

CHAPTER 1

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# Hinduism

## *Mantra Chanting and Singing in Spiritual Transformation*

India is . . . the land of mantra. To know and love Indian religious life means coming to terms with mantric utterances.

—Harvey Alper, *Understanding Mantras*

This chapter will examine how it is that Vedic words used in mantra chants and singing function as forces for spiritual transformation in the Hindu tradition. While mantra chanting was given careful analysis in Alper's *Understanding Mantras* (1989), the singing of kirtan and *bhajans* plays a powerful role in the practice of modern-day devotees. This chapter will examine the philosophy of word and practice underlying the formation of Hindu chant and singing and cite selected examples of important genres of chant and devotional music as powerful forms of spiritual transformation in Hinduism.

### Spiritual Transformation via Mantra Practice

Just as Westerners are often put off by the strange shapes encountered in Hindu images, they also sometimes find the scripture, prayers, rituals, and chants that are constantly chanted to be a mystery. Indeed, for me as a Protestant boy deeply influenced by the Christian sense

of sola scriptura, it was the Hindu sensitivity to the power of the spoken, chanted, or sung word to transform consciousness that first drew me to the study of Indian religious life. Technically referred to by the Sanskrit term *mantra*, this Indian ability to hear the divine sound, in the spoken words of the Veda (scripture) in ritual, in the chanting of Om, and the singing of hymns in the sounds of birds and nature—all of this is a continuing fascination for scholarly study.

In Indian cities one often feels engulfed in a sea of sound—trucks, cars, and motor scooters honk incessantly and one is surrounded by the crush of people. One soon longs for quiet and finds it by rising early and venturing out into the awakening day. Imagine yourself stepping into a small side street of Varanasi. The soft morning light is brightening to the East. All is quiet, and yet you begin to realize that around you the streets are full of activity. Forms of devout worshipers pass silently on their way to offer morning prayers and bathe in the Ganges. The merchants and traveling vendors with their distinctive cries of “Mangos,” “Knives sharpened,” or “Ice cream” have not yet appeared. But the morning quiet is broken by sounds of a different kind. From a second-floor window comes the sound of a morning prayer being chanted. As our ears become attuned to this chant, we hear it rising from houses all around us as we wind our way through the narrow streets. The golden globe of the sun is just cresting the horizon as we reach the ghats or steps leading down from the street level to the flowing water of the Ganges. The murmur of prayers being said around us steadily increases. A quietly chanted prayer is mixed with splashing of water from a man standing waist deep in the river. Sadhus, holy men, naked except for saffron loincloths, chant Sanskrit verses of the Veda, keeping count of their repetitions with prayer beads. Laypeople join in with their own chants—all seem to be different and yet somehow blend together. A harmonious hymn of sound is raised to welcome the auspicious moment of the rising of the sun—the dawning of a new day.

As the sun ascends from the horizon and its first rays are felt warm upon one’s skin, the chanted prayers increase in their intensity. To the Indian the light and warmth of the sun is a manifestation of the divine, but so is the sound of the morning chant that rises heavenward as an invocation of the new day. Speaking the Vedic chants and seeing the sunrise are both important experiences of the

divine in India. Indeed, we can say that Indians specialize in seeing the divine in nature, in images of gods and goddesses, and in hearing the divine in the sounds of daily life, from the morning prayer to the call of the crow, the screech of the ox cart axle or, in modern times, the incessant blaring of horns. In India, all sound is perceived as being divine in origin, since it all arises from the one sacred source. Some sounds, however, are more powerful in evoking the divine within and around oneself than are others. Sound intrinsically bears the power of the sacred in India. In the Hindu hierarchy of scripture, it is the *sruti*, the heard text, which is preserved in oral tradition, that is the highest manifestation of the creative word. Om is the supreme example, since it is the divine seed sound from which all other sounds are said to arise. Om is, therefore, taken as the root mantra or sacred sound for the whole universe of sound.

The rising sun also signals the start of activity in the major temples of Varanasi dedicated to the gods and goddesses of Hinduism. Within the imposing Vishvanath Temple, dedicated to Shiva, the priests begin to chant and dedicate offerings. Devotees crowd into the temple to have a view of the image of Shiva, a sight that is held to bring blessing, and to watch the colorful ceremony. Throughout the day, devotees stream to thousands of temples located all over Varanasi to worship their favorite gods and goddesses. The variety of images from which they can choose reflects the richness through which the divine has revealed itself in the Hindu tradition: Vishnu, the heavenly king who descends to the world from time to time in various incarnations (*avatars*) to maintain cosmic stability; Shiva, the ascetic god who dwells in yogic meditation in the Himalayas generating energy that can be released into the world to refresh its vigor; Krishna, the manifestation of the divine as lover; Hanuman, the monkey god, who embodies strength, courage, and loyalty; Ganesha, the elephant-headed god who removes all obstacles for his followers; Durga, the warrior goddess who periodically defeats the forces of evil in order to protect the world; and Kali, the black mother goddess who dwells in cremation grounds and takes you to herself at death.

