CHAPTER ONE
HINDU MYSTICISM
Chapter 1: Hindu Mysticism

Introduction

Zaehner classifies Hindu Mysticism into the pantheistic or pan-en-henic, “the 'I am this All' of the Upaniṣads, monistic, that is, the realization of undifferentiated unity, and theistic, the loving dialogue with God which results in transforming Union.”¹ He considers theistic mysticism as a higher form of religious life for Hindus than monistic mysticism and hence gives it the primary place. Govindacharya² and Srinivasachari,³ two modern scholars who are adherents to bhakti tradition, go even further and assert that devotional mysticism - the quest for union with a personal God alone qualifies as ‘true' mysticism. Dasgupta who produced one of the earliest collections of studies of Hindu mysticism classifies it under five categories, namely, Sacrificial Mysticism, Upaniṣadic Mysticism, Yogic Mysticism, Buddhist Mysticism and Devotional Mysticism.⁴

To Dasgupta there is no mysticism at all in the Vedas; it is that which surrounds their sacrificial rituals which have a mysterious link to cosmic forces and human events. So he does not include them in his classification of the Hindu Mysticism. According to him, prayers in the Vedas were not for the advancement of the inner spiritual achievements of man, for righteousness or moral greatness, prayers expressing a passionate longing for the divine or a humble submission to the divine will. Most of these prayers were recited in the performance of certain rituals. Though from the praises of the gods one might infer that it was

² A.Govindacarya, A Metaphysique of Mysticism, Mysore, 1923, pp. 7-9
³ P.N.Srinivasachari, Mystics and Mysticism, Chennai,1923, pp. 1-43
⁴ S.N.Dasgupta, Hindu Mysticism, New York, 1959, pp. 3-30
the gods who were supposed to bestow the benefits, it was in fact the complete set of ritualistic performances that was considered to be the cause of the showering of the benefits. It was supposed that these ritualistic performances when carried out in detail, precisely and accurately, could by their joint and mysterious effect, produce a mysterious something whereby the prayers were fulfilled. Dasgupta says, “The word "mysticism" is a European word with a definite history and is used to denote an intuitive or ecstatic union with the deity through contemplation, communion, or other mental experiences, or to denote the relationship or potential union of the human soul with the ultimate reality.”

He says that sacrificial mysticism, if it may be so called, does not recognize any God or supreme being from whom these commands emanate or who reveals them to man. The commands are taken as eternal truths revealing themselves to man and demanding man's submission to them. Nevertheless they are not spiritual or inner truths revealed from within man himself; they are external and impersonal commands which contain within themselves the inscrutable secrets of nature and of the happiness of man. Dasgupta apparently looked upon the Vedas through the eyes of the early European scholarship which undervalued the depth of the Vedic spirituality and saw the Vedas as merely a compendium of sacrificial lore and considered their valuable hymns at best as lyrical nature poetry.

Mystic Background of the Vedas

It is, of course, true that many Vedic hymns have ritualistic links with the sacrifice which was a major or even the central concern of the Brahmanic religion in the later Vedic period, but the original inspiration behind the

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5 Ibid., pp. 3-30
hymns of the *RgVeda* was of a much deeper nature. The Vedas are not merely the outcome of poetic inspiration by natural forces because later Hindu tradition has always claimed that the Vedas are a product of divine revelation which was transmitted to their ancestors by ancient seers (*rṣis*). In the context of the Vedas ‘*śravas*’ literally means ‘hearing’. From this is derived ‘*śravaṇa, śruti, śruta*’, meaning ‘revealed’ or knowledge that comes through the opening of the mind’s channels. *Drsti* – direct perception of the truth and *Śruti* – direct hearing of the truth are hence the two chief powers and faculties of that advanced consciousness, which corresponds to the Vedic idea of the Truth, the *Rta*. Aurobindo says, “The Language of Veda itself is *Śruti*, rhythm not composed by the intellect but heard, a divine Word that came vibrating out of the Infinite to the inner audience of the man who had previously made himself fit for the impersonal knowledge.”

The Vedic Ṛṣis believed that their *mantras* were inspired from higher hidden planes of consciousness and contained secret knowledge. The words of the Veda could only be known in their true meaning by one who was himself a seer or mystic, from others the verses withheld their hidden knowledge. The Ṛṣi Dīrghatamas speaks of the *Rks*, the *mantras* of the Veda as existing ‘in a supreme ether, imperishable and immutable in which all the gods are seated’, and he adds ‘one who knows not that what shall he do with the *Rk*?’ Dandekar explains this as, “He who knows not the eternal syllable of the Veda, the highest point upon which all the gods repose, what business has he with the Veda? Only its knowers sit here in peace and concord.” The ‘eternal syllable’ may be the ‘Om’ on which

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many Hindu mystics have focused their sense of the direct experience of ultimate reality. Concentration on the sound/syllable ‘Om’ is given primacy due to its status as the Essence of the Vedas and the sound form of Brahman.

Yaska, the ancient commentator of the Vedas, speaks of several schools of interpretation of the Veda. There was a sacrificial or ritualistic interpretation, the historical or mythological interpretation, an explanation by the grammarians and etymologists, by the logicians and a spiritual interpretation. Yaska himself declares that there is a triple knowledge and therefore a triple meaning of the Vedic hymns, a sacrificial or ritualistic knowledge, a knowledge of the gods, and finally a spiritual knowledge; but the last is the true sense and when one gets it the others drop or cut away. It is this spiritual sense that saves and the rest is outward and subordinate. He says further that the Rṣis saw the truth, the true law of things directly by an inner vision.

The tradition of a mystic element in the Veda as a source of Indian civilization, its religion, its philosophy, its culture is more in consonance with historical fact than the European view of this idea. But even if an element of high spiritual knowledge is found in the hymns, it might be supposed that that is only a small factor, while the rest is a sacrificial liturgy, formulas of prayer and praise to the gods meant to induce them to shower on the sacrificers material blessings such as plenty of cows, horses, sons etc. But there is a large mass of verses or whole hymns which admit only of a mystic character and significance. The symbols used by the mystics have an exoteric as well as an esoteric significance, the symbols themselves have a meaning which make them a part of the esoteric significance, an element in the secret teaching and knowledge. The esoteric meaning in the Veda is discoverable only if we give a
constant and straightforward meaning to the words and formulas employed by the Rṣis, especially to the key-words which serve as keystones to the whole structure of their doctrine. The sages were under pressure to mask their meaning with symbols and symbolic words to preserve secrecy. So they resorted to fix double meanings for words. Thus the word cow, ‘go’, meant also light, or ray of light. So the Vedic horse is a symbol of power, spiritual strength, force of tapasya. When the Rṣi is asking for a number of horses he is asking for great spiritual power. So too the enemies in the Veda are spoken of as robbers, dāsyus, who steal the cows or Vṛtras and are taken literally as human enemies in the ordinary interpretation, but Vṛtra is a demon who covers and holds back the light and the waters and the Vṛtras are his forces fulfilling that function. The dāsyus, robbers or destroyers, are the powers of darkness, adversaries of the seekers of Light and the Truth. There are always indications that lead us from the outward and exoteric to an inner and esoteric sense.

Many of the hymns in the Veda bear a mystic meaning. When the seer speaks of Agni as ‘the luminous guardian of the Truth shining out in his own home’, these are words of a mystic poet, who is thinking of the Inner Truth behind things of which the early sages were the seekers. He is not thinking of the Nature Power presiding over the outer element of fire or of the fire of the ceremonial sacrifice. The gods constantly stand out in their psychological functions; the sacrifice is the outer symbol of an inner work, an inner interchange between God and men – man giving what he has, the gods giving in return the horses of power, the herds of light, the heroes of strength to win battles for him against Darkness, Vṛtras, Dāsyus and Pāṇis. In the RgVeda the sage Vāmadeva says that a honeyed wave climbs up from the ocean and by means of this mounting wave which is
the Soma (amśu) one attains entirely to immortality, that wave or that Soma is the secret name of the clarity (ghṛtasya, the symbol of the clarified butter); it is the tongue of the gods; it is the nodus (nābhi) of immortality. That means, out of the subconscious depths in us arises a honeyed wave of ānanda or pure delight of existence, that it is by this ānanda that we can arrive at immortality; this ānanda is the secret being, the secret reality behind the action of the mind in its shining charities.⁸ Aurobindo says, “In such a hymn as this of Vāmadeva’s the ritualistic veil, so elaborately woven by the Vedic mystics, vanishes like a dissolving mist before our eyes and this encourages the Vedantic truth.”⁹

The many kinds of wealth, cows and horses which the sacrifice prays for are not material wealth, it is something which Thought, the Thought embodied in the mantra, can give. A process of divinization happens here when great and luminous riches are won from the gods by the inner work of sacrifice. In the Puruṣa Sūkta God becomes, in the form of creation, the field and opportunity for individual sacrifice.¹⁰ The universe is a sacrifice (yajña), and all actions, properly performed, in so far as they involve an element of self-abnegation for self-transcendence, are forms of sacrifice of one’s individuality. The Supreme Being Himself is a transcendent sacrifice when viewed in this form of manifestation. The essence of sacrifice points to a final absoluteness of being. This is the concept of supreme sacrifice in the Puruṣa Sūkta.

We have to invoke the gods by inner sacrifice; and by the Word call them into us - that is the specific power of the mantra – to offer to them

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⁸ RV V.58.1
⁹ Aurobindo, op.cit., p.103
¹⁰ RV X. 90
the gifts of the sacrifice and by that giving secure their gifts, so that by this process we may build the way of our ascent to the goal. The Vedic hymns are considered as *mantras*, sacred words breathed out from the depth of the heart by a process of spiritual contemplation. According to Yaska, *mantras* are the products of spiritual contemplation. *Mantras*, according to tradition, "are not compositions but the 'seeings', the revelation made to the particular Rṣis who were the 'seers'or, *mantradraṣṭāḥ*, in whose names they have come down to us."^{11} The European scholars made Sayana the base of their study of the Vedas and applied to their studies their knowledge of the new science, Comparative Mythology, comparative religion and comparative philology. They sought to trace parallels between Greek, Roman, Avestan and other peoples with the Vedic society. Pandit reacts to this stance taken by these scholars and remarks, "Sayana’s investiture of the Vedic hymns with a wholly ritualistic meaning, his explanations of the prayers and entreaties of the early Aryans to their gods for wealth, cattle, women, protection from and destruction of the malevolent, supplications for waters - all these fitted in perfectly with their ideas of what these primitives should have been in that early, pastoral stage of development."^{12}

The Veda *mantras* are praises offered to the deities, or Devas, who are regarded as capable of bestowing any blessing on man. It does not mean, however, that the poets of the *Samhitas* were ignorant of the existence of the Supreme Being and that the gods of the Vedas are mere personifications of the processes of Nature. Their hymns are not the ignorant prattle of immature cattle grazers, as certain Western historians are inclined to think.

Finally as the summit of the teaching of the Vedic mystics comes the secret of the one Reality, *ekam sat or tad ekam*¹³ which became the central word of the Upaniṣads. The gods, the powers of Light and Truth are powers and names of the one, each god is himself all the gods. But in the Veda this looks out still mostly from behind the veil.

We owe a lot to the great work of the Vedic interpreters, Eastern and Western, for the work in unravelling the mysteries of the Veda. Jan Gonda observes, “Aurobindo (1872-1950), one of the foremost modern exponents of an esoteric, psychological, mystic and symbolical interpretation, views the Veda as a book of esoteric symbols, almost of spiritual formulae "which masks itself as a collection of ritual poems.”¹⁴

The great philosopher Abhayananda says, “….it was some unnamed mystic or mystics who gave expression to the exalted vision of Unity which is the cornerstone of the Vedas and the foundation upon which rests the great non-dual tradition of Vedanta. Others may attempt to speak of such things, but it is only the mystic whose words are capable of conveying with certainty and authority which is born of true experience.”¹⁵

It was only later in the course of several centuries that Vedic ritual deteriorated into an over elaborated system of ceremonial observances of the late Vedic or Brāhmaṇa period in which the original vision became buried. We can certainly discern evidence in many Vedic hymns for genuine mystical experiences of the ancient seers which became the basis

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¹³ *RV* X, 129, 2


and starting point of the Vedic mysticism. Sacrificial Mysticism is irrelevent to our study. Therefore, in this study, based on the views of many Western and Eastern scholars, Hindu Mysticism has been classified into five categories, namely:

Vedic Mysticism
Upaniṣadic Mysticism
Yogic Mysticism
Buddhist Mysticism and
Devotional Mysticism

**Vedic Mysticism**

“A Vedic poet”, says Gonda, “is a seer (ṛṣi), a gifted man who with his inner or spiritual eye sees things divine and transcendent, and who through the power of his vision brings the past into the present.”\(^{16}\) The hymns are ascribed to individual ṛṣis who with their faculty of ‘seeing’ entered into contact with divinity or transcendent reality. The intuitive knowledge of these seers is believed to be free from errors and imperfections and eternal, above the limitations of time and space. According to Radhakrishnan, “the chief sacred scriptures of the Hindus are the Vedas, which register the intuitions of the ‘perfected souls’ are not so much dogmatic dicta as transcripts from life. They record the spiritual experiences of souls strongly endowed with the sense for reality. They are held to be authoritative on the ground that they express the experiences of the experts in the field of religion.”\(^{17}\)

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16 Jan Gonda, *op.cit.*, p.65
The Vedas are the records of the transcendental experiences of the ancient Mystics, through which they conclusively apprehended the exact nature of reality. The nature of the Vedic mystical dimension has been, however, seriously undervalued. We can find the beginnings of Hindu mysticism in the earliest and highly developed Vedic religion. The mystical experiences of the Vedic seers laid the foundation for the later philosophic systems of India. “According to the Hindu tradition”, says Mohanty, “the various philosophical ideas that were developed in the philosophical systems originated in the Vedas, a body of texts that were composed possibly around two thousand years before Common Era (B.C.E.).”

The earliest poetry of India contains many traces of the essential character of the philosophy of India. Speaking about the Veda, Gonda remarks that “its central teaching is a truth higher and deeper than that of outward existence, a truth which makes us unite ourselves with God and pass from mortality to immortality.” He also adds that “the Veda reveals truths which man could discover by the exercise of his own faculties-viz. in meditative experience though it is to our advantage that they are revealed because not all men are able to embark upon such an enterprise.” The Vedic experience is not the result of a preliminary thought constructing and obtaining the experience by a special effort but a direct and spontaneous experience, which come out spontaneously from the consciousness.

The ancient Vedic seers, so early in human history, used their spiritual intuition as the means of acquiring knowledge of mysteries of the

19 Jan Gonda, *op.cit.*, p.54.
universe and the Vedas are a description in a symbolic language of the spiritual quest and experiences and realizations of the Vedic *Ṛṣis*. A unique feature of the Vedas which gives mystic richness is that their symbolism is not a deliberate creation of the mind but a direct and spontaneous expression of a higher supramental consciousness and knowledge. The symbols can be interpreted at the spiritual, cosmic, psychological or physical level. The Vedic seer was consciously aware of the integral unity of the whole reality. He realized that there are several planes of reality, the physical (with its terrestrial, atmospheric, celestial), the psychical and the supra or transcendental reality. At the highest spiritual level the Vedas reveal the knowledge of the highest spiritual truth, powers and laws of the transcendent Reality. In the Vedic pantheon, the gods are spiritual powers or ‘aspects’ or names and forms of the supreme Godhead, each god containing within himself all the other godheads and representing the One Supreme. On the cosmic level each god is a universal force performing a particular cosmic function. On the psychological level each god represents a psychological faculty or power in the human consciousness, especially a higher faculty beyond the human mind.

The mystical vision of the ancient seers enabled them to discover and grasp the substance and meaning of the eternal law *ṛta* governing the whole of manifested reality as well as its emergence from the unmanifest. According to the Vedic sages, the laws of the universe follow the principle of unity and correspondence. The bright imagination of the Vedic sages soon saw striking identities between the realm of causes and the realm of ends, between the natural order and the moral order. If the reign of law was a dominant fact of the outer universe, it must be equally dominant in human affairs. Law, order, regularity must be found
everywhere; and sin crept in when these were disobeyed by human weakness or perversity. The gods were the guardians of the natural order and they became the guardians of the moral order too; they helped and strengthened those who conformed to laws, while their punishment would certainly fall upon those who neglected or defied these standards of action. The law of *karma* and reincarnation is a scientific law of the integrity of the cosmos. The Vedas recognise the fact that one's future life depends on the way one lives the present one.

The gods are affectionately called as father, mother, brother, friend, comrade, or relative - terms indicative of the cordial relation and implicit faith subsisting between the worshipper and the worshipped. There are gods like Varuṇa who appear as judges of the morality of men, who appoint spies to watch the conduct of men and punish the wrong-doer. Varuṇa is the lord of order (*ṛta*), true to Cosmic Law, born of Cosmic Law, enricher of Cosmic Law, intense hater of the false. 21 He is its guardian (*ṛtasya gopā*). He is also called *ṛtavan*, 'observer of order.' His wrath is roused by sin which amounts to infringement of his order, and he severely punishes the offender. He is said to bind sinners with fetters (*paśa*) and afflicts with disease those that neglect his worship. But Varuṇa, we are told, is always gracious to those who have broken his laws by thoughtlessness. 22

Varuṇa is therefore a god who is just yet merciful, a judge but yet a father, and he is only representative of the Vedic gods who appear with

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21 *RV* VII 66.3

ला नं स्तिमया तनूपं वरुणं जरित्वांगः।
भिग्न साध्यतं दियेः।

22 *Ibid.* VII.89.5

यक्षि चेद वरुण देविये जनेन्द्रियां मनुष्याक्षमसि।
अतिति यतव धर्मं युयोयिम मा नस्तस्मातेनसि देव संरेण स।
him as moral governors. It is only in the hymns to Varuṇa that the
confession of sins and prayer for forgiveness occur in the RgVeda.
According to Radhakrishnan, ‘the theism of the Vaiṣṇavas and the
Bhāgavatas, with its emphasis on bhakti, is to be traced to the Vedic
worship of Varuṇa with its consciousness of sin and trust in divine
forgiveness.’"\(^{23}\)

One of the preoccupations of the ṛṣis, as represented in the hymns, is to
discern with their ‘mind’s eye’ the mysteries of creation. Certain Vedic
ṛṣis were looked upon as ‘path-finders’\(^{24}\) who had won immortality and
thereby become equal in status and power to gods.\(^{25}\) They reached the
heights of immortality through the development of a special faculty of a
visionary or mystical and meditative character called ‘dhī.’ Gonda
observes, “The kind of knowledge which the authors of the speculative
hymns and passages considered important is metaphysical knowledge
regarding the origin and operation of the universe and in connexion with
this the investigation of the attainment of individual transcendence,
which, it is believed, may be won in mystic sight and vision.”\(^{26}\)

We can discern evidence in many Vedic hymns for other genuine
mystical experiences of the ancient seers. The Vedic cosmogonic myths
of creation - that of the goddess Aditi, mother of all that is, has been and
will be, \(^{27}\) that of the cosmic Puruṣa or the giant cosmic person,\(^{28}\) of

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\(^{24}\) \(RV\) 1.72.2

\(^{25}\) Ibid., X 54.4

\(^{26}\) Jan Gonda, op. cit., p.139.

