

# Translation of Some Hymns from the Rig Veda

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In this article we offer a selection of hymns from the Vedic literature with a translation and very brief comments. Our primary sources of inspiration are the writings of Sri Aurobindo.<sup>1</sup> (SriAurobindo, Secret of the Veda, 1972), (SriAurobindo, The Upanishads, 1972) and (AK-Coomaraswamy, 2000).

In the context of sacred literature, a translation is usually taken to be an adaptation of sacred speech in a language accessible to the uninitiated. Normally, such an adaptation distils the mental elements from the entire substance of its experience as a means to conceptualize and philosophize. But for us, the process of translation is sounding the Word in silence as a means to plumb our own depths. Translation and dwelling on the Word constitute a process that we employ to enter into the core of the Word so as to allow its substance to transfigure our being. Each translation is a journey by itself and therefore no translation can be taken as final.

Swami Vivekananda<sup>2</sup> says “Veda is of the nature of Shabda or of idea. It is but the sum total of ideas. Shabda, according to the old Vedic meaning of the term, is the subtle idea, which reveals itself by taking the gross form later on.” To us, the Riks<sup>3</sup> are embodiments of the Rishis themselves, in the form of Word-substance, for a perennial interaction and experiencing of the seeker after light. Rishi Dīrghatamas says,

*ṛcaḥ akṣare parame vyoman yasmin devā adhi viśve niṣeduh*

The luminous Word (**ṛcaḥ**),  
In the changeless (**akṣara**) summit space (**parame vyoman**),  
Wherein, seated above the universe,  
Are the beings of Light (**devā**).  
(*Rig Veda*, 1.164.39)

To understand the Riks, therefore, it is necessary to try and enter the soul of the rishi. Sri Aurobindo writes<sup>4</sup>

For ultimately, as I have already insisted, we can know the subject of the Veda only by the soul and its pure faculty of knowledge, not by verbal scholarship, metaphysical reasoning or intellectual discrimination. By entering into communion with the soul of the thinker which still broods behind the inspired language, we come to realise what he saw and what he put into his words, what waits there to make itself known to us. By communion with the soul of the Universe, which is behind the soul of the thinker, and one with it, we get those experiences which illumine and confirm or correct by amplifying our vision of truth in the Sruti. And since no man should lightly hope that he has been able always to think, act and

know by the supreme method, it is fitting always to bow down in utter self-surrender to the Master of All, the Lord, who as the Knower dwells in Himself as name and form and offer to him the truth we have found in the Sruti and the error we have imported in it to do both with the truth and the error whatever He wills in His infinite power, love and wisdom for the purpose of His eternal and infinite Lila.

Vedic thought is rooted in several basic principles. The thought around which all is centred is the seeking after Truth, Light, Immortality. There is a Truth higher and deeper than the truth of outward existence, a Light higher and greater than human understanding, which comes by revelation and inspiration, an Immortality towards which the soul has to rise. We have to find our way to that, to get into touch with this Truth and Immortality, to be born into the Truth, to grow in it, to ascend in spirit into the world of Truth, and to live in it. To do so is to unite ourselves with the Divine and to pass from mortality to immortality.

We must bear in mind that the object of the Veda Samhitas was not an enunciation of the general truths of Brahman but the practice of its particulars. They are essentially a record of Yoga, describing stages and movements in the progress of the individual towards the divine goal. There are hymns which praise and invoke the gods who preside over human functionings and the Cosmic order (the ṛta). But they are in most parts statements of experiences packed full of psychological detail and minute spiritual realization which confirm the experiences of the seer and assist in the journey of the seeker by providing significant landmarks.

The Vedic Rishis perceived the nature of the evolutionary process as well as the nature of all conscious action as a *yajna* or an offering. Self-fulfillment by self-offering, *ātma yajna*, to grow by giving, was recognized as the universal law. We must offer into the Agni, the Divine Fire, every single thought, every feeling and action, even our very body, for it is thus, by baking this body, as it were, shall we be in a condition fit to receive that draught of immortality (*soma rasa*). A perfect sacrifice constitutes a conscious offering to Agni, and a perfect apportioning of all the offerings to the various deities. But this comes as a culmination of a long process of Yoga, when the seeker is completely surrendered to the Divine Will; for it is Agni, the Supreme Will, who effects this perfect arrangement and ordering of the Truth-Law. The process of transformation is thus a gradual replacement of the fallible human will by the divine flaming force. But in the ultimate scheme of things, the Rishis recognized the law that ultimately all is offered by the Divine, to the Divine himself through the Divine. The Divine is the eater, eating and himself the eaten. As the Purusha Sūkta declares this:

*yajñena yajñam ayajanta*

The yajna is made by a yajna through the yajna. (*Rig Veda 10.90.15*)

We begin with a verse from the Rig Veda enlightening us on the symbolism underlying the Vedic hymns:

*Aśvād iyāyeti yad vadanty ojaso jātam uta manya enam,*

When they say he is come out of the horse, I understand Him to be born of luminous energy (**ojaso jātam**), and out of the mind's force. (*Rig Veda 10.73.10*)

It is essential to keep in mind our basic premise that the Rishi is a mystic poet who employs material occurring in physical existence into instruments for effectively expressing and communicating inner Truths. There is a new syntax, uncommon constructions and novel vocabulary. In the context of the mystical rite in the Vedic literature, we quote from Dr

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Ananda Coomaraswamy a few lines which apply admirably to the inner symbolism of the Rig Vedic hymns. He writes: “When we assert the priority of the metaphysical significance of a rite, we are not denying that there may have been, then as now, avidvānsaḥ, for whom the given rite had a merely magical character: we are deducing from the form of the rite itself that it could have been thus correctly ordered by those who fully understood its ultimate significance, and that this metaphysical significance must have been understood in the same way by the evamvit; just as a mathematical equation presupposes a mathematician, and also other mathematicians able to riddle it. That the modern scholar trained in a school of naturalistic interpretation is not a “mathematician” in this sense proves nothing. “For the scriptures crave to be read in that spirit wherein they were made; and in the same spirit they are to be understood” (William of Thierry, Golden Epistle, X.31).”<sup>5</sup>

We now trace out one path (among infinite possibilities) through the mystical world of the Veda.

*ā devānāmapī panthām agnam yat śaknavām tat anu pravoḷahum*

We have come (**agnam**) to the path of the gods (**devānām panthām**),

may we have the power (**śaknavām**) to tread it, to drive forward (**pravoḷahum**) along that road<sup>6</sup>. (*Rig Veda 10.2.3, Rishi Trīta Aptya, Tr. by Sri Aurobindo*)

The seeker needs to keep in mind that:

*nahi sthūri ṛthuthā yātām astī na ut śravaḥ vivide sam gameṣu*

A laboured<sup>7</sup> (**sthūri**) movement is not in accordance with the Truth (**ṛta**)<sup>8</sup>, nor does one get knowledge of (**vivide**) of inspiration (**śravaḥ**) in gatherings (**sam gameṣu**).  
(*Rig Veda 10.131.3, Rishi Sukṛti Kākṣivata*)

There is the initial onset of self-doubt, and a feeling of inadequacy and a subsequent inflow of inspiration:

*na vijñāmi yat iva idam asmi niñyaḥ sam naddhaḥ manasā carāmi yadā mā aḡan prathamajā ṛtasya āt it vācaḥ aśnuve bhāgam aśyāḥ*

I know not who I am, a mystery (**niñyam**),  
Tethered (**sam naddhaḥ**)  
by the mind I wander.  
When the first-born  
(**prathamajā**) of the Truth (**ṛta**)  
came into me,  
Then I enjoyed (**aśnuve**) a  
portion of the Word.  
(*Rig Veda 1.164.37, Rishi Dīrghatamaḥ*)

The path is hard and beset with obstructions; the only strength is the inner light and inspiration. The inspiration comes up as the expressive Word. The breaking down of the caves of Vala (the subconscious obstruction), and the role of the Word of inspiration in this breaking, is a recurring theme in the Vedic literature.

*sa suṣṭubhā sa ṛkvatā gaṇena valam ruroja phaligam ravena*

The phalanx (**gaṇa**) that sings the hymns of the perfect rhythm that affirms (**su-ṣṭubhā**) and the chant of illumination (**ṛkvatā**) break Vala into pieces (**phaligam**) by his roar (**ravena**).  
(*Rig Veda 4.50.5, Vāmadeva*)

The seeker soon realizes he is not alone on the path. Indeed, the entire gamut of experience of all the forerunners on the path is stored within him and can be recovered.