Dawn is a busy time at the cremation grounds on the banks of the Ganges River. Family funeral processions carry their stretcher-borne corpses down the steps to the spot where several funeral pyres are always burning. Pious Hindus believe that death near the Ganges

or Varanasi results in *moksa*, liberation, from the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth—the ultimate spiritual goal of most Hindus. Varanasi is also the home of many religious orders, including a large number of ascetics or world renouncers. These holy men or women may be seen spending their day in meditation on the steps leading to the Ganges or at the cremation grounds. Their only possessions are a staff and water pot. The males may be naked with long matted hair and bodies smeared with ash from the cremation grounds. The women may have shaved heads to show lack of concern for bodily appearance. All around them Hindu laypeople are busily going about their daily tasks as merchants, businesspeople, tradespeople, artists, students, and professors from Banaras Hindu University, all busy with everyday family life. In their midst, the ascetics look as if they are from another world, yet they are all part of the rich variety of lifestyles that Hindus may take on—one large extended family, as it were—full of diversity, including many languages, cultures, and religious traditions, yet with an underlying sense of unity.

Hindus living in North America cannot visit the Ganges at dawn, but many have a small pot of Ganges water on their home altar to help with morning prayers. Many of the same images (Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, Krishna, Ganesha, and Kali) will be present on the home altar, which is often located in an upstairs bedroom dedicated as the worship room. There the family may gather or pray individually, using the same chanted prayers or mantras and the same repetitions of Om that are said in India. Hindu temples have been built in many American cities, providing places for family and the whole community to gather on ceremonial occasions. Cremation takes place in funeral homes rather than on the banks of the Ganges. So, in many ways, the sacred practice of Hindus in Varanasi goes on in modified form in the West.

Just as the day begins with mantra chanting, so it also ends with an evening chant. At night, in India, the tropical birds join in with their “*donc donc, donc donc.*” From the seashore comes the rhythmic roar of the waves. Not only is each day enclosed in sacred sound but so also is the whole of life. Indeed, it has been said, “From the mother’s womb to the funeral pyre, a Hindu literally lives and dies in *mantra*” (Alper 1989a, 296). This saying appears to express a truth that has dominated India for the past thousand years. For generations

of post-Vedic Indians mantra is not primarily a Vedic text but rather the symbolic source of sacred sound that overflows textual boundaries until it encloses all of life—not only the speaking of humans but also of animals, particularly of birds. Mantra is also heard in the voices of fire, thunder, and rain.

Diana Eck has shown that India is filled with visual experiences of the divine—images in homes, temples, or roadside shrines—that a central act of worship “is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one’s own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity” (Eck 1998, 3). That is now also happening in Hindu diaspora communities all over North America where temples have been built and images installed. But India is also permeated by sonic experiences of the divine. Drums, bells, gongs, cymbals, conches, flutes, and a wide variety of vocalizations are often heard, sometimes simultaneously, invoking and evoking the divine within temple, home, or sacred space. As suggested earlier, the first impression to the outsider may be one of chaos and cacophony, an ensemble of “noise” with no apparent rhyme or reason. But, if we empathize with the presuppositions of the Indian culture and religious traditions, we come to realize that there is an underlying religious foundation for the experience of sound in general and for the saying of specific mantras (words or sounds) in particular. Indeed, we could parallel Diana Eck’s statement about the visual experience of the divine by saying that in Hinduism the central act of worship is hearing the mantra or sacred sound with one’s own ears and chanting the mantra with one’s voice (Coward and Goa 2004).

Hearing and saying the mantra is an act of worship and “tunes” one to the basic sound or vibration of the universe. By a continual hearing and chanting, one purifies and transforms one’s life until it vibrates in harmony with the divine, which is itself pure sound. Indeed, we find Hindu religion filled with many different versions of “sonic theology.” For Hindu India, then, *the act of worship* involves both seeing and being seen by the divine image (*darshan*) and also hearing and speaking the divine sound (mantra). Both are present and central to the worship of most lay people in India. For some more advanced worshipers, the sound may totally displace the image so that the concentration is on the sound alone. In this chapter, our focus will be on mantra, the hearing, chanting, and singing aspect of experiencing the divine by Hindu devotees.

