

## THE RIG VEDA

The *Rig Veda* is the oldest of the four Vedas. It consists of hymns which are generally thought to have been composed between 1500 and 1000 BCE, although this chronology has been challenged lately, and it is possible that they are significantly older. The other three include the *Samaveda*, the sacrificial chants, the *Yajurveda*, the sacrificial formulas, and the *Atharva Veda* which is a compendium of miscellany consisting of spells, cures and curses. They were orally transmitted via a complex process of multiple, overlapping methods of memorization, which insured their preservation throughout the ages. The Vedas are considered to be the central scriptures of Hinduism, and are still studied, chanted and revered by many Hindus today.

Translated by Michael Myers

[http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world\\_civ\\_reader/world\\_civ\\_reader\\_1/rig\\_veda.html](http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world_civ_reader/world_civ_reader_1/rig_veda.html)

### The Hymn of Creation

This hymn explores the issue of the creation of the universe, which is depicted as a mysterious and perhaps ultimately unknowable process. There is a familiar reference to a dark watery chaos enlivened by wind. Particular importance is placed on the role of desire, while the existence of a creator is questioned.

The non-existent was not; the existent was not at that time. The atmosphere was not nor the heavens which are beyond. What was concealed? Where? In whose protection? Was it water? An unfathomable abyss?

There was neither death nor immortality then. There was not distinction of day or night. That alone breathed windless by its own power. Other than that there was not anything else.

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning. All this was an indistinguishable sea. That which becomes, that which was enveloped by the void, that alone was born through the power of heat.

Upon that desire arose in the beginning. This was the first discharge of thought. Sages discovered this link of the existent to the nonexistent, having searched in the heart with wisdom.

Their line [of vision] was extended across; what was below, what was above? There were impregnators, there were powers: inherent power below, impulses above.

Who knows truly? Who here will declare whence it arose, whence this creation? The gods are subsequent to the creation of this. Who, then, knows whence it has come into being?

Whence this creation has come into being; whether it was made or not; he in the highest heaven is its surveyor. Surely he knows, or perhaps he knows not.

### **To Agni (Fire)**

Agni is both fire and the god of fire, and he became one of the most central deities of the Vedic sacrificial cult, for it was he who transmitted the offerings to the heavens. His role was that of a mediator between the sacred and the mundane. As such he was often compared to the brahmins, the human priests who played a similar mediating role in ancient Indian society, and this comparison is made in this poem.

I call upon Agni, the one placed in front, the divine priest of the sacrifice, the invoker, the best bestower of gifts.

Agni is worthy of being called upon by seers past and present: may he bring the gods here!

Through Agni may one obtain wealth and prosperity day by day, splendid and abounding in heroic sons.

O Agni, the sacrifice and work of the sacrifice, which you encompass on all sides--that alone goes to the gods.

May Agni, the invoker who has the powers of a sage, true and most brilliant in glory, come here, a god with the gods!

Whatsoever favor you wish to do for a worshipper, Agni, that favor of yours surely comes true, O Angiras [member of a priestly family].

O Agni, you who gleam in the darkness, to you we come day by day, with devotion and bearing homage; to you, ruler of the sacrifices, keeper of the Rta [cosmic law], brightly shining, growing in your abode.

So, be of easy access to us, Agni, as a father to his son. Abide with us for our well-being.

## To Indra

Indra was the chief of the heavenly gods, and is depicted first and foremost as a warrior wielding the terrible thunderbolt, and is akin to the Greek God Zeus. He was considered as well to be the paradigm for the kshatriya (warrior) class, who were to use their strength and wealth to protect and support the brahmins.

The one who is first and possessed of wisdom when born; the god who strove to protect the gods with strength; the one before whose force the two worlds were afraid because of the greatness of his virility: he, O people, is Indra.

The one who made firm the quaking earth; the one who made fast the shaken mountains; the one who measured out wide the atmosphere; the one who propped up heaven: he, O people, is Indra.