*seyam asme sanajā pitrya dhīḥ*

This in us is that contemplation of the ancient Fathers (**sanajā pitrya**).  
(*Rig Veda 3.39.2, Viśvāmītra*)

The seeker (the Rishi) prays for the epiphany of the Dawn of the light of Truth (*ṛtasya jyotiḥ*), the awakening of the inner consciousness. The Rishi invokes her as the deity who opens the pathways with her hues and lessens the pain on this long and tardy journey.

*dyutat yāmānam bṛhatīm ṛtena ṛtāvarīm aruṇapsu vibhātīm devīm uśasam svar āvahantīm prati viprāso matibhir jarante.*

Dawn with her illumined chariot, vast with the Truth (*bṛhatīm ṛtena*), full of the Truth (*ṛtāvarīm*), with a form like that of Aruna, is the radiant One, who ushers in (*āvahanīm*) with herself the heaven of Light. The vibrant illumined seers (*viprāsaḥ*) adore her (*jarante*) with their inspired mentalisings (*matibhiḥ*) (*Rig Veda 5.80.1, Satyaśravas ātreya*)

The cosmic Dawn heralds the rising of the inner Sun and a deeper contemplation leads to the inner soul, experienced as Agni, the flame burning in the cave of the heart. He is the Supreme's Design, Intention and Will placed in the human to lead him in the journey<sup>9</sup>.

*dhravam jyotiḥ nihitam dṛśaye kam manaḥ javiṣtam patayatsu antariṭi*

*viśve devāḥ samanasaḥ saketāḥ ekam kratum abhi vi yanti sādhu*

A moveless light (*dhravam jyotiḥ*), he is placed within (*nihitam*) that we may have vision (*dṛśaye*); he is the mind, the swiftest (*javiṣtam*) among all that wings (*patay-atsu*).

The universal deities, one in mind, one in perception (*saketā*) move straight (*sadhu*), in their wide-ranging paths, towards the Design, the Divine Will (*kratu*).

(*Rig Veda 6.9.5, Rishi Bharadvāja*)

The soul within is seen often as a Bird, a symbol for the soul in its swiftness of flight, its ability to see depths from afar, and simply because the symbol of the Bird is integrally intertwined with the form of the human soul.

*Ekaḥ suparñāḥ saḥ samudram āviveśa saḥ idam viśvam bhuvanam vicaṣte*

*Tam pākena manasā apaśyam antitaḥ tam mātā reḷiḥa saḥ u reḷiḥa mātaram*

One Bird of beautiful wing enters (*āviveśa*) into the ocean. Thence he beholds (*vicaṣte*) this universal existence (*viśvam bhuvanam*). Him with an infant mind (*pākena manasā*) I have seen from anear (*antitaḥ*), him the mother kisses and he in turn kisses the mother. (*Rig Veda 10.114.4*)

The Rishi (also the seeker) opens his eyes towards the world of Light and he beholds in the blue vastness a pure body of Light, a Swan seated on it. Its Light illumines the entire skies and this Light pervades each atom in the skies. From thence, this Bird beholds this earth through a Light which is its very own. When the seeker's inner eye opens, then his seeing is simultaneously an objective seeing as well as a seeing which arises by becoming all in a total subjectivity. When this vision awakens, the things afar become verily the things within, seen within the heart's ocean (*hṛt samudra*). One is reminded of Sri Ramakrishna's exquisite intuitive observation: "Sea-water appears dark blue from a distance, but when you take a little of it in your hand, it is all pure and limpid. So Lord Krishna appears azure from a distance".<sup>10</sup>

There is a new dawning of the Sun in this ocean and the consciousness is in a state of total purity and simplicity. In the deep inner solitude this Sun is witnessed in utter proximity. He beholds that the Sun in the Light worlds above is indeed the Vaisvānara Agni within his earthly foundation, within his heart. The process of sādhana forges this inner Sun and this earthly foundation is verily its Mother, Aditi (the Infinite matrix<sup>11</sup>). The entire foundation of the seeker is gradually being fashioned and forged by the Agni.