It has been said that there is no parallel to the concept of darshan, of seeing and being seen by the divine in the Western religions (Bharati 1970, 102). As Diana Eck puts it, when the gaze of the huge eyes of the image of Lord Krishna meets those of the worshiper standing on tiptoe in the crowd, there is a special exchange of vision that is itself a form of “touching,” of intimate knowing. Such an exchange of vision is darshan and is fundamental to Hindu worship. So also, the practice of hearing and speaking the mantra is an act in which the consciousness of the individual may experience a tuning into the divine sound of the cosmos. This is what Agehananda Bharati means when he says, “Mantra is not meaningful in any descriptive or even persuasive sense, but within the mystical universe of discourse” (Bharati 1970a, 102). Mantra chanting is verified not by what it describes or cognitively reveals but by the complex vibration or feeling tone it creates in the practicing person.

### The Indian Worldview

From the Hindu perspective two presuppositions, *karma* and *samsara*, are basic to Indian thought and the spiritual function of mantra. *Karma* is a word that is fairly common in the West but often little understood. There are many definitions of karma in the Indian tradition, some making karma appear quite deterministic. One of the clearest descriptions, however, is found in the *Yoga-System of Patanjali* (Woods 1966). This concept is widely influential and makes room for free will. It runs as follows. Every time you do an action or think a thought a memory trace or karmic seed is laid down in the storehouse of your unconscious waiting for conditions to arise conducive to its sprouting forth as an impulse, instinct, or predisposition to do the same action or think the same thought again (for a detailed analysis of the *Yoga Sutra* passages, see Coward 1983, 49–60). How does all of this apply to mantras? Speaking a mantra lays down a karmic memory trace in the unconscious. Chanting a mantra over and over reinforces that karmic trace (*samskara*) until a deep root or habit pattern (*vasana*) is established. Correctly chanting a mantra, such as Om or a Vedic verse, reinforces good karma and removes negative karmas or impulses

by preventing their blossoming or maturing so that they wither away, leaving no trace behind. The more powerful the mantra the more good karma will be reinforced and negative karma will be removed from one's storehouse consciousness. In this way mantra chanting or singing can be seen to be a powerful tool for purifying and transforming consciousness.

Karma works together with the other basic presupposition of Hindu thought, namely, *samsara* or rebirth. Accordingly, your unconscious storehouse contains not only all the karmic traces from actions and thoughts done in this life but also in the life before this and so on, backward infinitely, since in Indian thought there is no absolute beginning. From this perspective, your unconscious is like a huge granary full of karmic seeds or memory traces that are constantly sprouting up, as conducive situations arise, impelling you toward good or evil actions or thoughts. No wonder we constantly feel ourselves being pulled and pushed by our karmic desires. But the possibility of free choice always allows us to take control over these impulses, and mantra chanting or singing gives us a powerful psychological tool to use in directing this process.

In Hinduism, the thing that causes one to be reborn is the karma within one's own consciousness. The chanting or singing of mantras is one of the most powerful practices for the purging of karmas, and when the last karma is removed, *moksa* is realized. Although conceptualized differently by different Hindu schools, *moksa* may generally be thought of as the removal of karmas that make us appear to be separate from Brahman (the divine). When the last veiling or obstructing karma is removed, the fact that one is, and has always been, nothing but Brahman is revealed. That is *moksa*—the direct realization of one's own oneness with the divine.

The concept of mantra as powerful sacred sound is associated with one of India's ancient scriptures, the *Rgveda* (Findly 1989, 15). India also shares with the rest of the world a fascination with what Rudolf Otto has called numinous sounds (Otto 1958, 4–7), sounds that go beyond the rational and the ethical to evoke direct, face-to-face contact with the holy. Otto conceived of the numinous with a typically Western emphasis on the experience of the distance, the separation, between human beings and God. For Hindus in the

Rgvedic context the cosmos is peopled by gods sometimes thought of in personal ways. For example, prayers or mantras are spoken to gods such as Varuna to maintain relationships with them so that they will act for the devotee. However, the Rgveda also saw mantras as the means by which the power of truth and order that is at the very center of the Vedic universe could be evoked. That truth, however, is not thought of as a personal God, like Yahweh or Allah, but as the impersonal *rta* or divine order of reality. In his classic article “The Indian Mantra,” Gonda points out that mantras are not thought of as products of discursive thought, human wisdom, or poetic fantasy “but as flash-lights of the eternal truth, seen by those eminent men who have come into supersensuous contact with the Unseen” (Gonda 1963, 247). Sri Aurobindo puts it even more vividly: “The language of the *Veda* is itself a *sruti*, a rhythm not composed by the intellect but heard, a divine Word that came vibrating out of the Infinite to the inner audience of the man who had previously made himself fit for the impersonal knowledge” (Aurobindo 1971, 7). The Vedic seers supersensuously “heard” these divine mantras not as personal but as divinely rooted words and spoke them in the Hindu scripture or *Veda* as an aid to those less spiritually advanced. By concentrating one’s mind upon such a mantra, the devotee invokes the power and truth inherent in the seers’ divine intuition and so purifies his or her consciousness. It is this understanding that is behind the long-standing Indian practice of repeated chanting of mantras as a means for removing karmic ignorance or impurity from one’s personality. The more difficulties to be overcome, the more repetitions are needed. The deeper one’s separation from the Divine, the more one must invoke the mantra. Contrary to what our modern minds quickly tend to assume, the Hindu chanting a mantra in morning and evening worship is not simply engaging in an empty superstition. From the Hindu perspective, such chanted words have power to confirm and increase truth and order (*rta*) within one’s character and in the wider universe. Chanting a Vedic mantra has a spiritually therapeutic effect upon the devotee and a cosmic significance as well. Hindus maintain that the holiness of the mantra or divine word is intrinsic, that one participates in it not by discursive understanding but by hearing, reciting, and singing it (Coburn 447).



