

# *A Review of Vedic Literature And the Knowledge Within*

**By Stephen Knapp**

If we are going to understand the essential truths in Vedic literature, then we must get a glimpse of the content and purpose of its many texts and the expansive nature of the knowledge it contains. The Vedic philosophy encompasses the oldest spiritual texts of any religion in the world, and its subjects are broad and numerous. Its more advanced concepts can be difficult for even the greatest scholars to fathom. The Vedic literature discusses many types of philosophical viewpoints, and studying some of them will let us see that many of the concepts that we accept as new today are nothing more than parts of the ancient Vedic knowledge that had been dealt with and thoroughly understood thousands of years ago. Thus, there are not many ideas that are really new at all. The main purpose of the Vedic literature is to establish knowledge of the Absolute Truth and the process for attaining the highest levels of self-realization. To do that it must, and does, contain the elementary as well as most advanced forms of spiritual knowledge. So let us see exactly what kind of information is found within the many volumes of Vedic literature, and if there is any one understanding or direction in particular which it encourages people to take for complete spiritual success.

## **IF YOU ARE NEW TO THE STUDY OF VEDIC CULTURE**

If you are new to the study of Vedic culture, you may not understand all of these ancient Vedic texts or their purpose, or why it is necessary to mention them in this review. However, this study will provide the knowledge for you to begin to see how vast the Vedic science is and how numerous are these Vedic texts. You will begin to understand that there are few topics that have been left uncovered in the Vedic investigation of reality and the search for Truth, and in its presentation of what is God. You will also understand in the final analysis what direction they most recommend and how to pursue it.

## **THE FOUR PRIMARY VEDAS**

The Vedic literature is composed of many books. The oldest texts are the *Rig-veda*, *Yajur-veda*, *Sama-veda*, and the *Atharva-veda*. It is said in the *Muktikopanishad* that these four *Vedas* had 21, 109, 1000, and 50 branches respectively, with over 100,000 verses. Now, however, we can only find around 20,023 (some say 20,379) verses in total from these four *Vedas*.

The *Rig-veda*, the “Veda of Praise,” contains 1,017 hymns, or 10,522 verses, arranged in ten books or *mandalas*. The first eight mostly contain hymns of praise to the various demigods, such as Indra and Agni. The ninth book deals primarily with the *soma* ritual, which was the extraction and purification of the juice of the *soma* herb. The tenth book contains *suktas* or verses of wisdom and mantras that would cause certain magical effects to take place. The *Rig-veda* hymns were mainly of praise to the gods that were invoked during the Vedic ceremonies for ensuring immediate material needs. These were chanted by the four priests who conducted the Vedic rituals, namely the *hota* who calls the gods with the mantras from the *Rig-veda*; the *adhvaryu* who performs all the rituals of the ceremony according to the *Yajur-veda*; the *udgata* who sings the *Sama-veda* mantras; and the *brahmana* who supervises the general ceremony. However, it was usually only the *brahmana* priests who could be sure of chanting the mantras accurately to produce the desired result. If the mantra was chanted incorrectly by someone who was not qualified, the desired result would not take place and often something undesirable or horrible would happen instead.

The main gods in the *Rig-veda* were Indra (the god of heaven and rain), Agni (the fire god) and Surya

(the sun god). Surya is invoked in the sacred Gayatri mantra. However, Surya is also called Surya-Narayana in the *Rig-veda*. So the hymns to Surya and his different forms can also be related to Narayana or Vishnu, especially those to Savitur. Vishnu is also known as the Pervader, meaning that all the Vedic gods are absorbed in Him, and thus must also emanate from Him. They would be absorbed in Him during the time of cosmic annihilation, but would also emanate from Him during the time of the creation. There were also verses to three other names and forms of the sun god, namely Savitri, Mitra and Pooshan. Other gods included Dyos (a celestial god), Varuna (god of the seas), Soma, Marut (god of air or wind called Vayu in other places), Rudra (a form of Shiva) and Vishnu. All of these gods are celestial gods, or demigods, except for Rudra and Vishnu. There is also the important Purusha Sukta hymn in the 90<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Rig-veda*'s tenth *mandala*.

The *Rig-veda* is also a mystical text that contains knowledge in its abstract imagery of what the seers had realized. It has information on yoga, the spinal current and the *chakras*, as well as the planets and their orbits. Many aspects of this mystical knowledge are also contained in the other *Vedas*. The *Rig-veda* is said to have had 21 branches, out of which only two are still available. Much of the *Shakal* branch is still available, along with the *Brahmana* and *Aranyaka* of the *Shankhayan* branch. Although there are some stories in the *Rig-veda*, there are few historical records of the early Vedic kings. This has been a mistake amongst various linguists and researchers who study the *Rig-veda* to try to get an historical understanding of the early Vedic kingdom and Aryans.

The *Yajur-veda* is the “Veda of Rituals” and contains 1975 verse-mantras in 40 chapters, many of which are similar to those in the *Rig-veda* and used in rituals, usually by the *adhvaryu* priest. These contain different levels of knowledge and wisdom. The *Yajur-veda* once had 109 branches of knowledge, but now only parts of seven branches are found, of which the *Vajasaneyi* is prominent. The *Yajur-veda*, however, has two *samhitas*, or collections of verses, known as the *White Yajur-veda* (or *Vajasaneyi-samhita*) with the hymns and rituals, and the *Black Yajur-veda* (or *Taittiriya-samhita*) with their interpretations. These were primarily for the priests to use as a guide in performing sacred rituals, such as the *ashvamedha* or *rajasuya*, since they also contain directions or formulas that the priests use along with the verses that are sung during the ceremony.

The *Sama-veda*, the “Veda of Melodies,” contains 1549 verses meant to be used as songs in various ceremonies, primarily for the *udgata* priest. Most of them are taken from the *Rig-veda* and arranged according to their use as utilized in particular rituals. From the original 1000 branches of the *Sama-veda*, three are still available, of which the *Kauthumiya* and *Jaiminiya* are prominent.

The *Atharva-veda* is the “Veda of Chants” and once had 50 branches of which we have only the *Shaunak* branch today. It is a book of 5977 verses in 20 chapters containing prayers, spells, and incantations which in some respects resemble magical instructions found in the *Tantras* and even various magical incantations found in Europe. The *Atharva-veda* contains a small section of verses of instruction, wisdom, descriptions of the soul and God, but the majority of it consists of rules for worshiping the planets, rules for oblations and sacrifices, prayers for averting evil and disease, incantations for the destruction of foes, for fulfilling personal desires, etc., mostly for the material needs of people.

### THIRTY-THREE MILLION GODS?

The four primary *Vedas* represent the accomplishment of a highly developed religious system and encourage satisfaction of material desires through worship of the demigods. They contain many directions for increasing one's power and position, or for reaching the heavens in one's future by properly performing particular sacrifices in worship to the *devas* (demigods), and so on.

Some people ask why there seems to be so many gods within Hinduism or Vedic culture. Yet, if we properly analyze the situation, we will understand that there is but one Supreme Being who has many agents or demigods who assist in managing the creation and the natural forces within. And, like anyone else, if they are properly approached with prayer or worship, they may help facilitate the person by granting certain wishes that may be within the jurisdiction of that demigod.

In some places in the Vedic literature it is explained that there are 33 Vedic gods, or even as many as thirty-three million. The 33 gods are calculated as being eight Vasus, eleven Rudras (forms of Shiva), twelve Adityas, along with Indra and Prajapati (Brahma). Then there are also other positions that are considered major or minor *devas*. According to the *Vedas*, the *devas* are not imaginary or mythological beings, but are agents of the Supreme Will to administer different aspects of the universal affairs. They also

represent and control various powers of nature. Thus, they manifest in the physical, subtle or psychic levels of our existence both from within and without. In this way, a transcendentalist sees that behind every aspect of nature is a personality.

The names of these gods are considered offices or positions, rather than the actual name of the demigod. For example, we may call the president of the country by his personal name, or simply Mr. President. It's the position itself that allows for him to have certain powers or areas of influence. In the case of the *devas*, it is only after accumulating much pious credit that a living being can earn the position of being a particular demigod. Then a person may become an Indra, or Vayu, or attain some other position to assume specific powers, or to control various aspects of material energy.

Another example is that when you walk into a big factory, you see so many workers and all that they are doing. You may initially think that these workers are the reason for whatever goes on in the factory. However, more important than the workers are the foremen, the managers, and then the executives. Amongst these you will find people of varying degrees of authority. Someone will be in charge of designing the products. Another may be the Chief Financial Officer or main accountant. Another may be in charge of personnel, while someone else may be in charge of maintenance in the factory itself. Finally, a chief executive officer or president of the company is the most important of all. Without him there may not even be a company. You may not see the president right away, but his influence is everywhere since all the workers are engaging in projects according to his decisions. The managers and foremen act as his authorized agents to keep things moving accordingly. The numerous demigods act in the same way concerning the functions of nature, all of whom represent some aspect or power of the Supreme Will. That's why it is sometimes said there are 33 million different gods in Hinduism. Actually, there may be many forms, *avatars*, or aspects of God, but there is only one God, or one Absolute Truth.

This is often a confusing issue to people new to Vedic philosophy. We often hear the question among Westerners that if Hinduism has so many gods, how do you know which ones to worship? The point is that the *devas* affect all levels of universal activities, including the weather, or who is bestowed with particular opulences such as riches, beautiful wife or husband, large family, good health, etc. For example, one could worship Agni for getting power, Durgadevi for good fortune, Indra for good sex life or plenty of rain, or the Vasus for getting money. Such instruction is in the *karma-kanda* section of the *Vedas* which many people considered to be the most important part of Vedic knowledge. This is for helping people acquire the facilities for living a basic material existence.

There are, of course, various actions, or karmas, prompted by our desires to achieve certain results, but this is not the complete understanding of the *karma-kanda* section of the *Vedas*. The *karma-kanda* section is meant to supply the rituals for purifying our mind and actions in the pursuit of our desires, and not merely to live with the intent of acquiring all of one's material wants and necessities from the demigods. By having faith and steadiness in the performance of the ritual, one establishes purification in one's habits and thoughts. This provides a gradual process of acquiring one's needs and working out one's desires while simultaneously becoming purified and free of them. Such purification can then bring one to a higher level of spiritual activity. This was the higher purpose of the *karma-kanda* rituals. Without this understanding, one misses the point and remains attached to rituals in the pursuit of material desires, which will drag one further into material existence.

The reciprocation between the demigods and society is explained in *Bhagavad-gita* (3.10-12). It is stated that in the beginning the Lord of all beings created men and demigods along with the sacrifices to Lord Vishnu that were to be performed. The Lord blessed them saying that these sacrifices will enable men to prosper and attain all desirable things. By these sacrificial duties the demigods will be pleased and the demigods will also please you with all the necessities of life, and prosperity will spread to all. But he who enjoys what is given by the demigods without offering them in return is a thief.

In this way, it was recommended that people could perform sacrificial rituals to obtain their desires. However, by the performance of such acts they should understand their dependent position, not only on the demigods, but ultimately on the Supreme Being. As further explained in *Bhagavad-gita* (3.14-15), all living beings exist on food grains, which are produced from rain, which is produced by the performance of prescribed sacrifices or duties. These prescribed duties are described in the Vedic literature, which is manifest from the Supreme Being. Therefore, the Supreme is eternally established in acts of sacrifice.

Although the demigods may accept worship from the human beings and bless them with particular benedictions according to the sacrifices that are performed, they are still not on the level of the Supreme Lord Vishnu (who is an incarnation of Lord Krishna). The *Rig-veda* (1.22.20) explains: "The demigods are always looking to that supreme abode of Vishnu." *Bhagavad-gita* (17.23) also points out: "From the

beginning of creation, the three syllables *om tat sat* have been used to indicate the Supreme Absolute Truth (Brahman). They were uttered by brahmanas while chanting the Vedic hymns and during sacrifices, for the satisfaction of the Supreme.” In this way, by uttering *om tat sat*, which is stressed in Vedic texts, the performers of the rituals for worshipping the demigods were also offering obeisances to Lord Vishnu for its success. The four *Vedas* mainly deal with material elevation and since Lord Vishnu is the Lord of material liberation, most sacrifices were directed toward the demigods.

In *Bhagavad-gita*, however, Lord Krishna points out that men of small knowledge, who are given to worldly desires, take delight in the flowery words of the *Vedas* that prescribe rituals for attaining power, riches, or rebirth in heaven. With their goal of enjoyment they say there is nothing else than this. However, Krishna goes on to explain (in *Bhagavad-gita* 7.21-23) that when a person desires to worship a particular demigod for the temporary and limited fruits he or she may bestow, Krishna, as the Supersoul in everyone’s heart, makes that person’s faith in that demigod steady. But all the benefits given by any demigod actually are given by Krishna alone, for without whom no one has any power. The worshipers of the demigods go to the planets of the demigods, but worshipers of Krishna reach Krishna’s spiritual abode.

Thus, as one progresses in understanding, it is expected that they will gradually give up the pursuit for temporary material pleasures and then begin to endeavor for reaching the supreme goal of Vedic knowledge. For one who is situated in such knowledge and is self-realized, the prescribed duties in the *Vedas* for worshipping the demigods are unnecessary. As *Bhagavad-gita* (3.17-18) explains, for one who is fully self-realized, who is fully satiated in the self, delights only in the self, there is no duty or need to perform the prescribed duties found in the *Vedas*, because he has no purpose or material desires to fulfill.

However, another view of the Vedic gods is that they represent different aspects of understanding ourselves, especially through the path of yoga and meditation. For example, the god of wind is Vayu, and is related to the practice of yoga as the breath and its control in *pranayama*. Agni is the god of fire and relates to the fire of consciousness or awareness. Soma relates to the bliss in the *samadhi* of yoga practice. Many of the Vedic gods also represent particular powers of yoga and are related to the different *chakras* in the subtle body. It is accepted that as a person raises his or her consciousness through the *chakras*, he or she will attain the level of awareness and the power and assistance that is associated with the particular divine personality related to that *chakra*.

## BRAHMANAS AND ARANYAKAS

Although the four principle *Vedas* include the concept of spiritual perfection or liberation, it is not so thoroughly developed or presented. Therefore, to help one understand what the goal of Vedic philosophy is, there are also other compositions along with the four *Vedas*, namely the *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas*, and the *Upanishads*. Originally, the *Brahmanas* consisted of 1180 branches, with the same number of *Aranyakas*. Unfortunately, only a few of these branches remain today. The *Upanishads* also had 1180 branches to continue the explanation of these Vedic divisions of knowledge and practice. However, only about 200 are still available.

The *Brahmanas* are compositions that accompany different portions of the *Veda Samhitas* with additional directions and details that the brahmana priests would use when performing the sacrificial rituals, along with some of their histories. They include the *Aitareya*, the *Shankhayan* or *Kausitaki*, and the *Shatapath* and *Taittiriya Brahmanas* that are connected to the *Rig-veda*. These contain such instructions as what to meditate on and how to chant the mantras while conducting the sacrifice, etc. The *Brahmanas* also hold cosmological legends and stories that explain the reason for performing the Vedic rituals, along with the esoteric significance of the mantras and sacrificial rituals. They also describe the verses in the main *Samhitas*. Furthermore, they provide the seeds of the systematic knowledge of the *Sutras*, and can be used by the village householders.

The *Panchvinsha*, *Shadvinsha*, and *Tandya Brahmanas* belong to the *Sama-veda*, while the *Jaiminiya* and *Gopatha Brahmanas* belong to the *Atharva-veda*. The *Shatapatha Brahmana*, a large volume of 100 chapters authored by Yajnavalkya, is said to belong to the *Shukla Yajur-veda*.

The *Aranyakas* are sacred writings that are supposed to frame the essence of the *Upanishads* and are considered to be secret and dangerous to the uninitiated. The *Aranyakas* reveal more of the esoteric aspects of the rituals and their purposes than the *Brahmanas*. They are meant only for the brahmana priests and kshatriya warriors who have renounced all materialistic activities, and retired to the solitude of the forests, which is the meaning of “*aranya*.” They include a strict style of worship to particular forms or aspects of

God. These instructions could consist of which mantras to use for particular purposes, how to sit, in which time of the morning to practice, the devotions to incorporate into the practice, and so on.

Next we come to the *Upanishads*, which is the main part of the *Aranyakas* and constitute one of the most sacred portions of Vedic philosophy. There are three main sections of the Vedic scriptures. The *Upanishads* and *Aranyakas* are part of the *jnana-kanda* section, meaning they contain knowledge meant for introspection and contemplation. The four main *Samhitas* and *Brahmanas* which deal primarily with ritual are a part of the *karma-kanda* classification, meant for appeasing the gods for one's necessities and desires, and for helping purify the mind. The *upasana-kanda* section consists of those instructions on devotional service to God, which is found later in the *Vedanta-Sutras*, the *Puranas* and other books.

