

Old ideas of language

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Introduction

The study of language is an ancient science. In some ways, it is a science at the heart of traditional learning. And it raises some delicate questions about the relationship between modern science and traditional knowledge. For it comes from a very old and profound conception, about the nature of meaningful experience. Like modern science, this conception has its own universality. To a sympathetic eye, it can be found in many different traditions: as for example among many tribal peoples; or in Plato's dialogue, the *Cratylus*, from ancient Greece; or in many old religions, like Judaism.

However, in order to give a specific description, it may help to focus on a particular tradition. In what follows, this old conception of language will be described in the Sanskrit tradition, which comes down to us in present day India. In fact, India is a good place to study such ancient conceptions; because we have here a living tradition that comes down to us today, with such great richness, from so long ago.

In India, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there is an extraordinary mixture of two very different kinds of tradition. On the one hand, there are the traditions of modern science: which have been enthusiastically taken in from the West, during the last couple of centuries. On the other hand, there are much older traditions, which have continued here from medieval and classical and ancient times.

When we consider these two kinds of tradition, modern science has an obvious advantage. It has developed an extensive use of mechanized communications: starting with printing and transport engineering, and then going on to phones and radio and TV, and to computers and the internet. Through these new media of communication, the modern world has greatly developed an external standardization of knowledge: in modern schools and universities, and in scientific and technical institutions which are now co-ordinated quickly on a national and international scale. Modern science depends upon this external standardization of knowledge, which is made possible today by mechanized communications media.

In older traditions, before the use of printing, knowledge was standardized in a more intensive way, through oral texts that were recited and remembered. That standardization did not work essentially through writing down the texts and recording them in external media. Instead, it was carried out much more through hearing the texts and reciting them orally, in spoken sound that was meant for listening and remembering.

Such an oral tradition had to be passed on directly from person to person, with far less external media than we use today. Accordingly, the oral way of learning worked far less through *extensive* information, and far more through an *intensive* training of mind and living faculties.

In India, the *Vedas* and the *shrutis* are the earliest oral texts that have come down to us today. From there, the oral tradition continues on to the classical *shāstras* and the *smritis*, and then on to the *bhakti* (or devotional) traditions in our vernacular languages. Through this long development, over some thousands of years, the tradition has remained oral, in its basic character. It is only in the last two centuries that the tradition has begun to modernize, so as to make use of modern communications and modern science.

Of such modernization, one prominent example is of course the handing over of tradition from Shrī Rāmakrishṇa to Svāmi Vivekānanda. In many ways, Shrī Rāmak-

riṣṇa represented the old oral tradition, handed down through India's medieval period. And from him, the tradition passed on to Svāmi Vivekānanda, who was modern educated and who began to relate the tradition with modern science. That was little more than a hundred years ago, and the process of modernization is still very much in progress.

However, in this modernizing process, there is a rather tricky question. How far can the old knowledge be scientific? The problem is that scientific knowledge must be impartial and impersonal, beyond the partiality of personal perception. So, when we compare the old śāstras with modern science, we have to ask: How could the old śāstras be properly impartial, at a time when there was so much less external standardization and there was so much less recorded information than there is in modern sciences today? How could the old śāstras (or sciences) come to an impersonally scientific knowledge, if they relied so much upon an intensive training of our minds and our living faculties?

Well, one way of investigating these questions is to take a look at the old śāstra of Sanskrit linguistics. As codified by Yāska and Pāṇini and subsequent linguists, it was very much a traditional śāstra, at the centre of a classical Sanskrit education. And this old śāstra of linguistics is also a genuinely analytic science, with a rigorous conception of language that goes all the way back to the Vedas.

From the *Rig-veda*, one short sentence is quoted over and over again: 'ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti...'. It means: 'There is one being. Those who are inspired speak in many ways.' Clearly, this tells us about a final unity, beneath all differing descriptions. But this quotation comes from a passage that also tells us something more, about language and tradition. The passage consists of two stanzas (*Rig-veda* 1.164.45-46). Somewhat freely translated, the first stanza says:

The word is measured out in four.
Those steps of speech are known to them
of broad and deep intelligence.

Three are laid down concealed.
These three are not articulated forth.
Of speech, the fourth is what men speak.

This stanza tells us that outward words are only a superficial expression. To understand them, we have to go down to deeper levels: by reflecting inward, through the microcosm of individual experience.

Next, the second stanza goes on to say:

They speak of 'Indra' ('Chief of gods');
of 'Mitra' ('Friend'); of 'Agni' ('Fire');
of 'Varuṇa' (the 'All-enveloping');
and of fine-feathered 'Garutmān'
(('Celestial bird of prey')).

Of one same being, those who are
inspired speak, in different ways.

They call it 'Agni' ('Burning fire'),
or 'Yama' ('Death of changing things'),
or 'Mātarishvan' ('Subtle energy').

This stanza tells us that the ‘devas’ or the ‘gods’ are only different names, which arise from one common source. The names are spoken by ‘vipras’ or ‘sages’, who are inspired from that source. It is a single reality, expressed in common by all individuals and by the whole macrocosm of the world at large.

In Sanskrit, that one reality is described as ‘atmīya’ meaning that it is ‘spiritual’ and ‘subjective’. It is a final ground of pure spirit or pure consciousness, expressed in each individual’s experience. But that same reality is also described as ‘apaurusheya’: which means that it is utterly ‘impersonal’ and ‘impartial’, beyond all limitations of our partial minds and bodies. So it is both ‘subjective’ and ‘impersonal’, at the inmost centre of each individual. And the entire universe is only its expression or its speaking.

In this conception, the subjective and the impersonal are seen together, as a single unity which is at once pure consciousness and also the reality of the entire universe. That unity may be approached in different ways. On the one hand, it may be approached through the religious faith of *mata-bhakti* and through the mystic states of *rāj-yoga*, beyond our ordinary reasoning. But it may also be approached through the reasoned enquiry of *jnyāna*, which questions back into the depth of knowledge.

And then, through the enquiry of *jnyāna* (or knowledge), that same common unity is taken as the basis of all sciences. For then, it is conceived that a subjective reflection can lead on to the impartial knowledge of science. We can reason back, reflectively, by asking what our language means. That takes us deeply inward, to the impersonal centre of our personalities. It’s there, at the impersonal depth of our experience, that our understanding gets clarified. And it’s from there that clearer understanding is expressed, thus enabling our sciences to be less partial and more accurate.

Such a reflective reasoning is illustrated in the science of linguistics, which asks how meaning comes to be expressed in sound and speech. First, let us take a look at traditional ideas of sound; and then we can go on to ideas of speech and learning.

Sound and seeing

The sense of sound

According to a traditional conception, we can think of the entire universe as made of sound. This conception may be introduced by going down through a series of five levels, called the ‘tanmātras’.

Literally, the word ‘tanmātra’ means ‘that-merely’ or ‘that-measuring’. (‘Tat’ means ‘that’, and ‘mātra’ means ‘merely’ or ‘measuring’.) As ‘that-merely’, a tanmātra is a subtle essence, to which more obvious appearances may be reduced. As ‘that-measuring’, a tanmātra is a way of measuring or viewing our experience of the world. So the tanmātras are a progression of subtle essences, found through deeper ways of looking at the world.

In particular, there are five tanmātras, corresponding to the five traditional elements of ‘earth’, ‘water’, ‘fire’, ‘air’ and ‘ether’. And they also correspond to the five senses: of smell, taste, sight, touch and sound.

- The first tanmātra is that of ‘earth’ and ‘smell’. Here, ‘earth’ can be interpreted as objective matter, which is divided into particular objects. Each object is a piece of matter; and together all such objects make up an external world. At this level, experience is viewed through the kind of perception that identifies a particular object, as something different from other things. That kind of perception is represented by the sense of smell, which sniffs out particular things. As for example when a dog sniffs out a trail of scent. Or when we speak of ‘smelling a rat’, to imply a sense of detection that zeroes in on something particular which has gone wrong.
- The second tanmātra is that of ‘water’ and ‘taste’. Here, ‘water’ can be interpreted as flowing energy. Each particular object is conceived to be a gross appearance, made of something more subtle than what previously appeared. It is not a separate piece of matter; but, instead, it is a pattern of energy currents, flowing from and into other patterns. At this level, experience is viewed through a sympathetic activation of energy in the perceiving organism. That kind of perception is represented by the sense of taste. It is clearly moved to act in sympathy with the flavours that it perceives. As it perceives an attractive or repulsive flavour, its own perceiving action is attracted or repelled accordingly.
- The third tanmātra is that of ‘fire’ and ‘sight’. Here, ‘fire’ can be interpreted as meaningful information. Each apparent form or pattern is conceived to have a meaning, and thus to represent something that has to be interpreted. At this level, experience is viewed through the interpretation of apparent form. That kind of interpretation is represented by the sense of sight. It shows us visual shapes and forms that clearly have to be interpreted, to tell us what is thus perceived.
- The fourth tanmātra is that of ‘air’ and ‘touch’. Here, ‘air’ can be interpreted as conditioned quality. Each representation is conceived to be made up of relative qualities, which have to be evaluated. At this level, experience is viewed through the qualitative evaluations of intuitive judgement: as represented by the sense of touch.
- The fifth tanmātra is that of ‘ether’ and ‘sound’. Here, ‘ether’ can be interpreted as pervading continuity. Each variation of quality is conceived to show a common

continuity of underlying principle. At this level, changing experiences are viewed through the penetration of insight: to show an underlying continuity that they share in common. That kind of insight is represented by the sense of sound. It hears the changing sounds of words, and understands through them a continuity of meaning and consciousness that they express.

Thus, among the faculties that take perception in, the sense of sound is accorded a special place. It represents the deepest level of understanding: reflecting back from changing appearances to a changeless ground of consciousness that is expressed. From that inmost ground, the outward faculty of speech draws meaning and expresses it in sound.

Vibration and light

In traditional learning, with its intensive use of recitation and memory, experiences of listening and speaking are central. A student learned by hearing and reciting, far more than by reading what was written down. Thus it was only natural to make a profound investigation into the microcosmic and macrocosmic experiences of sound.

In that investigation, sound is taken to be a special kind of movement, called 'vibration'. This is a repeated movement, about a central point of origin. In this kind of movement, there is a repeated cycle of disturbance: from an originating, central state of equilibrium and rest.

As our bodies speak and hear, we experience physical vibrations in our chests and throats and ears. At the lower notes of sound, the frequency is slow; and so we notice the throbbing movement of individual cycles that make up the vibration. As the pitch of sound gets higher, the frequency increases, and we are less able to notice the individual vibrations.

When the pitch is high enough, we do not notice the individual vibrations at all. There, we only notice shapes and meanings and qualities of sound, produced by vibrations whose movements are too fast for us to perceive directly. Thus we conceive of subtle vibrations: which our senses cannot see directly, but which produce perceived effects in our experience.

Like modern physics, traditional conceptions make much use of this idea of subtle vibrations, behind the forms and names and qualities that we perceive. In particular, forms are conceived to be made up from pulsating currents of vibrant energy; names are conceived to achieve their representation and meaning through a radiant resonance of sympathetic vibration; and qualities are conceived to show a vibrant swinging to and fro between opposites (like pain and pleasure, depth and height, heat and cold).

