An Anthology of the Vedas For Modern Man
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The Vedic Experience

An Anthology of the Vedas For Modern Man

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One of the most stupendous manifestations of the Spirit is undoubtedly that which has been handed down to us under the generic name of the Vedas. The Vedic Epiphany belongs to the heritage of mankind, and therefore its deepest function is best served, as is that of many of the religious and cultural values of mankind, not by scrupulously preserving it, as if we were zealous guardians of a closed and almost hidden treasure, but by sharing it in a spirit of fellowship with humanity at large. This sharing, however, should be neither a profanation under the pretext of bringing profit to others nor an exploitation under the guise of scholarship and scientific knowledge. Rather, it should be a living communication, but one that is free from propaganda or proselytization. It is then not mere information that these pages intend to convey; it could be that their message has transforming power.

This anthology aims at presenting the Vedasas a human experience that is still valid and capable of enriching and challenging modern Man, as he seeks to fulfill his responsibility in an age in which, for better or for worse, he is inseparably

linked with his fellows and can no longer afford to live in isolation. Experiences cannot be transmitted but they can be described, and they can thus serve as stimuli to trigger our own experiences. An experience, as the word itself suggests, is something we go through, a threshold we cross, an enclosure into which we trespass. This anthology is also an invitation to appropriate for ourselves the basic experience of Vedic Man, not because it is interesting or ancient, but because it is human and thus belongs to us all. Indeed, among the many experiences of mankind, the Vedic experience is one that will evoke a responsive movement in that part of us which is numbed by the heavy pressures of modern life.

He who knows not the eternal syllable of the Veda, the highest point upon which all the Gods repose, what business has he with the Veda. Only its knowers sit here in peace and concord.Rig Veda I, 164, 39

The Vedic Literature

The Vedasare generally divided into 4 parts.

1. The Samhitasor mantras are the hymns belonging to the earliest stage. As the word Samhitaimplies, they represent the basic collection of hymns and as such are the oldest materials in each school. The oldest and most important is the Rig Veda Samhita, which contains more than 10,000 verses in the form of a little more than 1,000 hymns. These are written in various meters. Each of the Samhitasprovides the texts for one of the groups of priests of the Vedic rituals. Thus the Rig Veda belonged to the Hotr priests and was recited by them at the sacrifices. The Sama Vedacontains chants and melodies (saman), chanted by the priests of that name. With the exception of 75 stanzas, the text is borrowed and rearranged from the RigVeda. The Yajur Vedaconsists of sacrificial formulas of the Adhvaryu priests, and many of these also are taken from the Rig Veda. It has come down to us in several recensions, the Krishnaor "Black" Yajur Vedawhose Samhitas

are the Taittiriya,the Maitrayani,and the Kathaka,and the "White"or Shukla Yajur Vedawhose Samhitais the Vajasaneyi. The Atharva Vedais somewhat removed from the other three by virtue of the "popular" character of many of the prayers against ills, incantations, and spells which it contains. It also has, however, a number of hymns with an important philosophical content.

2. The Brahmanasform the second broad stage, attached to the various branches of the Samhitas. Clearly later works, as their language reveals, they are written largely in prose and give lengthy explanations and descriptions of the rituals and prayers connected with the sacrifice. They contain more than simple instructions for rituals, and much of the explanatory matter is of a symbolic character.

3. The Aranyakas,or "forest treatises," are in a sense continuations of the Brahmanas,dealing with the speculations and spirituality of forest dwellers (vanaprastha)those who have renounced the world. They represent a step toward interiorization, as the hermit in the forest could not perform the elaborate rituals demanded of the householder. Like the Brahmanas,they are attached to the various branches and schools of the Samhitas.

4. The Upanishadsare the fourth or final stage of the process, and are known therefore as the Vedanta,or "end of the Veda." They represent the mystical and philosophical culmination of the Vedas. They contain the teachings of the great masters which point toward the path of mokshaor liberation.

With the passing of time a further literature grew up whose main concern was the exegetic study of the Vedas. It is grouped under six headings as Vedangas, or "limbs of the Vedas." The Vedangasinclude the study of phonetics, and correct pronunciation of the Vedas, of metrics, etymology,

grammar, and astronomy, needed to ensure the correct timing of the sacred rites. The sixth Vedangais concerned with kalpa, or the correct ways of performing the rituals. The basic texts are written in the form of sutras, brief aphoristic statements phrased with great economy of words. With the further passing of time there were added extended studies, in the form of shastrasor treatises. Thus, under the heading of kalpathere are several branches of sutras dealing with domestic rituals, including the performance of the samskarasor sacraments associated with birth, marriage, death, and so on; with the great public sacrifices; and with dharma or the rules and laws governing the behavior of the individual in society. From the latter emerged the whole later legal literature known as Dharma-shastra.

I ask as a fool who knows not his own spirit, "Where are the hidden traces left by the Gods."Rig Veda I, 164, 5AB