\(^{27}\) \(RV\) 1.89.10

\(^{28}\) अद्वितीयाः यस्मिनः श्रद्धामन्त्रमात्रता व शिवमात्रा व तत्राः

विशेषेऽव अद्वित्ति: प्रति जनना अद्वितिजातमपदितामिनिन्त्यम्।
hiranyagarbha or the cosmic 'golden germ' (egg), 29 of Skambha, the
cosmic pillar or axis mundi 30 and that of the Indra-Vṛtra combat,
symbolizing the victory of cosmic creation over the dark demon of
stagnation - all these are referred to many times throughout the Veda.
Later in the hymn of creation, 31 “we have a description of the primal
Reality prior to the manifestation of the world by a sage who had seen it
for himself. In one of the oldest extant declarations of a true mystic, that
one Beginning-place of all things is described.” 32

This hymn conceptualised the Vedic vision of reality which continued in
the Upaniṣads and eventually produced mystical doctrines and
philosophical systems.

Here in the Creation Hymn from the RgVeda, the primeval creator is
identified with the Unborn, the first germ borne by the primeval waters.
There was, at the primeval stage, neither ‘non-being’ (asat) nor ‘being’
(sat); no trace of air or heaven; of any covering, refuge, water, or deep
abyss; of death or immortality, night or day; "there breathed that one
windless through its innate power (svadhā)," besides which there was
nothing else. Gloom being then enveloped in gloom, all this was
indistinguishable ‘fluid’ (salīla). Then that one which was to come into
being and had been concealed with ‘void’ (tucchyā) became manifest
through the majesty of (i.e. inherent determined urge). Upon this

28 Ibid., X 90
सहस्रशीषोऽपूर्वः सहस्राशि: सहस्रपाठ || ||
tे ह नाकं गौहिमानं सच्यत्यत्व पूर्वैः साधृः सन्ति देवः ||
29 Ibid., X 121
30 AV X 7
31 RV X 129
नासदशीषोऽपूर्वः सहस्राशिं दानानी नायीद्रजै नो व्योमा परो यत।
यो अरस्याशिः परमो व्योमस्य अवः वेद यदि वा न वेद॥
32 Abhayanananda, op.cit., p. 25
appeared ‘desire’ which was the first seed of the mind. The wise investigating in their hearts with contemplation found the bond (i.e. cause) of being in non-being. But, after all, who knows, and who can say whence it all came, or how this creation came about? The gods, themselves, came later than this world’s creation, so who truly knows whence it has arisen? Whence all creation had its origin, only He knows. Or perhaps even He does not! Keith states, “the gods are later than the creation and cannot know of its origin: whether the creation was made by itself or not, the overseer of it in the highest space of heaven he knows of it or perhaps he knows not.” 33

Commenting on this unique hymn, Abhinash Chandra Bose says, “The Veda recognizes the Supreme being overseeing all, but leaves unanswered the question of whence-from what material - this creation came into being. ... Here in this Nasadiya Sukta, to a logical query, to which a literal answer is required, no reply is given. This shows that a question is better left open. This attitude, typical of higher thought, leads to a very delicately poised sense of truth, which precludes every type of dogmatism. ....This (hymn) takes us to the loftiest heights of philosophy. It is doubtful whether the human mind ever surpasse[s] these heights.” 34 According to Raimundo Panikkar,” The vision of this hymn comes out of a profound insight into the mystery of reality. It is the product of a mystical experience that far transcends the limits of logical thinking; it is a religious chant - for only in music or poetry can such a message be conveyed - invoking in splendid verses the Primal Mystery that transcends all categories, both human and divine...” 35

33 Keith A.B, Religion and Philosophy of the Veda, Vol.II, Delhi, pp. 435/436
34 Abinash Chandra Bose, The Call of the Vedas, Delhi, 1960, pp. 131 & 154
35 Raimundo Panikkar, The Vedic Experience – Mantramanjari.,www. himalayanacadem.com, p.54
Coomaraswamy says, “Yet we are asked to believe that Vedic thought was “primitive” - that the wise singers of the Vedic hymns were able to express themselves in terms that have been universally employed elsewhere…without knowing what it was they said.”

Another cosmogonic hymn, the *Puruṣa Sūkta* was to exert a powerful and permanent influence upon the mythical and speculative thought of the *brahmaṇas* and Upaniṣads and in later times to become the foundation stone of Vaiṣṇavite philosophy. It is the first expression of the idea that the creation of the universe is the self-limitation of the transcendent Person (*Puruṣa*), who is this All, manifesting himself in the realm of our experience. The act of creation is here treated as a sacrificial rite in which the *Puruṣa* - who was the victim became the portions of the universe:

“When they divided the *Puruṣa*, how many parts was he made?
What was his mouth, his arms? What called his thighs and his feet?
His mouth was the brahmin, his arms the man of royal descent.
His thighs were the vaiśya, from his feet the sūdra was born.
From his mind the moon was born, from his eye the sun.
From his mouth Indra and Agni, Wind (Vāyu) from his breath.”

Out of the body of *Puruṣa*, the cosmic Man, the different parts of the universe are formed. In this hymn of the Cosmic Person, we have the most magnificent description of the spiritual unity of the cosmos and it is also in this hymn that the Veda gives symbolically, through the analogy of sacrifice, the earliest complete presentation of the nature of Reality as both immanant and transcendent. *Puruṣa*, in this hymn, is described as

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37 *RV* X, 90
38 J. Gonda, *op. cit.*, p.138
both immanent and transcendent. One quarter of him is manifested here on earth as all beings while the other three quarters are the immortal (amṛta) in heaven. The Supreme Being is here and now; He can be realised by this mighty act of universal self-sacrifice. Here we observe the concept of sacrifice carried to the degree of perfection where the whole universe is regarded as an act of sacrifice on the part of God. The all-encompassing Puruṣa, who is all-heads, all-eyes and all-limbs, everywhere, envelopes and permeates creation from all sides and stands above it as the glorious immortal. The Puruṣa is all that was, is and shall be. The whole universe is a small fraction of Him, as it were, for He ranges above it in His infinitude of glory. Such is the majestic Puruṣa, the God of all gods. From Him proceeds the original creative Will (later identified with Brahma, Hiranyagarbha or Prajāpati), by which this vast universe was projected in space and time. Regarding this powerful hymn, Pant observes, "The conception underlying the Puruṣamedha was something stupendous, possible only for the sages of the Vedic times who had a cosmic outlook in vision, thought and action. They felt and looked upon the entire creation as a manifestation, indeed an Embodiment of the Supreme Puruṣa who is One and Eternal."  

Prajāpati is the most famous of the abstract gods conceived by the Vedic seers with their effort to attain the conception of the unity of the Universe. This god is connected not only with the creation but with the entire government of the Universe. Prajāpati is thus the first born, the golden germ (hiranya-garbha) who creates the whole universe, who gives life, whose commands the gods obey, whose shadow is death and immortality, who is lord of man and beast, of the mountain and the sea,  

39 M.P. Pandit, op.cit., p. 95
and combines in himself the duties of creator, ruler and preserver of the Universe.

Viśvakarman is another synonym of Prajāpati. Two hymns are devoted in the Rāg Veda in praise of this divinity who appears there as the creator, who, self-created, is not merely the material cause but also the efficient cause of the world.\(^40\)

**Veda and Brahman**

In the Āraṇyaka literature, Prajāpati is identified with Ātman and Brahman. The identification of Prajāpati with Ātman and Brahman in the Āraṇyakas leads to the concept of Prajāpati’s identification with the Ultimate Reality as depicted in the Upaniṣadic literature. Prajāpati is the Self (Ātman), he is Brahman, Indra, all the gods, the five elements, earth, air, ether, water etc. In the Taiṭṭiriya Āraṇyaka, the creation of the universe has been explained properly and it describes Prajāpati as the creator. It states that, in the beginning of creation, there existed nothing but a sea of water, in which Prajāpati was alone, produced from a blue lotus. His mind grew up for the aspiration of the creation and generation. He wearied himself and performed fervid devotion (*tapas*). By the performance of *tapas*, Prajāpati’s body trembled.\(^41\) It is also stated that Prajāpati was first born from *ṛta*, i.e. parabrahman. He created all the creatures and the directions; and he himself entered into his creation.\(^42\)

The Rāg Veda mentions a mysterious factor called *brahman*. Some contexts depict *brahman* as the magical power in the holy utterance (*mantra*), while some others depict it as a supernatural life force. Regarding power

\(^{40}\) *RV* X 121; *RV* X. 81, 82

\(^{41}\) Tai. Ā. 1.23. 1-2

\(^{42}\) *Ibid.*, 123. 9
in the *mantra*, Franklin Edgerton notes, “Any holy mystic utterance is *Brahman*. This is the regular, if not the exclusive, meaning which the word has in the *RgVeda*. But from the point of view of those times, this definition implies far more than it would suggest to our minds. The spoken word hid a mysterious, supernatural power; it contained within itself the essence of the thing denoted. Brahman, the 'holy word', soon came to mean the mystic power inherent in the holy word... mystically speaking... the word and the thing were one; he who knew the word, knew and controlled the thing. Therefore he who knew the *brahman* knew and controlled the whole universe.”

The sacrifice was viewed cosmologically and the correct performance of the sacrifice possessed a magical potency which could coerce even the gods. In the *rṣī's* utterance of the holy hymn, words become manifestations of the underlying cosmic power named *Brahman*.

Hymns are utilised to invoke the gods. He who recited them was ‘prayerer or *Brahman*, or one related to prayer (*brahmaṇa*). This principle was later used in the Upaniṣads as the ultimate principle. The conception of Brahman as a cosmic principle is not developed in the *RgVeda*. However, we do find anecdotes of the notion of Brahman, *Tad Ekam*, in the conception of a unitary ground of existence that is the ultimate source of the cosmos. In the *RgVeda* and later *Samhitās* the term *Brahman* itself is used, depending on the context, at times to refer to Veda, in the general sense of “Word” and at times to the Vedic *mantras*. The Veda is described as the Word (Brahman) which is the essence of Brahman, the ultimate reality, and is at times more specifically designated as *Sabda-*

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44 *RV* VI 45,7
45 *RV* X 129
Brahman, Brahman embodied in the Word. The *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* uses the term *Brahman* to refer to that limitless totality of the Word, Veda, of which the Vedic *mantras* - *rk, sāmans*, and *yajus* - are but a limited manifestation. ‘The Ṛc verses are limited, the *sāmans* are limited, and the yajus are limited, but of the Brahman there is no end.’ Keith remarks, “Even in the ṚgVeda, Brahman is already the repository of great power, and this fact must, without doubt, have exerted considerable influence in the conception of Brahman.”

The *AtharvaVeda* celebrates Skambha (‘support’) as Brahman, the all-pervading reality that is the foundation of the entire cosmos. Skambha is depicted as embracing the infinity of space, encompassing within his body all the worlds, natural phenomena, and gods, and also as embracing the infinity of time, incorporating within himself all divisions of time, past, present, and future. Skambha is described as distinct from and superior to the creator Prajāpati, serving as the foundation on which Prajāpati establishes the worlds. The term Brahman is used a number of times in the hymn in at least two different senses: first, to refer to the highest Brahman, which is a cosmic principle identified with Skambha, of whom the earth is the basis, the mid-regions his belly, and the heavens his head, and, second, to refer to the Vedic *mantras*, which as a limited manifestation of the totality of Veda are depicted in one verse as forming only a portion of the cosmic body of Skambha - his mouth.

The Upaniṣads very frequently speak of Brahman being composed of ‘knowledge’ (*citr*), and bliss (*ānanda*); the *Ṛgvedic* seers seem to be quite aware of these two attributes of Brahman; in one stanza the seer

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46 *Tai. Sam.* VII.3.1  
47 Keith A.B., *op. cit.*, 449  
48 *AV* X 7
asks 'Who has seen the primeval (being), at the time of his being born? From earth are the breath and blood, but where is the Soul? Who may repair to the sage to ask this?'

Certain elementary notions about the human soul (Ātman) existed or began to enter man's mind within the RgVedic period, and such ideas took definite shape during the Upaniṣadic period. There are many words in the RgVeda which denote some factor in man, different from and subtler than his gross body. Most of the words in the RgVeda have undergone semantic changes in later times. Some of them directly denote such an entity; but there are some like Suparna, Ajo bhāga, and Satya which only imply it. Reference to the two souls as two birds resting on the same tree—one eating sweet fruit, but the other lustrous without eating—is to be seen in the RgVeda. Sayana interprets it as an allegorical reference to the individual soul Jīvatman (Ātman) and the Supreme Soul (Paramātman): The two birds spoken of here are the vital and the Supreme Spirit, dwelling in one body; the vital spirit (jīvātman) enjoys the fruit or rewards of actions, while the Supreme Spirit is merely a passive spectator.

The Vedic gods

The Vedic rṣis divided the universe into three spheres or lokas, namely, Dyurloka or the celestial world, over which Savitṛ, the solar deity, presided; Antarīksaloka or the intermediate sphere, supervised by Indra; and Bhūrloka or the terrestrial world, under the reign of Agni (Fire).
three spheres of the vertical universe of the original Vedic sages was believed to be the abode of thirty-three gods: the eight Vasus, the eleven Rudras, the twelve Adityas, Dyaus and Prithivi (earth). Later 3,339 gods and goddesses were assigned to these spheres, and finally their number was increased by some authorities to 330,000,000! Commentators like Sayana (14th century) and others who deeply reflected on this subject, believed that these gods were the personifications of the innumerable virtues and qualities of the eternal divine principle. It is Max Muller's view that Vedic religion should be called by the name, Henotheism or Kathenotheism. He says, "In the Veda, however, the gods worshipped as supreme by each sect stand still side by side. No one is first always and no one is last always. Even gods of a decidedly inferior and limited character assume occasionally in the eyes of a devoted poet above all other gods. It was necessary, therefore, for the purpose of accurate reasoning to have a name different from polytheism, to signify this worship of single gods, each occupying for the time a supreme position; and I proposed for it the name of 'Kathenotheism,' that is a worship of one god after another, or of Heno-theism, the worship of single gods."

The Relation that subsisted between God and Man in the Vedic Period

The Vedic poets had an an enormous fondness for life which is why the Vedas are full of prayers for long life. The longer the span of time one's life covers the more useful to the society and to oneself one becomes. Their prayers to the gods were, "Adityas grant to our children and their

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51 Max Muller, India: What can it teach us? Lectures delivered before the University of Cambridge, London, pp. 146-147
seed, extended terms of life that they may live long days”\textsuperscript{52} and “A hundred autumns may we live.”\textsuperscript{53}

The Vedic poets were an active, energetic people who took a healthy joy in the life they lived on earth. They craved for a long life for a full hundred years, freedom from diseases, abundance of food and drink, warlike sons and conquest of enemies. Engaged as these people were in incessant wars, it is not strange that of their gods, they should solicit horses and chariots which they could use in their warfare, weapons which they could wield on such occasions, and strength both to withstand the enemy as well as to crush him and this they got from their gods whom they worshipped with all sincerity. In this capacity the gods appear not only as protectors, but even as friends. In Whitney’s words, “They looked at all these things with the simple apprehension, the naive faith, which usually characterises a primitive people. They had a hearty and healthy love of earthly life, and an outspoken relish for all that makes up for the ordinary pleasures of life. Wealth and numerous offspring were the constant burden of their prayers to their gods; success in predatory warfare, or in strife for consideration and power, was fervently besought. Length of days in the land, or death by no other cause than old age, was not less frequently supplicated; they clung to the existence of which they fully appreciated all the delights.”\textsuperscript{54} Nor were they afraid to die for, after death, they went to a place which was not uncovetabale.

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\textsuperscript{52} RV VIII. 18,22

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., XII. 66,16

\textsuperscript{54} W.D. Whitney, Oriental and Linguistic Studies, New York, 1873, pp. 49-50
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It is no doubt true that the gods are by nature true, good, generous and ever intent on conferring blessings on mortals, but often a sort of reciprocity between the personal gods and their devotees is conspicuous. Most important of the solicitations of the seers from their gods seems to be that which craves for the removal of ignorance (māya, tamas) and for the dawn of knowledge. The word māya which occurs over eighty times in the RgVeda means generally the divine power to measure or encompass, but in certain contexts it means ignorance or illusion. Thus we see that the principle of illusion (maya) of the Advaita Vedāntin appears forestalled in the RgVeda.

The Vedic Eschatology

While explaining a Vedic hymn\textsuperscript{55} on eschatology, Gonda says, “Yama, the first human being and the archetypal defunct, who became the chief of those who followed him, has found the path to the hereafter, which has been trodden by the ancestors. The deceased are expected to meet their forebearers and periodically to return to the sacrifices in their honour.”\textsuperscript{56} When the dead body is either consigned to flames or laid away to gentle rest in the bosom of Mother Earth, the earth-born portion is given back, but the Soul of the pious man which belongs to the world above, soars up towards a new life.\textsuperscript{57}

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\textsuperscript{55} RV X 14.7-12
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परशुरामः परशुरामः परशुभिताः पुरुषोऽश्वन्तः: पूर्वः पिताः परेऽः।
उभा राजानां सवथ्या मन्दिरं यर्म पश्चात्परिभ्रमणे च देवम्॥
....उर्मिणांसुसुम्रा उदुम्बरली यमस्क दूलो वर्तलो जनानन्तु।
तावस्मत् दर्शायेत सूर्याय पुनर्दातामसुमाते भद्रस्म॥
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\textsuperscript{56} J.Gonda, op.cit., p.139
\textsuperscript{57} RV X 14.8
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सं गंधङ्गु विश्वे सं यमनेश्वः पूर्ण्यमेवोऽन।
हित्वायावधि पुनर्स्तम्पीत्रे सं गंधङ्गु तन्वासुक्वः॥
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Before the deceased reaches the abode of Yama who sits engaged in an everlasting bout with the gods, the man has first to run past the two, four-eyed, briddled dogs whom he meets on the way. Pūṣan, Agni and Savitṛ lead the dead on the far path to the fathers. In order to enjoy the luxuries available in Heaven, the Soul must have a body. We are told that the moment the dead man enters the abode of Yama, he shakes off all imperfections and bodily frailties. He has entered a land over-flowing with milk and honey ‘where there is eternal light.’ Here, united with a glorious body he passes a life of eternal enjoyment. In this heaven, the sound of the flute and of songs is heard. Thus the existence of a path to immortality was found by the seers and they had won immortality and become equal in power and status to God through mystical vision and meditation.