## THE UPANISHADS

The *Upanishads* are essentially presented for the continued spiritual progress of the individual. If the *Vedas* emphasize and primarily consist of worship to the demigods for material needs and only hint at the prospect of spiritual liberation, then the *Upanishads* start to explain how worldly attachments need to be renounced so we can surrender to God. The word *upanishad* literally means to sit down (*shad*) near (*upa*) and below or at the feet with determination (*ni*). So it indicates that the student should sit near the feet of one's spiritual teacher and listen with determination to the teachings. Only through such absorption can one learn how to apply the teachings in practice. Sitting at the feet of the teacher is both a sign of respect and humility, but also exhibits a natural flow, like water, from something high to that which is lower. Thus the student becomes a natural receptacle for such knowledge.

Another meaning of the word *shad* in *upanishad* means to destroy. So the spiritual knowledge the student receives from the teacher destroys the ignorance of the true nature of the world and his own Self. As one's ignorance is destroyed, enlightenment can follow.

The *Upanishads* are a collection of 108 philosophical dissertations. The *Muktikopanishad* (verses 30-39) lists all 108. (See Appendix One) However, there are over 100 additional compilations if you also count the lesser *Upanishads* that are not actually part of the primary group, making a total of well over 200. Out of all the *Upanishads*, the following eleven are considered to be the topmost: *Isa*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *Mandukya*, *Taittiriya*, *Aitareya*, *Chandogya*, *Brihadaranyaka*, and *Svetasvatara*.

The *Upanishads* were considered the secret and confidential knowledge of reality. They mainly focus on establishing the Absolute as nonmaterial and describe it as Brahman: the eternal, unmanifest reality, source and ultimate shelter of everything. The Brahman is said to be incomprehensible because it is without material qualities or form. The secret to understanding Brahman according to the *Upanishads* is that they describe the Absolute as having no material qualities or material personality, but consists of spiritual qualities.

The comparisons used in the *Upanishads* can be somewhat confusing to the beginner of Vedic study, but they are easy to understand for one who has some understanding in this matter or who is self-realized. For example, when the *Upanishads* describe the Absolute as being unembodied, without veins, yet runs swifter than the mind, or as being able to walk yet does not walk, or as being within everything and yet outside of everything, how can we know what to think? Does the Absolute have any qualities that we can comprehend?

These kinds of descriptions in the *Upanishads* are called indirect or contrary descriptions. These are used to indicate the spiritual nature of the Lord's qualities, meaning that He is not material nor confined to the rules of the material creation. An example of this is found in the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, Chapter Three, which explains: The Supreme Lord does not have material hands and feet yet He is able to receive anything and go everywhere. He does not possess material eyes and yet He sees past, present and future. He does not have material ears and yet He hears. He is the knower of everything, omniscient, but Him no one can know. The self-realized and enlightened souls know Him as the Primeval Lord and Supreme Being.

The *Svetasvatara Upanishad* offers more of these kinds of descriptions, such as "He is having His faces, heads and necks everywhere, yet He dwells in the cavity of the heart of all beings. He is omnipresent. Being the Supreme Godhead, He is present everywhere encompassing all that exists and He is benevolent. (3.11) With hands and feet everywhere, with eyes, heads and mouths everywhere, with ears everywhere, He stands encompassing all." (3.16)

Another example is the *Isha Upanishad* (5): "The Supreme Lord walks and does not walk. He is far away, but He is very near as well. He is within everything, and yet He is outside of everything."

So the point is that the Absolute has spiritual legs to run or walk with and spiritual senses that are not limited like material senses. One verse that clearly explains this is the following: “The Supreme Reality is far beyond this universe. He possesses no ephemeral form but He is *sat-cit-ananda*, the embodiment of complete eternal and spiritual bliss. He is free from any ill. He is beyond the illusive world. He is full of all-auspicious divine glories. Those who realize Him as such and render unalloyed devotion to Him become immortal, but others (who remain ignorant of Him) have to undergo suffering through transmigration in the realm of *maya* [illusions].” (*Svetashatara Upanishad* 3.10)

Therefore, though the *Upanishads* generally refer to the Absolute in an impersonal way, they also begin to establish that the Supreme Reality has form, or, in other words, is a person, and that there is a Divine Abode, although the details of it are not always clearly provided therein. So as we go through the Vedic texts, we get clearer and clearer views of the nature of the Supreme Being.

The *Isa Upanishad* in particular indicates that the Supreme Absolute is both impersonal and personal. Other *Upanishads* describe the Absolute as, “He who created the worlds,” or, “Who is luminous like the sun,” “beyond darkness,” “the eternal among eternal,” etc. In fact, the basic method used in most *Upanishads*, as explained in the *Hayasirsa Pancharatra*, is to first present the Absolute Reality in an impersonal way and then present the personal aspects.

Yet, as we study the *Upanishads*, there are numerous references that go on to describe very clearly, in a direct manner, the spiritual nature and characteristics of the Supreme. The *GopalaTapani Upanishad* has numerous verses which explain the nature of the Absolute Truth, such as the following verse (1.22): “Sri Krishna is that Supreme Divinity, the Paramount Eternal Reality among all other sentient beings, and the fountain-source of consciousness to all conscious beings. He is the only reality without a second, but as the Supersoul He dwells in the cave of the hearts of all beings and rewards them in accordance with their respective actions in life. Those men of intuitive wisdom who serve Him with loving devotion surely attain the summum bonum, supreme goal of life. Whereas those who do not do so never gain this highest beauty of their lives.”

Another verse from the *GopalaTapani Upanishad* (2.23) that further explains the nature of the Supreme is this one: “Sri Krishna has got no birth and no old age, He is always in His adolescence without any change. He is ever most effulgently shining so gloriously more than the sun. He is fond of remaining with the divine cows of Goloka Vrindavana. He is eternally fond of being with the Gopas, cowherd boys, as He feels pleasure tending the cows. He is the very object of the *Vedas*, He as the Supersoul ever dwells in the heart of every living being, and He is the only Sustainer of all. He is the beloved sweet-heart of you all.”

Not only do the *Upanishads* provide explanations of the impersonal Brahman and personal Bhagavan realizations, but as we can see they also speak of the Paramatma (Supersoul or Lord in the heart) realization. Especially in the *Katha*, *Mundaka*, and the *Svetasvatara Upanishads*, one can find statements explaining that within the heart of every individual in every species of life reside both the individual soul and the Supersoul, the localized expansion of the Lord. It is described that they are like two birds sitting in the same tree of the body. The individual soul, which is called the *atma* or *jiva*, is engrossed in using the body to taste the fruits of various activities that result in pleasure and pain. The Supersoul is simply witnessing the activities of the *jiva*. If, however, the *jiva* begins to tire of these constant ups and downs of material life and then looks toward his friend next to him, the Supersoul, and seeks His help, the *jiva* soul can be relieved of all anxieties and regain his spiritual freedom. This freedom is the spiritual oneness shared by the *jiva* and Paramatma when the *jiva* enters into the spiritual atmosphere by submitting to the will of the Paramatma. This is achieved by the practice of yoga and by being guided by a proper spiritual master. It is not said that the individual soul loses his individuality, but both the *jiva* and Paramatma remain individuals.

In any case, the *Upanishads* present a much clearer approach to understanding the ultimate reality than the four primary *Vedas*. We can provide a little more insight into the information found within the *Upanishads* by reviewing a few.

The *Isha Upanishad* comes from the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Shukla (White) Yajur-veda*. It has only 18 verses, but directly addresses the Personality of God in the first verse. Through the 18 verses, it gradually establishes that God has a personal form from which comes the great white Brahman effulgence. It explains that all opulence comes from God and that to try to enjoy such pleasures outside of the relationship with God is an illusion filled with suffering. Therefore, one should live life in such a way as to always remember God, and thus fulfill the real purpose of life so at the end one can constantly hold the vision of God within one’s consciousness. When God removes His effulgence or spiritual rays, then the devotee can see the personal form of the Lord.

The *Katha Upanishad* contains six chapters divided in two sections. Within it is the conversation

between Nachiketa and Yamaraj, the lord of death. Within that conversation Yamaraj establishes that due to ignorance and the desire to enjoy the material world, people continue to suffer in the cycle of birth and death, yet think they understand the real purpose of life. It is only in this human body that a person has the facility to realize God and escape the continued rounds of birth and death. Therefore, before the end of one's life, he or she should realize God in order to fully utilize this human birth.

The *Mundaka Upanishad* contains six chapters in three sections. This gives the instruction from the sage Angira to Shaunaka about the nature of God and how to become realized. These instructions include how the early Brahmanas understood that the Vedic rituals only provided the means to acquire the luxuries of life, without being able to deliver one to God. Therefore, they gave them up for approaching a God-realized saint, the only way one can learn how to surrender to the eternal Lord who is beyond all illusion of the universe. This is the God who cannot be understood by the Vedic impersonalistic philosophy, or intellectual meditation. The Lord is only realized when He reveals Himself to one whose heart is full of devotion, after that person has been graced with such faithfulness by a saintly devotee. Then one can see the Lord as He is in full.

The *Mandukya Upanishad* is another short *Upanishad* with only 12 verses. Herein it explains the impersonal aspect of God without going on to the personal traits. Here we find descriptions that can be confusing to those who are just beginning their investigation into Vedic philosophy, such as relating how the Absolute cannot be conceived by the mind, or contacted in any way. It has nothing that it can be compared to, and thus cannot be understood or spoken of, nor meditated upon because it is inconceivable. So, from this *Upanishad*, based on the impersonal point of view, it would seem that there is little for us to understand about the Supreme.

The *Svetasvatara Upanishad* is one of the most important. In its six chapters it elaborates on the more detailed characteristics of the soul, the Supreme Being, and the material nature, as well as the process for becoming spiritually realized. This is where we start to get deeper examples of the Paramatma, the Supersoul aspect of God. It describes that God is the Supreme, pure consciousness, from which all of creation manifests. And that God is realized when one becomes lovingly absorbed in the Supreme, which is the only way a person can cross the ocean of *maya*. It contains many relevant instructions and is one *Upanishad* that begins to take us much deeper into the understanding of the different aspects of the nature of God and the secrets of becoming God-realized.

The *Taittiriya Upanishad* goes into explaining more about the creative process of the material manifestation from the Brahman, and that the Brahman is from Whom all souls emanate, and in Whom they enter at the time of the universal annihilation. That Brahman is eternally personified, by which He is knowable and reachable. Through that personified form He expands bliss and Divine love which we can experience through spiritual practice. This *Upanishad* is divided into three chapters called Shiksha Valli, Brahmanand Valli, and Bhriгу Valli.

There are many other *Upanishads*, though they may be less prominent, that can be important to relating inner facts and secrets about the nature of God and how to realize Him. So I'll mention a few.

There is the *Krishna Upanishad* that directly reveals that the most divine form of bliss dwells in the supremacy of love of Lord Krishna. It elaborates that when Lord Krishna descended to Earth in Braja Mandala, Vrindavana, the other eternal and divine personalities and powers also came with Him in order to serve Him and taste the sweetness of that divine love.

The *GopalaTapani Upanishad* goes much further in explaining things in this direction. It has only two chapters with a total of 172 verses. In the first chapter it explains that Lord Krishna is the absolute bliss. He is the Supreme God and the embodiment of eternal life, knowledge and bliss. This is elaborated throughout the chapter. Chapter Two explains how Lord Krishna is the supreme and most beautiful form of God. No other god or portion of this material creation can compare to His beauty. Therefore, it is recommended that we need to remember and adore Him, by which we can experience His divine love, which is like an ocean of nectar.

It is important to point out that the Sanskrit term for the experience of Krishna's divine love is *rasa*. It is the *Bhagavat Purana* that, in the Vedic literature, begins to explain the *rasa-lila* or bliss pastimes of Lord Krishna with His numerous associates. The word *rasa* is never used in connection with Lord Vishnu, Lord Shiva, Goddess Durga or any of the other Vedic personalities in any of the *Upanishads*. That is because, though we may engage in respectful worship to these Divinities, the pleasure pastimes wherein there is such a deep exchange of divine bliss and love is not to be found in anyone but Lord Krishna. Even the expansions of Lord Krishna, such as Lord Vishnu or Lord Rama, may be forms of unlimited bliss, but the deep exchanges of loving bliss with Them do not have the potential that is found within Lord Krishna.

Therefore, the conclusion is that Lord Krishna is the Supreme Personality in which is found all other forms of Divinity, and from whom comes the Absolute Truth and Absolute loving bliss.

The *Radhika Upanishad* explains this a little further. Therein it is described that only within Lord Krishna is there the *hladini* power, which is the pleasure or bliss potency. The other forms of the Lord are but parts or expansions of the Lord, and although They may be the same in power, They are lacking in the level of bliss potency that is found within Lord Krishna. This means that the supreme sweetness in loving exchanges is manifested from Lord Krishna. In this way, you have the sweet, sweeter and sweetest levels of loving bliss established in the different levels of the spiritual reality, until it culminates from the Brahman and Vaikuntha on up to Goloka Vrindavana, the spiritual abode of Lord Krishna. Or from the *brahmajyoti* to the Vishnu forms up to the supremacy of Sri Krishna. This is what is established by fully understanding the purport of the *Upanishads*.

Another less prominent *Upanishad*, but one that is no less important, is the *Sri Chaitanya Upanishad* (*Chaitanyopanishad*), which comes from the ancient *Atharva-veda*. The *Chaitanyopanishad* is a short text with only nineteen verses. All of them are very significant. In this description there is not only the prediction of the appearance of Lord Chaitanya, but a description of His life and purpose, and the reasons why His process of spiritual enlightenment is so powerful and effective in this age of Kali-yuga.

The *Chaitanyopanishad* explains how one day Pippalada, a son of Lord Brahma, approached his father and asked about how the sinful living entities in the age of Kali-yuga may be delivered. Lord Brahma told him to listen carefully and he would give him a confidential description of what would happen in Kali-yuga. He explained that in Kali-yuga the Supreme Being, whose form is completely transcendental and who is the all-pervading Supersoul in the hearts of all living entities, will appear again in the Kali age. He will appear in the guise of the greatest devotee, with a golden complexion in His abode on the banks of the Ganges at Navadvipa. He will disseminate pure devotional service to the Supreme. He will be known as Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Appearing in this golden form, the all-powerful Supreme Being--who is understood only by the most fortunate and who is the oldest, the original person, the original cause of the universe--will spread spiritual bliss by the chanting of His own holy names. The Supreme Lord will chant a mantra consisting of the names of Hari, Krishna and Rama [the Hare Krishna *Maha-mantra*]. This mantra is the best of all mantras, and, though difficult to understand, it can be understood by engaging in devotional service to the Supreme. This is the most confidential of secrets, and those who seriously desire to make progress in spiritual life, and to cross the ocean of birth and death, continually chant these names of the Supreme.

Herein we find the assortment of information that can be found in the main *Upanishads*. For the most part, except for the more specialized and detailed *Upanishads* that were referred to at the end, they only briefly indicate the personal traits of the Supreme Personality and the Divinity of Krishna and His abode. Mostly they provide knowledge only up to the Brahman or Vaikuntha, not beyond. They express the non-material, spiritual nature of God, but do not know or present much information on the personality and pastimes of the Supreme Being. The end or conclusive result of knowledge in the *Upanishads* is to attain liberation from material existence. But what such liberation consists of is often left out. So, information on the pastimes and nature of the abode of God and the spiritual domain is generally absent.

This is the case with most all of the *Shruti* texts, which consist of the four *Vedas*, the *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas*, and *Upanishads*. Once you get beyond the rituals and methods for acquiring material needs by worship of the Vedic demigods, the *Shruti* texts primarily contain knowledge of the futility of material existence, the temporary nature of the material creation, the bondage of the *jiva* souls in this existence of birth and death, and the spiritual nature of the individual and the Supreme Being. In parts, they may also describe that the goal of life is liberation from this material manifestation and the need to return to spiritual existence through the understanding of karma, spiritual knowledge, renunciation and devotion to God (*bhakti*). However, they are unaware of much beyond this, or at least the finer details. They do not deliver information about the bliss of spiritual activities and the pastimes of Goloka Vrindavana, the most intimate and confidential abode of the Lord, who is a spiritual being, a personality. Because of this basic deficiency, additional information is supplied elsewhere, which must be sought and understood. As we can see, this is a progressive ladder of education, in which case one should not stop with the *Upanishads*.

## THE UPA-VEDAS AND VEDANGAS

Aside from the *Upanishads*, there are also the *Upa-vedas*. These are the *Artha-veda* (science of

economics and sociology), the *Dhanur-veda* (the science of defense, war, and politics), the *Gandharva-veda* (art of music, dancing, and singing), and *Ayurveda* (the holistic medical science). These are smaller compositions, each are attached to one of the four main *samhitas* (namely the *Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama*, and *Atharva* respectively). Unfortunately, most of these compositions are difficult to find, except for the *Ayurveda*, the majority of which is still available but not all of its original text.