Elsewhere, the Rishi Vāmadeva sings his Swan-chant:

*hamsaḥ śucisad vasur antariḥśasad hotā vedisad atithir duroṇasad nṛsad varasad ṛtasad vyomasad abjā gojā ṛtajā adrijā ṛtam.*

The Swan, seated in the Pure (*śucisad*), the shining One (*vasuḥ*), seated in the mid-worlds, in the wide empy-

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rean (*antariḥśasad*),

The Caller of the Gods (*hotā*) seated in the sacrificial seat (*vedisad*),

The Guest, seated in the body (*duroṇasad*),

Seated in Man (*nṛsad*), and in the Void (*vyomasad*),

Born of the Waters (*abjā*), Born of Matter (*adrijā*), Born of Light

(*gojā*),

Seated in *ṛta*, Born of *ṛta*, The *ṛtam*.

(*Rig Veda 4.40.5, Rishi Vāmadeva*)

In yet another place this is sung differently. The Bird within the heart aspires and reaches the cosmic Sun followed by the descent and the move towards universalization.

*kṛṣṇam niyānam harayaḥ suparñāḥ apāḥ vasānā divam ut patanti  
te ā avyṛtran sadanūt ṛtasya āt it ghṛtena pṛthivī vi udyate*

Bright (**harayaḥ**) and Beautiful of wing (**suparñā**),  
The Bird dwelling in the waters (**apo vasānā**),  
Surges heavenwards through the dark passage.  
He returns (**avyṛtran**) from the seat of Truth (**sadanād ṛtasya**),  
And the Earth is wide-uplifted  
by his flowing luminosity (**ghṛtam**).  
(*Rig Veda 1.164.47, Rishi Dīrghatamaḥ*<sup>12</sup>)

Repeated visitation of the light results in a constant perception of the Sun of Divinity in all that exists:

*tad viṣṇoḥ paramam padam sadā paśyanti sūrayaḥ  
divīva cakṣur ātatam.*

That paramount stride of Vishnu which the illumined seers (**sūrayaḥ**) perpetually behold like an eye extended (**ātatam**) in heaven (**divi**). (*Rig Veda 1.22.20 Rishi Medhātīṭiḥ Kāṇvaḥ*)

The three strides of Vishnu clearly correspond to the three boons of Naciketa in the Katha Upanishad, with the third step being the paramount stride (**paramām gatim**) (see Katha Upanishad III.9).

The seeker reaches the end of the road where he discovers the well of honey, the fount of Ananda, the goal of the Taittiriya Upanishad (in its *Ananda Mimamsa*) which is also the culminating word of the Kena Upanishad (*tad vanam*).

*urukramasya viṣṇoḥ pade parama madhva utsaḥ*

The wide-moving (**urukrama**) Vishnu's paramount step where there is a well of honey (**madhva utsaḥ**)<sup>13</sup>.  
(*Rig Veda 1.154.5, Rishi Dīrghatamaḥ*).

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## NOTES

- 1 (Sri Aurobindo, *Secret of the Veda*, 1972), (Sri Aurobindo, *The Upanishads*, 1972) and (A. K. Coomaraswamy, 2000).
- 2 See *Collected Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Volume 6, *Conversations and Dialogues IX*, pp. 496-499.
- 3 Having the same root as arka, meaning 'a hymn of Light'.
- 4 See page 305, *Supplement to the Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo*, [Birth Centenary Library], Volume 27, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972.
- 5 A. Coomaraswamy, Volume 1, *Selected Papers*, p. 447.
- 6 Page 381, (Sri Aurobindo, *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, 1972)
- 7 heavy, dense.
- 8 the dynamic Truth, the Order.
- 9 See also the last hymn in *Isha Upanishad*.
- 10 No 885, from "Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna", Sri Ramakrishna Math,

Mylapore, 1954.

11 Not to be confused with the mathematical concept of infinite.

12 We invite the reader to compare this with the following translation of this hymn given by Wendy Doniger, *The Rig Veda*, Penguin 2000. "The yellow birds clothed in waters fly up to the sky on the dark path. They have now returned from the home of the Order, and at once the earth was drenched with butter". While comparing these renderings, the reader should keep in mind the passage from Dr Coomaraswamy's writings quoted earlier. In rendering ghṛtam as "flowing luminosity" we follow the leading of Sri Aurobindo.

13 Or a fount of honey.

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