Thus, beneath apparent forms and names and qualities, more subtle vibrations are conceived. But where do they take place? At their most subtle, they take place beneath the changing surface of appearances, in the background continuity of space and time. This background continuity is called 'ākāsha' or the 'ether'.

But, what causes these vibrations in 'ākāsha'? According to Svāmi Vivekānanda, the activating cause is 'prāṇa' or 'living energy'. He says:

This Prana, acting on Akasha, is creating the whole of this universe. In the beginning of a cycle, this Prana, as it were, sleeps in the infinite ocean of Akasha. It existed motionless in the beginning. Then arises motion in this ocean of Akasha by the action of this Prana, and as this Prana begins to move, to vi-

brate, out of this ocean come the various celestial systems, suns, moons, stars, earth, human beings, animals, plants, and the manifestations of all the various forces and phenomena.¹

In a way, these old conceptions are similar to modern physics. The concept of ‘ākāsha’ is like the modern ‘space-time continuum’; and the concept of ‘prāṇa’ is rather like the vibrating ‘field energy’ of modern relativity theory and quantum mechanics. Just like the field theories of modern physics, the old idea of prāṇa tells us that material objects are only crude appearances of fluctuating energy, whose moving patterns are made up of subtle oscillations in the continuity of space and time. As the *Kaṭha Upanishad* says (6.2):

The universe of changing things –
whatever may be issued forth –
it is all found in living energy, whereby
it moves and oscillates and shines.

However, beneath the similarity with modern physics, there is also an essential difference. Modern physics works essentially through formal calculations and external instruments. Accordingly, it cannot work directly with a reflective concept of life and living meaning, where life and meaning are considered to express an inner consciousness. Such a reflective consideration of life is outside the scope of modern physics. But it is essential to the concepts of ‘ākāsha’ and ‘prāṇa’.

‘Ākāsha’ comes from the root ‘kāsh’, which means to ‘shine’. The same root is found in the word ‘prakāsha’, which of course means ‘shining forth’ or ‘shining out’. But in ‘ākāsha’, the prefix is different. Instead of ‘pra-’, which means ‘forward’, the prefix is ‘ā-’, which means ‘near’ or ‘back’ or ‘inward’. So ‘ākāsha’ implies an ‘inner shining’, found by reflecting back within. It implies an inmost consciousness, which persists through all our changing experiences of space and time. According to the old conception of ‘ākāsha’, that inner light is what gives space and time their continuity.

‘Prāṇa’ comes from the root ‘an’, which means to ‘breathe’ or to ‘live’. And this root is associated with the sound of speech produced by living breath. So, the energy of prāṇa is essentially alive. It functions through living purposes and meanings that express an underlying consciousness. And it has to be observed reflectively, by reflecting back into the living faculties that express consciousness in one’s own personality.

This implies a kind of science that is rather different from modern physics. Where modern physics works on outside objects, through outward calculations and external instruments, the sciences of prāṇa and ākāsha work on living actions and meaningful experiences, through cultivating inner faculties and clarifying understanding.

The old science of linguistics is a clear example. It works, on the one hand, by cultivating living faculties of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammatical usage. These faculties are cultivated in the disciplines of shikshā, nirukta and vyākaraṇa. It’s by these faculties that meaning is expressed in the vibrations of sound.

¹ From *The complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol 2, Advaita Ashrama, 10th edition, 1963, chapter called ‘The real and the apparent man’, last chapter of section on ‘Jnana-yoga’.*

And further, on the other hand, linguistics works by clarifying what is meant by words and speech. To understand what's meant, sound and seeing have to come together. The seeing that's expressed in language has to be uncovered in the meaning of the sound. That is achieved by reflecting back to underlying consciousness, where sound and seeing both arise. There, sound and seeing come together, so that meaning can be clarified.

Thus, linguistics does not work for us by calculating what next sound to make, or by predicting what next sound some speaker is going to make. In our actual use of linguistics, our living faculties are directly involved, in a way that is essentially 'biological'. That biological approach implies its own kind of energy, which is essentially 'alive'. Such a living energy does not merely act from one object to another. Instead, it is an energy of inspiration, which arises from a subjective consciousness into objective activities. As such energy arises, it expresses consciousness, in meaningful activity. That living energy of inspiration is called 'prāṇa'.

Like the energy of modern physics, prāṇa acts through subtle vibrations in the conditioning of space and time; and objects are thus interconnected patterns of its dynamic activity. But prāṇa is an energy that's understood biologically, through considerations of living purpose, meaning and value that are specifically excluded from modern physics. Where modern physics is applied externally, through calculation and engineering, the living energy of prāṇa is investigated reflectively, through education and intensive discipline.

In modern physics, the concept of sound is restricted to physical vibrations, in various bodies and substances that are externally perceived. But, in older traditions, this is not so. Concepts of sound and vibration are extended into mental experience: to include what we hear and perceive and think and feel within our minds. And further, there is a questioning of how these concepts extend beyond the mind as well: to a background continuity beneath all physical and mental appearances.

There, at that background continuity, it must be understood that sound is not a vibration in any object or substance which is physically or mentally conditioned. The background continuity is neither physical nor mental. It is itself beneath all changing attributes, of body or of mind. By conceiving a vibration there in it, we are adding something quite extraneous to what it is itself. It is this added on vibration that makes the continuity appear to be conditioned and changeable.

Here, a paradox is admitted to be inherent in our everyday conceptions. (As indeed, such paradoxes have to be admitted in modern physics.) The concept of vibration has been extended to the point where it is breaking down. The concept has been extended – beyond the physical and mental – to a subtle vibration that produces the world's appearances. But it produces them from a changeless background, where there is neither movement nor conditioning. So then, beneath all movement and conditioning, from where does this vibration come?

It is conceived to come from underlying consciousness: which is the essence of both light and sound. That consciousness is the essential principle of seeing and illuminating. And it is also the essential principle of hearing and speaking.

- By its very nature, of illuminating knowledge, consciousness illuminates appearances. From that illumination, all perception comes.
- By its very nature, of manifesting expression, consciousness vibrates with life. It keeps on bursting out into perceived appearance, and drawing back again. The cy-

cle keeps repeating: projecting out and then immediately drawing in, as each appearance is perceived. From that vibration, all manifestation is expressed.

Seen in the world of appearances, illumination and vibration are actions, involving change and movement. But in consciousness itself, they are not so.

The illumination of consciousness is not a changing act, which is put on at one time and taken off at another. No action needs to be put on, for consciousness to shine. It does not shine by any changing act, but just by being what it always is. Its shining is thus changeless, and involves no movement in itself. Appearances are lit by its mere presence, as it stays unmoved within itself.

So also the vibration of consciousness. As it bursts out into appearance or draws back in, it seems to change; but the change is only in appearance. Outwardly, a change appears; but in itself, consciousness remains unmoved and unaffected, just as it always is. As differing appearances keep getting manifested forth and drawn back in, each manifests the unchanged nature of consciousness. As the cycle keeps repeating, it is just a repetition of that unchanged nature, over and over again.

To the apparent world, consciousness vibrates forth into change. But, for consciousness, that vibration is just its own nature, remaining utterly unchanged. Thus, consciousness is pure activity: the unmixed principle from which all acts arise and change is brought about. And that pure principle of all activity remains itself unmoved by change.

Shining out

This concept, of pure illumination as the source of all activity, is expressed in the Sanskrit words ‘sphoṭa’ and ‘sphuraṇa’. The word ‘sphoṭa’ conveys a sense of sudden blossoming or bursting forth: from uncreated timelessness into the created appearances of passing time. And it combines this sense of bursting creativity with a further sense of clear illumination that makes things evident. The word ‘sphuraṇa’ conveys both these senses, and adds a further sense of continued repetition: so as to imply an activating vibration and an unceasing brilliance.²

Here is the report of a conversation in which Ramaṇa Maharshi describes ‘sphuraṇa’ as ‘I’-‘I’: as a repetition of the true, unchanging ‘I’, which is pure consciousness.³

M: ...‘I AM that I AM’ sums up the whole truth.... any form or shape is the cause of trouble. Give up the notion that ‘I am so and so.’ Our *shāstras* [scriptures] say: *aham iti sphurati* (it shines as ‘I’).

D: What is *sphuraṇa* (shining)?

² There is an interesting etymological connection here. ‘Sphoṭa’ and ‘sphuraṇa’ are from the verbal roots ‘sphuṭ’ (‘burst forth’, as in English ‘sputter’) and ‘sphur’ (‘incite’, ‘activate’, as in English ‘spur’). These roots are akin to another Sanskrit root ‘sphūrj’ – meaning to ‘thunder’, ‘crash’, ‘crackle’ or to ‘burst forth’, ‘be displayed’. ‘Sphūrj’ in turn is related to the English ‘spark’ and ‘speak’ and ‘aspersion’ (through Latin ‘spargere’, meaning to ‘scatter’, ‘strew’, ‘sprinkle’).

³ Reported in M. S. Venkataramiah: *Talks with Sri Ramaṇa Maharshi*, Note #363, Sri Ramanashramam, Tiruvannamalai, Tamilnadu, 1984.

M: (*Aham, aham*) 'I'-'I' is the Self; (*Aham idam*) 'I am this' or 'I am that' is the ego. Shining is there always. The ego is transitory. When the 'I' is kept up as 'I' alone, it is the Self; when it flies at a tangent and says 'this', it is the ego.

And here is the report of another conversation, in which Ramaṇa Maharshi talks of 'aham sphūr̥ti' as an 'incessant flash of I-consciousness'. 'Aham' means 'I', and 'sphūr̥ti' is just another grammatical form of 'sphuraṇa'.⁴

M: Yes, when you go deeper you lose yourself, as it were, in the abysmal depths; then the Reality which is the *Ātman* [Self] that was behind you all the while takes hold of you. It is an incessant flash of 'I-consciousness'; you can be aware of it, feel it, hear it, sense it, so to say. This is what I call '*Aham sphūr̥ti*'.

D: You said that the *Ātman* is immutable, self-effulgent, etc. But if you speak at the same time of the incessant flash of I-consciousness, of this '*Aham sphūr̥ti*', does that not imply movement: which cannot be complete realization, in which there is no movement?

M: What do you mean by complete realization? Does it mean becoming a stone, an inert mass? The *Aham vritti* ['I'-acting] is different from *Aham Sphūr̥ti*. The former is the activity of the ego, and is bound to lose itself and make way for the latter which is an eternal expression of the Self. In Vedantic parlance this *Aham Sphūr̥ti* is called *Vritti Jnyāna* [the pure activity of knowledge].... *Svarūpa* [the true nature of reality] is *Jnyāna* [knowledge] itself, it is Consciousness.

In these conversations, Ramaṇa Maharshi is speaking of an ultimate subjective principle, which is the essence of both knowing and doing. It is at once pure illumination and pure activity, unmixed with anything physical or mental. Each personal ego is a confused mixture of consciousness with body and mind. Beneath the confusion, the real 'I' is unmixed consciousness, the changeless source and essence of all apparent activity. All seen activities and happenings are its expressions. Accordingly, all the entire universe may be conceived as its speaking: as what it says to us.

That source is common to each one of us and to all else. It's only by returning there that our confused activities, of body and of mind, can come to knowledge and clarity. It's only there that we learn anything. Traditional conceptions of learning are thus centred upon that source, where doing and knowing come together.