Viṣṇu, a solar divinity, keeps the loftiest station, upholding dear immortal places and the wise seers always look forward with fond hopes to reach these dear abodes. It is thus stated that the group of Manes that go to his abode after their death is composed only of the pious among these Vedic poets. Their eye is ever directed towards this highest abode of Viṣṇu which is situated like an eye in Heaven. It is their fond desire always that they should attain to the dear domain of Viṣṇu where there are the many-horned nimble kine, where men devoted to the gods rejoice, and which is a veritable spring of nectar. “Two of the three steps of Viṣṇu, we are told,

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58 Ibid., X 14.10
59 Ibid., X 17.3-5
60 AV VI. 120.3
61 Ibid., IX.113.7
62 Ibid., III. 55.10
are visible to the naked eye, but the third and highest is beyond mortal ken. It is accessible to none, not even to the winged birds in their flight.”

Most of the hymns of the *RgVeda* are not just odes to the beauty of nature, but are musings about a transcendental reality beyond the visible natural phenomena. In the ninth *mandala* of the *RgVeda* we come across the following hymn:

“O Pavamāna, place me in that deathless undecaying world, wherein the light of heaven is set and everlasting luster shines; Make me immortal in that realm where dwells the King Vivasvan's son, where is there the secret shine of heaven, where are those waters young and fresh. Make me immortal in that realm where they move even as they list, in the third sphere of inmost heaven where lucid worlds are full of light; Make me immortal in that realm of eager wish and strong desire, the region of radiant moon, where food and full delight are found; Make me immortal in that realm where happiness and transports, where joys and felicities combine and longing wishes are fulfilled.”

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63 *Ibid.*, I. 155. 5

64 *Ibid.*, IX 113. 6-11

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The idea of immortality also was specially connecting itself with a man's worth. "Looking on men, never slumbering, they by their deserts attained as gods to immortality." 65 May be, the Hindu idea of gradual emancipation (karma - mukti) in which a man rises from personal to impersonal immortality, had its origin here.

In Edward Fitzpatrick Crangle's opinion, "neither the RgVeda, nor the later Vedas, give any indication of the doctrine of transmigration of souls or rebirth which is firmly established by the time of early Buddhism. As well, the RgVeda offers no themes of salvation or of desire to end repeated death and rebirth; nor does it even contain evidence of belief in a cycle of death and rebirth."66 But against this view, Ranade observes, "The three chief moments in the idea of Transmigration, namely the passage of the soul from the body, its habitation in other forms of existence like the plants or the waters, and even its return to the human form, are all implicitly found even so far back as the times of the Rg Veda."67

"Thy spirit that went far away, went to the waters and to the plants."68

"The sun receives thine eye, the wind thy spirit; go as thy merit is to earth or heaven. Go, if it be thine lot, unto the waters; go, make thine home in plants with all thy members.69 Such passages show the rise of the doctrine of the transmigration of soul in the Vedic India.

65 Ibid., X 63.4
67 R.D.Ranade, op.cit., p. 152
68 RV X 58.7
69 Ibid., X 16.3

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In a Rgvedic hymn the seer is addressing Agni who is consuming the dead body on the funeral pyre, not to destroy completely the man's 'unborn part' (ajo bhāga), but just to kindle it so that, purified thereby, it may be in a fit state to enter into a higher existence. The verses prove that any being proceeding from earth to heaven has to traverse a region of darkness before he can reach his destination. In another hymn Agni is entreated to burn mildly, to temper the 'unborn part', not to consume it, so that it gets a fresh birth. When the Rgvedic seers speak, at death, of a heaven for the virtuous and some punishment for the wicked, it is implied that they are sure that there is some part of the individual which survives cremation, and which later enjoys or suffers, for enjoyment or suffering is impossible without an enjoyer or a sufferer. It is quite likely that this part was designated the 'unborn part' (ajo bhāga) by them. We could, therefore, say that the RgVedic seers were already convinced that death is not the end of man, and that it destroys only his body, but not his real self which is neither born nor destroyed. It is this idea that forms the real core of the Upaniṣadic idea of the human soul.

The word 'asul' in the RgVeda is taken by Sayana in the senses of 'life or life-breath' (prāna) or controller of the body. The verses of the RgVeda where this word occurs prove that the Rgvedic seers knew that the spirit is distinct from the body: In a hymn to Uṣas or Dawn the seer is describing the glory of dawn when, as darkness begins to disappear gradually and streaks of light adorn the quarters, the whole of creation which, at night, had retired to rest, wakes up, inspired and enlivened by

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70. Ibid., X 16.6

यत्ते कृष्णः शकुन्न आतुलोद पिपीलः सार्थ उत्त वा श्रापदः 
अप्रिष्णिद्विस्ताद्गर्दैः कृष्णां तौ सोमक्ष्य यो ब्राह्मणां आविवेशः॥
the touch of the early rays of the sun. In the RgVedic hymn\textsuperscript{71} the seer speaks of the return of 'life' (\textit{asu}) at the approach of dawn, meaning thereby the revival of consciousness after sleep is over, and thus shows that he is aware that there is a spirit which exists in the individual as distinct from the body, whose existence is essential for all activity and in whose absence the body can only be dormant; When, therefore, the Seer says here that the sweetness of the morning has enlivened him into activity, \textit{jīva} must mean the active and animating principle of the individual in whose body it resides. This is nothing short of the Upaniṣadic idea that Ātman is the inciter of the body into action, or Ātman is the charioteer while the body is the chariot.\textsuperscript{72}

In another verse, the seer asks "who has ever seen the precise mode in which the boneless Soul, the very life-blood and informing spirit of the earth, comes to inhabit a bony tenement; and if this is not known who is it that will repair to the wise man to ask about it?\textsuperscript{73}

When the seer speaks here of the boneless entering the bony body it is quite clear that he knows that in substance, at least, the spirit is something which is entirely different from the body. According to Sayana, the import of the entire verse is the essencelessness of the human body and the eternity of the animating principle which resides in it.\textsuperscript{74} In yet another verse, while recalling the life of Subandhu from unconsciousness

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.}, I.113.16

उद्वीर्य जीवो असुर्य आगादय प्रागातम आ ज्योतिर्लिंगस्य।
आङ्केरेक परशु यात्सने सूर्याययंगम यन्त्र प्रतिरंति आङ्के।

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Ka Up} III.3

आत्मानं संधितं विद्विष्णुं शरीरं सप्तमेव तु |
बुध्दिः तु सार्थिं विद्विष्णुं मनं प्रग्रहेत्वमेव तु ॥

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{RV} I.164.4

को ददर्यं प्रथं जायमानमस्तेन्यदनस्था विभिर्विष्णुं |
भूयता असुरसमात्सरो के सितोऽको विद्विषा मु।

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Ibid.}, I.164.30
or death, Earth is requested to restore the departed Soul (asu) while Soma is asked to return the body, thus making a clear distinction between the body and soul. 75 These two verses which claim that there is but one essence, one true thing, unmistakably herald monism; it is but a step from such ideas to the Brahman in the Upaniṣads who is claimed to be the Pantheistic Absolute, without a second. The Rgvedic seers were also aware of the fact that the individual soul reaps the benefit of its karma, while the Supreme Soul is under no such compulsion. The Rgvedic seers knew also that the spirit is distinct from the body.

The Rgvedic seers can thus be credited with the knowledge of the following: (1) that there is some "Spirit" or "Self" in man; (2) that it is different from the body and survives the destruction of it; (3) that it is eternal, neither born nor liable to destruction; (4) that it forms the essence' of the body and is its controller; (5) that it is the experiencer of the reward of man's actions i.e., Heaven or punishment after death; (6) that it is composed of the three qualities, sat, cit and ānanda. They seem to know also the fundamentals of Brahman, the Upaniṣadic Absolute as distinct from the individual self. The credit of combining and consolidating all these conceptions and, to a good extent, developing them must certainly belong to the Upaniṣadic seers, though, now and then, it seems possible to see, even in the Upaniṣads, the survival of some early conceptions about Ātman. Thus the RgVedic thinkers seem to be quite aware of the existence of the Self apart from the body, distinct from it, capable of surviving it and experiencing after its destruction, the reward of actions on earth.

75 Ibid., X.59.7

पुनर्न अंतु पुनर्द्वितिः पुनर्द्वितिः पुनर्द्वितिः।
पुनर्न सोमस्ततन कर्मचारी या सवसति॥
Vedic Mystical Experiences

There are three important hymns attributed to the three sages, Dīrghatamas, Vāmadeva and Vāgambhrīni, which are highly mystical in character. The trend of visualising the manifold as expressions of the One, and the One as revealing itself in the many is unmistakably traceable in the hymns of the RgVeda. In a long hymn the Vedic sage Dīrghatamas says, ‘They call it Indra, Varuṇa, Mitra, Agni, and the winged bird (the sun): the one they call by many names, Agni,Yama,and Mātarisvan.⁷⁶ When the poet says Agni, Yama, Varuṇa and Mātariśvan are but the names of the One God we can find a tendency towards monotheism. The Vedic sages explicitly say that Reality is one and the numerous gods are only names representing different phases of the One. Here, the doctrine of the unity of the world is frankly expressed as regards the gods in one verse.

The Vedic sages had also reached the concept of jīvanmukti by realizing the divine both within and without.⁷⁷ The Vāmadeva Sūkta mentions the spiritual realization of sage Vāmadeva even while he was in the womb of his mother and his exclamations of joy on his attainment of freedom from the fetters that bound him to individuality. Vāmadeva identifies himself with various mythic personages and gods. This sage who seems to be constantly interested in the question of rebirth, declares that while yet in embryo he tried to know all the births of the gods. A hundred iron citadels tried to hold him, but a hawk that he was, with swiftness he came down to the earth. In embryo indeed did Vāmadeva speak in this

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⁷⁶ RV I 164.46
इन्द्रःितः वरुणमविभाषो दिय्क सुपर्णः गरुदान् ||
एक्क सहित्रव बहुध्व वदन्वय्यसि यम मातरिश्वनमाहाः इ॥
⁷⁷ R.D.Ranade, Constructive Survey of Upaniṣadic Philosophy, Bombay Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1968, p.117
manner. Thus the Sage to whom the infinite past was like an eternal now, broke forth into the exclamation that he has realized his previous birth. He says, “I had been Manu and Sūrya in previous births.”

Of this mystical experience of Vāmadeva, Ranade remarks that the sage Vāmadeva came to know that, "just as, at the origin of things, Brahmān came to self-consciousness and then understood that it was verily the All, similarly, whoever among the gods, or the mortals, or the sages comes to self-consciousness becomes verily the All; and thus the Sage Vāmadeva to whom the infinite past was like an eternal now, broke forth into the exclamation that he it was who had lived in Manu, and that he it was who had given light to the Sun.” Vāmadeva claims that one who realizes the ‘True Self’ becomes one with all. To such a man, according to Ranade, the past is like an eternal now and therefore, broke forth into such an exclamation. This is monism where the individual soul is identified with the universal soul. Ranade says, "Vāmadeva seems to have held that there were three births of a man: the first birth occurs when the spermatozoon combines with the ovum; his second birth comes when a child is born to him; his third birth takes place when he is himself reborn after death.”

Vāgambhrīni or Vāk, the daughter of the Rṣi Ambhrina, a female seer and author of mantras, is among the oldest poets of the world. Her song which appears in the RgVeda is known as Vāk Sūkta, though it is known by other names too, such as Ātma Sūkta, Song of the Soul, and Devi Sūkta, Song of the Goddess. Like other sūktas in the Vedas, the Vāk

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78 RV 4.26.1
79 R.D. Ranade, op. cit., pp. 350-51
80 Ibid., pp. 49-50
Sūkta too is a spontaneous outpouring of the poet-seer's soul—an outpouring not from the ordinary dimension of human experience, but from the highest possible reaches of it. It is not a deliberate composition, wherein the poet sits down and thinks of each word that will go into the making of the poem. The ṛṣi has had a powerful experience -- the most powerful experience possible, a hundred times, maybe a thousand times, more powerful than the most powerful experience we can imagine. The experience of herself, of her own self, an experience in which the experiencer, the experienced and the act of experiencing all merge and become one - an experience that is really no experience at all, since these distinctions have disappeared - an experience of herself as the soul of the universe, its very being. And she allows the ecstasy of her experience to pour out in words -- that is the Vāk Sūkta. For what Vāk experiences is that she is the mother of the universe, with all its gods and humans and every created thing. Hers is the ultimate spiritual experience, which the Upaniṣads speak of as 'aham brahmaasmī'.

Here Vāc (speech), the goddess of speech, has been extolled as the supreme power, as the companion of the gods and the supporter of the world. The envisaging of the mystic form of Vāc is considered not only eternal or imperishable but also imperceptible and mysterious to the ordinary person. Only those with sufficient spiritual insight understand the transcendent speech pervaded with Brahman.

In another hymn of Vāc the ṛṣi alone sees and hears the mystic visualization of the holy utterance. Here Vāc is the voice of the hymn regarded as the means of communication between the ṛṣi and the gods. The hymn says,
“One man hath ne'er seen Vāk:, and yet he seeth: one man hath hearing but hath never heard her.

But to another hath she shown her beauty as a fond well-dressed woman to her husband.”\textsuperscript{81}

Bhāradvaja Bārhaspatya speaks quite extra-ordinarily, not simply of a vision but also of an acoustic experience: "Asunder fly my ears, asunder my eye, asunder this light which has been put into (my) heart. Asunder wanders my mind, pondering far away…”\textsuperscript{82}

There is a hymn of the \textit{Ṛgveda} about the ‘longhaired sage’ of which Gonda says, "This Sūkta of the long-haired one (keśīn) deals with a 'medicine man,' the precursor of the doctor as well as the priest who in the state of ecstasy possessing a power that is superior to himself, is filled with the god, can soar into the atmosphere and becomes united with the gods.”\textsuperscript{83} The hymn says,

‘Made ecstatic due to our hermit-state, we have mounted upon the winds.

Only our bodies do you mortals perceive!'\textsuperscript{84}

The hymn pictures long-haired sages (\textit{munis}) who when gods get in them ride with the rush of the wind. And one of the sages confirms that through their silent meditation they, as spiritual personalities, have reached a

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{ṚV} X 71. 3-4
\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Ibid.}, VI 9.6-7
\textsuperscript{83} J. Gonda, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 149
\textsuperscript{84} \textit{ṚV} X 136.3

उम्मितिता मीनेर्य वातना दश्यीमा वक्म || शरीरदसनां घुः तात्त्वी मर्त्त्वी अभि पश्यथ ||
different level of existence from that of other people who, as ordinary mortals, cannot see them as they really are, but see only their bodies. He says, ‘Crazy with wisdom we have lifted ourselves to the wind. Our bodies are all you who are merely mortal can see.’ Karel Werner says, "This is a hint that they themselves are no mere mortals but have reached the plane of immortality, an achievement desired and often prayed for by traditional Vedic worshippers as well."\(^{85}\)

Compatibility of Vedic revelation with our working definition of Mysticism as direct experience can be shown through several examples. Uṣas brings not only light, but hope, happiness, riches, and all the good things. She is the goddess of light and beauty, whom the ancient Rṣis invoked for their protection and help. Dawn conquers darkness. She takes all sorts of creatures from their slumber into vitality, helping them realize themselves and her coming and influence are regular, reliable, indicating that she serves the law of the divine cosmos itself. These are some of the texts on ‘Dawn’:

Now Dawn with her earliest light shines forth, beloved of the sky.\(^{86}\)
Just as a young man follows his beloved, so does the Sun the Dawn, the shining Goddess.\(^{87}\)
For as a bride adorned by her Mother, you show your beauty for all to see.\(^{88}\)

\(^{85}\) Karel Werner, *The Yogi and the Mystic*, Surrey TW92QA, 1994, p. 45

\(^{86}\) *Ibid.*, I.46.1

\(^{87}\) *Ibid.*, I.115.2

\(^{88}\) *Ibid.*, I.123.11
Like a swift warrior she repulses darkness.\footnote{Ibid., VI.64.3}

She drives off wicked spirits and dread darkness.

She awakens living creatures.\footnote{Ibid., XII.75.1}

U\=sas comes carefully, fostering all creatures, stirring
to life all winged and creeping things.\footnote{Ibid., I.48.5}

Bright Usas, when your rays appear, all living creatures start to
stir, both four-footed and two.\footnote{Ibid., I.49.3}

Arousing from deep slumber all that lives, stirring to motion man
and beast and bird.\footnote{Ibid., IV 51.5}

This maiden infringes not the Eternal Law, day after day coming
to the place appointed.\footnote{Ibid., I.123.9}

Usas is the beloved of the sky. Denise Lardner Carmody remarks, "She is
so lustrous and alluring that the sun follows her, smitten like a young
male lover. Here, we find a prefiguring of the bhakti - erotic religious
love - that played an important role in later theistic Hindu mysticism."\footnote{Denise Lardner Carmody, Holiness East and West, New York, 1996, p.35}

Raimundo Panikkar says, “The experience of Dawn is one of the simplest
and most complete of all human experiences. It unites in itself a vision of
nature, an aesthetic awareness, a fresh opening for Man toward a hopeful
future, and a mystical insight into the horizon beyond the rising light
from where all good things come. …you are enwrapped in her light, you
participate in her all-encompassing beauty and sense that nature is more than nature and God is less than supernatural.”