The Hindu View of Language and Mantra in the  
Mimamsa, Grammatician, Patanjali's Yoga,  
Theistic, and Tantric Schools

The powerful function of words as mantras depends not only on Patanjali's psychological analysis of karma (as previously outlined) but also on the Hindu view of language as *Daiivi Vak* or Divine Word. For the Hindu, the spoken scripture of the tradition is the Divine Word (Murti 1983, 361). The "sensitive soul" was the seer, or *rsi*, who had purged himself of ignorance, rendering his consciousness transparent to the Divine Word. The *rsi* was not the author of the Vedic hymn but, rather, the seer (*drasta*) of an eternal, authorless truth. The *rsi*'s initial vision is of the Veda as one, which is then broken down and spoken as the words and sentences of scripture. In this Vedic idea of revelation there is no suggestion of the miraculous or supernatural. The *rsi*, by the progressive purifying of consciousness through the disciplines of yoga, had simply removed the mental obstructions to the revelation of the Divine Word. While the Divine Word is inherently present within the consciousness of all, it is the *rsis* who first reveal it and in so doing make it available to help all others achieve the same experience. The spoken Vedic words of the *rsis* act powerfully upon us to purify our consciousness and give to us that same full spiritual vision of the unitary Divine Word that the *rsi* first saw. This is the enlightenment experience, the purpose for which Hindu scripture exists.

As special words of revelation and power, mantras have received careful analysis by the scholars of India. Speculations begin in the oldest Hindu scripture, the Rgveda, where language has a prominent place. The words or mantras of language are described as the support of gods such as Indra, Agni, and the Asvins. *Vak* (language) bends Rudra's bows against the skeptic and gathers up all prayers. In the Satapatha Brahmana, *Vak* is identified with Sarasvati, who later becomes known as the goddess of learning, wisdom, and inspiration. The action of the *rsis* or sages in relation to the mantras of language is highlighted in Frits Staal's translation of Rgveda 10.71:

Brhaspati! When they came forth to establish the  
first beginning of language, setting up names, what had

been hidden in them as their best and purest good became manifest through love.

Where the sages fashioned language with their thought, filtering it like parched grain through a sieve, friends recognized their friendship. Their beauty is marked on the language.

They traced the course of language through ritual; they found it embodied in the seers. They gained access to it and distributed it widely; the seven chanters cheered them.

Many who look do not see language, many who listen do not hear it. It reveals itself like a loving and well adorned wife to her husband . . .

Though all the friends have eyes and ears, their mental intuitions are uneven. Some are like shallow ponds, which reach up to the mouth or armpit, others are like ponds which are fit for bathing. (Staal 1977, 5–6)

Here the power of language is clearly contrasted in its two forms. To those who “see,” as Staal explains, language (and meaning) is a manifestation, is widely distributed by the *rsis*, is seen and heard with understanding, is self-revealing and provides for deep intuitions; in contrast, to those who do not “see,” who are obstructed by their own karmic ignorance, language is hidden, is mysteriously possessed by the *rsis*, is looked at and listened to without understanding, is wrongly used and is hidden in shallow intuitions. According to this hymn, the nature and function of language is to manifest or reveal the meaning of things.

The way in which mantras reveal the meaning and power of cosmic order (*rta*) is analyzed by various schools of Indian philosophy. Two principle schools, the Mimamsa and the Philosophy of Grammar, made the most significant contributions. Both of these schools follow the Brahmanic tradition stemming from the Veda, which takes language and mantras as of divine origin (*daivi vak*), as spirit descending and embodying itself in the vibrations of words. The well-known Rgveda verse (4.58.3) expresses this truth in poetic form. It symbolizes Speech as the Bellowing Bull of abundant fecundity, as the Great God descending into the world of mortals. Patanjali, the great Grammarian scholar, asks, “Who is this Great God?” and answers, “Speech itself”

(*mahan devah sabda*) (Murli 1980, viii). To this view of mantra, the Hindu Mimamsa, Sankhya-Yoga, Grammarian, and Kashmir Saivism schools of philosophy are faithful.