These are a part of the eighteen principal branches of Vedic knowledge, which, according to the *Vishnu Purana*, are listed with their sources as the six *Vedangas*:

The four *Vedas*, the six *Angas* (or subsidiary portions of the *Vedas*), viz., *Siksha*, rules of reciting the prayers, the accents, and tones to be observed; *Kalpa*, ritual; *Vyakarana*, grammar; *Nirukta*, glossarial comment; *Chandas*, metre; and *Jyotish*, astronomy; with *Mimamsa*, theology; *Nyaya*, logic; *Dharma*, the institutes of law; and the *Puranas*, constitute the fourteen principal branches of knowledge. Or they are considered as eighteen with the addition of these four: the *Ayur-veda*, medical science as taught by Lord Dhanvantari; *Dhanur-veda*, the science of archery or military arms taught by Bhrigu; *Gandharva-veda*, or drama and the arts of music, dancing, etc., of which the Muni Bharata was the author; and the *Artha sastra*, or science of government, as laid down first by Brihaspati. (*Vishnu Purana*, Book Three, Chapter Six)

To briefly explain some of the branches mentioned above:

*Vyakarana* is the science of Sanskrit grammar. This is presently based on the Panini grammar, since the other ancient forms or books are extinct. The Panini system, which has some 4000 *sutras*, is said to have been inspired by Lord Shiva when he once played on his small *damru* drum from which came 14 separate sounds. Those vibrations inspired Panini, who then explained the science of Sanskrit grammar. These vibrations were said to be originally in the mysterious formula of the *Maheshvara Sutra*. This *Sutra* is said to contain all sounds arranged in an order that holds the key to all structure of language.

Panini also provided the *dhatu path*, which is a dictionary of the root Sanskrit words. Then he gave the *unadi sutras* to describe how the words in the original Vedic *samhitas* (the four *Vedas*) were formed, which can provide the means of understanding the real definition of the words in the *samhita* mantras. Without this, it is easy for a person to mistranslate the real meaning or purpose of the Vedic mantras.

*Nirukta* provides the explanations of the Vedic words. It is used along with the *Nighantu*, which is a collection of Vedic words with their basic explanations. These are used with the *Vyakarana* to understand the exact meaning of Sanskrit words to make sure the Vedic *samhita* mantras are not misunderstood.

*Siksha* is the science of correct pronunciation of Vedic mantras, such as intonation, duration, and the accent on a word or syllable. This will determine how one “sings” each mantra. Differences in the pronunciation of a mantra can also change its meaning, and the outcome of the ritual. That is one of the reasons why the old Vedic rituals are no longer recommended for this day and age. The problem is that this is difficult to learn and almost all books on the topic have become lost.

*Chandas* is the science of correctly emphasizing the meter of the Vedic verses according to the division or parts and letters, and the correct pronunciation of the words. The Vedic mantras are also named according to its parts. For example, the *anushtup chand* is a mantra of four parts in one stanza, and with 32 letters. Yet if it has 31 letters in four parts, it is called *brihati chand*, and so on.

*Jyotish* is the science of Vedic astrology. This was used for a couple of reasons. Primarily it was for establishing the correct position of the stars and planets at certain times, such as one’s birth, and their effects for predicting one’s future life. It was also for calculating the best times to begin special activities, such as Vedic rituals. There were many books on *jyotish*, but most have now become lost, leaving but several left to study.

The *Artha-sastra* is said to have been established first by Brihaspati, but was written most recently by Kautilya in the fourth century BC for the king, Chandragupta Maurya. It is the science of government and economics that takes credit for some of the principles of corporate management that have gained popularity today, such as using *prabhu shakti* (vision), *mantra shakti* (mission), and *utsah shakti* (motivation).

The *Mimamsa*, *Dharma*, and *Nyaya* are parts of the Vedic Sutras, which is explained next.

## THE SUTRAS AND SUPPLEMENTS

When it comes to the *Mimamsa*, there is the *Purva Mimamsa* and the *Uttar Mimamsa*. First there is the

*Purva Mimamsa* that was written by the sage Jaimini who was a student of Vyasadeva about 5,000 years ago. The *Uttara Mimamsa* is the *Brahma* or *Vedanta Sutrās*, which is discussed soon.

*Mimamsa* means solutions through critical examination, and was originally expounded by Jaimini in the twelve chapters of his *Mimamsa-sutra*. It clarifies the Vedic principles so a person can focus on the ways for attaining a good life now and in the next. This system was traditionally called *Purva Mimamsa*, representing the early revered thought. This is in relation to the study of Vedanta since Mimamsa was considered the preliminary understanding of Vedanta philosophy. On the other hand, Vedanta is also called *Uttara Mimamsa*, meaning the conclusion and higher teachings of the Mimamsa philosophy, because the *Vedas* are regarded as self-evident scriptures that reveal divine knowledge.

The Mimamsa system emphasizes the importance of action in terms of ritual, worship, and duty or *dharma* as the means of reaching liberation from karma and the cycle of repeated birth and death. It explains the essential Vedic issues and describes the eternal nature of the Vedic texts as part of the same spiritual energy as God, which are manifested on earth through the minds of the great sages. It then continues to clarify the accurate use of the Vedic mantras for the attainment of happiness and material facility. Mimamsa is basically a systematized code of rules for the Vedic rituals and worship used along with the *Vedas* and explains the purpose and meaning of the rituals. It is especially meant to help householders regulate and spiritualize their daily lives, while Vedanta is meant more for those who had grown tired of materialistic existence and are ready to retire and seriously engage in spiritual pursuits. *Dharma* is considered to be those moral activities that harmonize individual life with cosmic life.

The *Nyaya Sutra* presents the Vedic system of logic as established by the sage Gautama. This was written in a question and answer format, like many of the Vedic *Sutrās*. Nyaya is a school of logic which regards doubt as a prerequisite for philosophical inquiry. All other Indian systems of philosophy use the Nyaya system of logic as a foundation for reasoning and debate.

The five principles of the Nyaya system are: (1) to present the proposition, (2) the reason for presenting the proposition, (3) an example of it, showing that it is realistic or unrealistic, depending on the instance, (4) apply the example of the proposition presented, and (5) establish the conclusion of the proposition.

The ultimate purpose of the Nyaya system, which is closely linked to the Vaisheshika system, is to use this process of logic to establish the ultimate truth, or God, the Supreme Reality, and to show the spiritual platform is all that is truly desirable and not the temporary material creation. It is meant to help one achieve liberation from karma and material existence by properly understanding reality, or the difference between matter and spirit. Nyaya accepts that the only way to liberation is to obtain knowledge of the external world and understand its relationship with the mind and self. Through logical criticism, one can discriminate between truth and illusion and, applying such understanding in daily life, rid oneself of suffering and attain liberation. Additionally, this system of logic was developed to prove the validity of its principles by analysis and argument to counter the criticism of the Buddhists, Jains, and Charvakas. However, the Nyaya system was empirical and mostly relied on perception, inference, comparison, and testimony as its means of acquiring knowledge.

The *Vaisheshika-sutra*, written in a question and answer format, was the first work written on this philosophy by Kanada. Prasastapada later wrote a definitive commentary on this *sutra* entitled *Svartha Dharma Samgraha*. The name Vaisheshika comes from *visheshā*, which means uniqueness or particularity. Therefore, the Vaisheshika system is a study of the uniqueness and qualities of existence, such as the elements, atoms, their interactions, as well as the soul. But it accepts only two independent sources of knowledge, which are perception and inference. It is a *sutra* that helps show the futility of life in the temporary worlds of *maya*, and the need for understanding God and to become free from all karma so that liberation can follow. However, the knowledge within this *sutra* is unnecessary if one already knows that understanding God and regaining one's devotional love is the real goal of life.

The *Vaisheshika-sutra* contained several ideas: (1) that everything is composed of atoms bearing the qualities of either earth, water, light, or air; (2) that the individual souls are eternal and pervade a material body for a time; (3) there are nine basic elements, consisting of earth, water, light, air, ether, time, space, soul, and mind, which are all eternal in the form of energy; and (4) there are seven categories of experience, which are substance, quality, activity, generality, particularity, inherence, and non-existence. However, God is not mentioned in the *sutra*, but later commentators included knowledge of God to complete the system.

Vaisheshika attempted to integrate philosophical theories with moral and spiritual attitudes or *dharma* which would lead people to good in this life and the next. However, it did not bring the Supreme Being to the point of ultimate reality, but as merely an agent of release from karma and repeated birth and death. Therefore, the Vaisheshika philosophy is not complete in its understanding of the Absolute Truth or of

material nature.

The Vaisheshika theory is that merely by interactions between atoms the elements are formed and, thus, the world and all objects within appear. However, this is refuted by the *Vedanta-sutras*. For example, if atoms are simply inert matter, then atomic combinations could not properly take place without some higher directional force. The Vaisheshikas say this force is the unseen principle but fail to explain fully what it is, where it resides, or how it works. They also say that atoms and relationships between the atoms of the elements as earth, water, air, etc., are eternal, but this would mean that any form composed of atoms would also be eternal, such as the material world and all that is in it. However, anyone can see that this is not the case since everything is always changing and breaking apart. Even the Vaisheshikas accept the fact that all bodies and forms composed of atoms are temporary. In this way, we can recognize the contradictions in the atomic theory of the Vaisheshikas, which is, therefore, unacceptable.

The Sankhya philosophy is another system. The principal aim is to analyze the distinctions between matter and spirit. The study of the twenty-four material elements was originally developed as a complex science by Lord Kapila, as elaborated in *Srimad-Bhagavatam*. But later, there was another Kapila who presented an atheistic Sankhya system. Therefore, in other schools of this system, the existence of God is considered irrelevant. This is because the universe is regarded as a system of cause and effect. In other words, the cause of the universe is that which is eternal but ever-changing, or *prakriti*, the ever-changing material energy. God is eternal and non-changing, so, within this atheistic view of Sankhya it is considered that God cannot be the cause of the universe. Obviously, there are limitations in this analysis, such as not defining where *prakriti* came from and how could *prakriti*, which is inert, form the material universe without any guidance, and so on. So, gradually, there were additional arguments that again led to an acceptance of God in the philosophy of Sankhya.

The original Sankhya system, as explained in *Srimad-Bhagavatam* by Lord Kapila, acknowledges matter and spirit as two separate principles of reality. Thus, genuine Sankhya introduces a dualistic philosophy more developed than the previous three systems discussed so far. Sankhya analyzed such factors as *purusha* and *prakriti* (spirit and matter), the creation and development of matter through excitation of the *purusha*, how the world evolved, how the modes of nature operate and affect us, how *ahankara* (false ego) causes our identification with matter and bondage to the material world, the five organs of action and five senses of perception, the subtle elements, the gross elements, etc.

The goal of this system is to understand that the real self is eternal and free, but because of ignorance the soul identifies with what is temporary and, therefore, suffers. Through this kind of analysis of the material world it is expected that one will realize the difference between matter and spirit and attain freedom from false identification. After this stage is attained, release from existence in the material world is reached through spiritual training, meditation on the real self and Superself, and the practice of yoga.

Yoga is the next system, which is the application of the Sankhya system. Sankhya is the theory, and yoga is the practice. Yoga, which is essentially theistic, was known many years before Patanjali. Although he is often given the credit for it, he merely codified it in his *Yoga Sutras*. The complete system of yoga is very complex and has many steps to it, each of which must be perfected before one can go on to the next step. The purpose of yoga is to suspend the flickering nature and internal dictations of the mind. Yoga is also to attain relief from the pain that exists from such things as ignorance, which brings attachment, which then leads the way to fear and hatred, as well as the fear of death. The practice of yoga and renunciation is for bringing freedom from such pains and suffering. Although the basis of this system may be quite popular, few people can actually reach the higher levels of self-realization through this process in this day and age. The different levels of this process and yoga systems are briefly explained in the next chapter.

The other subsidiary portions of the *Vedas* previously mentioned in the *Vedangas* have additional texts that further explain that section of Vedic knowledge. For example, the *Kalpa-sutras*, which elaborate on the many kinds of rituals, are divided into four kinds, namely the *Shrauta-sutras*, *Grihya-sutras*, *Dharma-sutras*, and the *Shulba-sutras*.

The *Shrauta-sutras* explain the rituals the priests engage in, and the details of performing a Vedic *yajna*, or ceremony, according to the particular branch of the *Veda* with which it is connected. It covers the large and royal rituals performed by kings, such as the *ashvamedha* or *rajasuya*, to the ordinary ones performed by a family, such as the *agnishtoma*, *agnihotra*, or the *pitri yajna* for the dead relatives.

The *Grihya-sutras* describes the general and ritualistic social traditions that are usually observed by householders for their upliftment. These include such things as the performance of daily worship, study of

scripture, or installing a Deity in a temple. Also, how to greet a guest, do rituals for moving into a new house, or timely *samskaras* for giving a name to a child, or the ritual for a child's first hair cutting, a youth's acceptance of a Vedic order, or the marriage ceremony.

The *Dharma-sutras* deal with the different disciplines or duties of a person, from common individuals up to the king. This includes duties of people in the four orders of life (from birth up to renunciation, or *brahmacari* student to *sannyasa*), along with duties of a man to his family and society, or duties of a married couple to each other and their children, or duties of a king to his subordinates.

Vedic mathematics is found in the *Shulba Sutras*, which means codes of the rope since particular lengths of rope were used to make exact measurements. The *Shulba-sutras* had 1180 branches and give mathematical details on size and shape of altars for the fire rituals and the place where such ceremonies would take place. These mathematical codes are said to have been compiled from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, however such codes probably existed far earlier than this. It is figured that the original Indian mathematical developments arose from the needs of their religious ceremonies that required altars of precise measurement. This started to gain significance when the sages began to emphasize the use of external processes of worship and ritual as an additional means to attain internal awareness and spiritual progress. In other words, they were not interested in math outside of what it could do for them spiritually. The *Shulba Sutras* show the earliest forms of algebra as used by the Vedic priests.

The *Shulba Sutras* were only a portion of the broader system of mathematics found in the *Kalpasutras*. These consisted of arithmetic and algebra as well as geometry. In fact, geometrical instruments dating back to 2500 BC have been found in the Indus Valley, which was also a part of Vedic society. The Pythagorean theorem was already existing in the *Shulba Sutras* before Pythagorus presented it. This means he may have only learned of it through his travels in India rather than inventing it himself.

It was the Vedic system that developed the decimal system of tens, hundreds, thousands, etc., and how to take the remainder of one column of numbers over to the next. The numeral system of nine numbers and a 0 made calculations very easy. Without the invention and use of 0, many of the mathematical advancements that have been made in the West would not have been possible. These numbers were developed from the Brahmi script and became popular after 700 AD, spreading into Arabia. They became known as the Arabic numerals because the Europeans, who had adopted them, got them from the traveling Arabians. Yet the Arabians called them "Indian figures" (*Al-Arqaan-Al-Hindu*) because they had received them from India. Because of this it was called the India art (*hindisat*). Thus, the system of math that we all use today had its start in Vedic India.

Further developments in mathematics in India by its mathematicians, such as Brahmagupta (7<sup>th</sup> century), Mahavira (9<sup>th</sup> century), and Bhaskara (12<sup>th</sup> century) in such areas as algebra and trigonometry were not known in Europe until the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In fact, many of the great inventions made in Europe that we take for granted today, would have been impossible if they had been stuck with their cumbersome Roman numerals, and without the advanced system of mathematics that came from India.

The *Anukramanika* is another book in the same category as these *sutras* and relates the contents of the *Vedas*. It consists of 1180 books for the 1180 Vedic branches. It lists all of the Vedic gods and their associated mantras, and all the sages who composed them. So this works like a summary of the Vedic books.

Beyond these are many other texts that include the *Sraddha-kalpa*, *Pitrimedhasutras*, *Parisistas*, *Prayogas*, *Karikas*, etc., all of which deal only with Vedic rituals.

A later text that also deals with the Vedic rituals is the *Rigvidhana* by the sage Shaunaka. This book gives explanations on the usage of many of the verses or hymns in the *Rig-veda*. The precise chanting of particular verses produces specific magical or quick results, such as overcoming one's enemies, getting rid of disease, protecting oneself from ghosts, and many other things. The *Rigvidhana* indicates which verses, and the procedure if necessary, to be used to accomplish their various effects.

Additional topics, such as alchemy, are also dealt with, or architecture as found in the *Sthapatyaveda*, or erotics as found in the *Kama Sutra*.

India also had a long agricultural heritage that went back to before 3700 BC, and had the first written texts on the topic. One of the oldest books is the *Krishi-Parashara* (c. 400 BC), which means "Agriculture by Parashara". This has been translated by the Asian Agri-History Foundation in Secunderabad, India. This book gives lists of tools to be used, ways of predicting rain by using basic astrology with climate conditions, methods of good farming management for the high yield of crops, management of cattle, along with advice on seed collection and storage, etc.

Another text on agriculture was the *Kashyapiyakrishisukti* by Kashyapa (c. 700-800 AD). This

describes the means of producing certain crops, cattle management, soil properties, laying out gardens, means of irrigation, marketing, ways of support from the government, as well as mining, and even a personal code of conduct for farmers.

The *Vrikshayurveda* (The Science of Plant Life) by Surapala was another book that appeared later (c. 1000 AD). This dealt with the application of Ayurveda to various kinds of trees. However, it also contained knowledge of raising orchards, seed management, selection of soil, ways of irrigation, finding groundwater, using fertilizers, dealing with plant diseases, and so on. These books recommend practical ways of efficient farming while preserving the world's resources and environment, along with the means by which humanity can achieve the essential aims of life, such as *dharmā*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* (religion, economic development, sensual fulfillment, and liberation through spiritual advancement) which are all things that we should still consider today.