For Aurobindo, Uṣas, the divine Dawn, is the Truth and the mother of Truths. These truths of the divine Dawn are called her cows, her shining herds; while the forces of the Truth that accompany them and occupy the Life are called her horses. The ‘cows’ are mentioned constantly in connection with the Dawn as a figure for the Light and this light is connected with mental vision and with the truth that brings the bliss. Around this symbol of the cows and horses much of the Vedic symbolism turns; for these are the chief elements of the riches sought by man from the gods. According to Aurobindo, “the cows of the Dawn have been stolen and concealed by the demons, the lords of darkness in their nether cave of the secret subconscious. They are the illuminations of knowledge, the thoughts of the Truth which have to be delivered out of their imprisonment. Their release is the upsurging of the powers of the divine Dawn.”

Usas is described as “following effectively the path of the Truth. Truth is the path to the Bliss. Uṣas, the dawn of the illumination of the Truth, must necessarily bring also the joy and the beatitude. This idea of the Dawn as the bringer of delight we find constantly in the Veda and Vasiṣṭha gives a very positive expression to it in a hymn, as “Thou who bearest to the giver the beatitude as a manifold and desirable ecstasy.” Night in the Veda is the symbol of our obscure consciousness full of ignorance, light is the coming of the illuminated higher consciousness which leads to truth and happiness.

96 Raimundo Panikkar, op.cit., pp. 149-50
97 Aurobindo, The Secret of the Veda, op.cit., p.244
98 RV VII.81.3
While admiring the beauty of Uṣas, the Vedic mystics would have experienced some kind of ecstasy, and when they came out of that ecstasy they might have felt some kind of transformation in their souls caused by that beauty - an enlightenment caused by the Light, which Uṣas represented; a feeling of freedom of the human spirit after the ‘enlightenment’. Thus we see, as Denise Lardner Carmody says, “From Vedic times, seers and seekers have concentrated on the moment of illumination, when being, the ultimate and fully real, gives itself to the receptive human spirit. In that moment, the reciprocal giving back of the human spirit, the participatory flow of the human spirit into being, imparts a sense of union, spirit to spirit, that prepares the way for the radical Upaniṣadic assertion "That thou art."”

Thus we see clearly that Vedic Mysticism is not surrounded by sacrificial rituals alone and that it has originated from the Vedas only.

**Upaniṣadic Mysticism**

**Introduction**

The *Upaniṣads* were reactions against sacrificial system, reflecting the movement away from natural phenomena in search of something more unitary and interior. They were very philosophical with a powerful conviction that a single ultimacy, usually called Brahman is the final reality of all that exists and that which can be found in everything that we experience. *Upa-nisad* - the term literally means ‘those who sit near’ - implies a seeker listening closely to the secret doctrines of a spiritual teacher. Brahminic ritualism gave way to a direct encounter with the ultimate reality. A genuine expression of an experience of mystic union

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99 Denise Lardner Carmody, *op.cit.*, p. 56
came in bold statements such as 'I am Brahmā', ‘you are that’ and ‘I am all this’. It came as a culmination of a search which involved both intellectual questioning and a strong emotional need for security and certainty in face of an uncertain world in which man was the victim of successive deaths. The search proceeded first into the cosmic dimension and its inspiration must have been derived from the distant echoes of the Vedic cosmogonical mythology, all pointing in the direction of the original unit as the source of the cosmic diversity. That unity, which was understood to be the source of everything that is, was called by Yājñavalkya, the great Seer, 'the imperishable (akṣara)', but eventually it obtained the name Brahmā which became universally accepted. And in the course of further search man eventually discovered it to be his very essence, his inner self Ātman. Hymns to gods and goddesses were replaced by a search for the reality underlying the flux of things. What is that which, being known, everything else becomes known? Kena Upaniṣad states that it is the power of Brahmā which sustains the gods of fire, air, etc. The Vedas speak of the many into which the radiance of the Supreme has split, while the philosophers of the Upaniṣads speak to us of the One Reality behind and beyond the flux of the world. The Upaniṣads give in some detail the path of the inner ascent, the inward journey by which the individual souls get at the Ultimate Reality. The goal is not a heavenly state of bliss or rebirth in a better world, but

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100 BrUp 1.4.10
101 ChāUp 6.15.3
102 Ibid., 7.25.1
103 BrUp 3.8.8-11
104 Ibid., 4.2.4
freedom from the objective, cosmic law of *karma* and identity with the Supreme Consciousness and Freedom.

**Brahman and Ātman**

The word Brahman used in the Upaniṣads to indicate the supreme reality is derived from the root *bṛh* ‘to grow, to burst forth’. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad defines Brahman as *taṭjalān* as that (*tāt*) which gives rise to (*ja*), absorbs (*śi*), and sustains (*an*) the world.\(^{105}\) Different metaphors are used to indicate how the universe rises from its central root, how the emanation takes place while the Brahman remains ever-complete, undiminished. ‘As a spider sends forth and draws in (its thread), as herbs grow on the earth, as the hair (grows) on the head and the body of a living person, so from the Imperishable arises here the universe.’\(^{106}\) The many are parts of Brahman even as waves are parts of the sea. The whole universe before its manifestation was there. God does not create the universe but becomes it. It is not a making something out of nothing. It is the self-projection of the Supreme.

Two concepts that are of paramount importance in the Upaniṣads are Brahman and Ātman. The Brahman is the ultimate reality and the Ātman is individual self (soul). Brahman is the material, efficient, formal and final cause of all that exists. It is the pervasive, genderless, infinite, eternal truth and bliss which does not change, yet is the cause of all changes. The word Ātman means the inner self, the soul, the immortal spirit in an individual, and all living beings including animals and trees.

\(^{105}\) *ChāU* III 14  

\(^{106}\) *Mund* I.1.7

यथोर्भवनाति सुप्रादेह सुप्रायस च यथा पुरुषामाहोषयः संभवति।  
यथा सत: पुरुषानं केशलोमानि तथा सक्षरात संभविताहि विश्वम्॥
Ātman is a central idea in all the Upaniṣads. It is the spiritual essence in all creatures, their real innermost essential being. It is eternal, it is ageless. The term ‘Ātman' derives from ‘an' ‘to breathe’. It is the breath of life. Ātman is what remains when everything that is not the self is eliminated.

Brahman is further referred to also as four-footed. These four feet are the waking state and the world of its experience; the state of dream with its shadowy dream objects, the state of deep sleep where there is no object consciousness, but ‘consciousness-mass’ exists in its own being-an inkling of it is a sense of well-being when one wakes up from deep sleep; finally there is the fourth state called Turīya which is above all this; in it everything becomes one beyond the distinction of conscious and unconscious and is unthinkable, unspeakable etc: ‘Turīya is not that which cognizes the internal objects, not that which cognizes the external objects, not what cognizes both of them, not a mass of cognition, not cognitive, not non-cognitive.’ The four states stand on the subjective side for the four kinds of soul, Vaiśvānara, the experiencer of gross things, Taijasa, the experiencer of the subtle, Prajña, the experiencer of the unmanifested objectivity, and the Turīya, the Supreme Self. The Upaniṣads make it clear that the waking state and the dream state are quite different. The objects of the dream state are illusory, not so those of waking experience. ‘There are no chariots in that state (of dreaming), no horses, no roads.’ The world of experience with its three states of

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107 MandUp, 7

108 BrUp IV 3.10
waking, dream and deep sleep is based on the subject-object relation. This duality is the principle of all manifestation. The objects are perceived both in dream and waking and the distinction of seer and seen is present in both. The world of manifestation is dependent on the Absolute. The Absolute Spirit which transcends distinction between the subject and the object is logically prior to the manifested world. 109 The world is a process of becoming, it is not being.

**Māyā and Avidyā**

The Upaniṣads describe the universe, and the human experience, as an interplay of Puruṣa (the eternal, unchanging principle, consciousness) and Prakṛti (the temporary, changing material world, nature). The former manifests itself as Ātman (Soul, Self), and the latter as the universe. The Upaniṣads refer to the knowledge of Ātman as "true knowledge" (Vidyā), and the knowledge of Māyā as "not true knowledge" (Avidyā, Nescience, lack of awareness, lack of true knowledge). The distinction is between higher (para) and lower (apara) knowledge. Knowing Brahman simply in its manifestation without any understanding of the underlying unity is lower knowledge. The term aiddyā simply means acceptance of the phenomenal world, by itself, (that is without being grounded in Brahman) as the ultimate reality. The veiling of the ultimate truth of non-duality is by the world of name and shape, because of our inability to read their higher truth. The Upaniṣad tells us that a covering of untruth hides from us the ultimate truth even as the surface of the earth hides from us the

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109 Gaudapada Karika on Ma Up II. 4
अन्तःस्थानातु मेदवानात्मा तपस्याजागिरिते स्मृतम्।
यथा तद्युत्त्यत् स्वप्नः सबूतवेन मिदः॥
golden treasure hidden under it.¹¹⁰ Avidyā is mentioned in the Upaniṣads as the source of delusion. We are subject to Avidyā when we look upon the multiplicity of objects and egos as final and fundamental.

Realization of Brahman

The union of the individual soul with Ātman or Brahman is sometimes described as the individual soul’s beholding, apprehending, or knowing the ultimate reality. How is to realize the Brahman? Yājñavalkya instructs his wife Maitreyi that the Self should be realized - should be heard of, reflected on, and meditated upon. By the realization of the Self, through hearing, reflection, and meditation, all is known. Śravaṇa is the first stage where the aspirant is exposed to the context of the Upaniṣads as unfolded by the qualified teacher. Manana is the second stage where the aspirant employs reason to refute and eliminate doubts arising within one's own mind. Deep reflection (manana) leads the aspirant to the next stage, namely, nididhyāsana. This stage is constant and uninterrupted meditation or intense contemplation on the convinced doctrines of tat tvam asi and other mahāvākyas propounding the advaitic mystic doctrine. Nididhyāsana is the immediate preparation for the Brahma-jñāna or transcendentental experience, i.e., the supra-mental consciousness. After nididhyāsana, the aspirant attains to the experience that transcends all world consciousness and ego-consciousness. In that experience he realizes the truth of the Upaniṣadic utterance, ‘There is no diversity here.’

Knowers of Brahman say that there are two knowledges to be known- a higher (para) and a lower (apara). “The higher is that whereby that Imperishable is apprehended. ...That which is invisible, ungraspable,

¹¹⁰ ChāUp VIII 3.1-3
without family, without caste—Without sight or hearing is It, without hand or foot, Eternal, all-pervading, omnipresent, exceedingly subtle; That is the Imperishable, which the wise perceive as the source of beings.\textsuperscript{111} Other passages make it clear that when a person ‘knows’ or ‘apprehends’ Ātman or Brahman, then his individual soul is united with it (and he thus ceases to exist as a separate being).\textsuperscript{112}

The Upaniṣads say that Brahman cannot be understood or comprehended, which represents the ineffability of mystical experiences: ‘There the eyes go not; speech goes not, nor the mind we know not, we understand not how one would teach It (Brahman). Other, indeed, is It than the known, and moreover above the unknown.’\textsuperscript{113} ‘It is conceived of by him whom It is not conceived of. He by whom It is conceived of, knows It not.’\textsuperscript{114} This is the paradox of Brahman’s inscrutability. The same Brahman has opposite characteristics to be realized in distinctive types of mystical experience, and the fact that such opposing experiences of the same reality are possible is itself a mystical realization. The Hindu thinkers bring out the sense of the otherness of the divine by the use of negatives. That Self (Ātman) is not this, it is not that (this) (neti neti). It is unseizable, for it cannot be seized; indestructible, for it cannot be destroyed; unattached, for it does not attach itself; is unbound, does not

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\textsuperscript{111} MangUp, I.i.4-6
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., III.ii.5-9
\textsuperscript{113} Ke Up, I. 3
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., II.3
\end{flushright}
tremble, is not injured…. 115 This is the mystical doctrine of the
indestrutibility of the Absolute.

The experience of Brahman is associated with bliss, freedom from
passion, and tranquility, which represent the positive affect associated
with mystical experiences. 116

The Upaniṣads embody a diversity of doctrinal and religious trends. On
the one hand, they propose the Brahman-Ātman equation, which means,
the oneness of the ultimate objective ‘ground’ of all existence with the
ultimate subject and principle of consciousness, the ‘self’ in human
beings. Such an identification of the individual soul with the universal
soul dominates the entire speculative and mystical outlook of the earlier
Upaniṣads. The realization (jñāna) of That One (Tad Ekam), i.e., the
Absolute with which the self is basically considered to be identified, leads
to liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

The later Upaniṣads show a clear affirmation of the transcendent and
personal qualities of the divine Being, with a sharper distinction between
the supreme, universal Spirit and the individual soul. The Upaniṣad says
there are two forms of reality: ‘Verily there are two forms of Brahman,
the formed and the formless, the mortal and the immortal, the unmovings
and the moving, the manifest existent (sat) and the unmanifest that
(tat).’ 117 The idea is not that there are two Brahmans, but that the same
Brahman has opposite characteristics to be realized in distinctive types of
mystical experience, and the fact that such opposing experiences of the
same reality are possible is itself a mystical realization.

115 Br Up, IV. V.15
116 Tait Up, III.6
117 Br Up 2, 3, 1
The formless Brahman is an experience of infinite and limitless being wherein all particulars are absorbed, including the separate sense of the experiencing subject, so that this experience cannot properly be said to qualify as knowledge or consciousness. It cannot be described, because the language of description requires that there be a reality which is limited by the presence of another for the sake of description. To begin with the experiencing subject takes his stand on the world of plurality of which he is conscious, but then it disappears into indifferentiation and loses its separate identity. This formless experience is described by Yājñavalkya to Maitreyi: “As a lump of salt thrown in water becomes dissolved in water and there would not be any of it to seize forth as it were, but wherever one may take it it is salty indeed, so, verily, this great being, infinite, limitless, consists of nothing but knowledge.”  

The Brhādarāṇya Upaniṣad portrays beautifully the transcendentāl Ātman as universal and undifferentiated consciousness. It says, ‘where there is duality, as it were, there one sees another; there one smells another; there one tastes another; there one speaks to another; there one hears another; there one touches another; there one understands another. But where everything has become just one’s own self, then whereby and whom would one see? …smell? …taste? …speak(to)? …hear? …think (of)? …touch? …understand? …whereby would one understand him by means of whom one understands this All?’  

The experience of this undifferentiated formless Brahman is by its very nature non-dual in the sense of there being not two things to be experienced. But the same give also another account of the Brahman experience which is not non-dual in the sense that there is no second thing present in experience, but in the

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118 Ibid., 2.4.12
119 Ibid., IV.5.15
sense that all things in their particularity are actually seen as permeated by the same essence which is Atman or Brahman. They are non-dual with it as the waves of the sea are non-dual with the sea, although seen also as separate items. It is ‘the pure unitary consciousness’—‘pure’ because emptied of all empirical content, ‘unitary’ because there is in it no multiplicity. It is therefore ‘the One,’ and the One has no other, no second. It is undifferentiated unity. The empirical ego has been stripped of all empirical content, and what is left is the bare unity of the pure ego which is also the Universal or Cosmic Self. This non-duality of essence comes from the fact that Brahman actually becomes the world to enjoy diversity through differences of name, shape and work. ‘He desired, let me become many, let me be born. He performed austerity…created all this…entered into it… (and) became both the actual and the beyond, the defined and the undefined, both the founded and the non-founded, the intelligent and the non-ingelligent, the true and the untrue. As the real he became whatever there is here, that is what they call the real.’

In the beginning the world was only self, in the shape of a person…He had no delight… He desired a second. He became as large as a woman and a man in close embrace.’

120 Tatam, 2, 6, 1
121 BrUp 1.4, 1 & 3

आत्मवेदमयः आच्छादकुशः ।
सत्यसूत्रीस्क्रन्नानन्दनीयमन्यथाततुतसत्यसूत्रः ।
तत्सामायेवत्तमन्यिचित्सूत्रमयमिलोऽवद्य उक्तःहरियाश्च नीतिः ।
स यतःतत्तस्मातान्वर्त्यायामनो अवृत्ततस्मातुष्टः ।
ओषधिः ह ये स तथे गोस्मातृपूजा सुभूषितः एवं वेदः ॥
स वै नेव रेमे तत्सादेकारी न में सरसः ॥
से द्विविषयमिच्चर्तु हेवात्मानान्य यथा स्वपुमातो सम्परिश्चक्तः ॥

स इममेवात्तस्मान द्रेष्टास्पाट्यः ।
ततः पतिष्ठ परी चाभवताम् ।
तत्सामायेवत्तमन्यिचित्सूत्रमयमिलोऽवद्य इसात्तः स्मातसिद्धायाः ॥
तत्सामायेवत्तमाकाशः शिबया पूर्वतः एवं ॥
तं समभवते ततो मनुष्यः अजायन्तः ॥
undifferentiated. It became differentiated by the name and form. Therefore even today all this is differentiated by the name and form.  

Unity of Brahman

There are many statements throughout the Upaniṣads in which Brahman or Ātman is identified with ‘this all’, because it becomes this all. There are many accounts which suggest an actual mystical experience of diversity also issuing forth from a primal unity which has an experience of the opposite kind. Brahman becomes differentiated as the world while remaining inexhaustible as the unity that is holding forth all these phenomenal differences within its limitless being. Brahman is the cause of the phenomenal world as the spider is the cause of its web or as small sparks rise up separately from fire, even so do all breathing spirits, all worlds, all gods, all beings rise separately up from the self. Similarly God (the self) as final cause is compared to the ocean into which all rivers flow or He is that which pervades all things yet is other than they like salt dissolved in water.

Uṣasta Cakrāyana questioned Yājñavalkya, "explain to me who is the Brahman present and not beyond our ken, him who is the Self in all things...". Yājñavalkya answered, "He is your self (Upaniṣad), which is in all things. . . ." The spiritual hero says that the objective ground, or

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122 *Ibid.*, 1, 4, 7
123 *ChāU* VI.10
124 *Ibid.*, VI.13
125 *BrU* 3:4:1

अथ हृन्मुग्धस्तंक्तंकमाणं पंग्रहं। याज्ञवल्क्यमेव होवच यस्मात्सप्रायशादपरोऽद्रह्य य आत्मा सर्वोपर्यं तथा च आत्मा सर्वात्मैः। कतमो याज्ञवल्क्यसर्वात्मैः।

यः प्राणेऽन्नारिति स त आत्मा सर्वात्मेऽयेकपनेनानानिति स त आत्मा सर्वात्मेऽयेकपनेनानानिति स त आत्मा सर्वात्मेऽयेकपनेनानानिति स त आत्मा सर्वात्मैः॥
most ultimate reality, is the same as the self, the subjective ultimate. Uṣasta Cakrāyana wants Yājñavalkya to explain to him properly the Brahman that is immediately present and directly perceived, that is the self in all things, and Yājñavalkya replies, “That is your self which is within all your things, which is within all things, You cannot see the seer of seeing... hear the hearer of hearing...think the thinker of thinking...understand the understander of understanding. He is your self which is in all things. Everything else is afflicted.”