In particular, that source is the meeting point of sound and light. Here is Ramaṇa Maharshi's description.⁵

In the course of conversation, Maharshi said that the subtle body is composed of light and sound and the gross body is a concrete form of the same.

The Lecturer in Physics asked if the same light and sound were cognizable by senses.

⁴ Reported in Kapali Sastri: *Sat-darshana bhashya and talks with Maharshi*, pg xxi, Sri Ramanaashramam, Tiruvannamalai, Tamilnadu, 1993.

⁵ Reported in *Talks with Ramana Maharshi*, #215, see footnote 3, page 10 above.

Table 1

	ĪSHVARA [God] UNIVERSAL	JĪVA [personality] INDIVIDUAL
gross	Universe	Body
subtle	Sound and light – <i>Nāda, Bindu</i>	Mind and <i>Prāṇa</i>
primal	<i>Ātmā</i> (Self) <i>Param</i> (transcendental)	<i>Ātmā</i> (Self) <i>Param</i> (transcendental)

M: No. They are supersensual. It is like this:...[see table 1, above].

They [sound and light] are ultimately the same.

The subtle body of the Creator is the mystic sound *Prāṇa* [the mantra ‘Om’], which is sound and light. The universe resolves into sound and light and then into transcendence – *Param*.

Chanting and enquiry

The coming together of sound and seeing is not just a matter of theory and conception. It is central to the practice of traditional learning, through the intensive use of formal recitation.

When a text is recited, the immediate practice is that of sound. The first effect is from the shape and form of sound, as pronounced by the speaker. It is like listening to music. The passing shapes of sound affect the hearing mind. They act upon the mind so as to influence attention, energy and mood. When shape of sound is used like this, to enable particular effects upon the hearing mind, it is described by the Sanskrit word ‘mantra’, which means a ‘mental device’.

As shapes and sounds of words are heard, they are also understood to have a meaning, by which something more is seen. Through meaning, the hearing mind experiences a subtle and internal seeing, beneath the gross sounds that are externally heard. In that internal seeing, there is a reflection of attention back: from changing shapes at the mind’s surface, to a continued understanding at the background of experience.

Thus, beneath its changing shapes and sounds, language has a second aspect: of meaningful seeing, which continues through the changes of shape and sound. This second aspect of language is described by the Sanskrit word ‘vicāra’ which means ‘thought’ and ‘enquiry’.

In the practice of traditional learning, both aspects of language are highly developed.

- The *mantra* aspect is one of subtle force and power, through which the sound of words impels the hearing mind to change its state in some specific way.
- The *vicāra* aspect is one of reflective thought and enquiry, through which the meaning of words is considered and questioned.

In short, the *mantra* aspect is sheer force of sound; the *vicāra* aspect is reflective seeing.

Both these aspects are meant to be intensified by repetition. By repeated recitation, the mind is meant to focus more intently on the shape of sound, and thus to get thrown further and further towards the change of state intended by the *mantra* aspect. By repeated reflection, there is meant to be a progressive investigation of meaning: as the mind keeps questioning and clarifying its own assumptions, so as to go deeper and deeper into the meaning of what is said.

As the repetition continues, both aspects are meant to reinforce each other. The *mantra* sound induces an altered state of mind, which is meant to go together with a reflective enquiry into clearer seeing. Through continued repetition, both sound and seeing are meant to get increasingly internalized, until they reach a meeting point where the internalization is complete.

- The sound proceeds from recitation with the mouth to recitation in the mind. Then in the mind, the sound is meant to proceed from explicit forms and names of thought to tacit qualities and values of feeling: which go further and further down, into the background of experience. The eventual aim is the background itself. The idea is that there, at the background, the sound of speech dissolves into its silent essence. That is its living source. From there, expression is inspired: in a way that is completely natural and spontaneous, quite free from all the deliberated artificiality of thoughts and words.
- For seeing to be clarified, mere verbal argument must lead to genuine questioning, of prejudiced and preconceived assumptions. The eventual aim is to get beneath all prejudice and preconception: so that one comes to a pure seeing, at an inmost ground where no assumptions prejudice or preconceive what's seen.

The meeting point of sound and seeing is meant to be found there, at that inmost ground from which all sounds and seeings come.

From a narrowly 'modern' point of view, we think of 'learning by heart' as a merely formal and unthinking memorization, which does not bother to question what has been slavishly memorized. But the same phrase, 'learning by heart', has a more basic meaning, which is essential to traditional learning. It refers to a sustained process of absorbing both the sound and meaning of a text into the depth of one's own heart, far beneath the outward forms of recitation and the deliberated interpretations of thought.

Such 'learning by heart' is far from lazy or slavish imitation. Instead, it is a matter of making the text and what it says one's own. That requires an intensive familiarization with the text and a relentless questioning of what is said. The learning process is designed to be sustained until the text is fully familiar and its meaning is perfectly clear. In the course of time, the familiarization must be so thorough and the questioning so rigorous that what is learned goes far beneath all passing words and thoughts. The long term aim is thus an independent understanding that is spontaneously expressed in what an individual feels and thinks and does, in her or his own right.

Learning from source

Implicit in this traditional approach is a reflection back to an inner, common source: shared by the microcosm of individual experience and the macrocosm of the external

universe. A student learns by going down beneath the changing sounds of learning, to that unchanging source from where the world is understood. This is described, a little allegorically, in the *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upanishad*, 4.5.8-11.

First (in 4.5.8-10), there is a description of changing sound and how it may be understood. The understanding is achieved by holding one's mind to the instrument that plays the sound, and thus coming to the player: the inner source that is expressed.

The outward sounds of drumbeats can't
be captured. But, by holding on
to just the drum, or to the drummer,
what gets spoken there is grasped. 4.5.8

The outward sounds blown from a conch
cannot be captured and kept held.
And yet, by holding to the conch,
or to the one who blows the conch,
what's spoken there is understood. 4.5.9

The outward sounds played from a vīṇā
can't be captured and kept held.
And yet, by holding to the vīṇā,
or the one who plays the vīṇā,
there what's said is understood. 4.5.10

Next, after this description of how sound is understood, there is a description of how the world gets to be seen (in 4.5.11). Here, the forms of learning, personal experience and the whole universe are described as differentiated smokes and vapours, breathed out from that one inner source which is beyond all limitation.

As fire burns up sap-filled fuel,
smokes and vapours issue forth
in differentiated ways.

So too, breathed out of the unlimited,
which has now come to be,

is this Rig-veda, Yajur-veda,
Sāma-veda, the Atharva-veda,
history and myth,
the arts and sciences,
the teachings of philosophy,
verse-compositions, aphorisms,
explanations, commentaries,

sacrifices, offerings,
what's eaten, drunk,
this world, the other world,
and all created things.

They are the breaths of *that* alone. 4.5.11

Levels of expression

The science of language

How does meaning come to be expressed in speech? This question is investigated in the traditional science of Sanskrit linguistics.

In Sanskrit, the word for grammar is ‘vyākaraṇa’. It is an abstract noun from the verb ‘vi-kri’, which means to ‘make different’ or to ‘analyse’. So ‘vyākaraṇa’ means ‘analysis’, and it refers to the same science that we study today as linguistic analysis.

But, in the traditional view, language is not just an external construction: which builds words from letters, and sentences from words. Names are not just objects representing other objects and their properties and relationships. Verbs are not just connecting names that represent the actions of various objects upon each other. Instead, language is the living experience of speaking and listening, as people act and interact and learn.

Thus, in its analysis of language, Sanskrit grammar was not confined to formulating abstract rules of linguistic construction. Through grammarians like Pāṇini, classical Sanskrit was developed into a highly formal language, with a complex set of rules that was described with the most astonishing sophistication and brevity: more so perhaps than in any other tradition of which we know. But the study of language went far beyond that, to a basic questioning of language use and meaningful experience. Thus grammar was extended, through linguistic analysis, into philosophical enquiry.

Of such linguistic philosophy, the classic example is Bhartrihari’s *Vākyapadīya*. In classical learning, it was a standard text for advanced students of grammar. As with so many Indian texts, we are not sure when it was composed, but we have a reliable report that it was already established in the traditional curriculum of learning by the seventh century CE. The report is from the Chinese traveller I-tsing, who visited India then. He tells us that it was among the works which even Buddhist students were taught, alongside their Buddhist studies, at the great monastery of Nālandā.⁶

In the manner of a traditional treatise, Bhartrihari begins the *Vākyapadīya* with a statement of basic principle. (The following translations are rather free.)

The changeless essence of the word
is all there is. It has no start;
nor does it stop or come to end.

It manifests transformed: through aims
and objects, as they come to be.
From it proceeds the changing world.

1.1

Here, we are presented with the terms of an enquiry that the treatise intends to make. First, it is going to look for a changeless principle that underlies all our experience of language and speech. And second, it is going to interpret language in the broadest

⁶ See Harold G. Coward: *Bhartrihari*, start of chapter 2, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1976; and R.C. Majumdar, Ed.: *The history and culture of the Indian people, Vol 3, The classical age*, chapter 21, §4, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 1988.

sense, to include all experience. Everything in the world, in everyone's experience, is going to be taken as an expression of the changeless principle that is being sought.

How can that principle be found? For those who share his vedic heritage, Bhartrihari points out that it is the source of their tradition: reflected and described in the Vedas.

Reflecting it, the vedic texts
are means by which it may be found.

Though it is one, it's seen approached
in many ways; by those great seers
from whom traditions are passed on,
each one of them in its own way. 1.5

Of that same truth, all sorts of
explanations are put forth, by monists
and by dualists: depending
on their differing ideas,
born from their own opinions. 1.8

But, in the Vedas, unmixed truth
is spoken of, as knowledge in
itself. It's there associated
with the one-word mantra 'om',
not contradicting any way
in which its truth may be explained. 1.9

Subsequently, for his fellow grammarians, Bhartrihari describes how their own discipline is a means to the same goal that the Vedas represent.

For those who are intelligent,
the foremost of the vedic sciences
and the best discipline –
established in reality –
is the analysis of speech. 1.11

It is a direct path to that
same light which is at once the
purest virtue and the final essence
of all speech. This path proceeds
by trying to achieve correct
distinctions in the forms of speech. 1.12

All tying down of truths perceived,
in objects and their functioning,
consists of words expressed in speech.

But we don't clearly recognize
the truth of words, in due respect
to the analysis of speech. 1.13

Linguistics is a passageway
to freedom in all disciplines.

Wherever learning is concerned,
 linguistics there appears: as that
 investigative therapy
 which may be used to clear away
 the taints of speech in what is said. 1.14

All classes of the things we see
 are tied back to generic names.

So too among all disciplines,
 on this that analyses speech,
 the others must at last depend. 1.15

Differences and knowledge

In the above passage, to show the central position that he gives to linguistic analysis, Bhartrihari points to an intimate connection between seeing and speaking. The way we see things depends essentially on how we name them. For example, suppose that someone looks at some tall branching shape and recognizes it as a ‘tree’. That perception depends on the way that trees are named, in general. It depends on the generic name: ‘tree’. As we speak, we use such general names to distinguish different kinds of things. And we carry on the differentiation by using more particular names for more particular things: as for example when we say ‘this tree’ or ‘that tree’ or ‘this palm tree’ or ‘that oak tree’.