## THE SMRITIS

The *Smritis* were additional books that included those of many ancient authors, such as the *Manu-samhita*, the famous Vedic law book, and *Yagyavalkya Smriti*, *Parashar Smriti*, and those of Brihaspati, Daksha, Gautama, Yama, Angira, Pracheta, Yogeshwara, Atri, Vishnu, and several others. There were also the *Upa-Smritis* (smaller books) of Narada, Pulaha, Garga, Pulastya, Shaunaka, Kratu, Baudhayana, Jatukarna, Vishvamitra, Pitamaha, Jabali, Skanda, Kashyapa, Vyasa, Sanatkumara, Janaka, Vashishta, Bharadwaj and others. Most anyone who has done a fair amount of Vedic study will recognize these names, but most of these books are now unavailable.

These *Smritis*, especially like the *Manu-samhita*, explained the codes and laws or disciplines of proper conduct, and the consequences or recommended penances for bad or evil behavior. They prescribe the kind of fasting or charity or austerity one should perform for curing oneself of various sins, and what a person could expect if he was not relieved of such karmic reactions. However, some of the rules and laws it presents were meant for a much more conservative and stricter day and age. Thus, they are not as applicable in these modern times.

The first three *Smritis* mentioned above are the most important. However, their content is mostly for attaining good results in the next life or for attaining heaven or celestial opulence and avoiding hell. These generally do not provide the means for attaining complete liberation or God-realization, although the *Manu-samhita* does include such things as a description of proper behavior between guru and disciple.

Nonetheless, just as with the *Upanishads*, there are some *Smritis* that do relate the more confidential aspects of how to reach the perfection of life and attain liberation and God-realization. For example, the *Smriti* of Sanatkumara, the *Sri Sanatkumara Samhita*, is still available today and has over 321 verses. It is said to be connected with the *Skanda Purana*. It starts by describing the unfortunate characteristics of the people in this age of Kali-yuga, and then goes on to explain the need for all people, from the lowest to the highest, to take shelter of the holy names of Hari, Krishna, as the only way to attain the Lord. It then prescribes two mantras that are most effective for this purpose, and explains how to chant them. It later goes into some detail in describing the sweet pastimes of Lord Krishna and His associates in the spiritual world. In this way, this specialized and rare *Smriti* describes the way for God-realization and the most secret of secrets for complete liberation from material existence.

## VEDANTA AND THE VEDANTA-SUTRAS

After the above-mentioned *sutras*, we now come to the *Vedanta-sutras*. When it comes to Vedanta, many commentaries on it revolve around the Brahman. The Brahman generally means the all-pervading, self-existent power. The word *brahman* is based on the root word *brah*, which means vastness, power or expansion. It also denotes the Supreme Being, as well as the *atman*, the living being, who, when freed from the body, becomes situated on the level of Brahman, or the spiritual nature. The concept of the Brahman was, for the most part, first elaborated in the *Upanishads*. Therein we begin to find descriptions from which our understanding of it grows. It is described as invisible, ungraspable, eternal, without qualities, and the imperishable source of all things. (*Mundaka Upanishad* 1.1.6-7)

It is explained that Shankara's *advaita* doctrine was based on the famous passage in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (6.10.3), *tat tvam asi*, meaning "That thou art." He taught that "thou and that" were not to be

regarded as object and subject, but as identical, without difference (*a-bheda*), like the real self (*atman*). Thus, anything that was variable, like the body, mind, intellect, and ego are objects of knowledge and not the *atman*.

These concepts were more fully explained on the basis of the *Vedanta-sutras*. The *Vedanta-sutras* are a systemization of *sutras* or codes for understanding Vedic knowledge. As you know, they are short codes that are later to be explained by the spiritual master, guru or spiritual authority. By themselves, without further explanations, it is not easy to fathom their depths. So it is these commentaries that contain the additional information about such things as the Brahman.

Vedanta means the conclusion of the *Veda* or end of all knowledge. Vedanta is also known as *Uttara Mimamsa*, or later examination, and is a companion to the *Purva Mimamsa*, or preliminary examination. The *Purva Mimamsa* deals with the early portions of the *Vedas* and the *Uttara Mimamsa* deals with the latter portions. The Vedic tradition, unlike other religions and philosophies, is rooted in such remote antiquity that its origin cannot be fully traced. The Vedic literature explains that it exists in the form of eternal spiritual vibrations and is present both within and outside the universal creation.

Vedanta has been the most influential of the seven main systems of Eastern philosophy. Though the name Vedanta is often taken to indicate the impersonalist, nondual or Mayavada school of thought, it is essentially dualistic theism, but various commentaries have interpreted it to mean different things. It was the *Sariraka-Bhasya* commentary by Shankara that established the Vedanta as a nondualistic philosophy, meaning that the ultimate reality is but one. In this regard, the Brahman and the Atman (individual souls) are identical, and the Brahman is the Absolute Reality from which everything manifests and back into which everything merges. This interpretation has gained much respect and influence, but is not the only or ultimate viewpoint of Vedic literature, as will be explained.

The *Vedanta-sutras* are like short, condensed bits of information used as reminders for the spiritual master in his discussions on Vedic philosophy with a student or disciple. Each line, therefore, is meant to be elaborated upon by the spiritual master for the understanding of the student.

Vedanta means “the end of knowledge,” or the final conclusion of the Vedic philosophy. The *Vedanta-sutras* are also called the *Brahma-sutra*, *Sariraka*, *Vyasa-sutra*, *Vedanta-darshana*, *Uttara-mimamsa*, as well as *Badarayana-sutra*. Vyasa and Badarayana are two names for the same person who is considered to be the author and compiler of the major portions of Vedic literature.

The *Vedanta-sutras* are divided into four chapters with four divisions each. In each division the theme within is stated, reasons for it are given, examples are supplied to uphold the presented facts, the theme is then explained further for clearer understanding, and finally authorized quotations from the *Vedas* are supplied to support it. In this way, the information is given in a format meant to show the authenticity and reliability of the Vedic viewpoint.

The first two chapters discuss how the material world manifested from the Supreme and the relationship between the living entity and the Supreme. The third chapter explains how one engages in the prescribed duties to perform and how to act according to the loving relationship we have with the Lord. The fourth chapter describes the result of such devotional service (or *bhakti*), which is ultimately to attain liberation or return to the spiritual world.

The first verse of the *Vedanta-sutras* states: “*athato brahma-jijnasa*”, which means, “Now is the time to inquire about the Absolute Truth.” Why is it time? Because we are presently in the human form of life and should utilize it properly since only in the human form do we have the intelligence and facility to be able to understand spiritual reality. In animal forms, the living entities cannot understand such things because they do not have the brainpower. So we should not waste this human form of life by pursuing only the animalistic propensities, such as eating, sleeping, mating and defending. Therefore, the *Vedanta-sutras* begin by stating that now is the time for us to understand the Absolute Truth.

The *Vedanta-sutras*, however, being written only in codes, can be somewhat vague and requires a commentary to elaborate and explain the aphorisms. Practically speaking, some of the codes are fairly unclear for anyone who is not experienced in Vedic philosophy. And since Vedanta comprises the purport of the *Upanishads* which contain knowledge of both the personal and impersonal aspects of the Absolute, which commentary on the *Vedanta-sutras* you read can make a big difference. Some commentaries sway toward the impersonal understanding of the Absolute, while other commentaries sway toward the personal realizations. Obviously, to reach a mature understanding in this regard, we need to comprehend both of these viewpoints. In fact, it is stated that unless one understands all the features of the Absolute Truth, namely, the impersonal Brahman, the localized Paramatma or Supersoul, and ultimately the Supreme Personality of God, Bhagavan or Krishna, one’s knowledge is imperfect.

After studying the previous portions of the Vedic literature, only when we arrive at this *Brahma-sutras* or *Vedanta-sutras* of Srila Vyasadeva do we find an emphasis on doing bhakti-yoga, or devotional activities, for realizing God. This means that God is ultimately the Supreme Person from whom there is the imminent loving exchange that can be attained by lovingly surrendering to Him. That devotion and emotional absorption in God is the process for becoming free from the illusory attraction and attachments to the material world. This paves the way for genuine liberation from worldly existence.

There have been many commentaries written on the *Vedanta-sutras*. The most influential were by such famous *acharyas* as Shankara, Bhaskara, Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Vallabha, Madhva, and Baladeva. So let us review a few of these to get a better view of the development of the *advaita* and *dvaita* philosophies.

Let me point out here that the Vedic process has a unique system of checks and balances found nowhere else. This involves what you could call the three “S” system, namely *sadhu* (saintly devotees), *shastra* (Vedic texts) and spiritual master or *acharya*. If you ever want to know if you are taking the right path and are not being misled, you use this system. This means that any truth that you are given must be verified by these three sources of guru, *shastra* and *sadhus*. Even if a guru tells you something that cannot be verified in the *shastra* or by other *sadhus*, then it should be questioned or taken with caution. *Sadhu*, *shastra* and spiritual master must all verify the points in order to be considered authentic and truth. So now we are going to read about what some of the most prominent *acharyas* or spiritual authorities have said about what the ultimate reality is and how to understand it.

One of the most influential was Shankara (509-477 BC, though others have said 788-820 AD). He was a follower of Shiva, born of a South Indian brahmana family in the town of Kaladi, on the banks of the Periyar River. His father’s name was Shivaguru, and he lost his father at a young age. When he was only eight years old he finished his studies of all the scriptures and took sannyasa from Govinda who stayed on the banks of the Narmada and was a disciple of Gaudapada, the author of *Mandukya-karika*, a commentary on the *Mandukya Upanishad*. Not long after that he left for Varanasi, and then for Badarikashrama in the Himalayas. There he stayed until his twelfth year. While there he wrote his commentary on the *Brahma-sutra*, as well as on ten *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad-gita*. He continued to travel and preach and made many disciples. He left this world at the early age of thirty-three.

He established four main *maths*, or schools of study. These were at Dwaraka in the west, Jagannatha Puri in the east, Badrinatha in the north, and Shringeri in the south. These have records of their original establishment and list all of the successive *acharyas* who followed from the time of Shankaracharya. One of these lists, such as the one displayed at the Kamakoti Shankara Math in Kanchipuram, date back to 477 BC, thus dating earlier than the time of Christ.

Shankaracharya’s two major works are the *Vivida-cudamani* and *Sariraka-basya*. When Shankara appeared, Buddhism and anti-Vedic thought had spread throughout India because it had been patronized by Emperor Asoka in the third century B.C., and the followers of Buddhism had given up the *Vedas*. The Buddhist philosophy establishes that the material creation is the only manifestation of the Absolute Truth, which itself is temporary and brought on by egoistic desires. It is asserted that these desires must be eliminated for one to enter back into the void. The void itself is said to be all that is real and eternal, and the source from which everything manifests. Shankara’s purpose, therefore, was to reform and purify religious life by re-establishing the authority of the Vedic scriptures. His interpretation of the *Vedas* is known as *advaita* or nondualistic because he taught that the individual *jiva* or soul is identical with God, and that there is ultimately no variety, no individuality or personality in spiritual existence. The individuality of both the Supreme Being and the *jiva*, according to him, is false.

In order for Shankara to teach like this, he had to ignore the many statements in the Vedic literature which assert that the Absolute Truth is the Supreme Person and the *jivas* are His subordinate parts. Therefore, by word jugglery, he developed a twofold theory that Brahman consists of the pure impersonal Brahman, and that any incarnation of God within this universe is simply a manifestation of that Brahman. This was a complete rejection of the personalistic teachings found in some of the Vedic literature, such as *Bhagavad-gita*, and in this way he differed with all orthodox Vedic schools at the time. Like Buddha, he also refused to answer questions about the origin of the cosmos and said that *maya*, the illusory energy, was inexplicable.

This Mayavada philosophy teaches that the material world is false and the impersonal Brahman, or great white light or spiritual force, is the ultimate truth. One merges back into the Brahman, where there exists no activities or spiritual characteristics, after giving up the ego or bodily consciousness. Therefore, we find that impersonalists generally do not study the *Vedas* beyond the *Vedanta-sutras* because as we progress through the Vedic literature up to the *Puranas*, it becomes more specific about the personal

characteristics of the Absolute Truth and the individual nature of the *jiva* souls, which contradicts the impersonal viewpoint.

We must point out that some spiritual authorities say that Shankaracharya was an incarnation of Lord Shiva who had been ordered by the Supreme Lord to cheat the atheists. The *Shiva Purana* quotes the Supreme Lord as ordering Shiva: “In Kali-yuga mislead the people in general by propounding imaginary meanings from the *Vedas* [Vedic literature] to bewilder them”:

*dvaparadau yuge bhutva  
kalaya manushadishu  
svagamaih kalpitais tvam ca  
janan mad-vimukhan kuru*<sup>1</sup>

The *Padma Purana* also says that Lord Shiva would descend as a brahmana sannyasi and teach Mayavada philosophy in the verse:

*mayavada ashat shastram prachchanna  
boudhyam uchyate moya ebe godidam  
devi kalou brahmana murtina*

To do this, Shankara gave up the direct method of Vedic knowledge and presented an indirect meaning which actually covered the real goal of Vedanta. This is confirmed in the *Padma Purana* where Lord Shiva addresses his wife, Parvati:

*shrinu devi pravaksyami  
tamasani yathakramam  
yesham shravana-matrena  
patityam jnaninam api*

*apartham shruti-vakyanam  
darshayal loka-garhitam  
karma-svarupa-tyajyatvam  
atra ca pratipadyate*

*sarva-karma-paribhramsam  
naiskarmyam tatra cocyate  
paratma-jivayor aikyam  
mayatra pratipadyate*

“My dear wife, hear my explanations of how I have spread ignorance through Mayavada philosophy. Simply by hearing it even an advanced scholar will fall down. In this philosophy which is certainly very inauspicious for people in general, I have misrepresented the real meaning of the *Vedas* and recommended that one give up all activities in order to achieve freedom from karma. In this Mayavada philosophy I have described the *jivatma* and Paramatma to be one and the same.”<sup>2</sup>

The *Padma Purana*, in the quote that follows, describes how Lord Shiva tells his wife, Parvati, that he would appear in Kali-yuga to teach the impersonalistic philosophy, which is impious and merely a covered form of Buddhism. Yet, as explained next, there was a purpose for it.

*mayavadam asac-chastram  
pracchannam bauddham ucyate  
mayaiva kalpitam devi  
kalau brahmana rupini*

*brahmanas caparam rupam  
nirgunam vaksyate maya*

*sarvasvam jagato 'py asya  
mohanartham kalau yuge*

*vedante tu maha-shastre  
mayavadam avaidikam  
mayaiva vaksyate devi  
jagatam nasha-karanat*

“The Mayavada philosophy is impious. It is covered Buddhism. My dear Parvati, in the form of a brahmana in Kali-yuga I teach this imagined Mayavada philosophy. In order to cheat the atheists I mislead them by describing the Supreme Lord to be without any personal form or qualities.”<sup>3</sup>

Herein, Lord Shiva himself points out that to believe God has no form is not accurate and is equal to atheism. Even though this Mayavada philosophy was not good for pious people to hear because it would sway them toward an impersonalistic viewpoint, we should note that Shankara’s philosophy was just right for the time and circumstance. The Buddhists, who had spread throughout India and neglected the *Vedas*, believed in neither a soul nor a God and that, ultimately, the essence of everything is the nothingness or void wherein lies *nirvana*, freedom from all suffering. So considering how the Buddhists had followed a philosophy of what would generally be considered atheism for hundreds of years and would never have accepted a viewpoint which advocated a supreme personal God, Shankara’s was the only philosophy they would have considered. It was like a compromise between atheism and theism, but Shankara used portions of Vedic knowledge as the basis of his arguments. In this way, as Shankara traveled throughout India his arguments prevailed. Thus, Buddhism bowed and Vedic culture was brought back to prominence. Therefore, his purpose was accomplished, so much so that his *Sariraka-bhasya* is considered the definitive rendition of Vedanta even to the present day.