In opposition to this high evaluation of mantra, there are the Indian schools that reject the Veda as an authoritative source of revelation—Jainism and Buddhism. Although the Jains and the Buddhists adopted a naturalistic view of language, namely, that it is but an arbitrary and conventional tool, the chanting of mantras, as we shall see in the next chapter, continued to play an important role in Buddhist spiritual practice.

Hindu thought sees a direct relationship between ritual action and mantras. Indeed, it has been suggested that in India, language is not something with which you *name* something; it is something with which you *do* something (Staal 1979, 9). Each spoken mantra corresponds to one ritual act. In post-Vedic India activities, such as bringing the goddess Kali into a stone image, bathing to wash away sins, sowing seeds in the fields, guarding the sown seeds, driving away evil spirits, and meditating to achieve release, all had to be accompanied by the chanting of mantras in order to achieve success (Gonda 1963, 261–268). In some situations, the ritual act itself was later modified or even abandoned, yet the action of mantra recitation was retained (Gonda 1963, 267). Within ritual action it is the uttered mantra that has central importance for release (*moksa*).

#### THE MIMAMSA THEORY OF MANTRA AS ETERNAL WORD (*SABDA*)

The task of providing a theoretical explanation for the power of spoken mantras was taken up by the Mimamsa school of philosophy as outlined by P. T. Raju (1985). The Mimamsa proposed a theory of *sabda* that suggests that the sound produced in pronouncing a word is not the result of human choice or construction; rather, every *sabda* or word has an eternal meaning. Each *sabda* is the sound-representative of some aspect of the eternal cosmic order. The mantras of the Vedas, therefore, are not words coined by humans. They are the sounds or vibrations of the eternal principles of the cosmic order itself. It is for this reason that the rsis or speakers of the Vedas are called “seers” or “hearers” of the mantras and not the authors of the mantras. Thus,

the Hindu claim that the Vedas were not composed by human beings. They are not like other human literature. The Vedas, as the collection of the mantras, are not about everyday things. Rather, they give us negative and positive commands to ethical action in daily life that represent the eternal principles of *rta* (cosmic order) for ourselves and the universe around us. Even when the cosmic process ceases to be, between cycles of the universe, the mantras, as eternal truths, remain present in their seed state, ready to sound forth afresh as the eternal Veda in the next cycle of creation. Thus, the mantras are said by the Mimamsakas to be authorless and eternal. Another important aspect of this view is that these mantras are not written but passed on orally. The Vedic mantras are, thus, the eternal sounds of the ethical truth of the universe and ourselves. Words other than the Vedic mantras were regarded as human-made, with their meanings being established by human convention and, thus, incapable of giving us ethical guidance. Only the meaning content of the Vedic mantras can teach us the required continuous ethical action and enjoyment of its fruits that is the end goal in life.

For the Mimamsakas, ultimate reality is nothing other than the eternal words of the Vedas. They did not accept the existence of a single supreme creator god, who might have composed the Veda. According to the Mimamsa these gods named in the Vedas have no existence apart from the mantras that speak their names. The power of the gods, then, is nothing other than the power of the mantras that name them (Dasgupta 1977, 25). This concept of *sabda*, or word as divine, eternal, and authorless, is given further development in the Grammarian notion of *Sabdabrahman* and in the Tantric notion of *mantra* as mystical sounds that are “vehicles of salvation (*mantrayana*)”—an idea we see employed by the Buddhists in the next chapter (Eliade 1969, 212). Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* seem to take over the Mimamsa view with little change and then identify it with the mind of *Isvara*, the master yogi. Let us examine each of these in turn.

#### THE GRAMMARIAN THEORY OF MANTRA AS SABDABRAHMAN

We have seen that for the Mimamsa, *mantra* is *sabda*, the eternal authorless words of the Veda. The Grammarians adopt all of this but

add to it the notion of Brahman, God as unitary pure consciousness. Consequently, the Grammarians offer a theory of mantra as a manifestation of Sabdabrahman or divine word-consciousness (Coward and Raja 1990). Although unitary in nature, this divine word-consciousness manifests itself in the diversity of words that make up speech. The mantra Om is identified by Bhartrhari in his *Vakypadiya* (hereafter cited as *Vak*) as the root mantra out of which all other mantras arise (Iyer, 1965, 1:1 and 1:9). This sacred syllable is held to have flashed forth into the heart of Brahman, while absorbed in deep meditation, and to have given birth to the Vedas, which contain all knowledge. Om and the Vedic mantras are described as being at once a means of knowledge and a way of release (moksa) (*Vak*, 1:5). Fundamental to all of this is the notion that language and consciousness are inextricably intertwined. Indeed, the great Grammarian philosopher Bhartrhari puts it this way: “There is no cognition in the world in which the word does not figure. All knowledge is, as it were, intertwined with the word” (*Vak*, 1:123). Bhartrhari goes on to make clear that the word-meaning, as the essence of consciousness, urges all beings toward purposeful activity. If the word were absent, everything would be insentient, like a piece of wood. Thus, Bhartrhari describes the absolute or divine as Sabdabrahman (word-consciousness) (*Vak*, 1:1).

