

## [The Vedic Experience](#)

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INSIGHT

## The Vedic Experience

A modern admirer translates the ancient Hindu scriptures with inspiration, clarity and richly authoritative scholarship

One of the best of the many translations of the Vedas into the English language comes from an unexpected source, the famed Catholic theologian Raimon Panikkar. For twelve years, with the help of a team of Hindu pandits and Sanskrit scholars in Banaras, India, he struggled to bring the ancient texts into clear, accurate and inspired English. The result is a monumental scholarly achievement.

The following seven pages of excerpts are drawn from The Vedic Experience, which Professor Panikkar wrote while living at the Catholic diocese in Banaras on the Ganga River from 1964 to 1976. The verses presented here were selected to give a sense of the variety and beauty of content throughout the Vedas. They follow Panikkar's creative and insightful ordering of the ancient texts into seven sections, corresponding to seven parts of an Earth day, a human life and a cosmic cycle. This provides a useful structure to the extremely diverse collection of hymns which comprise the Veda. The entire text is available at [www.himalayanacademy.com/books ... c\\_experience/VEIndex.html](http://www.himalayanacademy.com/books...c_experience/VEIndex.html). Panikkar's seven sections excerpted over the next seven pages are:

1. Dawn: The preparation for birth into existence, fertile ground ready for planting.
2. Germination: The beginning, the striving, the affirmation of identity in the realm of existence.
3. Blossoming: The attainment of plenitude, of maturity, the zenith of a life well spent.
4. Fall and Decay: The beginning of the downward path, the natural decline of life, the discovery that nothing resists time.
5. Death: The destiny of all existing things, and the natural close of a physical life cycle.
6. New Life: The marvelous reemergence of life out of the ordeal of death, the disclosure that life is immortal, that being is unfathomable, and that bliss and reality are capable of self-renewal.

7. Twilight: The last part of the anthology, like a bouquet ribbon, binds the six in summary.

To illustrate these magnificent translations, special art was commissioned by Hinduism Today from the renown artist, S. Rajam of Chennai in South India.

Raimon Panikkar was born in Barcelona, Spain, in 1918 of an Indian Hindu father and a Spanish Roman Catholic mother. Information on his early years is sketchy. He was a brilliant student and studied philosophy and chemistry in Barcelona, Madrid and Bonn, and theology in Madrid and Rome. He earned an astounding three doctorates in philosophy, chemistry and theology. He was ordained a Catholic priest in 1946, serving as a scholar and theologian, and not, apparently, as a parish priest. In 1953 Panikkar left Spain to live in India where he taught at the Universities of Mysore and Banaras, specializing in Indian philosophy and Christian-Hindu understanding. He has been a professor at the Universities of Madrid, Rome, Harvard and the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Panikkar played a key roll in the writing of *Nostra Aetate*, the "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," released by the Second Vatican Council in 1965. Though most certainly a devout Christian, he championed the concept of respect for other faiths, so much so that some call him the "apostle of interreligious dialogue." To this day the Catholic Church's relationship to other religions as defined in *Nostra Aetate* remains a delicate issue both inside and outside the Church. It was just after participating in Vatican II, which changed the face of modern Catholicism, that he departed to India to write the *Vedic Experience*.

Now 83, he continues to follow a demanding teaching and lecture schedule. He has written more than 30 books and 900 articles. Besides *The Vedic Experience*, these include: *The Trinity and the World's Religions*; *Blessed Simplicity*; *Worship and Secular Man*; *The Silence of God: The Answer of the Buddha* and *The Cosmotheandric Experience*. He coined the word *cosmotheandric* to convey a concept of God, soul and world similar to that found in the South Indian perception of *Pati-Pasu-Pasam*. Today, Panikkar makes his home

in the mountains of Catalunya, Spain.

Dawn

At first was neither Being nor Nonbeing.  
There was not air nor yet sky beyond.  
What was its wrapping? Where?  
In whose protection?  
Was Water there, unfathomable and deep?

There was no death then,  
nor yet deathlessness; of night or day  
there was not any sign.  
The One breathed without breath,  
by its own impulse. Other than that  
was nothing else at all.

Darkness was there, all wrapped  
around by darkness, and all was Water  
indiscriminate. Then that which was hidden  
by the Void, that One, emerging, stirring, through  
power of Ardor, came to be.

In the beginning Love arose, which was the primal germ cell of the mind. The Seers, searching in their hearts with wisdom, discovered the connection of Being in Nonbeing.

A crosswise line cut Being from Nonbeing. What was described above it, what below? Bearers of seed there were and mighty forces, thrust from below and forward move above.

Who really knows? Who can presume to tell it? Whence was it born? Whence issued this creation? Even the Gods came after its emergence. Then who can tell from whence it came to be?