According to Bhartrihari, such differentiation is a floating overlay of disturbed affectation (*upaplava*), seen superimposed upon the true nature of speech.

The show of seeming differences,
 displayed in knowledge and in speech,
 is always just an overlay
 of affectation floating by.

Thus, speech is overlaid by forms
 that are produced successively,
 affected by successive change.

And knowledge then seems to depend
 on objects that are to be known. 1.86

This stanza is explained in a *vritti* commentary that is traditionally said to have been written by Bhartrihari himself.

In itself, knowledge has no differentiation, no form. All forms of things that may be known are taken on additional to it. Hence it appears with its own light reflected back, by the formation of differences. It is thus that we speak of ‘five trees’ or ‘a herd of twenty cattle’.

The self that speaks contains within itself all seeds, all potencies. It appears through a created show of different sounds: which make it manifest successively, at the times when they are shown. Through that, by taking on extraneous differences of form, the true essence of speech gets overlaid by affectation. This we know as the speaking of our minds. Partless, it is taken to be otherwise.

Thus, it is said:

Without an object to be known,
pure knowledge does not enter use.

Unless succession is obtained,
speech cannot aim at anything
for anyone to think about.

Here, two kinds of differentiation are described. On the one hand, there is a gross differentiation: of objects known externally, in an outside world of space and time. On the other hand, there is a more subtle differentiation, which requires only time. This subtle differentiation is called 'krama' or 'succession'. It is intermediate between undifferentiated knowledge and the differentiated world.

Three levels

In Bhartrihari's description, different appearances are superimposed on knowledge, through a succession of passing states. In each state, knowing continues, while some differentiated object appears. The differentiation is a changing appearance. In itself, knowing is unchanged. But it appears to change, through the passing affectations that express it in our minds.

The essence of that expression is indivisible. But, through our passing mental states, we mistake it to be divided. Thus, through successive states, a differentiated world appears: expressing an undivided unity that speaks through seeming differences.

To explain this conception further, Bhartrihari distinguishes three levels of speech.

- In '*vaikharī*' or 'elaborated' speech, external sounds and symbols are articulated, as we act towards the objects of an outside world. Our experience of this world is an elaborated construction: built by relating different objects together, in space and time.
- As we act towards objects, our minds express and interpret meaning in them. In this experience of meaning, objects are related back to our knowledge of them, as our minds pass through a succession of knowing states. This mental level of language is called '*madhyamā*' or 'mediating'.
- As our minds progress through passing states, knowledge carries on beneath the change. This continuing, subjective knowledge is called '*pashyantī*' or 'seeing'. In Bhartrihari's *Vākyapadīya*, it is a pure and unconditioned seeing, quite unmixed with any passing states or differentiated objects.

In the *vritti* commentary on the *Vākyapadīya* (stanza 1.142), these three levels are summarized by quoting from an ancient source. First comes *vaikharī*, as the most obvious level.

Arranged in their respective places,
different elements of speech
are carried, spoken, in the air.

That forms *elaborated* speech.
It's a recording, carried out

Table 2

Vaikhari (‘elaborated’)	External articulation of words and symbols	Symbolic structures, picturing a manifested world
Madhyamā (‘in between’)	Succession of appear- ances, which keep on forming and transfor- ming in our minds	Manifesting process, in which symbolic forms are progressively desc- ribed and interpreted
Pashyantī (‘seeing’)	Pure consciousness, remaining always present, underneath the changing mind	Pure being in itself, staying changeless through all changing show

through acts of living energy
that functions forth from those who speak.

This first level of speech is shown in table 2. It’s shown as the top row. Here, there is an external articulation of sounds and symbols. Through this articulation, we build the symbolic structures of language; and thus we elaborate our pictures of a manifested world.

Going down, the second level is *madhyamā*, which is described next.

Mind in itself is made of forms
that follow on successively,
replacing what has gone before.

The functioning of living energy
is thereby left behind,
as *mediating* speech goes on
with its continued functioning.

In table 2 (above), this mediating level of speech is shown as the second row. Here, as we speak and listen, we experience a succession of appearances that keep on forming and transforming in our minds. This stream of experience is a manifesting process, in which symbolic forms are progressively described and interpreted.

Going further down, beneath the stream of changing mind, the third level is *pashyantī*, which is described as the essential core of speech.

But *seeing* is that partless essence
always present, everywhere.
In it, succession is absorbed.

There’s only light in its true nature,
as it is itself, within.
That is a subtle speaking where
no disappearance can be found....

It reaches its conditioned form
by mixing it, with a variety
of differing disturbances
that seem to float on it.

But that, which seems elaborated,
is pure being in itself.
It is untouched, quite unaffected
by its show of qualities.

In table 2 (previous page), that unaffected ground of speech is shown as the bottom row. It is an unmixed consciousness, remaining always present, underneath our changing states of mind. There, we come down to being in itself, staying changeless through all changing views and descriptions that keep showing it in different ways.

The essence of speech

Thus, in Bhartrihari's *Vākyapadīya* and its *vritti* commentary, the seeing of pashyantī is identified as the true essence of speech. But it has two aspects.

- Seen in itself, it does nothing. It is at once pure light and pure being, quite unmixed with any changing acts or differentiated show. It stands self-illuminated: shining by its own nature, not by any acts that get put onto it.
- Seen from the world of change and show, it does everything. It is the common source from which all acts and happenings arise. Everything perceived arises from its unseen potentiality.

In its first aspect, pashyantī is pure consciousness, where knowing and being are at one. In the second aspect, seen from the world, the seeing of pashyantī is what psychologists describe as the 'unconscious'. It is a hidden reservoir of 'unconscious' seeing at the underlying depth of mind.

That reservoir contains all the potentialities that get manifested in a person's experience, in the course of time. There, past experiences have been absorbed and have left behind their samskāras (their latent tendencies), which are now bearing fruit or which are ripening to bear fruit in the future.

And there, in that 'unconscious' store of mind, are the intuitive potentialities of insight: which enable us to recognize common qualities and meanings and forms in different objects. In Sanskrit, this recognition is described by the word 'ākṛiti'. Literally, 'ākṛiti' means 'underlying formation' or 'inner form'. In this sense, it is related to the English words 'inform' and 'information'. Like these English words, it has both objective and subjective aspects.

On the one hand an 'ākṛiti' is something shared in common by different objects. It is some common principle of quality or meaning or form that is found to underlie their differences. On the other hand, precisely because an 'ākṛiti' is a common principle, its recognition is essentially intuitive. Its recognition must arise at the subjective depth of insight, beneath the differences of objective perception.

By recognizing that different objects share a common principle or 'ākṛiti', we see that they are of the same type and so belong to the same class. In Sanskrit, the word 'jāti' is used to mean both 'type' and 'class'. For example, the jāti of a tree or a human being is the general class into which this particular tree or human being has been

born. And the same word ‘jāti’ also describes the common type that this tree or human being shares with other members of the class.

These two words ‘jāti’ and ‘ākṛiti’ are thus alternative descriptions for the same thing. They both describe a common principle that different instances are seen to share. In ‘jāti’, the description is approached objectively, because the word implies outward birth (‘jā’ means to ‘be born’). In the word ‘ākṛiti’, the description is approached subjectively, because the word implies a reflection back (‘ā-’) from outward action (‘kṛiti’).

In either case, the particular object is perceived outside, in the differentiated world. And the common principle is understood within, at the unseen depth of seeing.

According to Bhartrihari, that subjective depth is being in itself. All things of any kind, throughout the universe, are its particulars. This is made explicit by a stanza that is quoted, as revealed authority, in the *vṛitti* commentary on the *Vākyapadīya*, 1.1.

It’s that which stands, the inmost form:
the common, universal principle
of every different class.

From it are born all kinds of
changeable particulars: as rainy
thunderclouds are born from air.

Levels and ground

After Bhartrihari, his distinction of three levels was elaborated a little, by separating the two aspects of *pashyantī*: on the one hand its appearance of storing latent potentialities, and on the other its true essence of self-illuminating unity. Accordingly, what Bhartrihari had called ‘*pashyantī*’ was now divided into two levels, and the previous three levels became four.

This slightly elaborated conception, of four levels, was used in the development of traditional cosmologies, particularly in the Shaivite tradition. This elaborated conception is shown in table 3 (next page).

The upper two levels, of *vaikharī* and *madhyamā*, are much the same as before. They are shown immediately below the column titles (which are in italics). In the microcosm of individual experience, *vaikharī* is our personal articulation of words and symbols. And through this personal articulation, we conceive a changing world of perceived objects, which is the macrocosm that we see outside.

Similarly, for the second level of *madhyamā*, our microcosmic experience is a succession of mental states, through which symbols are formed and meanings are interpreted. And this mental succession enables us to conceive a macrocosmic flow of happenings, through which objects take shape and convey meaning in the outside world.

But when we come down to the third level of *pashyantī*, it is a little changed. In this elaborated conception, the name ‘*pashyantī*’ or ‘seeing’ is now given to a slightly degraded position. It is not now the final ground; but, instead, it is a borderline level through which the ground is reached. In table 3 (next page), it is shown as the third row, immediately above the horizontal line.

Here, *pashyantī* is the accumulated seeing of insight, along with all the potentialities that are awakened and expressed from it. It is here that the process of learning develops our capabilities, in the course of experience. It’s here that common princi-

Table 3

<i>Level of expression</i>	<i>Microcosm of individual experience</i>	<i>Macrocosm of the external universe</i>
Vaikhari (‘elaborated’)	Personal articulation of words and symbols	Changing world of perceived objects
Madhyamā (‘in between’)	Succession of mental states, through which symbols are formed and meanings are interpreted	Flow of happenings, through which objects take shape and convey meaning
Pashyantī (‘seeing’)	Quiet insight and latent potentiality, continuing at the depth of mind	Subtly intelligible order and causation of nature’s functioning
Parā (‘beyond’)	Ultimate identity of knowing and being	

ples are understood in different things: so that what has been learned from previous things, experienced in the past, can be applied to further things, experienced in the present and the future. It’s by returning here that misunderstandings can be clarified and mistakes corrected; so that learning may progress towards better things, clearer perception and truer knowledge.

Thus, in table 3, pashyantī is described as the quiet insight of understanding and the latent potentiality of character, continuing at the depth of mind. And at this level we experience the subtly intelligible order and causation of nature’s functioning: which is seen manifested universally, throughout the world.

At the bottom of the table, the final ground is called ‘*parā*’ or ‘beyond’. It is both knowing in itself and being in itself. There, consciousness is self-illuminating light, whose very being is to shine. That shining is its knowing and its being, illuminating everything that anyone experiences. Thus, in the end, knowing and being are found identical. Each is the same, self-shining ground that’s found beneath all differences.

Language and tradition

Natural development

In the course of history, how do words form? How has language come about and grown, so as to carry meaning in the present? A very old conception of such cultural development is built into the Sanskrit language.

Literally, 'sanskrit' means 'well-formed' or 'fully done': from 'sam-' meaning 'unitedly' or 'fully', and 'kri' meaning to 'make' or to 'do'. Thus 'sanskriti' means 'culture' or 'refinement'. And the name 'Sanskrit' is given to a language that has been specially refined for the cultivation of learning and education.