When everything is merged into Sabdabrahman, as in a high moment of mystical experience, no speaking takes place and no meaning is available through mantras. But, when the divine is awakened and meanings are manifested through words, then the knowledge and power that is intertwined with consciousness can be clearly perceived and known. Because consciousness is of the nature of word-meaning, the consciousness of any sentient being cannot go beyond or lack word-meaning (*Vak*, 1:126). When no meaning is understood, it is not due to a lack of word-meaning in consciousness but rather to ignorance or absent-mindedness obscuring the meaning inherently present (*Vak*, 1:332). For Bhartrhari and the Grammarians, words (mantras), meanings, and consciousness are eternally connected and, therefore, necessarily synonymous. If this eternal identity were to disappear, knowledge, communion, and the means to spiritual release would all cease to exist (*Vak*, 1:124). T. R. V. Murti concisely sums up the Grammarian position when he says it is not that we have a thought and then look for a word with which to express it, “or that we have

a lonely word that we seek to connect with a thought. Word and thought develop together, or rather, they are expressions of one deep spiritual impulse to know and to communicate” (Murli 1974, 322).

The reason for the speaking of mantras is also traced to the nature of word-consciousness by Bhartrhari. He states that word-consciousness itself contains an inner energy (*kratu*) that seeks to burst forth into expression (*Vak*, 1:51). For example, the rsis see the Veda as a unitary truth, but, for the purpose of manifesting that truth to others, they allow the word’s inner energy to assume the form of the various mantras. On an everyday level this inner energy or *kratu* is experienced when, at the moment of having an insight or idea, we feel ourselves impelled to express it, to share it with others by putting it into words. Indeed, the whole activity of scholarship and teaching is dependent upon this characteristic of consciousness.

Bhartrhari offers a detailed analysis of how the uttered sounds of the mantra reveal meaning. He describes three stages in the speaking and hearing of mantras on the analogy of a painter. Just as a painting is perceived as a whole over and above its different parts and colors, so our cognition of the mantra is of a meaning-whole over and above the sequence of uttered sounds. *Sphota* (“that from which meaning bursts or shines forth”) is Bhartrhari’s technical term designating mantra as a gestalt or meaning-whole that can be perceived by the mind as an immediate supersensuous intuition. Let us return to the example of the rsi. At the first moment of a Vedic mantra’s revelation, the rsi is completely caught up in its unitary idea, gestalt, or *sphota*. But when under the expressive impulse (*kratu*) he starts to examine the idea (*sphota*) with an eye to its communication, he has withdrawn himself from the first intimate unity with the idea or inspiration itself and now experiences it in a twofold fashion. On the one hand, there is the objective meaning, which he is seeking to communicate, and on the other are the words and phrases he will utter. For Bhartrhari these two aspects of word-sound and word-meaning, differentiated in the mind and yet integrated like two sides of the same coin, constitute the *sphota*. Bhartrhari emphasizes the meaning-bearing or revelatory function of this two-sided gestalt, the *sphota*, that he maintains is eternal and inherent in consciousness (*Vak*, 1:23–26 and 122–123).

For the person hearing a mantra the process functions in reverse. Each repetition of the mantra removes karmic ignorance and brings

further illumination. After sufficient repetitions (depending on the darkness of the person's karma) the sphota of the mantra stands clearly perceived—perhaps something like the “light bulb coming on” image we find in cartoons. As Bhartrhari puts it: “The sounds, while they manifest the word, leave impression-seeds progressively clearer and conducive to the clear perception of the word” (*Vak* 1:84, *Vrtti*).

