusion. In other words, the student makes easier advancement if he accepts the direct meaning given in the *śāstras* rather than the indirect meanings set forth by imperfect commentators. Vedic literature is

not difficult to understand if the student learns the terms of the *śāstras* in their original meanings. The Three Aspects of the Absolute The Vedic literatures discuss three aspects of the Absolute Truth: Brahman, Paramātmā, and Bhagavān. The *Upaniṣads* focus on Brahman; the yoga systems, on Paramātmā; the *Bhagavad-gītā* and *Purāṇas* on Bhagavān. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (1.2.11) states that all three aspects are actually one, seen from different angles of vision: "Learned transcendentalists who know the Absolute Truth call this nondual substance Brahman, Paramātmā, or Bhagavān." 1 (1) Brahman Brahman refers to the impersonal, all-pervasive aspect of the Absolute Truth. The multifarious manifestations of the cosmos – moving and nonmoving matter, atoms, bodies, planets, space – are not ultimate causes in themselves, nor are they eternal. All of them come from the eternal Brahman. The *Vedānta-sūtra* (1.1.2) clearly states, *janmādy asya yataḥ*: "The Supreme Brahman is the origin of everything." 2 The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (2.2.10–12) offers elucidation: Brilliant is It, the light of lights –

That which knowers of the soul do know!

The sun shines not there, nor the moon and stars;

These lightnings shine not, much less this (earthly) fire!

After Him, as He shines, doth everything shine.

This whole world is illumined with His light.

... before,... behind, to right and left,

Stretched forth below and above. 3 Radhakrishnan writes that Brahman "cannot be defined by logical categories or linguistic symbols. It is the incomprehensible *nirguna* ["qualityless"] Brahman, the pure Absolute." 4 The *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (3.9.26) describes the Brahman philosophers as searching for the root of existence in the components of matter but finding only *neti neti*: "That self is not this, not that." 5 When one realizes Brahman he knows the impersonal spirit in all things. (2) Paramātmā *Ātmā* means "self." Thomas Hopkins writes, "*Ātman* was distinguished from the gross physical body; it was the inner self, the principle or energy that gave man his essential nature." 6 Vedic philosophy regards the self as eternal and individual; it is not destroyed when the body is destroyed. On the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, Kṛṣṇa has only encouragement for Arjuna: Never was there a time when I did not exist, nor you nor all these kings; nor in the future shall any of us cease to be ... For the soul [ *ātmā* ] there is never birth nor death. Nor having once been, does he ever cease to be. He is unborn, eternal, ever-existing, undying, and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain. 7

The *ātmā*, individual soul, is distinct from the Paramātmā (the Supersoul or oversoul, an identity beyond the *ātmā*). The word *parama* means "supreme and transcendental," and, as the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (1.2.20) has it, the Paramātmā and the *ātmā* are like two birds sitting on a tree: Both the Supersoul [Paramātmā] and the individual atomic soul [ *jīva-ātmā* ] are situated on the same tree of the body within the same heart of the living being; only one who has become free from all material desires as well as lamentations can, by the grace of the Supreme, understand the glories of the soul. 8 Awareness of one's eternal relation with the Paramātmā is the goal of the mystic *aṣṭāṅga-yoga* taught by Patañjali (the author of the *Yoga-sūtra*). According to the *Bhagavad-gītā*, "That Supersoul [Paramātmā] is perceived by some through meditation." 9 Perfection in meditation results in the yogic trance called *samādhi*:

The stage of perfection is called trance, or *samādhi*, when one's mind is completely restrained from material mental activities by practice of yoga. This is characterized by one's ability to see the self by the pure mind and to relish and rejoice in the self. In that joyous state, one is situated in boundless transcendental happiness and enjoys himself through transcendental

senses. Established thus, one never departs from the truth, and upon gaining this he thinks there is no greater gain. Being situated in such a position, one is never shaken, even in the midst of greatest difficulty. This indeed is actual freedom from all miseries arising from material contact.

[10](#) This realization occurs when the mystic sees the transcendental form of God within his heart. Although only genuine mystics can see the Supersoul, He is seated in the hearts of all living beings whether they realize or not. "I am seated in everyone's heart, and from Me come remembrance, knowledge, and forgetfulness." [11](#) The Paramātmā guides the embodied soul, witnesses his activities, and awards him the results of his actions. "The Supersoul enters into the bodies of the created beings who are influenced by the modes of material nature and causes them to enjoy the effects of these by the subtle mind." \*

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Department of Religious Studies, Franklin & Marshall College

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