By contrast, the word 'prākṛit' means 'wild' or 'raw' or 'natural'. The prefix 'pra-' means 'before' or 'prior to' or 'underlying'; so 'prākṛit' carries the sense of 'prior to doing' or 'underlying action'. Thus, 'prakṛiti' means 'nature'. And the name 'prākṛit' is used to describe various ordinary languages of everyday usage, in ancient and classical India.

In short, Sanskrit was the specially developed language of classical education; and the prākṛits were untutored languages of natural, everyday use. But does it follow then that Sanskrit is a more artificial construction, inherently less natural than the untutored prākṛits? No, it does not, according to the old conceptions. That is not the way they see their own tradition.

As we are told by the classical grammarian Bhartrihari, language and tradition are each considered at different levels. At the base, there is an inmost ground of unaffected, timeless seeing (pashyantī). At the surface, there is an elaborated construction (vaikharī) of outward words and symbols. In between (madhyamā), there is a living process that expresses knowledge outwardly, through a succession of changing states.

The history of learning is thus considered biologically. The elaborated structures of language are a living growth, which develops as an expression of continuing knowledge. On the surface, it may seem that systematic learning has developed through an artificial invention: which assembles fabricated words and symbols into formal structures, like fabricated parts are assembled into an engineered machine. However, such formal structures do not express knowledge by themselves. They express it through a living history, in which they are handed on from generation to generation.

And in that living history, learning is developed by renewal. As the constructions of learning change, they are developed as renewed expressions of knowledge. Without such a renewal of living knowledge, learning is merely artificial and no longer genuine. Its constructions may be clever on the surface, but they have lost their natural grounding in the knowledge that they should express.

Thus, in the traditional view, development is not essentially a matter of construction. More fundamentally, learning is developed by a living process: which keeps on reflecting back to source, from where it is continually refreshed. That source is knowledge, at its inmost ground. From there, development is naturally inspired. By reflecting back there, systems of learning can be developed to a high degree of refinement, without losing their natural grounding in an unconstructed source beneath all changes and developments.

This kind of naturally grounded refinement is conceived to be exemplified by the Sanskrit language. It was a special language of disciplined learning, cultivated along-

side the prākritis, the languages of ordinary, habitual speech. But they were compromised by the careless corruptions of everyday usage, while Sanskrit was very carefully refined by analytic systems that protected it from such corrupting compromise. This analytic refinement is described in a Tamil discourse by the late Kānci Shankarācārya, Candrashekharendra Sarasvati.⁷

Sanskrit has no syllable that is indistinct or unclear. Take the English ‘word’. It has neither a distinct ‘a-kāra’ [‘a’ sound] nor ‘o-kāra’ [‘o’ sound]. There are no such words in Sanskrit. Neither is the ‘r’ in ‘word’ pronounced distinctly, nor is it silent.

Sanskrit, besides, has no word that cannot be traced to its root. Whatever the word, it can be broken into its syllables to elucidate its meaning. Sanskrit is sonorous and auspicious to listen to. You must not be ill disposed towards such a language, taking the narrow view that it belongs to a few people.

To speak Sanskrit is not to make some noises and somehow convey your message. The sounds, the phonemes in it are – as it were – purified, and the words and sentences refined by being subjected to analysis. That is why the language is called ‘Sanskrit’. The purpose of Shikshā [trained pronunciation], and in greater measure of Vyākaraṇa [grammar], is to bring about such refinement.

To speak the language of Sanskrit itself means to be refined, to be cultured. As the language of the gods, it brings divine grace. The sounds of Sanskrit create beneficial vibrations of the nāḍis [living energy currents] and strengthen the nervous system, thereby contributing to our health.

This refinement, with its analytic systems, is considered as a natural growth, grounded in a living source that is its natural base. The grounding comes from those who found the tradition and develop its systems. The major founders and developers are recognized as sages, who have returned to source and thus express it naturally.

Gifted by seers

In particular, the analytic systems of classical Sanskrit were conceived to have been developed by sages like Pāṇini, Patanjali and Bhartrihari. And before this classical systematization, the language was founded and developed through the vision of vedic seers, called ‘mantra-draśṭās’. In that phrase, the choice of words is telling. The word ‘mantra’ refers to the chanted statements of the Vedas and the Upanishads. And the word ‘draśṭā’ means very simply a ‘see-er’. So the tradition is telling us that the foundation of its spoken sounds lies in the seeing of its founding seers.

These seers have not *created* the statements that they hand down to us. Instead, the sacred texts are handed down as something that the seers have *seen*, by reflecting down to an uncreated foundation. That uncreated depth of seeing is the originating source from which the tradition has been handed down. The late Kānci Shankarācārya

⁷ From Pūjyaśrī Candrashekharendra Sarasvatī Svāmī: *Hindu dharma – the universal way of life*, English translation of author’s Tamil discourses, published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 2000 – part 7, chapter 5.

again provides a clear description.⁸

If ours is a primeval religion, the question arises as to who established it. All inquiries into this question have failed to yield an answer. Was Vyāsa, who composed the *Brahmasūtra*, the founder of our religion? Or was it Krishṇa Paramātmān, who gave us the *Bhagavad-gītā*? But both Vyāsa and Krishṇa state that the Vedas existed before them. If that be the case, are we to point to the rishis, the seers who gave us the Vedic mantras, as the founders of our religion? But they themselves declare: ‘We did not create the Vedas.’ When we chant a mantra, we touch our head with our hand, mentioning the name of one seer or another. But the sages themselves say: ‘It is true that the mantras became manifest to the world through us. That is why we are mentioned as the “mantra rishis”. But the mantras were not composed by us but revealed to us. When we sat meditating with our minds under control, the mantras were perceived by us in space. Indeed we saw them (hence the term “mantra-draśṭās” or “see-ers of the mantras”). We did not compose them.’ [The seers are not ‘mantra-kartās’ or ‘makers of the mantras’.]

All sounds originate in space. From them arose creation. According to science, the cosmos was produced from the vibrations in space. By virtue of their austerities, the sages had the gift of seeing the mantras in space, the mantras that liberate men from this creation. The Vedas are apaurusheya (not the work of any human author) and are the very breath of the Paramātmān [the ultimate Self] in his form as space. The sages saw them and made a gift of them to the world.

What does the Shankarācārya mean when he speaks about the sages seeing vibrations in space, from which the cosmos was produced? Here, the word ‘space’ refers to the old concept of ‘ākāsha’ or ‘ether’. It describes a background continuity of space and time, underlying all physical and mental experience. This background continuity is both external and internal. It is shared by both the outer macrocosm of the universe and the inner macrocosm of individual experience, as the Shankarācārya explains in a further discourse.⁹

There is a state in which the macrocosm and the microcosm are perceived as one. Great men there are who have reached such a state and are capable of transforming what is subtle in the one into what is gross in the other. I am speaking here to those who believe in such a possibility.

When we look at this universe and the complex manner in which it functions, we realise that there must be a Great Wisdom that has created it and sustains it. It is from this Great Wisdom, that is the Paramātmān [the ultimate Self], that all that we see are born; and it is from It that all the sounds that we hear have emanated. First came the universe of sound and then the universe that we observe. Most of the former still exists in space. All that exists in the outer universe is present in the human body also. The space that exists outside us exists also in our heart. The yogins have experience of this ‘hridayākāsha’—

⁸ From *Hindu dharma*, as before – part 2, chapter 1.

⁹ From *Hindu dharma*, as before – part 3, chapter 8.

this ‘heart-sky’ or this ‘heart-space’ – when they are in samādhi (absorbed in the Infinite). In this state of theirs, all differences between the outward and the inward vanish, and the two become one. The yogins can now grasp the sounds of space and bestow the same on mankind. These successions of sounds that bring benefits to the world are indeed the mantras of the Vedas.

These mantras are not the creation of anyone. Though each of them is in the name of a rishi or seer, in reality it is not his creation. When we say that a certain mantra has a certain sage associated with it, all that we mean is that it was he who first ‘saw’ it existing without a beginning in space, and revealed it to the world. The very word ‘rishi’ means ‘mantra-drashṭā’ (one who saw – discovered – the mantra), not ‘mantra-kartā’ (i.e. not one who created the mantra). Our life is dependent on how our breathing functions. In the same way, the cosmos functions in accordance with the vibrations of the Vedic sounds – so the Vedic mantras are the very breath of the Supreme Being.

Growth from seed

Is the Shankarācārya claiming that the vedic texts of his religion exhaust all truth and leave no room for other texts? No, he is not, as he makes clear again.¹⁰

If the cosmos of sound (shabda-prapanca) enfolds all creation and what is beyond it, it must naturally be immensely vast. However voluminous the Vedas are, one might wonder whether it would be right to claim that they embrace all activities of the universe. ‘Anantāh vai Vedāh’, the Vedas themselves proclaim so (‘the Vedas are endless’). We cannot claim that all the Vedas have been revealed to the seers. Only about a thousand shākhās or recensions belonging to the four Vedas have been revealed to them.

But then, given this endless multiplicity of sound and world, how can a common truth be found, in so many different things? The Shankarācārya explains that this is always possible through a return to the living source from which the multiplicity has arisen, like a large tree has grown from living seed. Here is what he says:¹¹

What we call ‘this’ (‘idam’) is not without a root or a source. Indeed, there is no object called ‘this’ without a source. Without the seed, there is no tree. The cosmos with its mountains, oceans, with its sky and earth, with its man and beast, and so on, has its root. Anger, fear and love, the senses, power and energy have their root, Whatever we call ‘this’ has a root. What we see, hear and smell, what we remember, what we feel to be hot or cold, what we experience – all these are covered by the term ‘idam’. Intellectual powers, scientific discoveries, the discoveries yet to come – all come under ‘idam’ and all of them have a root cause. There is nothing called ‘this’ or ‘idam’ without a root. Everything has a root or a seed. So the cosmos also must have a root cause; so too all power, all energy, contained in it.

To realise this truth, examine a tamarind seed germinating. When you split the seed open, you will see a miniature tree in it. It has in it the potential to

¹⁰ From *Hindu dharma*, as before – part 5, chapter 12.

¹¹ From *Hindu dharma*, as before – part 5, chapter 34.

grow, to grow big. Such is the case with all seeds.

The mantras have ‘bījāksharas’ [‘seed letters’ or rather ‘seed syllables’]. Like a big tree (potentially) present in a tiny seed, these syllables contain immeasurable power. If the bījāksara is muttered a hundred thousand times, with your mind one-pointed, you will have its power within your grasp.

Whatever power there is in the world, whatever intellectual brilliance, whatever skills and talents, all must be present in God in a rudimentary form. The Vedas proclaim, as if with the beat of drums: ‘All this has not sprung without a root cause. The power that is in the root or seed is the same as the power that pervades the entire universe.’ Where is that seed or root? The Self that keeps seeing all from within, [that which sees] what we call ‘idam’, [that] is the root.

When you stand before a mirror, you see your image in it. If you keep four mirrors in a row, you will see a thousand images of yourself. There is one source (or root cause) for all these images. The one who sees these one thousand images is the same as the one who is their source. The one who is within the millions of creatures and sees all ‘this’ is Īshvara [the Lord]. That which sees is the root of all that is seen. That root is knowledge and it is the source of all the cosmos. Where do you find this knowledge? It is in you. The infinite, transcendent knowledge is present partly in you – the whole is present in you as part.