The logic of Bhartrhari's philosophy is that the whole is prior to the parts. This results in an ascending hierarchy of mantra levels. Individual words are subsumed by the sentence or poetic phrase, the phrase by the Vedic poem, and so on until all speech is identified with Brahman. But Bhartrhari focuses upon the *vakya-sphota* or sentence-meaning as the true form of meaning. Although he sometimes speaks about letter sounds or individual words as meaning-bearing units (sphota), it is clear that for Bhartrhari the true form of the sphota is the meaning-whole. This has interesting implications for single-word mantras. Since the fundamental unit of meaning is a complete thought (*vakya-sphota*), single words must be single-word sentences with the missing words being understood. For example, when the young child says “Mama,” it is clear that whole ideas are being expressed, for example, “I want mama.” Even when a word is used merely in the form of a substantive noun (e.g., tree), the verb to be is always understood so that what is indicated is really a complete thought (e.g., “This is a tree”) (*Vak*, 1:24–26, *Vrtti*). In this fashion Bhartrhari suggests a way to understand single-word mantras as meaningful. A devotee chanting “Shiva” may well be evoking the meaning “Come Shiva” or “Shiva possess me” with each repetition. Thus, such single-word mantras are far from being meaningless. They invoke a world of meaning.

In Vedic ritual mantra is experienced on various levels, from the loud chanting of the priest to silently rehearsed knowledge of the most esoteric formulas (Wheelock 1980, 358). Probably a good amount of the argument over the meaningfulness of mantras arises from a lack of awareness of the different levels of language. On one level, there is the intuitive flashlike understanding of the meaning of the mantra as a whole. At this level the fullness of intuited meaning is experienced in the “seen” unity of sound and thought in sphota. This is the direct supersensuous perception of the truth of the mantra that occurs at the mystical level of language—when “mystical” is understood in its classical sense as a special kind of perception marked by greater clarity than

ordinary sense perception (Stace 1961, 15). Bhartrhari calls this level of mantra experience *pasyanti* (the seeing one) (*Vak*, 1:142)—the full meaning of the mantra, the reality it has evoked, stands revealed. This is the *rsi*'s direct “seeing” of truth and the Tantric devotee’s visionary experience of the deity. Yet, for the uninitiated, for the one who has not yet had the experience, it is precisely this level of mantra that will appear to be nonexistent and meaningless. If, due to one’s ignorance, the *pasyanti* level is obscured from “sight,” then the uttering of the mantra will indeed seem to be an empty exercise.

Bhartrhari calls the level of the uttered words of the sentence *vaikhari*. At the *vaikhari* level every sound is inherently meaningful in that each sound attempts to reveal the *sphota*. Repetition of the uttered sounds of the mantra, especially if spoken clearly and correctly, will each time evoke the *sphota* afresh until finally the obscuring ignorance is purged and the meaning-whole of the mantra is seen. Between these two levels of uttering (*vaikhari*) and supersensuous seeing (*pasyanti*) there is a middle level of *madhyama* corresponding to the meaning-whole in its mental separation into meaning and a sequence of manifesting sounds, none of which have yet been uttered. For Bhartrhari the silent practice of mantra is accounted for by *madhyama* and is, of course, both real and meaningful.

When all three levels of language are taken into account, as they are by Bhartrhari, it would seem that all Vedic and Tantric types of mantra practice can be analyzed and shown to be meaningful. In cases where the karmic ignorance of the speaker or the hearer obstructs the evocative power of the mantra, it may indeed be experienced as meaningless. But even then, the mantra is still inherently meaningful because it prepares the way for the *sphota* to be finally understood. Also, there is the fact that the cultured person, not afflicted by ignorance, hears and understands the meaning even though the person uttering the mantra does not (*Vak*, 152–154). The argument, of course, is circular, and if it were merely a theoretical argument, then Bhartrhari’s explanation would have no power and would have been discarded long ago. However, Bhartrhari appeals not just to argument but also to empirical evidence—the direct perception of the meaning-whole (*sphota*) of the mantra. As long as such direct perception is reflected in the experience of people, Bhartrhari’s explanation of the meaningfulness of mantras remains viable.



In the Indian experience the repeated chanting of mantras is an instrument of power (Gonda 1963, 271). The more difficulties there are to be overcome, the more repetitions are needed. Repeated use of correct mantras removes all impurities, purifies all knowledge, and leads to release. The psychological mechanism involved is described by Bhartrhari as a holding of the sphota in place by continued chanting. Just as from a distance or in semidarkness it takes repeated cognitions of an object before one sees it correctly, so also concentrated attention on the sphota by repeated chanting of the mantra results in the sphota finally being perceived in all its fullness (*Vak*, 1:89).

For Bhartrhari and the Grammarians, then, mantras are inherently meaningful, powerful in purging ignorance and revealing truth, and effective instruments for the realization of release (*moksa*). Indeed, Bhartrhari's theory helps our modern minds understand how the chanting or singing of mantras can be experienced as meaningful, powerful, and in fact a "yoga of the word" (*Sabdapurvayoga*) (Coward 1985, 1–13).