That out of which creation has arisen, whether it held it firm or it did not, He who surveys it in the highest heaven,

He surely knows or maybe He does not!  
RIG VEDA 10.129

I magnify God, the Divine Fire,  
the Priest, Minister of the sacrifice,  
the Offerer of oblation,  
Supreme Giver of treasure  
RIG VEDA 1.1.1.

The Primal man is, simply, All:  
What is and what shall be  
He is the Lord of Immortality  
ATHARVA VEDA 19.6.4

Germination

Praise to the Breath of Life!  
He rules this world,  
master of all things,  
on which all things are based.

Praise, Breath of Life, to your uproar!

Praise to your thunder!  
Praise to your lightning!  
Praise, Breath of Life, for your rain!

When Breath of Life with his thunder  
roars o'er the plants,  
then, pregnant with pollen,  
the flowers burst forth in abundance.

The plants converse with this Breath,  
drenched by his moisture:  
"Our life is prolonged,  
for you have made us all fragrant."

Breath of Life clothes all beings with care  
as a father his son;  
master of all things,  
whether they breathe or breathe not.



Breath of Life is Queen, is Guide,  
revered by all things;  
he is sun, he is moon;  
he is also the Father of all.

A man breathes in, he breathes out,  
within the womb.  
Quickened by you,  
to birth he comes once more.

The mighty Wind they call him,  
or Breeze. The future and the past  
exist in him. On Breath of Life  
all things are based.

Breath of Life, do not forsake me.  
You are, indeed, I.  
Like the Embryo of the Waters  
I bind you to me that I may live  
ATHARVA VEDA 11.4

O God, grant us of boons the best--  
a mind to think and a smiling love,  
increase of wealth, a healthy body,  
speech that is winsome and days that are fair.  
RIG VEDA 2.21.6

## Blossoming

When a man is born,  
whoever he may be, there is born  
simultaneously a debt to the Gods,  
to the sages, to the  
ancestors, and to men.

When he performs sacrifice, it is the debt  
to the Gods which is concerned.  
It is on their behalf, therefore,  
that he is taking action when  
he sacrifices or makes an oblation.

And when he recites the Vedas, it is  
the debt to the sages which is concerned.  
It is on their behalf, therefore,

that he is taking action, for it is said of one who has recited the Vedas that he is the guardian of the treasure store of the sages.

And when he desires offspring,  
it is the debt to the ancestors which is concerned. It is on their behalf, therefore, that he is taking action, so that their offspring may continue, without interruption.

And when he entertains guests,  
it is the debt to man which is concerned. It is on their behalf, therefore, that he is taking action if he entertains guests and gives them food and drink. The man who does all these things has performed a true work; he has obtained all, conquered all

YAJUR VEDA  
SATAPATHA BRAHMANA 1.7.2

The sacrifice is man. It is man  
[who offers it] because it is man who  
spreads it out and because, in being  
spread out, it assumes exactly the same  
stature as man. For this reason,  
the sacrifice is man.

YAJUR VEDA

SATAPATHA BRAHMANA 1.3.2.1

Diffusing glory with your rays,  
you have scaled the shining realm of heaven.  
By you are supported all things that are,  
O God All-Creator, essence all-divine.  
RIG VEDA 10.170.4

Fall and Decay

Just as an overloaded cart  
lumbers along creaking, in the same  
way the self in this body,  
loaded by the Self of wisdom,  
lumbers along creaking when  
its breath is getting heavy.

When he becomes reduced,  
whether by old age or by disease, then,  
just as a mango fruit or a fig or a pipal fruit  
[detaches itself from its stem],  
so this person, being released from his limbs,  
returns to Life, to the place  
whence he has come.

Just as, when a king is arriving,  
the guards, the officers, the drivers,  
and the village elders await him with food,  
drink, and a place for his dwelling, saying,  
"Here he comes, here he comes!"  
even so all beings await him  
who knows this [saying]:  
"Here comes Brahman, here he comes!"

Just as the guards, the officers, the drivers,  
and the village elders gather around the king  
at his departure, even so all the powers of  
life gather around this self  
at the end of his time, when  
his breath is getting heavy  
YAJUR VEDA

## BRHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD 4.3

When a man, my dear, is stricken with disease, his relatives come near to him, asking: "Do you recognize me?"  
As long as his speech has not merged in his mind, his mind in his breath, his breath in light, and the light in the supreme Godhead, so long does he recognize them.

But when his speech has merged in his mind, his mind in his breath, his breath in light, and the light in the supreme Godhead, then he does not recognize them  
SAMA VEDA  
CHANDOGYA UPANISHAD 6.15

Only when men shall roll up space as if it were a simple skin, only then will there be an end of sorrow without acknowledging God.  
YAJUR VEDA,  
SVETASVATARA UPANISHAD 6.20

## Death

When this atman becomes weak  
and unconscious, then all the life powers  
collect around him. Then he gathers to  
himself all the particles of light and  
descends into the heart. When the person  
in the eye withdraws from him,  
he no longer recognizes forms.