The Upaniṣad says ‘Two birds, inseparable friends cling to the same tree. One of them eats the sweet fruit, the other looks on without eating. On the same tree man sits, grieving, immersed, bewildered by his own impotence. But when he sees the other lord (Isa), contented and knows his glory, then his grief passes away.”

We mistake the multiplicity for ultimate reality. If we overlook the unity, we are lost in grief.

Thus the mystical experience of all things issuing out of Brahman or Ātman does not see it diminished in its character as the infinite and limitless being. Nor does the non-duality of man and of all things with the ultimate, proclaimed in such statements as ‘that thou art’, suggest in the context of this type of mystical experience that manyness disappears when its unity with the one is realized.

In the early Upaniṣads we have, for the first time and side by side, both the experience and the doctrine and we have here, also for the first time, a clear formulation of the ontological nature of the final experience of the

126 Ibid., 3.4.2
127 SvetUp IV 6 and 7

द्वा सङ्गमं संयुक्तं संसारं समांते वस्तुं परिपक्वम् ज्ञाते।
तथ्योपथे पिपलं स्वाभिलक्षणं अभिवाचकसिद्धे।
समानं वस्तुं पुरुषों निन्योगनीश्चयं शोभ्यति विशेषम्।
ज्ञु: यदा पश्वाक्षरमियोंसमाश्चत्वमिन्द्रेषु मिति वैतत्वोऽक्षे:।

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true knowledge of the ultimate: to know Brahman is to be Brahman.\textsuperscript{128} True knowledge is here understood as being beyond the senses and the intellect. It is a non-dual, unmediated process of knowing, without the split between object and subject. He can be attained neither by sight, nor by Word of mouth, nor by any other sense, nor by penance, nor by any actions whatsoever.\textsuperscript{129} Of like import is another passage which tells us that "it is only when the whole moral being is purged of evil that one is able to realize the greatness of God."\textsuperscript{130} The Ātman is to the body what the wheat is to the chaff. The wheat must be separated from the chaff, even though the chaff may temporarily cover it. Even so must the Ātman be extracted from the body, even though, for a while, the body may serve as a covering for it. In this way the \textit{Upānīṣad} declares the immanence of Ātman. The \textit{Chhandogya Upānīṣad} tells us that "after having crossed the bund of phenomenal existence, even though a man may be blind, he ceases to be blind; even though he may be pierced, he is as good as unpierced; after having crossed this bund, the very night becomes like day, for before the vision of the aspiring mystic the spiritual world is suddenly and once for all illumined."\textsuperscript{131} One very celebrated passage of \textit{Upānīṣad} tells us that Brahman cannot be realized except by one whom Brahman himself chooses: before such a one does Brahman reveal his proper form.\textsuperscript{132} This is verily the doctrine of Grace. It implies that man's

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[128] \textit{Mund\textquoteleft Up} III.2.9
\item[129] \textit{Ibid}, III.1.8
\item[130] \textit{Kath\textquoteleft Up} I.2.20
\item[131] \textit{Ch\textquoteleft Up} VIII.4.2
\item[132] \textit{Mund\textquoteleft Up} III.2.3
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
endeavours after a full-fledged realization of God may always fall short of the ideal, unless Grace comes from above. It is only when Brahman chooses the saint for the manifestation of his supreme glory that the mystic will be able to perceive Him. It is only when the Individual Spirit sees the Being within itself that it can become one with the Universal Spirit. The Śvetāsvatāropanisād tells us that "just as a mirror which is cleaned of its impurities becomes lustrous and capable of reflecting a lustrous image, even does the mystic see himself at the height of his spiritual experience and reach the goal of his endeavour. Just, again, as with the help of a lamp one is able to see an object, similarly by the help of the Individual Self he sees the lustrous Universal Self, who is unborn, who is the highest reality, and who is beyond all existences."\textsuperscript{133}

When the identification with Ātman comes to take the place of the identification with body in a perfected Mystic, all his desires for bodily accommodation vanish immediately. Then, secondly, "the knots of his heart are broken, all his doubts are solved, and the effects of his actions are annihilated, when once he has seen God who is higher than the highest."\textsuperscript{134}

**Bliss of God-realization**

We have in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* a classic description of the illimitable bliss that a perfected Mystic experiences after his communion with the

\textsuperscript{133} ŚvetUp II 14-15

\textsuperscript{134} MandUp II.2.8
Highest. But the *Brhadāranyakopaniṣad*, in the vein of an almost erotic mysticism, tells us further that the only earthly analogue which we can have for the bliss of God-realization, is the bliss arising from union with a dear wife. “Just as when a man is embraced by his dear wife, he knows nothing outside nor anything inside; similarly when the individual Self is embraced by the universal Self, he knows nothing outside nor anything inside; for he has attained an end which involves the fulfillment of all other ends, being verily the attainment of Ātman which leaves no other ends to be fulfilled.”\(^{135}\)

We are told in the *Taittirīyā Upaniṣad* that the direct result of the enjoyment of divine bliss is that the Mystic is divested once for all of all feeling of fear.\(^{136}\) The one kind of emotion kills the other, and the feeling of bliss kills once for all the emotion of fear. Whom and what may such a perfected Mystic fear, when he finds infinite joy in all directions and at all times. "He becomes fearless," says the *Upaniṣad*, "because he has obtained a lodgment in that invisible, incorporate, indefinable, fearless, supportless support of all."\(^{137}\) "The Ātman," says the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad," is sinless, without age, without death, without fear, without any hunger or thirst, and has all his desires or ends fulfilled. This Ātman should be sought after; this Ātman should be known. He who realizes the Ātman in this way after having sought after him, for him all the worlds are gained, and all desires fulfilled."\(^{138}\) We thus see, on the whole, that the immediate effects of God-realization upon the Mystic are the entire

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\(^{135}\) *BrUp IV.3.21*

\(^{136}\) *TatUp II.4*

\(^{137}\) *Ibid. II.7*

\(^{138}\) *ChāUp VIII.7.1*
abatement of bodily excitement, the resolution of all doubts, the 
obtainment of infinite power, the enjoyment of illimitable joy, the 
destruction of all fear, and the fulfillment of any end that may be 
contemplated by the Mystic.

There are certain mystic monologues which contain the raptures of 
spiritual experience. The Sage of the Mundakopaniṣad, when he came to 
realize the immortal Brahman, fell into mystic raptures when he saw that 
"the Brahman was before him and behind him, to his right and to his left, 
above and below,"and broke forth into the exclamation that "this was the 
best of all possible worlds."139 The sage Vāmadeva came to know that 
"just as, at the origin of things, Brahman came to self-consciousness and 
then understood that it was verily the All, similarly, whoever among the 
gods, or the mortals, or the sages comes to self-consciousness becomes 
verily the All "; and thus the Sage, to whom the infinite past was like an 
eternal now, broke forth into the exclamation that “he it was who had 
lived in Manu, and that he it was who had given light to the Sun.”140

The Mystic of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad declares that even as a horse 
might shake its mane, similarly he had shaken off all his sin, that even as 
the Moon might come out fully after having suffered an eclipse from 
Rahu, even so, having been freed from the mortal coil, he had obtained 
eternal life in the Ātman.

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139 MundUp II.2.11
ब्रह्मवेदमूर्त्त पुरस्ताद ब्रह्म पश्चादु ब्रह्म दक्षिणात्कीर्तिरेन 
अवधक्षोचित् स प्रसुत ब्रह्मवेद शिक्षितभो वरिष्ठम् II

140 BrUp 1.4.10
ब्रह्म व इदमक्र आसीतु तद्वग्नामेववेद अहं प्रजापतिः 
सत्सत्सचासामस्वतु तथा यी देवानां भृत्वकृयः स एव तद्भवतु तथपीताम् तथा मनुष्याणाम् 
तदैवप्रात्मवेद्याधिकुर्द्ववेद्य अहं मनुष्यव सुर्यक्षितः I

79
Then, again, the utterances of Triśanku in the *Taittirīya Upanīṣad* are remarkable for the grandeur of the ideas involved in them. After Triśanku had reached Self-realization, he tells us he felt as if he was the ‘Mover of the Tree’. Triśanku tells us that, like the true Soul that he was, he could move the Tree of the bodily or worldly coil. He tells us, furthermore, that his glory was ‘like the top of a mountain’, “which is as much as to say that when he had come to realize the Self, he felt that everything else looked so mean and insignificant to him from the high pedestal of Ātmanic experience that he felt as if he was on the top of all things whatsoever. Finally, he tells us that he was verily "the intelligent, the immortal and the imperishable One," thus identifying himself with Absolute Spirit.”¹⁴¹ The greatest of the Mystics, Bhṛgu Vāruṇa, son of Varuṇa tells us his ecstatic experience in a Upanisadic passage. The pupil Bhṛgu Vāruṇi approaches his father Varuṇa and asks him to explain to him the nature of Brahman. The father replies, “That from which these beings are born, that in which when born they live, and that into which they enter at their death is Brahman.”¹⁴² The son arrives at the truth that spiritual freedom or delight (ānanda), the ecstasy of fulfilled existence is the ultimate principle. The pupil’s doubts are stilled by Self-evident Reality. He apprehends the Supreme Unity that lies behind all the lower forms and leaves behind discursive reason and contemplates on the One and is lost in ecstasy. The Sage, when he had transcended the limitations of earthly adjuncts, and sitting in solitude sings the song of universal unity exclaims, “Oho! Oho! Oho! I am the food, I am the food; I am the eater, I am the eater, I am the eater; I am the unifier, I am the unifier, I am the unifier; I am (Hiranyagarbha) the first born of this

¹⁴² *Tait Up III i, 1*
world consisting of the formed and the formless, I (as Virāt) am earlier than the gods. I am the naval of immortality. He who offers me thus (as food), protects me just as I am. I, food as I am, eat him up who eats food without offering. I defeat (i.e. engulf) the entire universe. Our effulgence is like that of the sun.”  

“The mystic, in extreme wonderment says that though he is the Absolute, beyond all taint of duality, yet the wonder of it is that he is himself both the food and the food-eater, the enjoyer and the object of enjoyment, the subject and the object. The whole universe is divided into these two aspects and they both belong to the same Brahman. The sage’s statement implies that he who was thinking prior to the dawn of knowledge, that he was the enjoyer only now feels the unity of his being with Brahman and hence appearing in that dual aspect of the enjoyer and the enjoyed.”

The enlightened one attains unity with the All. He expresses with wonder that the individual with all limitations has been able to shake them off and become one with the All. These are the utterances of the man who has realized the unity of his Ātman with the universal Being and lost all his individuality in Brahman. The mystic Sage himself is the subject-world and the object-world as well as the entire subject-object relation - a stage of spiritual experience where the difference between the field, the fighter, and the strife vanishes altogether - the culmination of the unitive song is thus couched in these mystic utterances. “To get at the Real”, says Radhakrishnan, “we must get behind the forms of matter, the forms of life, the forms of mind, the forms

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143 Tai Up III.10.5-6

144 Swami Sharvananda, Taittiriya Upanisad, Madras, 1921. p.133
of intellect. By removing the sheaths, by shaking of the bodies, we realize the Highest.”\textsuperscript{145}

The \textit{Svetāsvatāropaniṣad} tells us that just as oil is hidden in sesamum, or ghee in curds, just as water is hidden insprings, or fire in the churning sticks. Even so is the \textit{ātman} immanent in the body.”\textsuperscript{146} Another passage from the same \textit{Upaniṣad} tells us that just as there is an extremely subtle film on the surface of ghee, even so does the Godhead who is immanent in all beings envelope the whole universe, by knowing Whom alone is a man released from all bonds.\textsuperscript{147}

The essence of all this teaching about the immanence of God is that if man may but try in the proper way, he may be able to realize God even within himself.

For Śaṅkara the world exists only as an illusory imposition through ignorance, as snake exists in the rope through imposition by mistake, i.e. ignorance. Śaṅkara believes that the experience of the ultimate can be of only one kind, the kind in which the phenomenal world disappears. So all our other experiences, that of phenomenal diversity included, must be of the nature of illusion from the point of ultimate truth.

\textsuperscript{145} S.Radhakrishnan, \textit{The Principal Upaniṣads}, London, 1968, p.561

\textsuperscript{146} SvetUp 1.15

\textsuperscript{147} \textit{Ibid.}, IV.16
Identity of Ātman and Brahman

The Upaniṣads contain four sentences, the Mahāvākyas (Great Sayings), which were used by Śaṅkara to establish the identity of Ātman and Brahman as scriptural truth:

"Prajñānam Brahma" - "Consciousness is Brahman."
"Aham Brahmāsmi" - "I am Brahman"
"Tat tvam asi" - "That Thou art."
"Ayamātmā Brahmac" - "This Ātman is Brahman."

Śaṅkara most emphatically insisted that to know Brahman is to be Brahman. If Śaṅkara ever had mystical experience, it was only the kind where plurality disappears into undifferentiated unity. He certainly did not have the mystical realization of the opposite kind where the one differentiates itself into the many. His logical mind finds the concepts ‘one’ and ‘many’ to be opposites, hence both cannot be true, and since the ‘one’ is true, the ‘many’ is illusory. Śaṅkara treats the statement ‘khalvidam Brahmac’ (everything here is Brahman) as saying that everything does not exist as everything; only Brahman exists and everything appears as existing only through being generated by some illusive power called māyā and then superimposed on Brahman, the sole reality, by the human mind soaked in ignorance. He produced logical arguments to show why the existence of the many, experienced by us in common, must have an illusory status, explaining away all statements to the effect that Brahman becomes all that through the activity of Īśvara, the creator God, who, however, is himself generated by cosmic illusion. Śaṅkara argues as follows: As the tree has many branches, so Brahman possesses many powers and energies dependent on these powers. Unity and manifoldness are therefore both true. Thus a tree considered in itself
is one, but it is manifold if viewed as having branches; so the sea is itself one, but manifold as having waves and form; so the clay itself is one, but manifold if viewed with regard to the jars and dishes made of it. ‘Just as by one clod of clay all that is made of clay can be made to be known, the different modifications being understood by different names arising out of speech, clay itself being their truth.’ A distinction is being made here between two kinds of truth, the ordinary one (satyam) and the higher kind (satyasya satyam) not between truth and falsity as Śaṅkara alleges. For him the knowledge of Brahman is truth while ‘knowledge’ of manyness is ignorance (avidyā). What the Upaniṣads say, according to Śaṅkara’s view of ultimate reality, is that only Brahman exists. It is the ground, the inmost reality, of all that we consider to exist, both material and spiritual. Brahman has no qualities, no qualifications, no limitations. It is not a personal deity, and so devotion, in the ordinary sense of venerating a god, usually with considerable personal engagement and emotion, does not befit it. Brahman is unchanging, does not act, and has no needs because it is utterly complete. It is not a being because it is unlimited, and beings are finite, circumscribed. Rather, it is being pure and simple. For Śaṅkara there is no substantial difference between Brahman and Ātman. Ātman is the eternal, unchanging self of the world, the ground of being considered to be the source of awareness and subjectivity. It, too, has no conditions or qualities. It is passive, as Brahman is, because it is perfect and so does not need to act to gain any enrichment. We tend to think of it as the ground of subjectivity, but it is not personal, having no emotions or ego. As identified with Brahman, it too is the only thing that exists fully or truly for those who have gained

148 ChāU 6.1.4
यशो सोमयेकेन मुलिपृडङ्ग सर्व मृणय मिज्जातम् ।
स्याद्वा वाचार्यं विकारो नामश्च मुलिकेतेभ सत्यम् ।
enlightenment and so see reality with a direct intuitive awareness of what it actually is. To see in a flash that there is only Brahman is a mystical achievement. Śaṅkara’s philosophy is an invitation to mystical self-realization. It is not simply a programme of study but rather a full way of life.

The chief characteristic of Upaniṣadic Mysticism is the sincere quest for spiritual illumination and the rapturous delight and force that characterize the utterances of the sages when they speak of their ineffable experience, the ultimate and the absolute truth and reality and the immortality of all mortal things.

**Buddhist Mysticism**

**Introduction**

According to the Upaniṣads life's ideal was *mokṣa*, a liberation from the eternal cycles of birth and death and there was a primal being, Brahman, who was the ultimate ground of existence and was eternal in time and infinite in space. Buddhism represents a unique case in the history of religions and in the history of philosophy and its mysticism is defined differently from other forms of mysticism. Buddhism is based on pure mysticism: mysticism in the sense that it is contemplative in character and tends to the purification of consciousness and the perception of the Transcendent - and ‘pure’, in the sense that it does not blend pure-consciousness with ideas of God or divine Substance. Buddhism does not believe in the existence of a supernatural entity called God, although it believes in many gods. These gods, however, have no special status in Buddhism, for they are considered to be part of the natural world, like animals and people are; only they may have superior powers and occupy heavenly regions. Rather than getting realization from a higher being or
power, such as God, Buddhist mysticism is focused on contemplation. This form of enlightenment is considered to be the mind’s acknowledgement that it is in high states of existence. The existence is not of a God, but rather the existence of one’s self. In religions with a God, the goal which proceeds finding or experiencing a God is to achieve entering heaven or any form of it. Buddhism is not much different. While no god exists, the ultimate spiritual goal following the reach of enlightenment is to achieve the state of Nirvāṇa (*nibbāṇa*). The literal meaning of the word Nirvāṇa is ‘blowing out’ or ‘quenching’, which marks the soteriological release from rebirths in *saṃsāra*; it should be attained whether it is through this present life or the next, or some life after that.