Several times, however, Shankara revealed his true beliefs, that he was actually a devotee of Lord Krishna. For example, in the first verse of his *Vivida-cudamani* he explains that it is Krishna Himself who is the source of the supreme bliss and the Divine Master to whom he offers obeisance. Furthermore, in his birthplace of Kaladi there is a temple near the *samadhi* tomb of his mother that has a Deity of Lord Krishna that was installed by Shankara himself. So why would he give his mother the facility to worship Krishna if he was also not in favor of such a view? Also, in his *Gita-bhasya*, the first verse explains that Narayana (another incarnation of Lord Krishna), or Bhagavan, is transcendental to the material creation. In *The Bhagavad-gita with the Commentary of Sri Sankaracarya*, (p.6) Dinkar Vishnu Gokhale establishes that Shankara writes in his *Meditations on the Bhagavad-gita*: “Salutations to thee, O Vyasa [the incarnation of Krishna who compiled the essential Vedic literature]. Thou art of mighty intellect, and thine eyes are as large as a full-blown lotus. It was thou who brightened this lamp of wisdom, filling it with the oil of the *Mahabharata*.”<sup>4</sup> Shankara also readily points out that it is Bhagavan Krishna “whose glories are sung by the verses of the *Vedas*, of whom the singers of the *Sama* sing, and of whose glories the *Upanishads* proclaim in full choir.”<sup>5</sup>

This would seem to indicate that Shankara was encouraging everyone to read *Bhagavad-gita* and *Mahabharata* as written by Srila Vyasadeva to understand the conclusion of spiritual knowledge. This would also give evidence that Shankara’s own personal beliefs were different from the philosophy that he taught. There is no evidence that makes this more clear than texts eight and nine of his *Meditations on the Bhagavad-gita* as follows:

I offer my respectful obeisances unto the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Krishna, the transcendental, blissful husband of the Goddess of Fortune, whose mercy turns the dumb into eloquent speakers and enables the lame to cross mountains. Let all obeisances be unto the Supreme Lord Sri Krishna, whom Brahma, Varuna, Indra, Rudra, the Maruts, and all divine beings praise with the divine hymns of the *Vedas* and their supplementary parts, such as the *Upanishads*, whom the followers of the *Sama-veda* glorify with song, whom great mystics see with their minds absorbed in perfect meditation and of whom all the hosts of demigods and demons know not the limitations. To Him, the Supreme Lord, let there be all obeisances.

Near the end of his life, Shankara wrote his *Bhaja Govindam* prayers. Verses 1 and 34, which are the

conclusive verses in these prayers, are often overlooked by his followers. Yet they were written especially for those who might miss the actual purport of the *Vedas*. He wrote in verse one, “Worship Govinda [another name of Krishna], worship Govinda, worship Govinda, you intellectual fools. At the end of your life all your grammatical arguments will not help you.” And again in verse 34 he writes: “Worship Govinda, worship Govinda, worship Govinda, Oh fool. Other than chanting the Lord’s names, there is no other way to cross the material ocean [of birth and death].”

In the final book that Shankaracharya wrote, the *Prabodh Sudhakar*, he established his true philosophy. He pointed out that God has two eternal forms, which are both personal and impersonal, that latter of which is difficult to realize. The supreme form is the beautiful and divine Lord Krishna, who appeared on this earth in the Yadu dynasty. Without devotion to Lord Krishna, one’s heart cannot be fully purified. Thus, as he says, it is one’s own ill fortune if one is not attracted to the form and pastimes of Lord Krishna.

In this way, even Shankaracharya emphasized that it is Krishna who is the Supreme form of God, and that the supreme form of God-realization is through the process of worshiping Him and chanting Krishna’s holy names, which is the sure way of liberation from material existence.

Ramanuja (A.D. 1017-1137) did not accept Shankara’s Mayavada interpretation of the *Vedanta-sutras* and sought to expose Shankara’s contradictory arguments which were actually in defiance of the real Vedic conclusions. He wrote over forty books, but the three major commentaries for which Ramanuja is most known is his *Vedanta-sangraha*, which is on the *Vedas*; the *Sri-bhasya* on the *Vedanta-sutras*; and *Bhagavad-gita-bhasya*, which is on *Bhagavad-gita*. His prominent theme is his opposition to impersonal monism, especially of Shankara, and the support of Vaishnavism, worship of the one God Vishnu or Bhagavan Sri Krishna.

Ramanuja’s interpretation of Vedanta, as related in his *Sri Bhasya* commentary, establishes that God is one and the soul is a part of God, but that it remains individual in nature even after liberation from the body, rather than merging into the Absolute. This is called *vishishthadvaita*. He also explains that the process for liberation includes surrendering to the personal form of God.

Ramanuja accepted that the Supreme and the individual living entities are one in spiritual quality, but the individual souls are very small and God is unlimited, and between them is a relationship based on *bhakti*, or spiritual love. By logical reasoning, he taught that just as the *jiva* controls his own body and uses it as an instrument, God controls the whole material creation as well as the *jiva* souls within. The soul is eternal and after being liberated from material entanglement lives in an eternal spiritual body. The soul is the eternal servant of God, in which case the soul becomes fully happy after meeting and engaging in service to God. This, therefore, is the goal of the Vedic spiritual process.

Madhvacharya (A.D. 1239-1319) was another prominent philosopher who wrote a commentary on the *Vedanta Sutra* and the *Gita*, along with more than thirty other books. He was also a Vaishnava who worked to combat Shankara’s impersonal philosophy. Madhva accepted the renounced order of *sannyasa* when he was only eleven years old. He studied the Vedanta and after traveling to the Himalayas, he met Vyasadeva who still lives in the mountains and who taught him to teach the glories of Vaishnava *bhakti*. Thereafter, he traveled around the country and established the importance of *bhakti* through his talent of debating with scriptural evidence.

Madhva’s interpretation of Vedanta, as found in his *Tatparya Nirnay*, also presents Vedanta philosophy as dualistic (*dvaita*), similar to Ramanuja’s but more developed. Madhva taught pure dualism and that there are three energies: the spiritual, marginal and inferior. The Lord is of the superior spiritual energy and controller of all other energies. The living entities are the marginal energy since they can be engrossed spiritually or materially. And the material energy is inferior due to its temporary nature. The Lord and the living entities are eternal and always distinct, but the Lord is always completely transcendental to the material world. The Lord is the ultimate cause of the creation, maintenance and annihilation of the material manifestation, thereby being completely independent while the living entities are completely dependent on the Lord. They remain bound up in material energy by the result of their own karma or activities based on their fruitive desires. But Madhva pointed out that through *bhakti*, devotion to God, people could eliminate their karma and reawaken their real spiritual identity and return to their natural position in the spiritual world.

Nimbarka also delivered a commentary called *Vedanta Parijata Saurabh* based on the dualistic idea. He was born in South India, somewhere near the Godavari River, but it is not known exactly when. The

tradition is that he was initiated by Narada Muni, another eternally living sage. In his commentary he establishes that God is one with but separate from each soul. This is called the *dvaitadvaitvad* philosophy. This means that God and the individual souls are spiritual in quality, yet God is infinite, and the living entities are infinitesimal. Nimbarka also explained that Radha-Krishna are the ultimate form of God, and the basis of the topmost spiritual development is devotion to Radha-Krishna.

Vallabhacharya (1478-1530) also wrote a commentary on the *Vedanta-sutras*, called the *Anu Bhashya*. He also wrote on the *Bhagavatam*, along with a few other books, which emphasized that the *Bhagavatam* is the essence of all spiritual and devotional knowledge. His philosophy is called *shuddhadvaita vad*, or pure monism. This established that Krishna was the supreme form of God, and that the soul is not merely a part of God's energy, but is qualitatively the same as God, but small in potency. Furthermore, Krishna gives a person everything for spiritual development when one surrenders with love to Him. This knowledge is said to have started from Lord Shiva (Rudra), and came down to Vishnuswami, then Gyanadeva, Nath Dev, and on down to Vallabhacharya. This is why it is also called the Rudra *sampradaya* or disciplic succession.

Vallabhacharya was born in Raipur. By the time he was eleven years old he went to Kashi to study under Madhavendra Puri and became well educated in the knowledge of the Vedic scripture. After staying for a time in Vrindavana, he traveled to the major holy places of India and spread the understanding of devotion to Lord Krishna. After he returned to Vrindavana he started the temple of Sri Nathji at Govardhan. He established a structured form of Deity worship centered around the Deity of Lord Krishna. When he was 28, he was married and had two sons, Gopinatha and Vitthalnath. Vitthal became known as Goswamiji and started six more temples, of which four are in the area of Vrindavana, two in Kamban and one in Gokul. Kashi was the home to Vallabhacharya the last years of his life. It is said that once during bathing in the river, in front of hundreds of people, a big bright light appeared near him and he ascended up into the sky and disappeared into the spiritual world.

Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (A.D. 1486-1534) also strongly opposed Shankara's Mayavada philosophy and established the principle of *achintya-bhedabheda-tattva*. This specified that the Supreme and the individual soul are inconceivably and simultaneously one and different. This means that the Supreme and the *jiva* souls are the same in quality, being eternally spiritual, but always separate individually. The *jivas* are small and subject to being influenced by the material energy, while the Supreme is infinite and always above and beyond the material manifestation.

Sri Chaitanya taught that the direct meaning of the Vedic *shastras* is that the living entities are to engage in devotional service, *bhakti*, to the Supreme, Bhagavan Sri Krishna. Through this practice there can develop a level of communication between God and the individual by which God will lovingly reveal Himself to those who become qualified. In this understanding, the Vedic theistic philosophy of Vaishnavism reached its climax.

Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, who is considered and was established by Vedic scripture as the most recent incarnation of God, did not become much involved in writing. In fact, He only wrote eight verses called the *Shikshastaka*, but His followers compiled extensive Sanskrit literature that documented His life and fully explained His teachings. However, it is one of His followers, Baladeva Vidyabushana, who wrote a commentary on the *Vedanta-sutras* called *Govinda-bhasya*. (See Appendix Three for more information about Lord Chaitanya)

Baladeva Vidyabushana also wrote a very important commentary on the Vedanta called *Sri Bhasya*, and established the individual nature of the soul. Baladeva had met Pandit Sri Radha-Damodara, a disciple of Sri Rasikananda Deva, who was a great follower of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Sri Radha-Damodar instructed Baladeva in the pastimes and teachings of Sri Chaitanya and the Vaishnava Gaudiya tradition. Later Baladeva went to Vrindavana to stay with Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur to continue his progress.

One day in the royal court in Jaipur, the Ramanuja pandits were arguing that the Gaudiya line did not have any written commentary on the Vedanta. In other words, without a written commentary, they were not viewed as authorized. So the Ramanuja Pandits said the Gaudiya Vaishnavas should simply join them since they were an authorized line with their own written commentary. The Jaipur king, who was also a follower of the Gaudiya line, sent word of this to Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakur asking that if there was a commentary it should be sent at once. Sri Vishvanatha was too old and infirm to go, so he sent Baladeva to Jaipur.

Baladeva was an excellent scholar and challenged the Ramanuja pandits in the huge assembly. Even after much debate, none of them could stand before Baladeva's conclusions. However, he said that the Gaudiya Vaishnava line or *sampradaya* did not write a commentary on the *Vedanta-sutras* because they accepted Vyasadeva's *Srimad-Bhagavatam* as the final commentary on Vedanta. The Ramanuja pandits could not accept this. So Baladeva promised to show a commentary to them in a few days.

Baladeva, in a troubled state, then went to the temple to pray to Rupa Gosvami's Deity, Lord Govinda, and related everything that had happened to the Deity, who is still one of the prominent Deities in Jaipur today. That night Baladeva had a dream in which Sri Govinda told him to write the commentary and it would be perfect. Thereafter, he meditated on the lotus feet of the Deity of Govinda and wrote the powerful commentary and called it *Govinda-bhasya*, signifying that it was the words of Sri Krishna Himself. He arrived at the assembly hall of the king and presented the commentary to the Ramanuja pandits, who were speechless. The Gaudiya tradition was declared victorious and that is when the pandits gave Baladeva the name of Vidyabhushana, meaning one whose decoration is knowledge. The Ramanuja pandits also accepted Baladeva as their acharya and desired to become his disciples. However, with humility he said that the Ramanuja or Shri *sampradaya* was also one of the four prominent spiritual successions.

Baladeva wrote a number of other books besides the *Govinda-bhasya*, among the most noted are *Siddhanta-darpana*, *Vedanta-samantaka*, and *Prameya Ratnavali*. All of these presented different levels of spiritual understanding based on the fact that the Vedic knowledge is the best to use for realizing the Supreme Lord Sri Krishna and the ultimate form of reality.

There is, of course, one more commentary on the *Vedanta-sutras* that we cannot neglect. Srila Vyasadeva, the original author of the *Vedanta-sutras*, was still not satisfied after writing it. After explaining this perplexing situation to his spiritual master, Narada Muni, he was advised to write the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (also called the *Bhagavata Purana*). After doing so, Vyasadeva considered it his own commentary on the *Vedanta-sutras* and the complete explanation and conclusion of all Vedic philosophy. This is why Sri Chaitanya never cared for writing a commentary on the *Vedanta-sutras*, because He considered *Srimad-Bhagavatam* to be the topmost commentary that had already been written, which will be discussed soon. This *Srimad-Bhagavatam* is part of the Vedic literature called the *Itihasas*.

## THE ITIHASAS

The *Itihasas*, or supplementary Vedic literature, helps explain the rituals of the *Vedas* and the highly compressed philosophy of the *Vedanta-sutras* by using historical events of the universe and factual stories of many great sages, demigods, and so forth.

Included in the *Itihasas* is the *Mahabharata*, written by Srila Vyasadeva. It is an historical epic about the great kingdom of *Bharatavarsa*, or the region of India. It contains 110,000 couplets making it the longest poem and greatest epic in world literature. It is divided into 18 sections called *parvas*, such as the *Adi Parva*, etc. It is a treasure house of Indian lore and holds within it a code of life for ethical, social and spiritual relations. Throughout this great epic every sort of human situation is described and every kind of emotion is aroused. There is a saying that if it is not in the *Mahabharata* then it is not to be found.

The *Mahabharata* deals with the activities of the Pandavas and Krishna's relations, as well as topics that include the creation of the world, history of the sages, *dharma*, politics, military strategies, proper behavior of a king, and ways of spirituality and devotion to God. It includes the essence of the *Upanishads* and Vedic teachings, and the famous *Bhagavad-gita*.

The *Mahabharata* also explains a great variety of historical incidents, mainly consisting of the story of how the demoniac Kuru dynasty cheated the family of pious Pandavas time and time again out of their rightful heritage of the kingdom of northern India. Finally, after the Pandavas are exiled to the forest and attempted peaceful means to gain their right to the throne, the epic centers around the eighteen day battle at Kuruksetra, a place which is still found in Madhyadesa, a three hour train ride north of Delhi. There the Pandava army defeated the Kurus and their soldiers. This is also where Sri Krishna speaks the *Bhagavad-gita* to His friend Arjuna just before the battle takes place.

The *Bhagavad-gita* is from chapters 25 to 42 of the *Bishma-parva* section of the *Mahabharata*. It is a classic of Indian literature and considered the essence of all Vedic knowledge. It is the indispensable *Upanishad* and the important handbook or guide for traveling the spiritual path to God realization. It is especially good for those who do not have much time for reading or who cannot go very deeply into

studying the Vedic literature. It contains knowledge of the soul, law of karma, reincarnation, attaining the Supreme, knowledge of God, and the essential purpose of life. It ultimately reveals the supremacy of the path of devotion, bhakti-yoga, as the best means for regaining our awareness of our relationship with the Supreme Lord. More importantly, the *Bhagavad-gita* is the direct instruction from God to His devotee. The *Mahabharata* is especially meant to draw the attention of people to the *Bhagavad-gita* through the format of an exciting, historical adventure, which is certainly found in the *Mahabharata*.

The *Ramayana* is a similar epic, consisting of 24,000 verses, and first written during the time of Lord Ramachandra by the great poet Valmiki, which describes the life of Lord Ramachandra, an incarnation of God, and His wife Sita. This is also a most touching and exciting adventure which explains how Lord Ramachandra lived in the forest and fought against and killed the great demon Ravana and his armies in order to rescue His wife, Sita, who had been kidnapped. Many other stories are included in this storehouse of wisdom that has been an inspiration for thousands of years to all people who have read it. In the incarnation of Lord Ramachandra, God appears as the perfect king and ruler, and inspires all His subjects with the greatest love for Him.

Even though the *Itihasas* are accepted as supplementary Vedic literature, the *acharyas* such as Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva have all presented the *Itihasas* as valid Vedic evidence and wrote commentaries on *Bhagavad-gita*. Actually Shankara thought the *Gita* was in fact the epitome of the essentials of all Vedic teaching. Madhva, commenting on the *Vedanta-sutras* (2.1.6), quotes the *Bhavisya Purana*, which states, “The *Rig-veda*, *Yajur-veda*, *Sama-veda*, *Atharva-veda*, *Mahabharata*, *Pancaratra*, and the original *Ramayana* are all considered Vedic literature. The Vaishnava supplements, the *Puranas*, are also Vedic literature.” The *Chandogya Upanisad* (7.1.4) mentions the *Puranas* and *Itihasas* as the fifth *Veda*. The *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (1.4.20) also states, “The four divisions of the original sources of knowledge [the *Vedas*] were made separately. But the historical facts and authentic stories mentioned in the *Puranas* are called the fifth *Veda*.” Therefore, the *Vedas* themselves not only accept the four *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, and *Vedanta-sutras*, but also the *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad-gita*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Puranas* as being authentic Vedic literature.

The point is, to be accepted as Vedic literature it must present the same purpose as the original texts. But if it deviates from the Vedic conclusion or is a hodgepodge of various concocted philosophies, as are many viewpoints that one will find merged under the name of “Hinduism,” then it cannot be relied upon. Therefore, to be sure something is authorized, we only accept the established Vedic teachings that are supported in the many Vedic texts. So Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, which do not refer to or support the conclusions of the Vedic texts, are considered non-Vedic, although outgrowths of Vedic philosophy and accepted as part of Hinduism by some.