Here is a small bulb. There you have a bigger bulb. That light is blue, this is green. There are lamps of many sizes and shapes. But their power is the same – electricity, electricity which is everywhere. It keeps the fan whirling, keeps the lamps burning. The power is the same and it is infinite. When it passes through a wire, it becomes finite. When lightning strikes in flashes, when water cascades, the power is manifested. In the same way, you must try to make the supreme truth within you manifest itself in a flash. All Vedic rites, all worship, all works, meditation of the mahāvākyas, Vedānta – the purpose of all these is to make the truth unfold itself to you – in you – in a flash.

Even the family and social life that are dealt with in the Vedas, the royal duties mentioned in them, or poetry, therapeutics or geology or any other shāstra are steps leading towards the realisation of the Self. At first the union of ‘Tat’ and ‘tvam’ (‘That’ and ‘you’) would be experienced for a few moments like a flash of lightning. The *Kena Upanishad* (4.4) refers to the state of knowing the Brahman experientially as a flash of lightning happening in the twinkling of an eye. But with repeated practice, with intense concentration, you will be able to immerse yourself in such experience. It is like the electricity produced when a stream remains cascading. This is moksha, liberation, when you are yet in this world, when you are still in possession of your body. And, when you give up the body, you will become the eternal Truth yourself. This is called “videhamukti” (literally bodiless liberation). The difference between jīvanmukti [liberation while living in the body] and videhamukti [liberation on departing from the body] is only with reference to an outside observer. For the jnyānin [the liberated sage], the two are identical.

In this conception, the knowledge that tradition shows is truth itself. It is a true knowing that is at once the source and ground of all experience. All things that we

experience are its expressions. They all arise from it and stand on it. To realize it, one has only to return to it and stand established there, in one's own experience.

That is what the tradition tells us, through the sayings of sages who have returned to an establishment in this same truth that underlies our own experience now. This present truth is the ancient knowledge that the tradition has always expressed and teaches us today.

What's here described as 'knowledge' is completely timeless and individual. It is not a built-up knowledge: cultivated in our social institutions of technology and science, or of art and organized religion. Instead, it is an underlying knowledge that remains the same, as it is differently expressed in changing cultural and intellectual structures. As cultural descriptions change, this underlying knowledge stays unchanged. It is quite unaffected by all changing circumstances and all passing times in which it gets expressed. For it is always true, quite plainly and unconditionally true, at the centre of each individual's experience.

For example, in modern physics, we can say that Einstein knew more than Newton. Or we can say that discoveries in chemistry have brought modern chemists more knowledge of their subject than was known before. Or that some growth or decline of artistic techniques and imagery has brought artists to a greater or lesser knowledge of their art. Or that some change of doctrine or faith has affected the theological or devotional knowledge of a religious community.

But, in a tradition like Hinduism, where knowledge is considered changeless, it would be meaningless to say that a twentieth century sage like Ramaṇa Maharshi knew more than Shri Shankara did many centuries before, or that Shri Shankara knew more than the sages of the Upanishads, or that the sages of the Upanishads knew more than tribal sages before the development of civilization.

The knowledge of all sages is conceived to be the same. Each of them knows the same truth. The only difference between them is the way in which they express their common knowledge. In earlier times, the expression tends to be more condensed and implicit: like a germinating seed. As time progresses, the expression may grow to become more explicitly articulate, with a fuller explanation of its reasoning; just as a growing plant may show a developing elaboration of manifested potency, which was previously latent within a germinating seed.

The mantra 'om'

The growth of tradition is exemplified in the mantra 'om'. It is a 'bijākshara' or a 'seed syllable'.

And here, the word 'akshara' is especially significant. It comes from the root 'kshar': which means to 'flow', to 'melt away', to 'change'. So, in its root meaning, 'akshara' means changeless. From that root meaning, the same word 'akshara' is applied to the technicalities of language, where it is used to describe a 'letter of the alphabet' or a 'syllable of spoken sound'.

Of course, as a person speaks, letters, syllables and words are heard as passing sounds, which keep on changing all the time. But, as such sounds of language pass, each represents a changeless something: which can later reappear, as a repetition of the same thing. We imply such a changeless something every time we recognize some sound as a letter or a syllable or a word that we have heard before. It is then the *same* letter or the *same* syllable or the *same* word that has already been heard – though spoken differently – on previous occasions. Thus, behind the passing sounds of speech,

we somehow recognize particular letters, syllables and words that stay the same. This ‘sameness’ is essentially implied, whenever the word ‘akshara’ is used.

One syllable, in particular, is described as ‘akshara’. It is *the* akshara: the one, unchanging syllable that signifies all speech, all expression and creation, all experience. That syllable is ‘om’. It reflects back: from the formal standardization of outward syllables, towards an inner changelessness at the underlying background of experience. And this reflection back is not just an artificial convention. It is latent naturally, in the actual sound of ‘om’. The very shape of its sound is such that when it is recited, it directs the listening mind into the underlying background.

Through the science of ‘shikshā’ or ‘phonetics’, it is explained how ‘om’ has a shape of sound that works reflectively upon the mind. Phonetically, the sound of ‘om’ is analysed into three elements: ‘a’, ‘u’ and ‘mmm...’.¹² This analysis is not just theoretical. ‘Om’ can be pronounced in a prolonged way: with an initial ‘a’ sound merging gradually into an ‘u’ and then into an ‘mmm...’, which fades finally into silence. The ‘a’ and ‘u’ sounds coalesce to form an ‘o’ and then join into the ‘mmm...’, thus forming ‘om’.

But, in pronouncing ‘om’, the coalescence of sound and silence is even more crucial. The initial ‘a’ emerges imperceptibly out of silence, as it merges with the subsequent ‘u’; and the ‘mmm...’ is a gradually fading sound that carries on from the ‘u’, into an imperceptible merging with a final background of pure silence. The whole point is to emphasize a sense of background continuity, which carries on quite undisturbed, beneath the rising and falling of changing sound.

In this experience of progressing sound, the coalescing elements may be interpreted philosophically, as different states of experience.

- ‘A’ represents the waking state: where our minds and senses see objects, in an outside world. Here experience has an outside and an inside. There is a world of space and time outside, perceived through a stream of perceptions, thoughts and feelings in each person’s mind.
- ‘U’ represents the dream state: where our minds imagine an apparent world, made up of their own thoughts and feelings. Here, experience has an inside, but no outside. All objects in a dream are in the dreaming mind. There is no world of space and time outside, but only a succession of dream appearances that come and go in mind.
- ‘Mmm...’ represents the deep sleep state: where there are no appearances, neither in an outside world, not within some inner mind. Here, there is no sense of outside or inside, no distribution of objects in space, no flow of happenings, no passing states of time. There’s only pure experience, quite undivided and undisturbed by any seen activity.

Viewed from the waking state, deep sleep can be quite paradoxical. On the one hand, it seems to be quite blank and empty, and therefore negative. But on the other hand, there must be something positive in its quiet experience; because we keep returning there, to relax from physical and mental activity. As we fall into deep sleep, our

¹² ‘A’ is pronounced as ‘-er’ in ‘father’ (without any ‘r’ sound). ‘U’ is pronounced as ‘oo’ in ‘good’. ‘Mmm...’ is pronounced as a humming sound, with the mouth closed.

thoughts and minds become dissolved in it; and we often wake refreshed, with a clearer and more settled understanding. That's why we sometimes talk of 'sleeping on' a problem, as a way of solving it.

Thus, despite the seeming blankness of deep sleep, it has an intimate connection with the absorption of perceptions, thoughts and feelings into settled understanding. Beneath its negative appearance, the deep sleep state has a profound capacity for assimilating mental activity into a quiet understanding that continues at the background of experience. From a subjective point of view, deep sleep is just that state where all changing activities become absorbed into their continuing background.

That is why, as 'om' is chanted, the deep sleep state is represented by the 'mmm...' sound, which merges into a background of quiet stillness. As the sound trails off and merges into stillness, attention is supposed to follow it and thus reflect into the changeless background.

Elaboration over time

However, when the mantra 'om' is analysed in this way, the analysis can give a misleading impression. It can give the impression that the mantra was seen as an artificial device, which was constructed for the purpose of signifying an intellectual analysis. This impression would make it seem that the intellectual analysis of the three states came first, then the letters 'a', 'u' and 'mmm...' were chosen to represent these states, and finally the letters were joined together in the sound 'om'.

Actually, the traditional conception is just the opposite. 'Om' is considered to be a very ancient 'bijākshara' or 'seed syllable'. As such, it was first discovered by some very early sage, who had fallen deeply back into the changeless background of our shared experience. From there, the mantra 'om' emerged, as a single sound of prime significance. And that significance became elaborated later on, progressively, in the course of long tradition: as the texts were composed and as the shāstras were organized to explain them analytically.

In the tradition of texts and shāstras, explanations and analysis are progressively elaborated. Traditional scholars tell us that the Vedas often make an implicit reference to the syllable 'om', in many passages where the word 'akshara' is used. In some of the earlier Upanishads (particularly the *Chāndogya*), 'om' is explicitly described as a beginning and ending syllable of vedic chanting: a syllable associated with threefold knowledge and thus signifying everything. In the *Prashna Upanishad* (5.1-7), it is described as a symbol with three elements for meditation: in which one element leads to greatness in the changing world of human beings; two elements together lead to expansion in an intermediate world associated with the mind; and all three elements together lead to an ultimate principle of light itself, represented by the sun.

In the *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad*, the entire text of twelve stanzas is devoted to a concise, but analytic discussion of the mantra 'om': how it represents three states of experience and an unvoiced reality that underlies them all. Subsequently, Shrī Gauḍapāda composed a *kārikā*: of which one chapter comments on the verses of the *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad*, and the remaining three chapters extend the analysis to a systematic exposition of non-dual philosophy. After that, Shrī Shankara composed a *bhāshya* commentary, further explaining both the *Māṇḍūkya* verses and Gauḍapāda's *kārikā* on them.

And to this day, the syllable ‘om’, the *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad* and its various commentaries continue to be further discussed and explained. Even Bhartrihari’s three levels of speech, and their elaboration to four, are related to the *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad* and its analysis of ‘om’. The letter ‘a’ corresponds to the waking state and the external world, and hence to the level of *vaikhari*. The letter ‘u’ corresponds to dreaming and conceiving mind, and hence to the level of *madhyamā*. The merging letter ‘mmm...’ corresponds to the dissolving consciousness of deep sleep and hence to the level of *pashyantī*. And the distinction of the merging sound ‘mmm...’ from the unchanging background corresponds to the further elaboration of distinguishing *pashyantī* from a final ground called ‘*parā*’.

All this growth of reasoning and explanation is manifested forth from the implicit potency contained within the sound ‘om’; just as a many-branching tree, with all its leaves and blossoms, is manifested from the living essence of a seed.

This is how the tradition grows and develops, according to its own conception. A living source of timeless knowledge is expressed in germinating seeds of culture, which grow into our built-up structures of religion and art, technology and science. It is in this sense that traditional scholars sometimes say that the Vedas inherently contain all cultural and scientific developments. They are then thinking of the Vedas (including those lost or undiscovered) as comprising all the seeds that sages may discover by going back into the depth of their experience.