**Final Emancipation**

The Buddha, too, advocated liberation from *saṃsāric* existence, but he replaced the Brahman with a more pragmatic, empirically based philosophy. For him there was no transpersonal primal being (Brahman), or eternal self (*ātman*), or the eternal words of the Vedas at the centre of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths. In the teachings and instructions found in Pāli works ascribed to the Buddha, it is said that we are bound, without and within, by the entanglements of desire and the only way of loosening these is by the practice of right discipline, concentration and wisdom. Right discipline or *sīla* means the desisting from the commission of all sinful deeds. This is the first pre-requisite. One has to refrain from all actions prompted by bad desire. Next, by concentration or *samādhi* one has to destroy all the roots of one’s old vicious tendencies. By doing so one’s desires are destroyed leading to the more advanced stage of a saint. It leads directly to *prajñā* or true wisdom; and by this one achieves his final emancipation. The individual must cultivate the habit of meditating
on the virtues of universal friendship, universal compassion and happiness in the happiness of all. By thus rooting out all misery he will eventually become happy and avoid thoughts of death. When a saint enters into a state of concentration which has four stages and gradually advances to the fourth or the last stage both happiness and misery vanish and all the roots of attachment are destroyed. With the mastery of this stage of concentration there comes the final state of absolute extinction of the mind and total cessation of all sorrows and sufferings – Nirvāṇa. The ultimate goal of all concentration and its highest perfection with the Buddha is total extinction.

**Different Buddhist Views**

Most Buddhists interpret mystical experiences in terms of an experience of *anatta* or no-self, which is the view that there is no such thing (ever) as a separately existing self, and that the usual view one has of oneself as being inherently separate from other beings is illusory. There are many kinds of Buddhism, however, and they have different interpretations of the no-self doctrine, as well as different views about the nature and role of meditation in realizing the truth of no-self. The three main kinds of Buddhism are Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna (also known as Tāntric Buddhism or Lamaism). Theravāda (‘Way of the Elders’), called Hīnayāna (‘Lesser Vehicle’) by Mahāyanists, is the oldest surviving branch of Buddhism, and its scriptures (the Pāli Canon) are the oldest extant Buddhist texts. Theravadins view the realization of Nirvāṇa as being essentially different from *samsāra* (the world of suffering and delusion), they tend to place a greater emphasis on personal effort rather than on prayer to Buddhas or *bodhisattvas* (future Buddhas), and they usually regard entry into the *sangha* (community of monks) as being a necessary condition for the attainment of Nirvana. Mahāyāna (‘Greater
Vehicle’) Buddhists view Nirvāṇa as not essentially different from samsāra, they tend to place a greater emphasis on the intervention of bodhisattvas to aid the faithful, and they place less of an absolute distinction between the spiritual prospects of the clergy and the laity. Vajrayāna, which is sometimes regarded as a branch of Mahāyāna, emphasizes devotion to a personal guru or teacher (whether a god, bodhisattva, or human master) to enable a practitioner to make progress towards enlightenment.

The major sources of Teravāda are the Vinaya and Sutta pitakas of the Pali canon. Early Indian Buddhism as taught by the Buddha states that there is suffering, dukkha, and it’s cause is attachment. To be free of this pain, a practitioner must work at losing all forms of permanence. This is the way to Nirvana, which is free of dukkha. However, if dukkha is in all things, then Nirvāṇa is nothing. Indeed, it is empty. The basic constituents of the Teravāda world-view, which may well represent the Buddha's standpoint, is that the sensory process leads to suffering, grief and death, and its reversal leads to the disappearance of suffering, grief and death. In the earliest Hinayana traditions there was an emphasis on one or another form of cessation, a mystical experience of complete unity in which suffering has ceased as the barricades between ‘Self’ and the external world have broken down.

The true nature of compounded things, when they are shown as they really are, to the discerning intellect is, according to Buddhism, impermanent, productive of suffering, and devoid of a self. Without the insight that there is no self it is impossible to realize Nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa was not only a total and final freedom from the three things but was also a total and final liberation from the notion that anything has a self. The four pillars on which Buddha’s teaching rests are what are called the four
Noble Truths. The first is the truth of suffering: it is a fact that there is suffering everywhere in life. Old age is suffering, sickness is suffering and death is suffering. The second noble truth is that there is a cause to suffering: The Buddha's analysis of suffering is that it is ultimately based on the fact that we desire things, and this desire is in turn based on an ignorance, particularly the ignorance that we are an independent and permanent ego or self, and on the resultant grasping of the self. The third noble truth is that it is possible to remove suffering. The fourth truth gives us, in the form of the famous eightfold path, the way to remove suffering.

The most important doctrine of early Buddhism is the doctrine of no-self (anāmavāda). This follows directly from the doctrine of impermanence (anitya). The Buddha stressed the impermanence of phenomena and the absence of their enduring nature. All existences are characterized by Tilakkhana (three marks), namely, anatman (anatta, not eternal self), anitya (anicca, no permanence) and dukkha (duhka, suffering). He makes it clear all the elements of being are lacking in ego.\(^{149}\) Buddhism believes, unlike the Upaniṣads, in a changing view of reality: everything in the world is impermanent (anitya). It is not only that change exists, but that everything in the universe is in a constant flux, such that we cannot say that there are any stable self-subsistent things. If everything in the world is constantly changing, then there cannot be a permanent entity called the self. Therefore, what appears to be a permanent self in us is only an appearance, and is an illusory entity. There is no basis for any belief in such an entity in our experience.

\(^{149}\) AN 3,134
What is Nirvana?

Buddhist experience is a radical one. Nirvāṇa is described variously in Pāli canon. In one sense it is absolutely contentless. It is the state of deliverance from all sorrow and from all happiness. The essential characteristic of Nirvāṇa is freedom from suffering. Yet, as the ultimate ideal of all our highest strivings and the goal of all our moral perfection and concentration, it was an ideal which was in the highest degree attractive to the Buddhists. In many passages it is actually described as blissful. In other passages it is held to be like the extinction of a flame. The description of the ascending series of altered states of consciousness through which the practitioner passes on the way to the attainment of cessation makes this very clear. Nirvāṇa is not an experience that is created when one follows the Buddhist path of moral conduct, meditation, etc. According to Buddhaghosha Nirvāṇa is not arousable by the path; it is only reachable, not arousable, by the path; that is why it is uncreated. It is because it is uncreated that it is free from aging and death. It is because of the absence of its creation and its aging and death it is permanent. In Theravada Buddhism the key spiritual gain associated with Nirvāṇa is the cessation of samsāra, the cycle of rebirth and death. This cycle the Buddha calls ‘misery.’

Another characteristic of Nirvāṇa is that it is beyond the limitations of both earthly and heavenly existence. Nirvāṇa is transcendent in that it is not part of the loka or cosmos. Everything in the loka is impermanent and without self (atta) and suffused with dukkha. Nirvāṇa is transcendent but not immanent. It is transcendent in the intuitive experience of and subsequent reflection upon inner liberation. Although Nirvāṇa is the

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150 Dhp 153, 154
ultimate it is not the ultimate Being or God, but rather the ultimate state, to be classified ordinarily in the Indian tradition as moksa, or salvation or liberation.\textsuperscript{151}

In the early Pāli material Nirvāṇa or nibbāna is a revolutionizing of consciousness gone through its mystical stages of jhānas and signless samādhi. Nirvāṇa has been shown, in the Pāli suttas, to be a form of objectless, unsupported consciousness (viññāna). The Pāli text describes it as ‘non-manifestive’ (anidassana), objectless and so beyond the ‘manifestation’ of all objects. The text also describes Nirvāṇic consciousness as ‘infinite’ (ananta) because it has no object.\textsuperscript{152} In the Pāli texts Nirvāṇa is called ‘highest bliss’.\textsuperscript{153}

Theravada Buddhism could not accept that Nirvāṇa is just a way of experiencing the world as it is because they see Nirvana as a distinct, otherness that is beyond saṃsāra. But Mahayanana Buddhism refuses to make distinctions from anything. The cycle of rebirth, saṃsāra, is the same as Nirvana or enlightenment. So the suffering of life and the escape into enlightenment are not separate. In other major religions, an afterlife comes after death and individuals usually try to describe its splendor and joy or terror and suffering. But as far as Nirvāṇa is concerned, it is a separate reality from life and death where there is no pain, no sorrow, no desire, and it’s just nothing at all. Nirvana can be described as nothing as it has also been described as empty. It is incorrect to think that Nirvāṇa is the natural result of the extinction of craving. Nirvāṇa is not the result of anything. If it would be a result, then it would be an effect produced by a cause. It would be 'produced' and 'conditioned'. Nirvāṇa is neither cause.

\textsuperscript{151} Smart, Ninian, \textit{Dimensions of the sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs}, Berkeley, 1996, p.31
\textsuperscript{152} \textit{DN I}, 223
\textsuperscript{153} \textit{Dhp} 204
nor effect. It is not produced like a mystic, spiritual, mental state, such as dhyāna or samādhi. The enlightenment comes suddenly, in a brief moment of ecstasy, leaving behind a permanent emancipation of mind. Therefore it is an awakening. It is entirely new and different from the ordinary understanding. It is incomparably perfect awakening. It is a direct and personal experience, an act of realization and brings with it the most perfect certainty. There is singular clearness in it. If any one asks what is there after Nirvāṇa, the answer is that it is the Ultimate Truth and being so there can be nothing after it. It is final, allowing no further knowledge beyond it. It has been described as a state, or a feeling or a sense of achievement with regards to enlightenment. Nirvāṇa in Early Buddhism is the state of emptiness but also wisdom for which practitioners strive. For the historical Buddha, Nirvāṇa is a separate, transcendent state from the cyclic dukkha that plagues all things. That means that the enlightened state is empty in a way that cannot be fully described. Nirvāṇa cannot be expressed satisfactorily in words, because human language is too poor to express the real nature of a supramundane experience like that of the Absolute Truth which is Nirvāṇa. The only way to know and express Nirvāṇa, therefore, is to experience Nirvāṇa. The abiding in Nirvāṇa, can be described, as a state of 'deathlessness' and as the highest spiritual attainment, the reward for one who lives a life of virtuous conduct.

"How sweet the solitude of the peaceful, of him who has heard and perceived the Truth!

Happy to be without malice! Restraintful towards all beings!
Happy are the passion-free! Happy he who overcomes Desire!"
To have removed the notion 'I am', that is the supreme joy!'\textsuperscript{154}

`Whatever there may be things conditioned or unconditioned, among them detachment is the highest. That is to say, freedom from conceit, destruction of thirst, ....the uprooting of attachment, the cutting off of continuity, the extinction of thirst, detachment, cessation, Nibbāna.'\textsuperscript{155}

In Mahāyāna Buddhism Nirvāṇa was identified with the Absolute, variously named Suchness (tathatā) and the void (śūnya). These terms served to bring out the ineffability and undifferentiated nature of ultimate reality, which in turn corresponded to the undifferentiated and ‘void’ nature of the contemplative experience itself. In Mahāyāna traditions, there arose a monistic metaphysics essentially based upon the idea that the ultimate reality behind all appearances and illusions was a kind of buddha-nature. The Absolute was also identified, from the standpoint of the ordinary worshippers, with the Truth Body of the Buddhas-the transcendent and essential aspect of Buddhahood-and thus the mystical path involved being a bodhisattva (buddha-to-be). The distinctionless, non-dual experience of ultimate reality, the goal of the path, was the achievement of identity with the Absolute, which was equated with buddhahood. This is why the Mahāyāna path of contemplation was thought of as the path of bodhisattvahood, so that on his enlightenment the mystic would himself become a buddha. Nirvāṇa is where it is recognized that there is nothing but what is seen of the Mind itself, where there is no attachment to external objects existent or non-existent.

\textsuperscript{154} U\textit{d}, 2,1
\textsuperscript{155} \textit{AN} 2
Buddha’s Experience

To understand Buddhist mysticism, we must understand where this philosophy comes from. Buddhist philosophy is based on the experience Buddha had about twenty-five centuries ago. To understand, therefore, what Buddhist philosophy is, it is necessary to know what that mystic experience was which Buddha had after six years’ hard thinking and ascetic austerities and exercises in meditation.

The story of Gautama Buddha (566-486 B.C) starts with a young prince of India. Though he was married and had everything to support his life and the life of his family, he abandoned the life of luxury to live a life of finding answers. Not happy with the state of the general public well being, Buddha left his home in search for answers and solutions at the age of 29. Six year later, after studying with various religious leaders and still not happy with the answers laid before him, Buddha decided to start his own search for answers. One day, while sitting under a tree, Buddha experienced enlightenment. This enlightenment could be considered a mystical experience. It was rapid, unexpected, and allowed Buddha to see life in a brand new way.

The experience which forms the basis of Buddhist philosophy is called ‘enlightenment-experience’. Gautama became the Buddha through his experience of awakening and realization under the bodhi tree. That is the experience that empowered him to found the Middle way and become the first jewel, the experience of Gautama brought him to a direct, comprehensive, but intuitive understanding of the ultimate Reality.

For Buddha experience is seeing. He couples knowing (jñāna) with seeing, for without seeing, knowing has no depths, cannot understand the realities of life. Therefore, the first item of the Eightfold Noble Path is
sammadassana, right seeing, and sammasankappa, right knowing, comes next. Seeing is experiencing, seeing things in their state of suchness (tathata) or is-ness. ‘Right seeing,’ is not just an ordinary seeing by means of relative knowledge; it also has a mystical component to it; it is the seeing by means of a prajña-eye which is a special kind of intuition enabling us to penetrate right into the bedrock of Reality itself. It is through prajña/intuition that one arrives at anātman, or non-ego. The doctrine of anatta or anātman, is, the doctrine of non-ego. Its argument begins with the idea: (1) that all things are transient as they are composites (skandha or khandha) and go on disintegrating all the time, that there is nothing permanent; and (2) there is therefore nothing worth clinging to in this world where every one of us is made to undergo all kinds of sorrow and suffering. When a man by wisdom (pañña) realizes [this], he heeds not this world of sorrow; this is the path to purity. All things (dhamma) are egoless. The enlightenment experience means the opening of the prajña-eye, and seeing into the realm of Ultimate Reality, and landing on the other shore of the stream of saṃsāra, where all things are viewed in their state of suchness, in the way of purity. This is when a man finds his mind freed from everything, not confounded by the notions of birth-and-death, of constant change, of before, behind, and middle. When a Bhikku (mendicant) in a secluded place with peaceful surroundings meditates on the characteristics of impermanence, sorrowful and egolessness in respect of the physical and mental phenomena, an unspeakable joy floods his mind. Everything in this life appears to him just like bubbles in the running waters that arise and dissolve. What is impermanent is nothing but suffering to him and what is suffering is not worth accepting 'I' or 'mine'. The process of this meditation itself is deathlessness to him who knows it.
Jhāna or Absorption

The Buddhist concept of *jhāna* or ‘absorption’ (also called *samādhi*) seems to be an example of a mystical experience. In Theravada Buddhism practice aims at concentration which in turn aims at a kind of purified consciousness. The ascent of the *Jhānas* grows even more subtle culminating in the realization that ‘There is nothing’. There is no creature *feeling*, sense of awe, or fascination with any phenomenological object. The contemplative experience abolishes the distinction between subject and object. The Buddha calls the *jhānas* the ‘footsteps of the Tathāgata’ and shows them to be precursors of the bliss of Nirvāṇa that lies at the end of the training.\(^{156}\) In the *Dīgha Nikāya* the stages of Nirvāṇa are given: by the transcendence of all conceptualizations of form, by the disappearance of conceptualizations based upon sense-data, by paying no attention to conceptualizations of manifoldness, having attained to the sphere of infinite space (the practitioner) remains therein, thinking space is unending. This unending space is an aspect of Nirvāṇa, and a step towards an ineffable experience. The next step in realization, after remaining in the ‘sphere of infinite space’, is when a practitioner thinks, ‘consciousness is infinite.’ The complete awareness of this space coupled with the lack of conceptual limitations, means that consciousness is also without end. Having reached the first two states, one may come to realize that ‘there is nothing.’ When all of reality washes through your consciousness without attachment, then there is no grasping to anything. For nothing is truly there: because it is impermanent. To attach is to be under the impression that there is something there. To be unattached is to see it all, impermanent and infinite and empty. There isn’t anything there.

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\(^{156}\) *MN* 27.19-22
The fourth stage states, ‘By entirely transcending the sphere of nothing at all, having entered the sphere of neither conceptualization nor non-conceptualization, (the practitioner) remains therein.’ At this point, the sphere being entered has a non-dualistic nature, hence: ‘sphere of neither conceptualization nor non-conceptualization.’ Finally, ‘having attained the cessation of sensation and conceptualization, (the practitioner) remains therein.’ The prime characteristic of Nirvāṇa is, says Forman, ‘a vacuous state of emptiness, a non-responsiveness to the external world . . . a massive forgetting.’ It is a ‘massive forgetting’ because, while entering the next stage, the contents of the previous state is forgotten or pushed aside by the practitioner. What the practitioner is of course seeking is the release from attachment and the pain of permanence. Such a state is of one who has escaped dukkha, and sees the world truly.

Buddha’s Enlightenment

The accounts of the Buddha's enlightenment are crucial and centrally important in the history of Indian mysticism. Gautama Buddha passed through each of the four foundational jhānas as an immediate prelude to his enlightenment. Tradition tells that Buddha found Nirvana under the Bodhisattva tree. When Buddha attained his supreme enlightenment, he was in his sitting posture; he was neither attached to nor detached from the earth. He was one with it, he grew out of it, and yet he was not crushed by it. During the first night, the Buddha, seated under the bodhi tree, remembered the series of his former births; during the second, he acquired the ‘heavenly eye’, which enabled him to view the entire world and the whole cyclical process of rebirth; during the third, he saw how the

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157 DN II.71.2-17
159 MN 1.247-249
latter depended upon grasping and ignorance-if living beings were liberated from these, they would escape rebirth; and in the fourth, he attained supreme insight after going through the various stages of meditation. In all this he gained supreme peace. *Mahāparinibbana-Sutta* of the *Dīgha-Nikāya* explains how the dying Buddha goes through a progression of trance-states, each more subtle than the one preceding it, just before he enters into Nirvāṇa.