## THE PURANAS

Another important part of the *Itihasas* are the *Puranas*. The *Puranas* are the histories of the universe and contain many stories that took place on earth or even on other planets and dimensions, or in which superhuman powers are commonplace. As we pointed out earlier, Vedic knowledge often consists of information about things from beyond our own sense perception or experience. We can be assured of its authenticity because of the fact that many Vedic scholars such as Sukadeva, Maitreya, Madhva, Ramanuja, and others have reached spiritual perfection with the help of information found in the *Puranas*.

Each *Purana* is supposed to contain five basic subjects and in some cases ten. These include the creation of the world, its destruction and re-creation, the genealogy of the patriarchs and the demigods, the reigns of the Manus (who are the *avatars* in each duration of time known as a *manvantara*), and the history of the Solar and Lunar dynasties. Many of them also include descriptions of the activities of the incarnations of God, as well as the great sages and devotees of God. One thing that may seem somewhat confusing is that the stories are not in any particular chronological order and may be related at any time according to need. This is primarily due to the fact that the *Puranas* are generally related in a dialogue of questions and answers between sages and saints, or masters and disciples. Then the histories and stories are related in the answers.

Other subjects included in various *Puranas* are geography, astrology, use of military weapons, organization of society, duties of different classes of men, characteristics of social leaders, predictions of the future, law of reincarnation and karma, analysis of the material elements, symptoms of consciousness,

how the illusory energy works, the practice of yoga, meditation, spiritual experiences, realizations of the Absolute, etc.

The *Puranas* explain more clearly and completely the spiritual philosophy found in the four original *Veda samhitas*. Thus, they especially are meant for all classes of people. Since all men are not on the same level of consciousness and are spread over many different types of thinking, feeling and desiring, the *Puranas* are divided so that any class of people can take advantage of them and utilize them to get out of the material entanglement either gradually or rapidly. So, depending on their position in life, people may use the particular *Puranas* that are most suited for them.

The *Puranas* are divided into two main groups consisting of the primary *Mahapuranas* and the secondary *Upa-puranas*. The *Upa-puranas* consist of eighteen, entitled: *Sanatkumara, Narasimha, Naradiya, Shiva, Durvasasa, Kapila, Manava, Ausanasa, Varuna, Kalika, Samba, Nandi, Saura, Parasara, Aditya, Mahesvara, Bhagavata* or *Bhargava*, and *Vasistha*.

The eighteen *Mahapuranas* are divided into three groups. One group considered to be related to the mode of *tamo-guna*, or the lower nature, consists of the *Linga, Skanda, Agni, Matsya, Kurma*, and *Shiva* (or sometimes the *Vayu*) *Puranas*. These are usually related to Lord Shiva. The next group is usually related to Lord Brahma and is considered connected with *raja-guna*, the mode of action or passion. These consist of the *Brahma, Brahmanda, Brahma-vaivarta, Markandeya, Bhavisya*, and *Vamana Puranas*. The third group relates to Lord Vishnu with *satya-guna* prevailing, which is the mode of purity or goodness. These are the *Vishnu, Bhagavata, Narada* or *Naradiya, Garuda, Padma*, and *Varaha Puranas*.

## A REVIEW OF THE PURANAS

This review of the *Puranas* will exhibit some of the many topics found in each one. We offer this so that we can get an understanding of the basic content of each *Purana* and see the direction in awareness and understanding that can be reached by the study of particular *Puranas*.

The *Linga Purana* has about 11,000 verses in two sections. It focuses mainly on the glories and activities of Lord Shiva. This *Purana* includes the manifestation of the Shiva-*linga* and its worship, the worship and fasting days for Shiva, descriptions of the holy city of Kashi (Varanasi), Shiva's thousand names, his marriage to Parvati, the appearance of Ganesh, and more. The later section also includes some descriptions of the glories of Lord Vishnu and some of His pastimes, as well as more about the worship of Lord Shiva.

The *Skanda Purana* is the largest with around 81,000 verses. It is divided into seven sections, mostly about Lord Vishnu and Shiva. It covers many different topics, some of which include the holiness of places like Kedar, Badarikashrama, Mathura, Kashi, Dwarka, and many other places and sacred rivers. It also covers worship of Shiva, the austerities of Parvati, worship of Vishnu and stories of prominent devotees, as well as activities and worship of Lord Rama,

The *Agni Purana* has about 15,000 verses. Herein Agni, the fire-god, explains to the sage Vashishtha many spiritual instructions. These include descriptions of the Lord's incarnations, the universal creation, the greatness of the Ganges River, the science of astrology, religious disciplines, yoga practice, Ayurveda, knowledge of Brahman, and the art of *bhakti*, or devotional service.

The *Matsya Purana* has about 14,000 verses, which begins with the conversation between Lord Matsya and Manu. Again, it includes many topics, among which you can find descriptions of the universal creation, the family and descendants of King Ikshvaku, Surya and Chandra, along with the ten avatars of God. It also relates the principles of worship and fasting on holy days, the pastimes of Parvati and Shiva, their marriage, and other stories.

The *Kurma Purana* has around 17,000 verses about the occurrences of the day of Brahma called *Lakshmi-kalpa*. Herein, the Lord's incarnation as Kurma presents His teachings to the great sages. These include the manifestation and maintenance of the universe, the pastimes of Lord Krishna, the greatness of Kashi and other holy places, the effects of devotion (*bhakti*) to God that everyone should strive to attain, and the duties or *dharma* for liberation.

The *Vayu Purana*, or sometimes the *Shiva Purana*, has about 24,000 verses. In this book Vayu, the wind god, describes events of the present *kalpa*, or day of Brahma. It contains the usual information that a *Purana* explains, such as the process of creation, the incarnations of God, the *manvantaras*, the glories of the Narmada River, and detailed accounts of Lord Shiva.

The *Brahma Purana* has around 10,000 verses. This includes the stories of Lord Ramachandra, many stories of Lord Krishna, along with those of Surya the sun god, and the birth of Parvati and her marriage to Shiva, and other aspects of the Vedic sciences.

The *Brahmananda Purana* has around 12,000 verses in four parts. This provides descriptions of future *kalpas* (days of Brahma). Included are descriptions of the holy place of Naimisharanya, Bharatvarsha (the area of India) and other places in the world. It also describes other planetary systems, Svayambhuva Manu and other *manvantaras*, the activities of Lord Krishna, and the dynasties of King Ikshvaku, Yadu and Vrishni, along with the dynasties and characteristics of people in the age of Kali-yuga. There are also descriptions of the creation and annihilation of the universe.

The *Brahma-vaivarta Purana* has about 18,000 verses in four sections. This *Purana* is known for the information it provides about Lord Vishnu and Shiva, and shows their unity. It also includes the basic topics of most *Puranas*, such as the account of the universal creation. It also provides 129 chapters of many stories of the pastimes of Radha and Krishna and how to worship Him. It also discusses Goloka, the divinity of Krishna and appearance of Radha, and numerous descriptions of Her, the birth and marriage of Tulasi, the story of Vrinda, and more. There are also accounts of Narada going to Shiva's abode and receiving instructions, along with activities of Ganesh, Kartikeya, Parashurama, and others.

The *Markandeya Purana* has about 9,000 verses. Here we find the conversation between the sages Markandeya and Jaimini. A wide range of topics are discussed, a few of which include Lord Balarama's pilgrimage when He refused to take part in the war of Kurukshetra, stories of Draupadi's five sons, Dattatreya, the lineage of Vaivasvata Manu, stories of Lord Rama, Krishna, His incarnations, and various spiritual instructions.

The *Bhavishya Purana* has about 14,000 verses in five sections, or *parvas*. This deals with the characteristics of Brahma, *dharma*, worship of Vishnu and Shiva for worldly prosperity as well as liberation, and information about Surya. There are also instructions for religious discipline, charity, etc. The fifth section is what this *Purana* is most known for, which contains the descriptions of the kings and characteristics of the future of this age of Kali-yuga. However, there are now parts of this *Purana*, namely of the fifth section, that are completely lost. Furthermore, some scholars feel that certain portions of it, such as the *Uttara Parva*, were later additions that were separate from the original. So, though many people look to the *Bhavishya Purana* for its predictions of the future, it is not considered fully dependable because of the additions and deletions. However, numerous predictions of the future are also found in other *Puranas*, many of which can help substantiate those in the *Bhavishya* by comparisons.

The *Vamana Purana* has about 10,000 verses and describes the occurrences that take place in the day of Brahma called the *Kurma-kalpa*. It relates the fighting between the demons and demigods, Daksha's unfortunate sacrificial ritual, the activities of Goddess Durga and Parvati, the greatness of Vishnu, and the conversation between Prahlada and King Bali, as well as the activities of Lord Krishna and His devotees.

The *Varaha Purana* has about 24,000 verses. Herein there is a conversation between Lord Varaha and Bhumidevi (the Earth Goddess) about the manifestation of Gauri (Parvati) and her sons Ganesh and Kartikeya. Gauri's battle with the demon Mahishasura, and the greatness of holy sites like Mathura and other places are also described. It also has more about general Vedic philosophy.

The *Narada Purana* has around 25,000 verses. This *Purana* includes the teachings of the four Kumaras who offer their advice regarding such things as duties in family life and religious practice. There are also descriptions of the appearance and activities of Shukadeva Gosvami who learned the knowledge of the *Bhagavatam* and recited it for King Pariksit, along with the pastimes and characteristics of Lord Vishnu, Surya, Ganesh, Shiva, Durga, and others. It also offers descriptions of the other *Puranas*, as well as the greatness of such holy places as Haridwar, Kashi, Kuruksetra, Mathura, Vrindavana, and other places.

The *Garuda Purana* has around 19,000 verses in which Lord Vishnu answers questions of his carrier, Garuda, on Vedic topics and activities of the day of Brahma called the *Tarkshya-kalpa*. This *Purana* primarily relates the glories of Lord Vishnu. It contains the thousand names of Vishnu (the Vishnu Sahasranama), ways of meditating on Lord Vishnu and worship of Lord Krishna. It also includes the pastimes of Lord Rama, the process of yoga, types of charity, Sankhya philosophy, descriptions of the spiritual domain, the celestial regions, and the process for attaining liberation from material existence.

The *Padma Purana* is a large book of 55,000 verses in five sections. It includes the important stories of Lord Krishna and Vrindavana, Lord Rama, and other stories on the importance of various holy places, such as Pushkar, Jagannatha Puri, Kashi (Varanasi), Prayag (Allahabad), Gaya, and the Narmada and Ganga rivers. It also includes a section called the *Bhagavata Mahatmya* on the glories and greatness of the *Bhagavata Purana*.

The *Devi Bhagavat* is another prominent *Purana* not mentioned in the main groups that is said to be written by Srila Vyasadeva. It has 18,000 verses in 12 cantos. It offers descriptions of the other 18 *Puranas* and the 18 *Upa Puranas*. It also describes the 28 Vyasadevas who appeared at the end of each of the 28 Dvapara-yugas during the present time period known as the *manvantara* of Svayambhuva Manu. It also contains the typical information found in most *Puranas*, but the 10<sup>th</sup> canto specializes in information about the goddesses Maha Kali, Maha Lakshmi and Maha Sarasvati. The 9<sup>th</sup> canto explains that Vishnu and Shiva ultimately appeared from Lord Krishna, and both Lakshmi and Sarasvati manifested from the Supreme Goddess Srimati Radharani, while Durga appeared in front of both Radha and Krishna. This shows that Radha and Krishna are the source of all other forms of the Divine.

The *Devi Bhagavat Purana* says, as do other *Puranas*, that Vyasadeva appears at the end of every Dvapara-yuga to compile and write the four *Vedas*, and to reorganize the *Puranas* for the good of the people of Kali-yuga. This means that this information is eternal and is the same as that produced in its written form in the earliest Kali-yuga many thousands of years ago.

Out of all the *Puranas*, many scholars seem to agree that the *Vishnu Purana* seems to conform most closely to what a *Purana* is expected to be. It has around 23,000 verses. It contains the five essential subjects that a *Purana* is supposed to relate and also describes many other topics that are dealt with in detail. The central theme is praise of Vishnu, so it describes many aspects of Him and prominent stories of the Lord's famous devotees, such as Prahlada, Dhruva, Prithu, and others. It also contains many stories of Lord Krishna in Vrindavana and Mathura, and His incarnations, along with the evils and predictions of the age of Kali-yuga, and many other facets of Vedic knowledge. This *Purana* is quite similar to the contents of the *Bhagavata Purana*, otherwise called *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, which is also centered around the theme of praise of Lord Krishna, the source of all other incarnations of God, and relates many stories of Lord Krishna's pastimes.

## THE SRIMAD-BHAGAVATAM

The *Bhagavatam*, or *Bhagavata Purana*, is held to be the most significant of all the *Puranas*. It has about 18,000 verses in 12 cantos and is the most widely read and one of the greatest works of devotion ever written. It is a book that goes to the core of understanding God and reveals the bliss of devotion to the Supreme Being, the depths of which make the other Vedic gods, such as Shiva, also hanker for it. This *Purana* describes how Vyasadeva came to write it and details the pastimes of the various avatars of God and His prominent devotees, but especially the pastimes of Lord Krishna. Other descriptions include the process of the universal creation and annihilation, the characteristics of the four ages or *yugas*, and much in the way of the teachings of Lord Krishna and Vedic knowledge.

Five hundred years ago Sri Chaitanya Mahaprahu, along with other scholars of the *Vedas*, relied on and researched the *Bhagavatam* extensively for information on the Absolute Truth and became immersed in many stories about Sri Krishna in their spiritual ecstasies.

The *Bhagavatam* is Sri Vyasadeva's own commentary on all the Vedanta philosophy. It brings to light all the different aspects of the Absolute Truth, but especially the personal characteristics of Bhagavan Sri Krishna as the final conclusion of all Vedic understanding. This is why those who are impersonalists or monists, believing God ultimately has no form and, therefore, performs no activities, never reach the *Bhagavatam* in their Vedic studies. But if they do read the *Bhagavatam*, they are sure to interpret it in an impersonalistic way and, thus, deprive themselves of the truth and purity that they could derive from it.

*Srimad-Bhagavatam* is considered the postgraduate study of the *Bhagavad-gita*. The *Bhagavatam* does not elaborate on worship of the other demigods or on rituals that award various temporary material benedictions as do some of the other *Vedas* and *Puranas*. Therefore, the *Bhagavatam* completely transcends all other philosophical viewpoints of the Vedic literature. This is confirmed in the *Garuda Purana (Brahma Kanda, 1.45)* where it states: "The wise declare knowledge to be manifold, consisting of various grades--high, low, and middling. All that knowledge is found in the *Bhagavata Purana*. Hence, *Bhagavata* is the highest of all *Puranas*." Furthermore, in the "artho 'yam brahma-sutranam" verse, it fully states: "The *Srimad-Bhagavatam* is the authorized explanation of *Brahma-sutra*, and it is a further explanation of *Mahabharata*. It is the expansion of the *gayatri* mantra and the essence of all Vedic knowledge. This *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, containing 18,000 verses, is known as the explanation of all Vedic literature."

It is explained in the first verse of the *Bhagavatam* that it aims only at selfless devotional service to Lord Krishna. This is what separates it from all other *Puranas*. It ultimately delivers one to the Divine bliss

found in the loving pastimes that Lord Krishna displays in His spiritual abode of Goloka Vrindavana. This topic is beyond the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, which do not go near to that depth or level of spiritual understanding.

The *Shruti* scripture (*Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishads*), besides giving information on the process of rituals, primarily consists of knowledge of the futility of material existence, the temporary nature of the material creation, the bondage of the *jiva* souls in this existence, and the spiritual nature of the individual souls and the Supreme Being. They explain that the goal of life is liberation from the material worlds by returning back to the spiritual domain through the process of understanding karma, spiritual knowledge, renunciation, and devotion (*bhakti*). They do not explain much beyond this, or at least the finer details of what is beyond. They do not take you to the bliss of spiritual activities, nor the pastimes of Goloka Vrindavana, the most intimate and confidential spiritual abode of the Lord.

That is why it is especially the *Bhagavatam* that begins to explain the supreme bliss of devotional love in the eternal pastimes that go on in the Vaikuntha planets, and in the Vrindavana atmosphere. It is this *Bhagavata Purana* that first reveals the supremacy of Lord Krishna's love and the reciprocation that He provides above all other forms of God. The *Bhagavatam* is the highest manifestation of the bliss that comes from purely concentrating on the Supreme without any material inebriates. It is from this platform that one can go deeper and deeper into such love and bliss, which then manifests even profounder realizations and experiences.

The second verse of the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* explains this point and what this *Purana* consists of and who can understand it:

Completely rejecting all religious activities which are materially motivated, the *Bhagavata Purana* propounds the highest truth, which is understandable by those devotees who are fully pure in heart. The highest truth is reality distinguished from illusion for the welfare of all. Such truth uproots the threefold miseries. This beautiful *Bhagavatam*, compiled by the great sage Vyasadeva, is sufficient in itself for God realization. What is the need for any other scripture? As soon as one attentively and submissively hears the message of *Bhagavatam*, by this culture of knowledge the Supreme Lord is established within the heart.