### Mantra in *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras*

Patanjali, the great systematizer of the Yoga school, shares much in common with Bhartrhari, the Grammarian, when it comes to the understanding of mantra. In Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* (1978, hereafter cited as *YS*), *Isvara*, like *Sabdabrahman*, is described as an eternal unity of meaning and consciousness from which all speech, including the Vedic mantras, evolves (*YS*, 1:24–29). Mantra, as the scriptural truth of the *rsis*, is taken to be the authoritative verbalization of *Isvara's* word-consciousness. All this is expressed in the sacred mantra, *Om*, which, when spoken, connotes *Isvara* and his omniscient consciousness. As was the case for Bhartrhari, it is the obscuring power of consciousness veiled by karmic ignorance that robs mantras of their inherent meaning and power (*YS*, 1:5). And as was the case for Bhartrhari, Patanjali states that this ignorance can be removed through a constant repetition of appropriate Vedic mantras. Says Patanjali, as a result of constant chanting or study (*svadhyaya*) upon mantras (including seed or *bija* syllables like *Om*) the desired deity becomes visible (*YS*, 2:44). Through the practice of fixed concentration (*samadhi*) upon

an object, in this case an uttered mantra, consciousness is purified of karmic obstructions and the deity is “seen.” Since for Patanjali Om is the mantra for *Isvara*, the devotee is advised that the *japa* or chanting of Om will result in the clear understanding of its meaning. Vyasa, a commentator on Patanjali, puts it in more psychological terms:

The yogi who has come to know well the relation between word and meaning must constantly repeat it [the mantra] and habituate the mind to the manifestation therein of its meaning. The constant repetition is to be of the *pranava* (OM) and the habitual mental manifestation is to be that of what it signifies, *Isvara*. The mind of the Yogi who constantly repeats the *pranava* and habituates the mind to the constant manifestation of the idea it carries, becomes one-pointed. (YS, 1:28, *Bhasya*)

What does it mean for the mind to become “one-pointed”? The “point” is the mantra that is being chanted. “One-pointed” means that the continual chanting of the mantra is keeping it front and center in one’s mind to the exclusion of everything else one might perceive or think. Through the chanting the devotee has become one with the mantra (Om in this case). It is as though one’s whole world becomes only the mantra and for the period of the chanting nothing else exists. It is like the experience we sometimes have when we find ourselves “caught up” in a piece of music to which we are listening—for the moment your hearing of the music fills the whole universe. Or it is like the experience of being in a moment of love or sexual intercourse with another person—for the moment everything else ceases to exist. You are one-pointed. The yoga discipline described here involves becoming one-pointed or one with the mantra Om and what it signifies, *Isvara*.

The power of such mantra concentration (*samadhi*) to induce a perfectly clear identity with the signified deity is given detailed psychological analysis in the commentary on *Yoga Sutra* 1:42. With continued mantra concentration all traces of uttered sounds and conceptual meaning are purged until only the direct pure perception of *Isvara* remains. Patanjali’s analysis supports Bhartrhari’s claim that the repetition of mantra *samadhi* has the power to remove ignorance

and reveal truth (YS, 1:17, *Tika*). This conclusion confirms the Vedic mantra experience (previously discussed) and the Tantric mantra experience to which we will turn shortly.

Since an additional aspect of the practice of mantra concentration is chanting, Patanjali prescribes the yogic discipline of making Isvara the motive of all one's actions (*Isvarapranidhanam*) (YS, 2:45). It is as though one is to become an "empty channel" through which Isvara (who is being held steady at the center of one's mind through the chanting or meditation upon Om) acts. In one's yoga practice one is attempting to emulate Isvara, the master yogi, so what better way than to attempt to act in every situation as though he were acting through you? It is rather like the young hockey player who tries to keep Gretzky uppermost in mind so that as he or she goes down the ice all moves will be those of the "great one." While chanting Om one "dedicates" all one's moves to Isvara. The result of such complete self-surrender, says the yoga text, is a vision of Isvara. In this way, says Oberhammer, the yoga of Patanjali is perhaps the oldest statement of theistic mantra meditation (Oberhammer 1989, 204). It is this actual face-to-face encounter with God that is given further development in theistic mantra meditation.

### Theistic Mantra Meditation

The theistic traditions (e.g., worship of Shiva or Vishnu), which come to dominate Hinduism, use the meditation on mantras to effect an actual encounter with God. In the devotee who reverently disposes him or herself to an experience of transcendence, the mantra functions to take one out of or beyond one's spirit to an existential experience of the divine. The mantra has a sacramental function to make God present as an actual event. In Hindu theistic experience, mantras have both meaning and power—power to purify the mind and reveal the transcendent lord to the devotee in an existential encounter (Oberhammer 1989, 219).

Such mantras in the Hindu theistic traditions are held to have been created by the decree of the god involved—Shiva in the preceding examples. Shiva creates and empowers these mantras to be effective in communicating himself to his devotees for their salvation