Then the Blessed One entered the first *jhāna*. Emerging from that he entered the second *jhāna*. Emerging from that, he entered the third...the fourth *jhāna*...the sphere of the infinitude of space...the sphere of the infinitude of consciousness...the sphere of nothingness...the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception. Emerging from that, he entered the cessation of perception and feeling. When the Buddha was at the highest trance state, that is, the cessation of perception and sensation, the state prior to Nirvāṇa, one of the monks told Ananda, another disciple of the Buddha, “The Blessed One has now entered Nirvāṇa.” Ananda immediately replied, “No, the Buddha has not yet entered Nirvāṇa. He has simply arrived at the cessation of sensation and perception, nothing more.”\(^{160}\) The Buddha not only ceased universal human cravings, but also saw his past lives, and saw the future lives of others.\(^{161}\) At this stage Ananda, assuming that the Buddha has passed away, addresses Anuruddha, his senior, and tells him, “the Blessed One is totally unbound... No, friend Ananda. The Blessed One isn't totally unbound. He has entered the cessation of perception and feeling.”\(^{162}\)


\(^{161}\) *MN* 1.247-249

\(^{162}\) *DN* 16, 8 *Mahāparinibbana Sutta*
Then the Blessed One, emerging from the cessation of perception and feeling, entered the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception. Emerging from that, he entered the sphere of nothingness...the sphere of the infinitude of consciousness...the sphere of the infinitude of space...the fourth jhāna...the third...the second...the first jhāna. Emerging from the first jhāna he entered the second...the third...the fourth jhāna. Emerging from the fourth jhāna, he immediately was totally Unbound. The utmost consciousness that filled the Buddha’s mind at the time of enlightenment was that he was no longer the slave to what he calls ‘the maker of the tabernacle’, or ‘the builder of this house’, that is gahakāraka. He now feels himself to be a free agent, master of himself, not subject to anything external; he no longer submits himself to dictation from whatever source it may come. By enlightenment Buddha sees all things in their proper order, as they should be, which means that Buddha’s insight has reached the deepest depths of Reality. As a newborn baby free from all sankharas, he declared, standing, with one hand pointing to the sky and the other to the earth, ‘Above heaven, below heaven, I alone am the honoured one!’ He poured out his joy of liberation in the two famous verses of the Dhammapada.

I ran through saṁsāra, with its many rebirths,
Searching for, but not finding, the house-builder.
Misery is birth again and again.
House-builder, you are seen!
The house you shall not build again!
Broken are your rafters, all,
Your roof beam destroyed.
Freedom from saṁsāra has the mind attained,
To the end of cravings has it come.\textsuperscript{163}

The Buddha says that he has gone round in vain the cycles of many lives ever striving to find the builder of the house of life and death. How great is the sorrow of life that must die! But now he has seen the house-builder: never more shalt he build this house. The rafters of sins are broke, the ridge-pole of ignorance is destroyed. The fever of craving is past: for his mortal mind is gone to the joy of the immortal Nirvāṇa.

Buddhism is about living in the present, which is what the historical Buddha realized when he had his mystical enlightenment. There is no contemplating the past or future; there is not an attachment to the beyond. It is not a heaven state and it is not the absorption of the individual soul into an Absolute. According to the Buddha Nirvāṇa is the ultimate happiness (nibbānam paramam sukham). For the Buddha, Nirvāṇa is a separate, transcendent state from the cyclic dukkha that plagues all things. That means that the enlightened state is empty in a way that cannot be fully described. How is it different from straightforward unconsciousness, dreamless sleep or death itself? The answer is in the following passage where a disciple asks the Buddha the same question:

What is the difference, revered one, between a dead person who has passed away and a monk who has attained the cessation of conceptualization and sensation? “Revered one, the physical, verbal, and mental functions of the dead person who has passed away have ceased and subsided; his vitality is destroyed, his heat is extinguished, and his sense-organs are scattered. But although the physical, verbal, and mental functions of the monk who has attained the cessation of conceptualization

\textsuperscript{163} Dhp 153, 154
and sensation have ceased and subsided, his vitality is not destroyed, his heat is not extinguished, and his sense-organs are purified. This is the difference between a dead person who has passed away and a monk who has attained the cessation of conceptualization and sensation”.  

Buddhist philosophy is the philosophy of ‘Emptiness’, it is the philosophy of self-identity. Self-identity is to be distinguished from mere identity. In an identity we have two objects for identification; in self-identity there is just one object or subject, one only, and this one identifies itself by going out of itself. Self-identity is the mind going out of itself in order to see itself reflected in itself; it is the logic of pure experience or of ‘Emptiness’. In self-identity there are no contradictions whatever. Buddhists call this suchness. Nirvāṇa is attained when we have knowledge, when the mind is freed from thirst (tānha), and cravings (asava).

The Dhammapada says, ‘The monk who has retired to a lonely abode, whose mind is calmed, who perceives things clearly, experiences a joy that is superhuman. As much as he reflects on the rise and fall of aggregates, he experiences joy and happiness. This is immortality to those who know.’ The mind of a Bhikkhu, who is serene and tranquil in body, speech and mind by destroying delusion, lust etc. and cutting off all internal fetters, remains merged in the depth of peace of Nibbāna.

This is the Buddha's admonition to the Bhikkhu: Leave aside sleepiness and devote yourself to the cultivation of meditational practices to reach the supreme goal. Let not your mind indulge in sensual thoughts and

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164 MN 1:1296.11-23
165 Dhp, Bhikkavagga, 25, 15
166 Ibid., 25, 12
swallow the red-hot iron ball of enjoying gifts of the laity as a Bhikku devoid of virtues and self-restraint. Consequently weep not jumping into the flame.\textsuperscript{167} One on whom the light of wisdom has not dawned cannot find an access to the realm of concentration by defeating the onslaught of internal enemies - passion, hatred, etc. One who is devoid of concentration cannot be blessed with the divine wisdom. One who possesses both concentration and wisdom reaches the supreme goal of Nirvāṇa leaving behind the worldly play of going and coming.\textsuperscript{168}

The Buddha was able to obviate a strictly mystical outlook and recognized the essential role of sensory validation in acquiring true knowledge. His own succinct account of his own Enlightenment does not have any characteristics of mysticism. The Buddha appears to have been exceptionally calm and poised, as he began his meditation in the hours before his enlightenmant. He mentioned that he had eaten proper food, rested and regained his strength. The Buddha never described his Enlightenment as a result of divine grace. He always thought that a person attains enlightenment through his own knowledge and vision.

The Buddha was not a mystic. He does not claim to have had an experience that granted him privileged esoteric knowledge of how the universe ticks. Only as Buddhism became more and more a religion such claims were attributed to his awakening. In describing to the five ascetics what his awakening meant, he spoke to have discovered complete freedom of mind from the compulsion of craving. He called such freedom the taste of Dharma.

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 25.19
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 25.13
Teachings of the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*

The *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* is a principal Mahāyāna Sūtra which is supposed to have been delivered by the Buddha while he was staying in Sri Lanka (Ceylon). In this the Buddha teaches that to be great in the exercise that makes up Bodhisattvahood, one has to be an expert in four things, (three of which are intellectual and the last one is practical). One should be an expert (1) to perceive clearly that this visible world is no more than Mind itself; (2) to abandon the notion that birth, abiding, and passing-away really take place; (3) to look into the nature of things external and realize that they have no reality; and finally (4) to train oneself towards the realization of the truth in the inmost consciousness by means of supreme wisdom."

The world is like māya, or mirage, as man’s intellect is no longer snared in the meshes of dualistic logic, he intuitively perceives that the world is no more than the reflection of his own mind. His life is thus designated as formless or imageless and his deeds effortless and purposeless. Yet he never relaxes his efforts to benefit all sentient beings. He knows from his transcendental position that saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa are the same (samata), and yet he knows not when to stop working for the realization of the highest ideals and also for universal salvation. His inner mind is then said to be abiding in the *Samādhi* known as Māyopama (mirage-like).

When one understands that the body, property, and abiding-place are the particularisations of the Ālaya-vijñāna (or citta, mind), one is freed from ideas such as, perceived and perceiving. This is a spiritual state of absolute purity in which one finds no traces of dualism. It is a complete identification of the self with the suchness or thusness (tathata) of things, and there is no thought of birth, abiding, and disappearance, seeing that
all things start from the evolution of one’s own mind. *(svacitta).* Such a *Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva* will before long realize the sameness of *samsāra* and Nirvāṇa.

This seems to be the highest state of spiritual attainment realizable by a mind encased in a human body; but there is still a higher state to be attained by the Buddhist. There is a higher body called *Buddhakāya* which is obtained when a man enters upon *Vajravimbopama Samādhi.* When this is obtained one is endowed with the ten Powers, the six Psychic Faculties, and the tenfold Self-mastery. He is then able to transform himself into various forms in order to benefit sentient beings in accordance with their desires and circumstances.

The idea of emptiness plays itself into the Buddhist concept of mysticism. The four stages of *dhyāna* progressively remove feelings and perceptions from one stage to another. However mysticism does not stop here, it can go beyond that, removing all ideas and thoughts to reach what is called emptiness. All that there is in emptiness is a state of consciousness. According to Suzuki, *sūnyata,* the Buddhist word for emptiness means, “…absolute emptiness transcending all forms of mutual relationship, of subject and object, birth and death, God and the world, something and nothing, yes and no, affirmation and negation. In Buddhist Emptiness there is no time, no space, no becoming, no-thingness…. Pure experience is the mind seeing itself as reflected in itself, it is an act of self-identification, a state of suchness. This is possible only when the mind is *sūnyata* itself, that is when the mind is devoid of all its possible contents except itself.”¹⁶⁹

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To sum up, all that is mystical is contained in the third and highest
discipline which is the eightfold path and attaining of Nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is
the extinction of all our sorrows and pleasures and all our worldly
experiences. It is a state of absolute dissolution of all world process.
Though it is a blissful state there is no distinction between the bliss and
the enjoyer of the bliss. To call it bliss is not to understand bliss in an
ordinary way. For this mystical bliss is incomprehensible by the intellect.
It has no describable essence. The mysticism of the Buddhist consists in a
belief in this essenceless state of Nirvāṇa as the state of ultimate
perfection and ultimate extinction, to be realized by the complete
extinction of desires. It is too deep and unfathomable for ordinary
comprehension, is transcendent, unworldly and without content. Nirvāṇa
is a state which is ineffable. It exists only as an experience. It is described
as being different from any other thought or object. All the rest is formed,
fashioned, made, conditioned, caused. Nirvāṇa alone is the unconditioned
reality. The consciousness which belongs to it has been called
transcendental consciousness that has altogether gone beyond all worlds.

Nowhere is measure for one gone to oblivion,
That whereby we speak of him - that exists no longer.
Wholly cut off are all forms of our knowing.
Cut off the channels of speech, every one.\(^{170}\)

To Heiler, "Ecstasy is the highest pitch of emotion. Nirvāṇa, on the
contrary is complete disappearance of emotion, a continuous, permanent
state of profound quiet and perfect solitaries, a blessedness without
excitement, transport or storm, not a being possessed but a being utterly

\(^{170}\text{SN 4.2.9}\)
self-absorbed.”\textsuperscript{171} The experiential nature of Nirvāṇa which is the result of the life of moral conduct, the methodic and gradual nature of the Eightfold path leading to it, and the Buddha’s transparent attitude - all these factors contribute to the non-mystical character of the Buddhist religious experience of Nirvāṇa.

**Devotional Mysticism**

**Introduction**

Vaiṣṇavism is one of the major traditions within the broader Vedic, or Hindu spiritual culture. It is exclusively a religion of bhakti and the tradition is known for the loving devotion to Viṣṇu.

**Vaiṣṇavism, its Origin and Growth**

Vaiṣṇavism, as one of the oldest living religions of India, owes itself to Rāmānuja, the most famous among its Ācāryas, whose traditional dates are 1017-1137. The term Śrīvaiṣṇavism denotes the system developed by Rāmānuja where Viṣṇu and His consort Goddess Śrī (Lakṣmī) are accepted as Supreme Being and Lakṣmī as the mother of the entire creation. A central presupposition in Śrīvaiṣṇavism is that Viṣṇu is always accompanied by, attended by or associated with his consort Śrī. It believes that the exclusive and devoted worship of Lord Viṣṇu along with His consort Śrī will lead to the attainment of the highest spiritual goal. Rāmānuja’s Vaiṣṇavism is often designated as Śrīvaiṣṇavism to distinguish it from that of Madhva and other religious reformers. Śrī, being inseparable from Him, acts as the mediatrix (Puruṣakāra) between man and God. She is also reckoned to be an Ācārya or teacher in this

tradition. This system of Śrī Rāmānuja is also therefore known as Śrīsampradāya. According to Nammālvār, Nārāyaṇa who is equated with the Ultimate Reality of the Upaniṣads is not mere Nārāyaṇa, but Tīru-Nārāyaṇa, that is Nārāyaṇa associated with Śrī or Lākṣmī (Tīru in Tamil means Śrī or Lākṣmī in Sanskrit). The Supreme Being is Śriyāh-pati (consort of Śrī), a concept generally used in Vaiṣṇava treatises. Instead of Śriyāh-pati, the Āḻvārs have used words such as Tīrumāl, Manavāḷaṉ, Śrīdharan etc: God is often described as Mādhava or Tīrumārban because He is ever enjoying the company of Śrī, who is acknowledged as His beloved consort, residing in His chest. The Śrīvaiṣṇavas unequivocally affirm the presence of the divine consort in the context of rituals, especially, in her mediatory role and the Śrīvaiṣṇava ritual will be incomplete without her presence. One crucial question regarding Hinduism, Christianity and Mahāyāna Buddhism is how grace is mediated to human beings. Śrīvaiṣṇavism posits the reality of the divine consort Śrī as the mediator between the Lord and the devotee. For Vedānta Desika, Lākṣmī seems indispensable in approaching the Lord. He describes Śrī as a gracious mother who willingly intervenes with her often stern husband on the devotee’s behalf. In Śrīvaiṣṇavism, Śrī embodies divine compassion. It is through the grace of Viṣṇu that the devotee is able to reach Vaikuṇṭha and get liberation. Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition is predominantly a bhakti oriented theistic tradition which aims at God-realization within the framework of our normal worldly activities. Vaiṣṇavism, like any other school of Vedānta, claims the authority of immemorial tradition. It is based on the triple authority of the Upaniṣads, the Brahmasūtra of Śrī Bādarāyaṇa and the Bhagavadgītā, collectively known as the Prasthāna-Trayī. Historically speaking, Śrī Rāmānuja is not the founder of this system as is commonly believed and it existed long before him. But he is the first historic exponent of the Viśiṣṭādvaita
philosophy who put it on firm scriptural grounds. Rāmānuja himself says, in the introductory verse of his monumental work, the Śrī Bhāṣya that his system was founded on the work of an ancient teacher called Bādarāyāna and the prior teachings of Tanka, Dramida and Guhadeva. It is also traceable to the teachings of Nammalvār, the doyen of the Ālvārs and also the super-mystic of Śrīvaiṣṇavism. The Ālvārs lived long before Rāmānuja and taught the same Vedānta Philosophy and Vaiṣṇava Religion that was already prevalent, through the medium of the vernacular language of South India, namely, Tamil. The common people were greatly attracted by the devotional songs of these saints which had an emotional appeal. According to the Śrīvaiṣṇava school, the first teacher was Lord Nārāyaṇa Himself and his student was His consort Goddess Lakṣmi who communicated the same to the commander-in-chief Viśvaksena. From him it was handed over to a series of teachers headed by Satakopa (Nammalvār). Then came the lineage of Ācāryas led by Śrī Nathamuni who was bestowed upon with knowledge by Śrī Nammalvār. His grandson Yāmunacārya (Ālavandār) was next to follow with his disciple Śrī Rāmānuja and a series of Ācāryas.

Vaiṣṇavism has its origin in the Vedas and its Vedic origin has been put forth on strong scriptural grounds. Vaiṣṇavism, before it became a full-fledged philosophy in the hands Rāmānuja has passed through several stages. In Vaiṣṇavism, Lord Viṣṇu, who appears as an ordinary god in the Rgveda, the earliest of the Vedas and as one of the several deities, attained pre-eminence and came to be recognized as the Supreme Being by the time of the Itihāsas and the Purāṇas. This transformation of Lord Viṣṇu to be the Supreme can be traced in the following way:
Vaiṣṇavism in the ṚgVeda

Viṣṇu, a Vedic deity, was only a minor deity in the Vedic pantheon of gods. In the ṚgVeda, Agni (fire) is glorified first and Indra is designated as the king of gods and praised in the maximum number of hymns. Viṣṇu, Rudra, Varuṇa, Vāyu and others occupy next positions. Lord Viṣṇu is described as a young and powerful god helping Indra in his many wars against the Asuras and evil forces. The hymns speak of his long strides and three steps. His first two steps can be discerned and approached by men, third no one can dare transgress.\textsuperscript{172} The most important hymn which establishes beyond any doubt the supremacy of Viṣṇu is the one which speaks of the eternal abode (paramapada) of Viṣṇu. The hymn says, “The enlightened seers (sūrayaḥ) always see that supreme abode of Viṣṇu like the shining sun pervading the entire sky as if it were an eye fixed in the heaven.”\textsuperscript{173} This Vedic concept of paramapada (the eternal abode of Lord Viṣṇu) became the central idea of Viṣiṣṭādvaita, an Absolute Being that is the source and substratum of all that exists. In the highest place of Viṣṇu there is a well of honey and there the gods rejoice.\textsuperscript{174} Viṣṇu measured the entire universe with three great strides.\textsuperscript{175} The purpose of Viṣṇu’s pervasion is to provide protection to all beings in the universe. This is made evident in the words Viṣṇuḥ gopāḥ.\textsuperscript{176} Although not expressed in so

\textsuperscript{172} RV 1.155.5

\textsuperscript{173} RV 1.22.20

\textsuperscript{174} RV 154.5

\textsuperscript{175} RV 1.22.17

\textsuperscript{176} RV 1.22.18
many words, the above statements signify, as to scholars, the supremacy of Lord Viṣṇu; for the spring of Honey is nothing but divine nectar or Amṛta, which indicates that Viṣṇu’s abode is the place of immortality and His place is fixed (dhruva). Bhandarkar observes, “The moment which seems to have been in operation during this process of elevation, was reverence for the third step or the mysterious highest abode of Viṣṇu beyond the ken of all.” Of all the hymns in the RgVeda the Puruṣa-sūkta in the tenth mandala establishes decisively that Puruṣa, who is equated with Viṣṇu, is the Supreme Being. In this hymn there is a description of a cosmic Puruṣa, who by performing sacrifice, became the cosmos itself. This sūkta is found in all the Vedas and is, therefore, regarded as a scriptural text of great authority. The distinguishing characteristic of Vaiṣṇavism that Viṣṇu associated with Goddess Śrī is the Ultimate Reality (Śriyāh-pati) has its root in the hymn which says, an individual who surrenders himself to Viṣṇu who exists from time immemorial (pūrvyāya), who is the creator of the variegated universe (vedhase) who at the same time looks as newly born (navīyase) and who possesses as His consort the one that delights the whole universe (sumajjānaye); such an individual not only lives an illustrious life in this world but also reaches the supreme spiritual goal. Though the name Śrī or Lakṣmi is not explicitly mentioned in this hymn, the term sumajjānaye used here is interpreted by Śāyaṇa as the Goddess Śrī. His consorts are

178 RV X 90
179 RV 1.156.2
180 Sayana Bhāṣya quoted by S.M.S. Chari, *Vaisnavism, Its Philosophy Theology and Religious Discipline*, Delhi, 1994, p.10
Goddess Hṛ (Bhūdevī) and Goddess Śrī (Lakṣmi). In the Puruṣa Sūkta Lakṣmī (Śrī) and Bhū Devi are described as two consorts of Viṣṇu. There is another important passage in the Rg Veda known as Śrī-Sūkta which comes at the end of the fifth mandala as an appendix. This Śrī-Sūkta speaks of the greatness of Goddess Śrī or Laksmi who is referred to as the consort of Viṣṇu. The Upaniṣad also states that Śrī and Hṛ are the consorts of Viṣṇu.