As it is stated, this knowledge can be understood by those who are pure in heart. This means that those who are envious, atheists, or who read it with some ulterior motive will never be able to fully comprehend it. But for those who listen submissively and sincerely with an open mind, all the mysteries of the highest truth will gradually be revealed. That highest truth is "reality distinguished from illusion for the welfare of all." Not that we can make up our own reality, but we must understand what is actually reality.

Even though we can find information about Lord Krishna's pastimes in all the *Puranas*, particularly the *Skanda Purana, Padma Purana, Vishnu Purana*, and the 129 chapters of the *Brahma-vaivarta Purana*, as well as details about Radharani in the *Devi Bhagavat*, there is a difference in the *Bhagavatam*. The difference is that the other texts relate the pastimes like a reporter giving a description of the events. But in the *Bhagavatam*, especially in the 10<sup>th</sup> canto, the bliss of these pastimes is presented from a participant's point of view, one who is involved, and not from a spectator who is merely watching and describing the proceedings. This is the way Vyasadeva was inspired by Narada, and how the *Bhagavatam* had been spoken by Shukadeva Gosvami to King Pariksit. King Pariksit had seven days left to live and asked for the most essential spiritual truth, so Shukadeva Gosvami spoke the *Bhagavatam* to him. This is also how the reader can dive deep into the *rasa*, or the taste of the loving relationship that is displayed between Lord Krishna and His devotees in Goloka Vrindavana. This loving bliss is not experienced or seen in the relationships with Shiva, Durga, Brahma, or Vishnu, or in their abodes. It is only available with Sri Krishna in Vrindavana. It is this bliss, this ever-increasing happiness, for which we are always searching, intentionally or not, knowingly or unknowingly. This is what the *Bhagavatam* delivers for one who can dive deep enough.

## THE PREEMINENT NATURE OF THE SRIMAD-BHAGAVATAM

Many quotations regarding the extraordinary importance of the *Bhagavatam* can be found in several other *Puranas*, such as the *Bhagavata-Mahatmya* section of the *Padma Purana*, wherein we find such verses as the following:

The holy scripture known as *Srimad-Bhagavatam* was expounded in this age of Kali by the sage Sukadeva Gosvami [Vyasadeva's son] with the object of completely destroying the fear of being caught in the jaws of the serpent of time. There is no means other than this conducive to the purification of the mind. One gets to hear *Srimad-Bhagavatam* only when there is virtue earned in one's past lives. (1.11-12)... All the evils of Kali-yuga [this present age of quarrel and confusion] will surely disappear at the very chanting of *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, even as wolves take flight at the very roar of a lion. (1.62)... If you seek the highest destiny, read even yourself daily one half of a quarter of a verse of *Srimad-Bhagavatam*. (3.33)... Indeed, this is the righteous course prescribed in the Kali age for washing away all agony, poverty, misfortune and sin as well as for the conquest of passion and anger. Otherwise the illusory energy of the Lord is most difficult to get rid of even for the gods. How then can it be set aside by men? Hence, the course of hearing *Srimad-Bhagavatam* has been recommended. (3.64-65)... Like bubbles appearing in water or mosquitoes among living beings, those who remain deprived of hearing an exposition of *Srimad-Bhagavatam* are born only to die. (5.63)

There are many other verses in the *Padma Purana* that point out the potency and importance of the *Bhagavatam*. The importance of the book is also described in the *Bhagavatam* itself:

This *Bhagavata Purana* is as brilliant as the sun, and it has arisen just after the departure of Lord Krishna to his own abode accompanied by religion, knowledge, etc. Persons who have lost their vision due to the dense darkness of ignorance in the age of Kali shall get light from this *Purana*. (*Bhag.*1.3.43.)

Another example (*Bhag.*12.13.14-16) is where Suta Gosvami emphasizes its significance, stating that the glorious *Bhagavatam* is considered to be the cream of all the *Upanishads*, and a man who is satisfied with tasting the nectar from it will not find such pleasure anywhere else. "All other Puranic scriptures shine forth in the assembly of saintly devotees only as long as that great ocean of nectar, *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, is not heard. *Srimad-Bhagavatam* is declared to be the essence of all Vedanta philosophy. One who has felt satisfaction from its nectarean mellow will never be attracted to any other literature. Just as the Ganga is the greatest of all rivers, Lord Achyuta, the supreme among deities and Lord Shambhu [Shiva], the greatest of Vaishnavas, so *Srimad-Bhagavatam* is the greatest of all *Puranas*." Suta Gosvami also says (*Bhag.*1.2.3):

Let me offer my respectful obeisances unto him [Sukadeva], the spiritual master of all sages, the son of Vyasadeva, who, out of his great compassion for those gross materialists who struggle to cross over the darkest regions of material existence, spoke this most confidential supplement to the cream of Vedic knowledge, after having personally assimilated it by experience.

Srila Suta Goswami explains the benefit of studying the *Bhagavatam* in this way, "Simply by giving aural reception to this Vedic literature, the feeling for loving devotional service to Lord Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, sprouts up at once to extinguish the fire of lamentation, illusion and fearfulness." (*Bhag.*1.7.7)

When Maharaja Pariksit learned that he had merely seven more days to live, only a week to bring his life to any kind of spiritual perfection, he asked the great sage Sukadeva Gosvami what he should do. Shukadeva was the son of Srila Vyasadv, the compiler of the Vedic literature. At the time, no one was more qualified than Sukadeva Gosvami to give such advice to the great king. In reply, Sukadeva Gosvami told Maharaja Pariksit: "The highest perfection of human life, achieved either by complete knowledge of matter and spirit, by practice of mystic powers, or by perfect discharge of occupational duty, is to remember the Personality of Godhead at the end of life. O King Pariksit, mainly the topmost transcendentalists, who are above the regulative principles and restrictions, take pleasure in describing the glories of the Lord. At the end of Dvapara-yuga, I studied this great supplement of Vedic literature named *Srimad-Bhagavatam*,

which is equal to all the *Vedas*, from my father, Srila Dvaipayana Vyasadeva. O saintly King, I was certainly situated perfectly in transcendence [realized in the impersonal Brahman], yet I was still attracted by the delineation of the pastimes of the Lord [Krishna], who is described by enlightened verses. That very *Srimad-Bagavatam* I shall recite before you because you are the most sincere devotee of Lord Krishna. One who gives full attention and respect to hearing *Srimad-Bhagavatam* achieves unflinching faith in the Supreme Lord, the giver of salvation.” (*Bhag.2.1.6-10*)

“My dear Maharaja Pariksit, that great personality Srila Vyasadeva taught me this scripture, *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, which is equal in stature to the four *Vedas*.” (*Bhag.12.4.42*)

Sukadeva Gosvami explained elsewhere that, “This *Srimad-Bhagavatam* has elaborately described in various narrations the Supreme Soul of all that be--the Personality of Godhead, Hari [Krishna]--from whose satisfaction Brahma is born and from whose anger Rudra takes birth.” (*Bhag.12.5.1*)

Regarding the power of the contents of the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, Sri Sukadeva Gosvami relates that there are ten divisions of statements regarding the creation of the universe, the secondary level of creation, planetary systems, protection by the Lord, the creative impetus, the change of Manu, the science of God, returning home back to Godhead, liberation, and the summum bonum. (*Bhag.2.10.1*)

After a full description of the contents of the *Bhagavatam*, Suta Gosvami explains that for the person who glorifies this *Bhagavata Purana* by chanting or hearing it, the demigods, sages, Siddhas, Pitras, Manu, and kings of the earth bestow all desirable things. By studying this *Bhagavatam*, a brahmana can enjoy the same rivers of honey, ghee and milk he enjoys by studying the hymns of the *Rig, Yajur* and *Sama Vedas*. A brahmana who diligently reads this essential compilation of all the *Puranas* will go to the supreme destination, which the Supreme Lord Himself has herein described. However, not only can a brahmana who studies the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* achieve firm intelligence in devotional service, but also a king [kshatriya] who studies it gains sovereignty over the earth, a vaishya who studies it acquires great treasure, and a shudra is freed from sinful reactions. Lord Hari, the supreme controller of all beings, annihilates the accumulated sins of the Kali age, yet other literature does not constantly glorify Him. But that Supreme Personality of Godhead, appearing in His innumerable personal expansions, is abundantly and constantly described throughout the various narrations of this *Srimad-Bhagavatam*. (*Bhag.12.12.62-66*)

“From beginning to end, the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* is full of narrations that encourage renunciation of material life, as well as nectarean accounts of Lord Hari’s transcendental pastimes, which give ecstasy to the saintly devotees and demigods. This *Bhagavatam* is the essence of all *Vedanta* philosophy because its subject matter is the Absolute Truth, which, while non-different from the spirit soul, is the ultimate reality, one without a second. The goal of this literature is exclusive devotional service unto that Supreme Truth.” (*Bhag.12.13.11-12*)

“*Srimad-Bhagavatam* is the spotless *Purana*. It is most dear to the Vaishnavas because it describes the pure and supreme knowledge of the *paramahansas* [the swan-like saints]. This *Bhagavatam* reveals the means for becoming free from all material work, together with the processes of transcendental knowledge, renunciation and devotion. Anyone who seriously tries to understand *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, who properly hears and chants it with devotion, becomes completely liberated.” (*Bhag.12.13.18*)

Furthermore, the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* has not always been a book but is an ancient work and has been a spoken tradition from time immemorial. This is illustrated by the following narration. Once Maitreya Muni began to describe to Vidura, saying, “Let me now begin speaking on the *Bhagavata Purana*, which was directly spoken to the great sages by the Personality of Godhead for the benefit of those who are entangled in extreme miseries for the sake of very little pleasure. Some time ago, being inquisitive to know, Sanat-kumara, the chief of the boy saints, accompanied by other great sages, inquired exactly like you about the truths regarding Vasudeva, the Supreme Lord Krishna, from Lord Sankarshana, who is seated at the bottom of the universe. At that time, Lord Sankarshana was meditating upon His Supreme Lord, whom the learned esteem as Lord Vasudeva [Krishna]. For the sake of the advancement of the great learned sages who were there, He slightly opened His lotus-like eyes and began to speak. The sages came from the highest planets down to the lower region through the water of the Ganges, and therefore the hair on their heads was wet. They touched the lotus feet of the Lord, which are worshiped with various items by the daughters of the serpent-king when they desire good husbands.

“The four Kumaras, headed by Sanat-kumara, who all knew the transcendental pastimes of the Lord, glorified the Lord in rhythmic accents with selected words full of affection and love. At that time Lord Sankarshana, with His thousands of raised hoods, began to radiate an effulgence from the glowing stones on His head. Lord Sankarshana thus spoke the purport of *Srimad-Bhagavatam* to the great sage Sanat-kumara, who had already taken the vow of renunciation.

“Thereafter, Sanat-kumara in turn, when inquired of by Sankhyayana Muni, explained *Srimad-Bhagavatam* as he had heard it from Sankarshana. The great sage Sankhyayana was the chief amongst the transcendentalists, and when he was describing the glories of the Lord in terms of *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, it so happened that my (Maitreya Muni’s) spiritual master, Parashara, and Brihaspati both heard him. The great sage Parashara, as aforementioned, being so advised by the great sage Pulastya, spoke unto me this foremost of the *Puranas* [*Bhagavatam*]. I shall also describe this before you, my dear son, in terms of my hearing, because you are always my faithful follower.” (*Bhag.* 3.8.2-9) In this way, for thousands of years before the *Bhagavatam* was ever compiled by Srila Vyasadeva in a written form, it had been handed down and spread through an oral tradition.

The *Matsya Purana* also says that which contains many narrations of spiritual instructions, begins with the *gayatri* mantra, and also contains the history of Vritrasura, is known as the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*. Whoever makes a gift of this great work on a full moon day attains to the highest perfection of life and goes back to the spiritual world.

All these references conclude that *Srimad-Bhagavatam* is the most ripened fruit of the tree of Vedic knowledge consisting of the most clearly defined and highest realizations and understanding of ultimate reality--the Absolute Truth. Over and above that it is also considered the incarnation of God in the form of sound vibration, as confirmed in the following verse: “This *Srimad-Bhagavatam* is the literary incarnation of God, and it is compiled by Srila Vyasadeva, the incarnation of God. It is meant for the ultimate good of all people, and it is all-successful, all-blissful and all-perfect.” (*Bhag.* 1.3.40)

From this verse it is made clear that *Srimad-Bhagavatam* is meant for the benefit of everyone who is sincerely interested in the highest truth, regardless of their background. Furthermore, it is compiled by Srila Vyasadeva who was an incarnation of God. He appeared in this world in order to give people this knowledge for the highest good. After all, who can explain the characteristics of the Supreme better than the Supreme Himself? This is also confirmed in *Bhagavad-gita* (15.5) in which Krishna explains that He is seated in everyone’s heart and from Him comes remembrance, knowledge, and forgetfulness. He is the knower and compiler of the *Vedas*, by which He is to be known.

This is further elaborated in the *Vishnu Purana*, Book Three, Chapter Three:

In every Dvapara [or third] age, Vishnu, in the person of Vyasa, in order to promote the good of mankind, divides the *Vedas*, which is properly but one, into many portions: observing the limited perseverance, energy and application of mortals, he makes the *Veda* four-fold to adopt it to their capacities; and the bodily form which he assumes, in order to effect that classification, is known by the name of Vedavyasa.

Know, Maitreya, the Vyasa called Krishna Dvaipayana (Vedavyasa) to be the Deity Narayana; for who else on this earth could have composed the *Mahabharata*. . . That form of Vasudeva. . . composed of the *Rig, Sama, and Yajur Vedas*, is at the same time their essence, as He is the soul of all embodied spirits. He, distinguished as consisting of the *Vedas*, creates the *Vedas*, and divides them by many subdivisions into branches: He is the author of those branches: He is those aggregated branches; for He, the eternal Lord, is the essence of true knowledge. (*Vishnu Purana*, Book 3, Chapter 4)

These verses clearly explain that it is none other than the incarnation of the Supreme Being who has appeared in this world to compile and divide the *Vedas* so that people of all levels of intelligence can understand them. It is explained that no ordinary person can do such a thing. How can people who are limited and finite understand the Unlimited and Infinite unless that Supreme Being descends to explain this knowledge Himself? Therefore, as stated in the above-mentioned verses, the essence of the Absolute Reality is found in the Vedic literature, especially within the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*.

## DIFFERENT PATHS IN THE VEDAS

Even though Vyasadeva had worked for the welfare of all by writing the many portions of Vedic literature, before he wrote *Srimad-Bhagavatam* he had still felt dissatisfied. This is a great lesson. Naturally, we all desire freedom from the problems that material life causes us, but only by engaging in direct spiritual activities does the spiritual living entity, the soul within these temporary material bodies, begin to feel any real relief or happiness. How to do this by engaging in service or bhakti-yoga to the Supreme Being is what the *Vedas* are ultimately meant to establish. Because this had not yet been prominently presented in the literature Vyasadeva had written, he was still feeling dissatisfied. Now he was trying to understand the cause of his dissatisfaction.

In all the literature compiled by Vyasadeva, there are many descriptions of the temporary universe, prayers to the demigods, the process for attaining one's material necessities, information about the soul, the Brahman, the Supersoul, and the process of yoga for attaining spiritual realizations. There is also information about the Supreme Lord, Bhagavan Krishna. But the detailed descriptions of God, His form, His incarnations, names, activities, potencies and energies, and how He is the source of everything, including the ever-increasing spiritual bliss for which we are always looking, had not yet been fully described. Therefore, although the spiritual truths are presented in different degrees, it could be asked why the Vedic literature seems to also recommend different processes for people to achieve various levels of material and spiritual perfection.

This question was also asked by Uddhava in his conversation with Sri Krishna in *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (11.14.1). He asked whether all the processes, recommended by the learned sages who know the Vedic literature, are equally important or if one process is superior.

As is revealed shortly, there is one process that is more effective than others, but why there are different methods and rituals included in the Vedic literature is explained first. So in answer to Uddhava's question, as related in *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (11.14.3-8), Sri Krishna replied that the Vedic knowledge disappeared during the annihilation of the universe. Then after the subsequent universal creation took place, He spoke the Vedic knowledge to Brahma. Brahma in turn taught this knowledge to his eldest son Manu, along with the seven great sages and Bhrigu Muni and other sons of Brahma who are associated with the creation of the universe. From these fathers of creation came many descendants who took the forms of demigods, demons, human beings, Guhyakas [spirits who have secret powers], Siddhas [a class of beings with all mystic abilities], Gandharvas [angel-like beings], Vidyadharas [inhabitants of the heavenly planets], Caranas, Kindevas [demigod-like humans on another planet], Kinnaras [similar to human beings but with a horse-like body], Nagas [a race of extraordinary serpents], Kimpurusas [a race of extraordinary monkeys similar to humans], and so on. All of these species of beings had different desires and natures. To accommodate these different characteristics, there are many kinds of Vedic rituals, mantras and rewards. And due to the great variety of desires and goals among human beings, there are so many different theistic as well as atheistic viewpoints. Therefore, with their judgement clouded by the illusory energy, they all speak their own whimsical ideas of what is good for people without knowing the truth.