"He is becoming one," they say,  
"he does not see."  
"He is becoming one," they say,  
"he does not smell."  
"He is becoming one," they say,  
"he does not taste."  
"He is becoming one," they say,  
"he does not speak."  
"He is becoming one," they say,  
"he does not hear."  
"He is becoming one," they say,  
"he does not think."  
"He is becoming one," they say,  
"he does not feel."

"He is becoming one," they say,  
"he does not understand."

The tip of his heart gets illumined and,  
being illumined, the atman departs through  
the eye or the head or some other part  
of the body. As he departs, the breath of life  
departs after him; and when the breath  
of life departs, all other breaths follow.  
He then is reunited with consciousness and  
departs together with consciousness.  
His knowledge and his works and his past  
experiences accompany him.

YAJUR VEDA

BRHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD 4.4

From unreality lead me to reality;  
from darkness lead me to light;  
from death lead me to immortality.

YAJUR VEDA

BRHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD 1.3

Just as a cucumber is removed from its stalk,



so from Death's bonds may I be removed,  
but not from Immortality!  
RIG VEDA 1.10.115

Desireless, wise, immortal, self-existent,  
full of bliss, lacking in nothing,  
is the one who knows the wise, unaging,  
youthful atman: he fears not death!  
ATHARVA VEDA 10.8.44

## New Life

Eye cannot see him, nor words reveal him;  
by the senses, austerity, or works  
he is not known. When the mind is cleansed  
by the grace of wisdom, he is seen  
by contemplation--the One without parts  
MUNDAKA UPANISHAD 3.1.8

.In the beginning this was Brahman,  
One and infinite, infinite in the East,  
infinite in the South, infinite in the West,  
infinite in the North, infinite above  
and below, infinite in every direction.  
For him there are, of course, no directions

such as the East and so on, no across,  
no above, and no below.

Inconceivable is this supreme atman,  
immeasurable, unborn, inscrutable,  
unthinkable, he whose Self is space.  
He alone remains awake when the  
universe is dissolved, and out of this space  
he awakens [again] the world consisting  
of thought. By him alone is all this thought  
[into being] and in him it dissolves again.  
His shining form is that which burns in  
the sun; it is the multiform light that shines  
in the smokeless fire and it is that which  
digests the food in the body.  
For thus it has been said:

He who dwells in the fire,  
he who dwells in the heart,  
he who dwells in the sun,  
he is One. The man who knows this,  
he verily attains the Oneness of the One  
YAJUR VEDA  
MAITRI UPANISHAD 6.17

For me there is no earth, no water, and no  
fire. For me there is neither wind nor ether.  
The one who has discovered the supreme  
atman dwelling in the heart, without parts,  
without a second, the universal witness,  
neither being nor nonbeing, attains  
the pure form of the supreme atman.

ATHARVA VEDA

KAIVALYA UPANISHAD 23

That is Fullness, this is Fullness;  
from Fullness comes Fullness.  
When Fullness is taken from Fullness,  
Fullness remains.

YAJUR VEDA

BRHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD 5.1

Twilight

At many a dawn of shining splendor  
has the Lord presided.  
Come on your chariots, far-ranging Spirits,  
come to our sacrifice.

Suffusing light for every creature,  
the Inspirer God rises.  
The Sun has filled heaven and earth  
with his radiance disclosing his presence.

Rosy Dawn advances, adorned with the  
brightness of many a beam.  
She pursues her way on her  
well-equipped chariot arousing Men to joy.

Come, O twin Spirits, at break of day  
on your powerful chariots.  
We offer in sacrifice this honey-sweet  
draught for your delectation.

How is it that, united and unsupported,  
he does not fall down?  
By what inner power moves he?  
Who has seen? A firm pillar,  
he protects heaven's vault.  
RIG VEDA 4.14

I hail you, Goddess, Dawn of light!  
To her let us offer the homage  
of our songs!  
She imparts to us sweetness,  
she steadies the Heaven and lavishes  
abroad her radiant splendor.

Our songs have awakened  
this Daughter of Heaven. Equitable,  
generous, she has scaled the two worlds.  
Toward Dawn, O Fire, when she comes in  
her brightness, you advance,  
eager to share her fair treasures.

The Mighty One, firm-based on Order,  
speeds after each dawn and makes  
his debut in the worlds.  
Great are the powers of Mitra and Varuna.  
Dawn in all directions  
diffuses her splendor!  
RIG VEDA 111.61