The one who, having killed the serpent, released the seven rivers; the one who drove out the cows by opening Vala [a cattle pen] the one who generates fire between two rocks, victor in battles: he, O people, is Indra.

The one by whom all things here were made moving; the one who put in hiding the lowly Dasa color; the one who, like a gambler who has won the stake, has taken the enemy's possessions: he, O people, is Indra.

The one who is the terrible one, about whom they ask "Where is he?" and they say of him, "He is not!" He diminished the enemy's possessions like stakes [at a game]. Put your faith in him: he, O people, is Indra.

The one who is the impeller of the weary, of the weak, of the Brahman seeking aid, the singer; the one with goodly mustaches who is the helper of him who works the stones, who has pressed the Soma (2): he, O people, is Indra.

The one in whose control are horses, cows, villages, all chariots; the one who has caused to be born the sun, the dawn; the one who is the waters' leader: he, O people, is Indra.

The one whom the two lines of battle, coming together, call upon separately, the nearer and the farther, both foes; even the two who have mounted the same chariot call upon him individually: he, O people, is Indra.

The one without whom people do not conquer; the one to whom, when fighting, they call for help; the one who is a match for everyone; the one who shakes the unshakable: he, O people, is Indra.

## Hymn of Purusa, the Cosmic Person

This very important hymn is usually considered to be one of the latest of the Rig Vedic hymns. It relates the creation of the world out of the sacrifice of *purusa*, the cosmic person. *Purusa* literally means person in Sanskrit. As the cosmic person we see both elements of the cosmos and the social hierarchy mapped onto the human body. This hierarchy consisted of four *varnas* or castes, which are: (1) the *brahmins*, the priestly class; (2) the *kshatriya*, the warrior and ruling class; (3) the *vaishya*, the merchant and farmer class; and the *shudra*, or servant class.

Thousand-headed is Purusa, thousand-eyed, thousand-footed. Having covered the earth on all sides, he stood above it the width of ten fingers.

Only Purusa is all this, that which has been and that which is to be. He is the lord of the immortals, who grow by means of [ritual] food.

Such is his greatness, yet more than this is Purusa. One-quarter of him is all beings; three-quarters of him is the immortal in heaven.

Three-quarters of Purusa went upward, one-quarter of him remained here. From this [one-quarter] he spread in all directions into what eats and what does not eat.

From him the shining one was born, from the shining one was born Purusa. When born he extended beyond the earth, behind as well as in front.

When the gods performed a sacrifice with the offering Purusa, spring was its clarified butter, summer the kindling, autumn the oblation.

It was Purusa, born in the beginning, which they sprinkled on the sacred grass as a sacrifice. With him the gods sacrificed, the demi-gods, and the seers.

From that sacrifice completely offered, the clotted butter was brought together. It made the beasts of the air, the forest and the village.

From that sacrifice completely offered, the mantras [Rig Veda] and the songs [Samaveda] were born. The meters were born from it. The sacrificial formulae [Yajurveda] were born from it.

From it the horses were born and all that have cutting teeth in both jaws. The cows were born from it, also. From it were born goats and sheep.

When they divided Purusa, how many ways did they apportion him? What was his mouth? What were his arms? What were his thighs, his feet declared to be?

His mouth was the Brahman [caste], his arms were the Rajanya [Kshatriya caste], his thighs the Vaishya [caste]; from his feet the Shudra [caste] was born.

The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born; from his mouth both Indra and Agni [fire]; from his breath Vayu [wind] was born.

From his navel arose the air; from his head the heaven evolved; from his feet the earth; the [four] directions from his ear. Thus, they fashioned the worlds.

Seven were his altar sticks, three times seven were the kindling bundles, when the gods, performing the sacrifice, bound the beast Purusa.

The gods sacrificed with the sacrifice to the sacrifice. These were the first rites. These powers reached the firmament, where the ancient demi-gods and the gods are.