From this we can understand that as various kinds of living entities evolved with different natures and desires, the Vedic literature also expanded to accommodate the different levels of consciousness. The *Vedas*, of course, are to provide the means by which the living beings can regulate their activities and thus be materially happy while simultaneously making spiritual progress. In this way, a variety of theistic philosophies have been handed down through tradition according to the level of illusion by which people are influenced.

Everyone is essentially spiritual in nature, but as people forget their spiritual identity they become motivated by material desires for mental or sensual pleasure. Thus, people become engaged in a particular type of activity according to the mode of nature that influences them the most. Then they pursue a lifestyle or religious process that is conducive to the mentality they have developed. This is further explained in *Bhagavad-gita* (17.2-4): depending on the nature into which the embodied soul evolves, he develops a faith characterized by goodness, passion or ignorance. Men in the mode of goodness worship the demigods, those in passion worship demoniac beings, and those in darkness worship the departed and ghosts. *Bhagavad-gita* (9.25) also explains that those who worship demigods take birth among them, those who worship ghosts take birth as such, those who worship the ancestors go to them, but those who worship Krishna return to Him.

Herein we can understand that whatever mode of worship or activity we engage in brings particular results. Some may strive for happiness simply by filling their belly full of food and are content to work hard

for no other reason. Others are satisfied by the pursuit for sex life, or by political power, or by religious activities, or by giving charity, or by achieving peace of mind. But if this is somehow or other based on pleasing the temporary body and mind of yourself or others, then all such happiness, being material, is temporary. The results are very meager, like trying to be satisfied with one drop of water while living in a desert. People who struggle to achieve one drop of happiness here and another drop there are busy running around, working very hard, and yet miss the real goal of life. This is explained in the *Bhagavatam* (11.21.28) by Sri Krishna that people dedicated to pleasures of the body that are obtained through the performance of Vedic rituals, or any other process for material happiness, cannot know Him though He is situated in their hearts and the whole universe emanates from Him. Such people are like persons whose eyes are covered by mist and cannot recognize what is right in front of them.

In this way, according to the Vedic texts, people remain blind and cannot understand how to reach the real happiness that exists within them since they always focus on external comforts. Processes for attaining such things as external pleasures, heavenly bliss, a good future birth, or different levels of mystic awareness are included in the *Vedas* for those who want them. But such people miss the essence of the Vedic teachings that emphasize the need to reach the ultimate spiritual perfection.

### THE ULTIMATE PATH TO THE ABSOLUTE

Ultimately, the Vedic system is to engage everyone in a process that will elevate them from whatever position they are in to a higher mode of living. Thus, there are many levels of understanding found within the Vedic tradition in order to accommodate the various forms of consciousness and tendencies of the innumerable living beings, especially humans. But without coming to the highest level of knowledge and realization, they will continue to engage in activities resulting in different degrees of anxiety and lamentation. Being concerned about this problem and foreseeing the troubled times ahead, the great sages 5,000 years ago requested Suta Gosvami to explain the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* after having learned it from Srila Vyasadeva and others. Thus they put forth the following request:

O learned one, in this iron age of Kali men have but short lives. They are quarrelsome, lazy, misguided, unlucky, and, above all, always disturbed. There are many varieties of scriptures, and in all of them there are many prescribed duties, which can be learned only after many years of study in their various divisions. Therefore, O sage, please select the essence of all these scriptures and explain it for the good of all living beings, that by such instruction their hearts may be fully satisfied. (*Bhag.1.1.10-11*)

In this way, the sages pointed out that in Kali-yuga, this present age, men are easily distracted by so many things and their lives are very short, so now let us not waste time but hear only the essence of all spiritual knowledge so that everyone can be satisfied and know the real goal of life and not remain confused. It was also for this reason that Srila Vyasadeva was feeling dissatisfied, even after compiling all the previous Vedic knowledge into written form in the earlier texts. The essence of all spiritual and metaphysical understanding and realizations had not yet been put into a concise and conclusive format.

Vyasadeva, while questioning his unexpected dissatisfaction, was at that very moment greeted by the sage Narada Muni who had just arrived at Vyasadeva's cottage. Suta Gosvami, in *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, Canto One, Chapters Five and Six, relates the story in this way:

Narada Muni asked Vyasadeva whether he was satisfied after having written the great *Mahabharata*. Sri Vyasadeva answered that in spite of all he had done, he was not content and, accepting Narada Muni as his spiritual master, questioned him about the root cause of the dissatisfaction he felt. Narada replied that the cause was that Vyasadeva had not written about the sublime characteristics of the Supreme. The philosophy that does not satisfy the transcendental senses of the Supreme is considered worthless, but that literature which is full of the transcendental descriptions of the name, form, and pastimes of the unlimited Supreme can bring about a revolution amongst the misdirected civilization of the world. Even though improperly composed, such literature is heard and accepted by saintly and intelligent men.

This is exactly what is missing in the earlier Vedic texts as well as most other religious scriptures found in the world today. Narada is recommending that to include the topics he mentioned will certainly bring about a revolution to help all those who are living in a misguided civilization. The reason for this is simple: one may defend the science of religion or engage in so many philosophical conversations, but there

will never be any final conclusion to such talks without practical experience of the Supreme. Without this genuine experience, all religious or philosophical talk is merely cultivated knowledge or mental speculation. It is another way of passing time for the armchair philosophers because anyone, simply by juggling words or taking things out of context, can steer various controversial topics towards any conclusion they want. This is the way some so-called religious leaders or propagandists use things like religion to justify their own selfish intentions.

More light is shed on these points in the *Bhagavatam* (11.22.5-6) wherein Krishna explains to Uddhava that when philosophers cannot agree on the way they view things; it is simply the interaction of Krishna's illusory energies that motivate their disagreements. But for those who have fixed their minds in Krishna, the Absolute Truth and ultimate conclusion of all spiritual realizations, the cause for argument and differences of opinion disappear.

Just as when you may have several hungry people in a room discussing the various causes of and means to extinguish their pains of hunger, no one has to tell them that the process of eating a nice meal has worked when, after having done so, they automatically feel their hunger subside. The experience is universal and, after eating and feeling satisfied, leaves no room for argument. Similarly, after having reached the platform of experiencing the Absolute Truth, what need could there be for further argument or disagreement? The experience is universal for those who have reached it. And for those who have, participating in a religion or faith which condones the idea of deliberately quarreling or fighting wars with members of other faiths is utterly absurd. Indeed, such fighting only shows the gross ignorance of one's real spiritual identity and the animalistic qualities of such people, though they may claim strong allegiance to a particular religion. Of what use to the world is such a religion or philosophy? As pointed out in the *Manu-samhita* (12.95-96), such a religion is simply based on darkness and is worthless, producing no good reward after death. Therefore, to help avoid further quarrel and confusion among the people in this age, Narada Muni encouraged Vyasadeva to write and describe the eternal spiritual truths in a more direct manner.

Narada explained to Vyasadeva that *spiritual knowledge, though free from material faults and connections, is still incomplete if devoid of an understanding of the transcendental characteristics of God*. But Vyasadeva, who is completely perfect, can meditate on the Lord's pastimes for the liberation of all people from material existence. Only one who has retired from activities for material happiness deserves to understand such spiritual knowledge and experience spiritual bliss. Therefore, Narada emphasized that by Vyasa's mercy, those who are attached to material existence should be shown how to attain spiritual realization. Those who are truly intelligent will endeavor to reach this goal.

Vyasadeva knew all about spiritual knowledge and the transcendental qualities of the Supreme Being because he is a plenary portion of the Lord. Though he is birthless, he appeared in this world for the welfare of all. And to teach a lesson, he displayed dissatisfaction when he had still not engaged himself in writing the glories of the Supreme's spiritual qualities, and then accepted Narada as a spiritual master to learn the reason for his discontent. Thus, Narada continued to explain to Vyasadeva that learned men have concluded that the actual purpose for engaging in austerities, sacrifices, studying the *Vedas*, chanting the hymns, etc., is to advance in the knowledge of the transcendental characteristics of the Supreme, which is the only way to remove all difficulties.

This is the ultimate process for perfecting one's life and for attaining full spiritual realization. This is the answer to Uddhava's question about whether a particular process in the Vedic literature is superior. Without understanding the Absolute Truth, one's knowledge of his real identity, or the universe, the purpose of life, and everything else in one's experience, is incomplete. So the conclusive purpose of the Vedic process is to increase one's knowledge of the Supreme, which will encompass all other forms of knowledge. The most direct way of doing that is through the practice of hearing about the Supreme Being from the Vedic literature, such as *Srimad-Bhagavatam*. Simply hearing or studying this literature is a part of the process of bhakti-yoga. As explained in *Bhagavad-gita* (11.54), only through bhakti-yoga can one enter into the mysteries of understanding the Supreme as He is. Similarly, *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (1.2.20) points out that only by *bhagavata-bhakti*, devotion to the Lord, can one get positive scientific knowledge of the Supreme Personality. Therefore, Narada requested Vyasadeva to describe the spiritual activities and qualities of the Supreme to satisfy inquisitive and learned men, and mitigate the sufferings of the people in general. After all, by engaging in ordinary yoga people may attain some peace of mind and freedom from desire and lust, but to give satisfaction to the soul requires the performance of devotional service, bhakti-yoga, to the Supreme. This is the means of establishing a link between the soul and the Infinite Lord. This is what Vyasadeva had yet to do. And the perfection of this was to compile the great devotional work of *Srimad-Bhagavatam*.

Then, when Sri Krishna had left this planet after performing His various pastimes by which He attracts the conditioned souls, and on the new moon night near the end of the month of Phalgun (February-March), the planets aligned themselves in one direction above the Earth, with the planet Rahu over India. On that night in 3102 BC, according to the Vedic scholars, the world slipped into the depths of forgetfulness as Dvapara-yuga ended and the age of Kali-yuga began. Shortly after this occurrence the great sage Vyasadeva had heard all these instructions from Narada Muni.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this story, as related in the *Bhagavatam* (1.7.2-6), is that after Narada Muni had explained all these points, he took leave of Vyasadeva. Then Vyasadeva, in his cottage at Samyaprasa on the western bank of the River Sarasvati, sat down to meditate. He fixed his mind, perfectly engaging it in devotional service, bhakti-yoga, without any tinge of materialism, and thus he saw the Absolute Personality of Godhead along with His external energy, *maya*, which was under full control. Deluded by *maya*, the living entities think they are a part of the material world and thus undergo the reactions of material miseries. However, such miseries, which do not really touch the soul, can be counteracted by engaging in devotional service, bhakti-yoga. But the mass of people do not know this, so to dispel their grief, materialistic infatuation, and fear, the learned Vyasadeva compiled this Vedic literature, *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, which is in relation to the Supreme Truth.

In this way, Srila Vyasadeva, the compiler of the original Vedic literature, wrote his concluding commentary on Vedanta in the form of *Srimad-Bhagavatam*. In the *Bhagavatam*, Srila Vyasadeva very clearly establishes that real Vedanta, or the ultimate end of all knowledge, is to understand the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Lord Sri Krishna:

In the revealed scriptures, the ultimate object of knowledge is Sri Krishna, the Personality of Godhead. The purpose of performing sacrifice is to please Him. Yoga is for realizing Him. All fruitive activities are ultimately rewarded by Him only. He is supreme knowledge, and all severe austerities are performed to know Him. Religion [*dharmā*] is rendering loving service unto Him. He is the supreme goal of life. (*Bhag.*1.2.28-29)

Herein, it becomes clear that the aim of all austerity, penance, charity, scriptural study, yoga practice, and religious activity is to regain one's love for God, Krishna. Without that, all religious and pious acts, however positive and pious they may be, remain incomplete. Only through selfless love can God be captured or attracted, or can one bind oneself to Him. From this study of all the Vedic literature and its purpose, it becomes clear that this is the real goal of all yoga and spiritual activities. This is what leads us to the heart of Hinduism, *sanātana-dharma*, the awakened love for the Supreme Being and all other living beings, which are His parts and parcels.

As the *Bhagavatam* explains, the practice of yoga or *karma-yoga* alone is unable to cut the bondage of attraction to the illusory energy or worldly attachments. Therefore, the easiest way to achieve the most complete form of liberation is through the process of *bhakti*, loving attachment to the Supreme Being through devotional service, which can overtake all other forms of attachment.

## VAISHNAVISM

As we can see, the science of Vedanta is extensive and thorough. There is not much that it has not considered. It not only includes the knowledge of the Absolute Truth, but also explains the path by which one can attain his or her own individual realizations of the Absolute. This in itself separates it from most religions we find today that usually do not include higher principles of spiritual self-realization, but depend mostly on basic moral doctrines and the blind faith of the followers in their connection with the religious institution as the means of approaching God, or for being saved. The Vedic system, on the other hand, allows everyone individuality to take up the process in whichever way they feel is most appropriate. The sages, gurus and Vedic texts provide the necessary insights and directions for progress, but an individual can work with full liberty of thought, and not on the basis of some institutional dogma. Thus, a person is

allowed the freedom to explore the various avenues within the Vedic system to understand and perceive the Ultimate Reality and regain one's own relationship with God.

This divine knowledge is for the entire world, not merely some portion of it or for a certain class of people. These Vedic scriptures contain such a wide range of knowledge and information that can help one understand God and the process of realizing Him that anyone from any background can find assistance by adding them to their life. These scriptures provide many descriptions of God, His beauty, characteristics, His pastimes and personality that are not available elsewhere. No matter whether one is merely inquisitive or is already a sincere devotee, these descriptions, especially from the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, can fill one's heart with the nectar of devotional love for the Supreme Being.

Saints such as Shukadeva, who was already absorbed in the bliss of the Brahman, gave up that bliss to become absorbed in the devotional love of Lord Krishna in His pastimes in Vrindavana. And Shankaracharya, though he was the great preacher of *advaita* (nondualism) philosophy, appreciated the beauty and characteristics of Lord Krishna so much that he wrote the book, "Prabodha Sudhakar" in praise of Krishna. So these scriptures reveal the whole process from understanding the details of God's creation up to entering into the Divine bliss of devotional love for the most beautiful and loving Supreme Being.

Within this process, as we can see, the worship of Lord Krishna and His expansions as Vishnu, Narayana, Rama, etc., is as old as the Vedic tradition itself. In fact, it is the essence of Vedanta according to the proposal and explanations of Srila Vyasadeva. So, the conclusion of Vedic philosophy is essentially the doctrine of Vaishnavism, the worship of the personal form of God, especially as Vishnu or Krishna. The path of Vaishnavism is, basically, *sanatana-dharma*, which is the practice of acting according to the eternal nature of the soul and reawakening our consciousness to our spiritual identity and the loving relationship we have with the Supreme.

The Vaishnava *bhakti* movement has grown in many areas across India and beyond. It has also produced many volumes of devotional literature and poetry by numerous adherents in that tradition. The Vaishnava sect is one of the three major divisions of Hinduism, the others being Shaivism and Shakta. Vaishnavas have four major sects: the Ramanujas founded by Ramanujacharya; the Madhvas founded by Madhvacharya; the Vallabhas founded by Vallabhacharya; and the Gaudiya *sampradaya*, founded by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu who is regarded as an incarnation of Krishna Himself. Some of the aspects of following this Vaishnava philosophy are described later in this book.

Essentially, a Vaishnava is a person who accepts Sri Krishna as the Supreme Being and worships Him or any of His expansions or incarnations. The essence of Vaishnavism is expressed in the process of bhakti-yoga, unity with God through devotion. There is nothing more powerful than love and devotion to give one the impetus to absorb one's thoughts in thinking of another, the beloved. *Bhakti* puts less emphasis on ritual, austerity and sacrifice, and more on the *sadhana* and practice that can increase one's devotion. This is something that anyone can follow and develop, regardless of caste, status, background or disposition. *Bhakti* is not simply for Vaishnavas, but Shaivites also develop *bhakti* for Lord Shiva. However, Shiva does not reciprocate in quite the same way or in the number of ways of blissful exchange as does Lord Krishna.

So the process of spiritual realization practiced by all Vaishnavas is bhakti-yoga. Elements of this devotional process are easily recognized in all other religions of the world, but bhakti-yoga has been developed into a multifaceted science. Thus, all systems of philosophy and religion reach their culmination in Srila Vyasadeva's Vedanta, as specifically and conclusively described in the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*.

The main difference between the Vaishnava philosophy and all others of the world is that the goal is also the means of attaining the goal. In other words, *bhakti*, devotional service to the Supreme, is attained by engaging in devotional service to the Supreme. This devotional process of engaging in service to God refines and purifies one's consciousness to the level where he or she becomes completely spiritually realized, at which time a person knows his or her real spiritual identity. The Supreme also reveals Himself to such a pure soul, and thus one's relationship with the Lord becomes awakened. Then *bhakti* is no longer merely a process to be followed, but it becomes a spontaneous flow of emotion and attraction for the Supreme who reciprocates such love. Then the eternal, spiritual, loving activities and pastimes, along with a person's spiritual realizations and ecstasy, knows no limits.

#### CHAPTER NOTES

1. *Caitanya-caritamrita*, Adi-lila,

7.110, pur.

2. *Ibid.*,

3. *Ibid.*,

4. *Bhagavad-gita with Commentary of Sri Sankaracarya*, Dinkar Vishnu Gokale, edit.
5. *Ibid.*,