Interpreted too crudely, this kind of thinking can of course become mind-boggling and absurd; but in its essence it is simple and does not conflict with any genuine development. The essence is a timeless ground to which each individual may return, in her own or his own experience. Conceiving that unchanging ground as knowledge in itself, all cultural and scientific developments are then conceived as its changing expressions.

Over the course of many generations, the expressions are built up: in religious, artistic, technological and scientific institutions. But this development depends upon the ever-present ground of living experience, from where the forms of knowledge are renewed and come alive. All genuine developments are inspired from that living ground; and so they are best carried out by sages who have come to oneness with that ground and stand established there.

In its own view, the whole tradition rises from the realization of its guiding sages. Their knowledge, in the end, is individual, though utterly impersonal as well. It’s taught from one individual to another, as a return to common ground: beyond all personality, beneath all social and cultural institutions.

Interpretation and retelling

Freedom of choice

As learning is continually renewed from generation to generation, by different people and in changing circumstances, old texts are liable to be interpreted in different ways. This changing use of texts is described in Bhartrihari's *Vākyapadīya*.

All arguments and inference
depend upon intelligence.
They're nothing but the power of words.

Where logic follows abstract rules,
but does not flow from living speech,
it ties no concrete meaning down;
it cannot record anything.

Such logic is not found in texts
of genuine authority. 1.137

Like colours, shapes and other
qualities of sight, so also words
are each perceived to have their
capabilities: which can be used
for various purposes, like throwing
out contaminating waste. 1.138

And similarly, there are words
with virtuous powers leading on
to nature's ordered harmony.

Such words are meant to cultivate
an elevated character. 1.139

It's commonly acknowledged that
unseen effects may be achieved
by chanting from the sacred texts.

But it is always possible
to say conflicting things about
what's in the texts and what they mean. 1.140

... Therefore, some sacred text is made authentic, and a settled standpoint is established. There, whatever reason finds fit and proper, confirmation is attained. [From *vritti* commentary on 1.140]

Linguistics is a discipline
whose aim is knowledge, clarified
from errors of mistaken use.

It is recorded through an
uncut continuity, of learning

that is called to mind by those
who've learned it well and hand it down.

1.141

... From generation to generation, the intent remembered is reconstituted, over and over again, through an unbroken succession. In an established tradition of common practice that has not been recorded in words, it's only the unbroken practice of successful learning that gets remembered. [From *vritti* commentary on 1.141]

In this passage, Bhartrihari is describing the interpretation of texts that are regarded as authoritative. The word he uses for such a text is 'āgama'. It is derived from the root 'gam', meaning to 'go' or to 'move'. To this root is added the prefix 'ā-', meaning 'near' or 'back'. So 'āgama' implies a coming back, near to a source of origin. In fact, the word 'āgama' is often used to mean a 'source'. And when a text is treated as a source of traditional authority, it may be called an 'āgama'. It is thus considered near to an ultimate origin, of which it is a close representation. In listening to the text, and following its meaning, one is meant to experience a coming back, towards the final source that is expressed.

In the above passage, Bhartrihari points out that reasoning is an essentially practical capability, depending on intelligence and carried by the power of words. So abstract rules, derived from the mere form of words, can never be enough to understand the meaning of a text (1.137). The meaning inherently includes 'unseen effects' that make it possible to interpret the texts in different and conflicting ways (1.140).

Thus, Bhartrihari points to an essential freedom of interpretation, which is inherent in the use of authoritative texts. Moreover, in the *vritti* commentary (on 1.140), a further freedom is described: of choosing a text that is 'made authentic', as 'a settled standpoint is established'.

These two freedoms, of selection and interpretation, are essential to the actual practice of a living tradition. For, in practice, such a tradition is 'a continuity of learning, called to mind by those who know it well and hand it down' (1.141). This calling to mind is inherently selective; as, 'from generation to generation, the intent remembered is reconstituted, over and over again', so that 'only the unbroken practice of successful learning is remembered' (*vritti* commentary on 1.141).

Intensive use

Since an authoritative text is considered close to final source, its statements are taken to be rich in meaning, with a condensed significance that may unfold itself through many different aspects. Such a condensed statement is liable to an intensity of use, through a sustained repetition and reflection in which the same text may be rather differently interpreted on differing occasions. From this intensive usage come the two inherent freedoms:

- on the one hand, to select particular statements and passages upon which attention is intensively focused;
- and on the other hand, to make particular interpretations that may differ widely, in accordance with their changing contexts and situations.

Over many thousands of years, the Sanskrit language has been specially cultivated and refined, for this intensive usage of recited texts – with its implicit freedom of selection and interpretation. Here, Sanskrit is rather different from ordinary spoken lan-

guages, and from most modern scientific and technical languages that have been developing since the introduction of printing and subsequent media of communication.

For Sanskrit is especially inclined towards the *intensive* statement of inner ideals and principles, abstracted metaphorically and analytically from the outward world of varying particulars. By contrast, ordinary spoken languages are inclined towards everyday descriptions of particular circumstances. And modern scientific or technical languages are inclined towards *extensive* description of the diverse information that modern media have now made so much more widely available.

Thus, in the modern world, we tend to have become somewhat unfamiliar with the kind of intensive statement that is found in Sanskrit and other such ancient languages of education. In particular, we often fail to take proper account of the flexible interpretation that is implied.

For example, the codes of conduct in the dharma-shāstras are often considered on the model of modern jurisprudence, as though the dharma-shāstras were the printed legislation that some modern state applies through standardized bureaucratic procedures in its administrative offices, its law courts and its police. In fact, of course, the dharma-shāstras were no such thing. They were not at all a politically enacted legislation, meant to be applied through the official administration and law-enforcement of some political government in overall control. Instead, they were statements of social and cultural ideals: designed to make allowance for community and personal differences that are conceived to overlie a common principle of ‘humanness’ (‘purusha’) where true equality is ultimately found.

In practice, these social and cultural ideals were not applied in any one way that was officially standardized, across the very different times and places in which they came to be used. Instead, they were applied through an essential flexibility of interpretation, to a great variety of very different communities, in widely varying localities and circumstances.

Poetic ambiguity

In allowing for such flexibility, the Sanskrit language has developed an extraordinary capacity for difference of interpretation. Here is an example, in a story told by the late Kānci Shankarācārya, Candrashekharendra Sarasvati.¹³

There is no tonal variation in poetry as there is in Vedic mantras. The unaccented poetic stanza corresponding to the accented Vedic mantra owes its origin to Vālmīki, but its discovery was not the result of any conscious effort on his part.

One day Vālmīki happened to see a pair of kraunca birds sporting perched on the branch of a tree. Soon one of the birds fell to the arrow of a hunter. The sage felt pity and compassion, but these soon gave way to anger. He cursed the hunter, the words coming from him spontaneously: ‘O hunter, you have killed a kraunca bird sporting happily with its mate. May you not have everlasting happiness.’

¹³ From Pūjyaśrī Candrashekharendra Sarasvatī Svāmī: *Hindu dharma – the universal way of life*, English translation of author’s Tamil discourses, published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 2000 – part 8, chapter 4.

mā nishāda pratishṭhām tvam
 agamah shāshvatīh samāh
 yat kraunca-mithunād ekam
 avadhīh kāma-mohitam

Unpremeditatedly, out of his compassion for the birds, Vālmīki cursed the hunter. But, at once, he regretted it. ‘Why did I curse the hunter so?’ When he was brooding thus, a remarkable truth dawned on him. Was he not a sage with divine vision? He realized that the very words of his curse had the garb of a poetic stanza in the Anuṣṭubh metre. That the words had come from his lips, without his being aware of them for himself (in the same way as he had, without his knowing, felt compassion and anger in succession), caused him amazement.

It occurred to him that the stanza he had unconsciously composed had another meaning. The words aimed at the hunter were also words addressed to Mahāvishṇu. How? ‘O consort of Lakshmī, you will win eternal fame by having slain one of a couple who was deluded by desire.’ Rāvaṇa and his wife Maṇḍodarī are the couple referred to here, and Rāvaṇa was deluded by his evil desire for Sītā. Shrī Rāma won everlasting fame by slaying him. Without his being aware of it, the words came to Vālmīki as poetry. Realizing it all to be the will of Īshvara, the sage composed the Rāmāyaṇa in the same metre.

The ‘shloka’ (without the Vedic tonal variation) was born in this manner.

This story describes how epic poetry was born in Sanskrit, from the intense inner experience of a sage. And this intensity is shown to produce a stanza with two very different meanings. Significantly, the ambiguity is not shown to rise from any objective calculation in the composer’s mind. Instead, it arises spontaneously from a subjective intensity that gives the stanza a special richness of meaning. The richness unfolds in two interpretations that seem to conflict objectively, though each is valid in its own way and has its own contribution to make.

Objective analysis

From an objective point of view, ambiguities of meaning show a failure of linguistic precision. If a statement has conflicting interpretations; then, objectively, its meaning is thus imprecise. This is as true in Sanskrit as in any other language. There is no lack of respect for formal and objective precision in traditional Sanskrit. In fact, traditional Sanskrit linguists and analysts have taken great pains in developing the language to an extraordinary degree of formal and objective precision: as for example in Pāṇini’s rules for generating grammatical forms, or in the Mīmāṃsa and Nyāya analyses of textual exegesis and logical argumentation.

However, along with these objective analyses, there is a recognition that they each define a limited and partial point of view. And this partiality gives rise to many different views, thus leaving us with a problem of conflicting appearances that have somehow to be reconciled. In the end, the reconciliation has to be subjective. It is achieved by standing back from the differentiation of objective perceptions, into a deeper subjectivity that underlies the differences.

Thus, beyond its formal and objective precision, the Sanskrit language also developed a deeper precision that is essentially informal and subjective. That deeper precision is expressed in ambiguities of meaning which are inspired directly from an inten-

sity of inner experience, beneath all outward determination of diverging names and forms. Such inwardly inspired ambiguities are then precisely used: to show us different aspects of a common reality that cannot be determined by outward descriptions, but must be realized reflectively within.

This use of ambiguity is relatively obvious in the imaginative symbols and metaphors of art and poetry, ritual and myth, religious worship and belief. But, through analytical discussion, particular traditions try to develop more abstract concepts that apply more universally and are thus less ambiguous in their meaning. It may then appear that there is no proper place for ambiguity of meaning, in a discussion that is analytic.

Again, this is only a partial and somewhat misleading appearance, in some objective view that has been restricted by basing it upon a constructed foundation of limiting concepts and assumptions. In effect, this conceptual foundation forms a logical but limiting framework, within which analytical discussion serves to work out the details that build up an objective picture. When such a foundation is being used to build upon, then of course there is no proper room for ambiguity of meaning in the discussion that derives the details and builds up the picture.

Reflective questioning

Beyond this building of objective pictures, there is a further and more fundamental use of analytic discussion. That further use is skeptical and reflective. It investigates the foundations of our built-up pictures, by using words and concepts in a reflective way that throws their meaning into question. Here, ambiguity of meaning can be properly and positively used, as different meanings are investigated on the way to underlying truth.

Such use of ambiguity is illustrated in a story from the *Chāndogya Upanishad*. The story starts with the words of Prajāpati, the father of all created things.

‘That which is self dispels all ill:
untouched by age, decay and death
and grief. It does not hunger, does
not thirst. It’s that for which all thought
and all desire is only truth.

‘It’s that which is to be sought out,
just that which we must seek to know.
Whoever finds and knows that self
attains all worlds and all desires.’

8.7.1

These words are heard by the gods and the demons, who then say among themselves:

‘Well let us seek that self:
that self which seeking one attains
all worlds and all desires.’

from 8.7.2

Accordingly, Indra travels from the gods and Virocana from the demons, into the presence of Prajāpati. For thirty two years they live with him, observing the chaste and humble life of student discipline. Finally, Prajāpati asks them why they have come. They repeat the words that they have heard he said, and then they ask to know the self he speaks about. He replies:

‘This principle of humanness
that’s seen in seeing is the self.
It does not die. Nor has it fear.
It is complete reality.’

from 8.7.4

Indra and Virocana are puzzled by these words, and so they ask:

‘Then, Sir, what is it that’s perceived
in water, or a mirror here?’

from 8.7.4

Prajāpati replies:

‘Within all these, just this
itself is seen perceived.’

from 8.7.4

He makes them look at their reflections in a pan of water, and asks them what they see. They say:

‘We both of us, Sir, see it all:
the self that is reflected here,
down to the hairs and fingernails.’

from 8.8.1

Next, Prajāpati tells them to dress in all their finery, as chieftains of the gods and demons. Again, he makes them look at their reflections in a pan of water and asks them what they see. They reply:

‘Just as we are, Sir, well-adorned,
well-dressed, well-groomed; so also these
are well-adorned, well-dressed, well-groomed.’

from 8.8.3

Prajāpati points out that what they see is only self:

‘It is this self
that does not die.
Nor has it fear.
It is complete reality.’

from 8.8.3

At this reply, Indra and Virocana now feel a sense of satisfaction. So they take their leave and go away, thinking that they have understood. But Prajāpati looks sadly after them, saying to himself:

‘They go away, not having realized
or understood the self.
Whoever takes to such a doctrine,
whether they be gods or demons,
shall in time be overcome.’

from 8.8.4

Virocana goes back to the demons and proclaims his doctrine to them:

‘Here, self alone is to be magnified,
and self alone is to be served.
Here magnifying self alone
and serving self, one thus obtains
both worlds: this world and that beyond.’

from 8.8.4

The Upanishad comments then (in 8.8.5) that this is the doctrine which we call ‘demonic’. It is a doctrine of personal selfishness: held by one who is ungiving and faithless, quite unprepared to make any personal sacrifice. It amounts to dressing a lifeless body with clothes and ornaments that have been begged from somewhere else, in the vain hope that this extraneous dressing up will somehow win some further state of life.

Indra takes a different course. On the way back home to his fellow gods, he is troubled and dissatisfied:

‘Just as this self gets to be
well-adorned here in a body that
is well-adorned, or gets to be
well dressed and groomed here in a body
that’s well-dressed and is well-groomed;

‘so also it gets to be blind
here in a body that is blind.
And in a lame or crippled body,
it gets crippled or gets lamed.
So too, it even gets destroyed,
here when the body gets destroyed.

‘I see no satisfaction here.’

from 8.9.1

Thus Indra turns around and goes back to Prajāpati, to live there as a humble student for another thirty two years. Then Prajāpati tells him:

‘This which journeys free in dream
enabling mind to magnify,

‘this is the self.
It does not die.
Nor has it fear.
It is complete reality.’

from 8.10.1

Again, Indra feels satisfied by what he hears and goes away. But again, on his way back home, he is troubled by doubt:

‘It’s true that even if this body
here gets to be blind, the dreaming
self may not thereby be blind.
So too, if body here is lame,
the dream self is not thereby lame.

‘Indeed, it doesn’t suffer from
this body’s ills. Nor by this body’s
death does it get killed. Nor by
the body’s lameness is it lame.

‘And yet, in dream, it is as if
they kill the self found there; as if
they strip it bare; as if it comes

to know dislike and suffering;
as if it weeps and grieves as well.

‘I see no satisfaction here.’

from 8.10.1-2

Thus Indra comes again back to Prajāpati, to live as a student for a third period of thirty two years. Then Prajāpati tells him:

‘That is just this, where one who sleeps
perceives no dream, but is withdrawn
back into unity and peace.

‘This is the self.

It does not die.

Nor has it fear.

It is complete reality.’

from 8.11.1

For a third time, Indra feels satisfied, starts out for home and on the way is troubled by dissatisfying doubt:

‘This deep sleep self, such as it is,
it does not rightly know itself
as “I am this”; nor does it know
these things created in the world.

‘It thus becomes a something gone
to where all things have been destroyed.

‘I see no satisfaction here.’

from 8.11.1

Thus, yet again, Indra comes back to Prajāpati and tells his doubt. Once more, Prajāpati says that he will explain further. But this time he adds that ‘there is really nothing else, other than this’; and he asks Indra to live there only five years more (8.11.3). When the five years are over, he finally enlightens Indra, by distinguishing a deathless self that lives within our dying personalities:

‘This body is just mortal, Indra.
It is always held by death.
And yet it is a dwelling place
of bodiless, undying self.

‘Whatever is found mixed with body
is inevitably held
by pleasure and unpleasantness.

‘Thus, for existence mixed with body,
there’s no true deliverance
from pleasure and unpleasantness.

‘But pain and pleasure cannot touch
existence that is bodiless.

8.12.1

‘As a draught animal is harnessed
to a cart, so too this life

is harnessed to the body that
is added onto us by birth.

from 8.12.3

‘Where sight is settled down as this
that underlies pervading space –
continuing through everything –
that is the principle which sees.

‘The faculty of sight is just
an instrument that’s used to see.

‘What knows “I smell this” is the self.
The faculty of smell is just
an instrument that’s used to smell.

‘What knows “I say this” is the self.
The faculty of speech is just
an instrument that’s used to speak.

‘What knows “I hear this” is the self.
The faculty of hearing is
an instrument that’s used to hear.

8.12.4

‘What knows “I think this” is the self.
Mind is its shining sight within.

‘That self in truth is this that sees,
through shining sight of inner mind,
all these desires here. It is
itself at peace and happiness.

8.12.5

‘That is in truth this self, to which
the gods pay heed, here in this state
beyond all petty narrowness.
Because of that, all states and worlds
and all desires are held by them.

‘Whoever finds and knows that self
attains all worlds and all desires.’

from 8.12.6

This story tells us about a sustained reflection into the meaning of ‘ātman’ or ‘self’. At the start, there is an intriguing text, which promises ‘all worlds and all desires’ to one who comes to knowledge of the self. To find this knowledge, Indra and Virocana come to live as humble students in the presence of Prajāpati, the father of creation.

Virocana does not persist beyond his first interpretation that the self is a physical body in an outside world. So he returns to a demonic arrogance that self is to be magnified by seeking bodily dominion in this world and that beyond.

Indra’s first interpretation is similar, but he keeps questioning persistently beyond it. Thus he is led through a series of different interpretations to an ultimate realization of impersonal self, beyond all physical and mental faculties. Similar descriptions of a deathless and fearless and complete self are repeated over and over again (in 8.7.1, 8.7.4, 8.8.3, 8.10.1, 8.11.1, 8.12.6). Quite often, the exact same words are repeated from before, but in a different context that changes the interpretation; until the mean-

ing is finally refined into a realization of unconditioned truth, beyond all the conditioned descriptions that lead towards it.

This story illustrates how differences and changes of interpretation are considered an inherent part of investigation into truth. That applies no less to an analytically reasoned approach than to a poetic or metaphorical one. And it affects both individual enquiry and the collective development of culture and tradition. Accordingly, to understand the Hindu tradition, it helps to distinguish two kinds of precision that have been specially developed in the Sanskrit language, to an extraordinary degree.

- First, an objective precision that enables highly formalized discussions, intended to narrow down particular meanings in their particular contexts.
- Second, a subjective precision that inspires the unfolding of a rich variety of meanings in different and changing contexts.

Because of its intensive oral character, the Sanskrit language is able to combine these two kinds of precision in a way that has become quite unfamiliar to us today, in our modern languages that have developed a much more extensive expression of information suited to the use of printing and other modern media.

Changing times

From this unfamiliar combination of objective and subjective precision, there results a characteristic problem of translation.

- On the one hand, literal translations tend to become extremely awkward and technical and difficult to understand, as they attempt to reproduce the objective precision. Moreover, each time a word is literally translated, a particular interpretation is chosen and meaning is thus narrowed down. So literal translation cannot reproduce the original richness of meaning; and it is forced to restrict itself to some particular interpretation that it has narrowed upon. This can be very misleading, if it is somehow thought that being literal means being fully faithful to the original.
- On the other hand, free translations may be more graceful and more clearly understood; but they depend more directly on the judgement of a translator, to be faithful to the spirit of the original. Here, the approach is subjective rather than objective. The translator reflects from the original to an understanding found expressed in it, and the translation is composed as a new expression of that understanding. This is not just an objective translation word by word, but more essentially a subjective retelling by reflection back to underlying meaning. And here also, as the retelling takes place, choices of meaning are made; so that some richness of meaning is lost from the original.

In either case, no matter how literal or free a translation may be, the loss of richness must be clearly understood. And where a special richness of meaning is compressed into a relatively few words, as in ancient and classical languages like Sanskrit, we need especially to understand how far each translation gives only one of many possible interpretations that show different aspects of the original.

Today, our main access to ancient and traditional texts is through translations made available by modern media. But in traditional times, before the use of printing, it was not so. In the Hindu tradition, before the nineteenth century, relatively little use was made of translation from Sanskrit.

For most traditional Hindus, Sanskrit was their common language of classical education. For those who were classically educated, their standard training of intellect was attained through learning the rigorous and complex formalities of the Sanskrit language. So, for those who were prepared to train their intellects, there was no need for any translated texts.

If a Sanskrit text was found difficult to understand, it was not accessed by reading a translated text; but instead by a further examination of the original, through textual commentaries and explanations and elaboration, under the guidance of a living teacher. Over the generations, various different schools of thought were developed through such commentary and elaboration of the ancient texts.

As Sanskrit learning developed and continued through classical and medieval times, it played a major role in the development of more ordinarily spoken languages, or 'vernaculars' as they have come to be called. But this widespread and popular influence of Sanskrit learning did not take place through scholarly and institutional translations into the vernacular. Not nearly to the same extent that Greek and Roman classics and the Jewish and Christian bibles were translated into European vernaculars by scholars and academics associated with church and university institutions.

Instead, in the Hindu tradition, the popularization of Sanskrit learning was brought about through vernacular retellings by inspired individuals: who did not speak so much from scholarship or institutional authority as from a renewed return to the same underlying source that had inspired the older Sanskrit texts. Following the tradition of Sanskrit epics and Purāṇas, the new vernacular retellings freely modified the old stories and ideas, to suit the changing and differing circumstances of changing times and differing communities.

These new retellings gave rise to vernacular literatures with classics of their own, in an overall process of vernacular popularization whose records go back a millennium and a half (to the early devotional literature of Tamil in the south). In the process, there has been a progressive broadening of the tradition: from a somewhat elite emphasis on intellectual education in classical Sanskrit, towards a more popular and emotional spirit of religious worship and spiritual devotion, expressed in the vernacular languages that ordinary people speak. And it is from there that the Hindu tradition is being modernized today, in the everyday lives of those who now inherit it.