Vaiṣṇavism in the Brāhmaṇas

In the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, it is said that Agni is the lowest and Viṣṇu is the highest among gods. In the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa there is a story of a sacrificial session conducted by the gods for the attainment of power, glory and wealth. It was decided upon by them that whoever by his mighty deeds reached the end of the sacrifice before the others would attain the greatest position among them all. Viṣṇu reached the end first and he thus became the greatest of all the gods. There is another story of Viṣṇu, the dwarf. The gods and the asuras were fighting for a place for sacrifice. The latter agreed that they would allow as much land for the former as the size of a dwarf. Viṣṇu came as a dwarf and lay down, but gradually grew larger and larger so that he encompassed the entire earth

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181 Rv X 90 Yajurveda Recension, II.6
182 Śrī-sūktam 33
183 Viṣṇu-प्रभवत्स्य माधव-रघुविविध-वी 
184 Mahā NUp 1.6
185 Hṛ तेजस्विते तन्मयविश्वेश्वर-विजयः भवाय उपस्थित रूपम्।
186 Viṣṇu-प्रभवत्स्य माधव-रघुविविध-वी 
187 AB 1.1
188 अेन्द्रियेन देवलानांमर्गमो विषुः परमस्तदन्तरेण सर्वं अन्या देवता।
189 Bhūṣṇa 1.1, 2
181 Ibid., 1,2,5
and so the gods got the whole earth. Here, Viṣṇu is shown as having miraculous powers.

**Vaiṣṇavism in the Upaniṣads**

The Upaniṣads (the final portion of the Vedas) present the philosophical and religious doctrines of Vaiṣṇavism in great detail. They contain the Tattva-traya or the three ontological entities which constitute the foundation for Vaiṣṇavism. The three tattvas are Īśvara (God), cit (soul) and acit (matter). They also speak about the nature of Īśvara as a personal God endowed with attributes, bhakti or upāsana as sādhana or means of God-realization and the nature of mokṣa as conceived in Vaiṣṇavism. Brahman or Ātman is the Ultimate Reality according to the Upaniṣads. The term Viṣṇu is not frequently used in the Upaniṣads. The *Subāla Upaniṣad* refers to Nārāyaṇa as the sole reality existing prior to creation. It also mentions the supreme abode of Viṣṇu as the supreme goal to be attained confirming the RgVedic hymn. The *Mahopaniṣad* says that in the beginning, prior to creation, only Nārāyaṇa existed. There was neither Brahma, nor Rudra, nor Agni, nor earth nor heaven. The *Nārāyaṇa Upaniṣad* points out that Brahma was brought into existence by Nārāyaṇa and that from Nārāyaṇa was born Indra etc. The

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187 *Subālopànīṣad 6*

188 *Mahopaniṣad 1.1.4*

189 *N. U. P.*
MahaNārāyaṇa Upaniṣad identifies the Puruṣa of the Puruṣa-Sūkta as Nārāyaṇa.\textsuperscript{190}

Nārāyaṇa means, the resting place or goal of Nara or a collection of narās.\textsuperscript{191} Tradition that Brahmadeva sprang from the lotus in the navel of Nārāyaṇa goes back to the Rgveda,\textsuperscript{192} where it is said, ‘Prior to the sky, prior to the earth, prior to the living gods, what is that embryo which the waters held first and in which all the gods existed? The waters held that same embryo in which all gods exist or find themselves; on the navel of the unborn stood something in which all beings stood.’ The unborn corresponds to Nārāyaṇa. This confirms the identity between Brahma and Nārāyaṇa mentioned by Manu and some of the Purāṇas. The idea of Nārāyaṇa was developed in the period of the later Brāhmaṇas and Āranyakas. In the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, Puruṣa-Nārāyaṇa is represented to have sent forth from the place of sacrifice Vasus, Rudras, and Ādityas by means of the morning, midday and evening libations respectively, he alone remaining in the place. Prajāpati tells him to sacrifice again and Nārāyaṇa placed himself in all the worlds, in all the gods, in all the Vedas and in all the vital airs, and they were placed in him.\textsuperscript{193} This shadows forth the rising of Nārāyaṇa to the dignity of the Supreme Soul who pervades all and in whom all things exist and who in the beginning sent forth all the gods, being himself the receptacle or resting place as indicated in the Rgveda.\textsuperscript{194} In the Taittirīya Āranyaka, Nārāyaṇa is described with all the attributes of the Supreme Soul which are usually

\textsuperscript{190} Mahā N Up 13.1
\textsuperscript{191} सहस्रशीर्ष देवं विश्वेश्वरे विश्वेश्वमुहूर्तम्।
विश्व नारायणे देवमात्रं परम्प्रभु (सद)म्॥
\textsuperscript{192} Nārāyaṇīya VII,34
\textsuperscript{193} RV X 82. 5,6
\textsuperscript{194} Śat. Br. XII.3,4
\textsuperscript{194} RV ’82,6
mentioned in the Upaniśads. In the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas, Nārāyaṇa figures as the Supreme God of Creation, lying on the body of a huge serpent in the ocean of milk. The original conception of his connection with the primal waters, being kept to Nārāyaṇa, became thus an object of worship. In the epic times Viṣṇu being identified with Nara and Nārāyaṇa is traceable in the Upaniśads in the two birds, where Nara is engaged in eating the fruit and Nārāyaṇa, the resting place or abode of all men is the Lord and Onlooker.

**Vaiṣṇavism in the Āgamas**

A fuller development of the important tenets of Vaiṣṇavism can be seen in the Āgamas of the post-Vedic period. The concept of Viṣṇu as the Supreme Deity, as found in the *RgVeda*, was developed into a cult in the Vaiṣṇava Āgamas, emphasizing the exclusive worship of Viṣṇu as a means for salvation. Āgamas are a body of religious treatises devoted mainly to the modes of worship of God. Āgama means revealed scripture, also known as *Tantra* or the system that elaborates the knowledge acquired from the Vedas. It is also known as *samhitā* or composition. Among the several types of Āgamas, three are considered as important. They are the Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva and Śākta Āgamas. The Vaiṣṇava Āgamas hold Viṣṇu as their Godhead, the Śaiva Āgamas, Śiva, and the Śākta Āgamas regard Śakti or a female energy as their Godhead. The Vaiṣṇava Āgamas fall under two categories—the Vaikhānasa and the Pāncarātra and together they constitute the main source for the later development of Vaiṣṇavism. The Āgamas delineate the visual aspects of the divine

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195 Tai.A.X,11
196 *Mund Up* III.1.1

∥श्री सुप्रसिद्ध समस्त संवदों योजनानि महत्त्वपद्धतिः
तत्त्वाध्यायय: *विभव स्वाहाः* श्रीपद्मय: *अभिवाकृतिः*∥

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personality and describe the modes of worship. Both the Pāncarātra and Vaikhānasa Āgamas deal with the incarnation of God in the form of icon to be worshipped (arcā) along with the details of worship and the ritual with which the icons are consecrated. The Vaiṣṇava Āgamas also enumerate clearly the five forms of avatāra, viz: para, vyūha, vibhava, arcā and antaryāmi. This has influenced the Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas who have offered rational justification for the theory and the worship of God in the form of icons in the temples. The doctrines of avatāra, Goddess Śrī and prapatti are all derived from Ahirbudhnya samhitā and Lakṣmī-Tantra which belong to the Pāncarātra Āgamas. Thus the theological aspect of Śrīvaiṣṇavism has been greatly influenced by the Vaiṣṇava Āgamas, while the philosophical aspects such asĪśvara, Jīva and prakṛti, organic relationship, upāya (means) and mokṣa (goal) are all taken direct from Upaniṣadic teachings.

Vaiṣṇavism in the Itihāsas

This period saw a comprehensive development of the essential tenets of the Vaiṣṇava philosophy and religion in the two Itihāsas (epics), the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata which includes the Bhagavadgītā. The Rāmāyaṇa is regarded by the Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas as a Śaranaṅgati-śāstra or text expounding the doctrine of self-surrender. A classic example of śaranaṅgati is that of Vibhīṣaṇa who deserts his kingdom, family and wealth and seeks refuge of Śrī Rāma. The Rāmāyaṇa is also considered as a text expounding the greatness of Goddess Lakṣmī through the character of Sītā. The epic further depicts that Lord Viṣṇu incarnated Himself as a human being extolling the significance of avatāra. The two important Vaiṣṇava concepts, viz; dāsatva or service to God and Bhagavad-bhakti or the worship of God with devotion are personified in the characters of Lakṣmaṇa and Bharata. Śatrughna is the symbol of
Bhāgavad-kaiṅkarya or service to a God’s devotee, known as Bhāgavata śeṣatva. The Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas including Rāmānuja have drawn material from the Rāmāyaṇa in developing the theological doctrines of Vaiṣṇavism. The great epic Mahābhārata is considered to be the encyclopedia of Vaiṣṇava philosophy and religion. The doctrines of Pāncarātra can be found in the Nārāyaṇiya section of Śāntiparva of the Mahābhārata. The supremacy of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa conception appears often in the Mahābhārata. The identity of Viṣṇu with Vāsudeva, Nārāyaṇa, Bhagavān and Kṛṣna is established in this epic. The Mokṣadharma section of Śāntiparva presents the philosophy and religion of Vaiṣṇavism. The Bhagavadgītā, a part of the Mahābhārata serves as the most important sourcebook and also the foundation for the exposition of the sādhanā for mokṣa.

Vaiṣṇavism in the Purāṇas

The Purāṇas in general and Viṣṇu Purāṇa, in particular, have played a significant role in the development of Vaiṣṇavism. It presents all the basic philosophical and theological doctrines of Vaiṣṇavism. Sage Parāśara, the author of Viṣṇu Purāṇa, establishes Lord Viṣṇu as Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer of the Universe and as always associated with Śrī or Mahalakṣmī. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa delineates Kṛṣṇa as a Pūrṇa Avatāra.197 The earlier vibhava avatāras possessing all the supreme qualities such as jñāna, bala, śakti, aishvarya and tejas establish twin qualities of paratva and saulabhya. Whatever form Lord may take Śrī joins Him in a suitable form. From the Bhagavadgītā, the Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas and the Pāncarātra Āgamas the Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas taught of the

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197 Bhag.P. I.3.4

कृष्णस्य भगवान्स्वयम्।
Nature of the Ultimate Reality of a Personal God with attributes and of his consort Śrī and the avatāras of God.

**Vaiṣṇavism in the Tamil Hymns of the Ālvārs**

The four thousand Tamil Hymns composed by the twelve Vaiṣṇava saints, known as the Ālvārs, mark an important stage of development of Vaiṣṇavism. Along with the worship of Viṣṇu, according to the Āgama tradition, the Ālvārs followed the Vedic culture also. It was a period when culture was brought within Vedic framework. We find frequent references in the Nālāyira Divyaprabandham to the Vedic mantras that were cited in the temples which the Ālvārs visited and of the yajñas that were performed. The Ālvārs who brought Viṣṇu worship within the fold of Vedic culture represent the phase of synthesis of Vedic culture and Āgamic ideology. The period of the Ālvārs is of special importance because their hymns, composed in Tamil, the vernacular language of South India, contained rich philosophical and theological ideas that were related to the Viśiṣṭādvaita Philosophy, namely, tattva, the Ultimate Reality, hita or the means of its attainment and puruṣārtha or the supreme goal of life. The philosophy of the Ālvārs marks a phase in the evolution of Vaiṣṇavism because it laid the foundation for a great philosophic system later crystallized by great Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas like Nāthamuni, Yāmuna, Rāmānuja and Vedānta Desika.

**Development of Vaiṣṇavism by the Ācāryas**

In the Śrīvaiṣṇava school, the first teacher is Lord Nārāyaṇa Himself and His student is His consort Goddess Lakṣmi who communicated the teachings to the Commander-in-Chief Viśvaksena. He revealed them to Nammālvār, the doyen of the Ālvārs, all of whom had direct experience of the Divine. The Ācāryas then received the teachings and handed them
down to the Vaiṣṇava community through a succession of spiritual masters, known as *Guruparamparā*, the greatest of them being Nāthamuni, Yāmunācārya, Rāmānuja and Vedānta Desika. As a system of philosophy, the scholars say, that it is likely to have originated with Nāthamuni in the 10th century, though his works have not remained extant. However, the works of his grandson Yāmuna give us some insight into the school before Rāmānuja’s systematic development of its tenets. According to Vedānta Desika, a great scholar and consolidator of Viśiṣṭādvaita Philosophy, Nāthamuni was the first exponent of this Philosophy. While Nāthamuni was greatly inspired by the emotional hymns of the Ālvars, the basis on which he founded Śrīvaiṣṇavism was the Vedānta, the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and the Pāncarātra Āgamas. He also brought forth a tradition by establishing a lineage with the Ālvars. The post-bhakti Vaiṣṇava religion in Tamilnādu was marked by the elaborate exposition and institutionalization of the ideas and philosophy of the Ālvars. A host of illustrious Ācāryas, like Nāthamuni, Yāmuna, Rāmānuja, Embār, Kureṣa, Nanjiyar, Nampillai, Pillai Lokācārya, Vedānta Desika, Maṇavāla māmuni, and many other later scholars carried on the Ālvar or the Bhāgavata tradition and wrote commentaries on it in Sanskrit, Tamil and *Maṇipravāḷa* languages. The sentiments expressed by the Ālvars can be described as emotional bhakti whereas those of the Ācāryas can be described as intellectual discourse on bhakti-mārga. The post-bhakti is often called ‘the age of commentaries’. Great scholars, proficient in both Sanskrit and Tamil brought out the inner meanings of the Tamil prabandhas and correlated them with Sanskrit sources like the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, the two great epics, the Purāṇas and the Bhagavadgītā in a language called Maṇipravāḷa, a mixture of Sanskrit and Tamil. They gave new interpretations to the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata and the
Bhagavadgītā in the light of the hymns of the Āḻvārs with emphasis on love, service, devotion and surrender. They considered these works as extolling bhakti and prapatti-mārga, the path shown by the Āḻvārs. They were also keen on contradicting Saṅkara’s theory of attributeless God (nirguṇa Brahman), theory of illusion (māyāvāda), the path of knowledge (jñānamārga), and non-dualism (advaita). We see in the works of Rāmānuja a different theory based on the concepts of saguṇa Brahman (God with attributes), reality of the world, bhakti-mārga and qualified monism (Viśiṣṭādvaita). They also held the Tamil language as worthy of equal veneration and a worthy path to salvation. Soon after the last Āḻvār, South Indian Vaiṣṇava traditions encouraged the diffusion of the Divyaprābandham. Hagiography credits Nāṭhamuni (823-923) with the rediscovery of these poems. He was the first to attempt a thorough-going expression of Vaiṣṇava theology through an interpretation of the Sanskrit scriptures. From his time onwards the 4000 stanzas of the prābandham were canonized and recited in the Śrīrangam temple, a practice which spread to other Vaiṣṇava temples in South India. The Koil Olukku, chronicle of Śrīrangam temple, describes the duties of Araiyar or ‘supplicants’ who were and still are, in charge of chanting and illustrating (by gestures) the Divyaprābandham and enacting simple religious dramas. Nāṭhamuni’s inclusion of the Āḻvārs’ hymns in temple worship provided a definitive legitimation of both Vaiṣṇavite devotionalism and Tamil as a language of worship. At the same time, this inclusion gave tremendous intellectual challenges for later Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas who sought to reconcile the intensely theistic devotionalism of the Āḻvārs with the Vedantic tradition that included ritualistic, meditative, non-theistic and theistic expressions.
A new phase of Śrīvaiśṇavism begins with Śrī Rāmānuja who tries to bring about a synthesis between Vedic philosophy and the Tamil traditions of the Āḻvārs, between Vedānta and Bhakti ideology, between caste-based social division and sectarianism of the Āḻvārs. The beliefs of the Āḻvārs are certainly evident in Rāmānuja’s thought. The close correlation between the fundamental beliefs of the Āḻvārs and the philosophy of Rāmānuja suggests that he was certainly systematising philosophical and religious ideas that had been in vogue. And there is no doubt that these ideas had been fed to the ordinary man in the Tamil language by the Āḻvārs through their devotional hymns, the Nālāyira Divyaprabandham. Some of the very important concepts of Śrī Rāmānuja are so glaringly similar to those of the prabandham that one cannot but ask the question whether Śrī Rāmānuja was influenced or not by the Āḻvārs in formulating his Viṣistādvaīta philosophy.

Another view regarding the origin of Vaiśṇavism

Some Western Indologists as well as Indian scholars like R.N.Dandekar and some others hold a different view regarding the origin of Vaiśṇavism. According to them there is ample evidence to show that it is Vāsudeva, the hero of the Vṛṣṇi tribe, and not the Vedic Viṣṇu, who is the origin of what we today understand by Vaiśṇavism. The theistic cult of Vāsudeva entered on bhakti for the deified Vṛṣṇi tribal hero, who is not mentioned in any text. Pāṇini (6th to 5th centuries B.C.) has enunciated a special rule in his Astādhyāyī to explain the formation of the word ‘Vāsudevaka’ in the sense of a “bhakta or devotee of the pre-eminenty venerable god Vāsudeva.” 198 On the basis of Pāṇini’s Sūtra, R. N. Dandekar states, “Vāsudeva mentioned in the Sūtra as the name of a god is thereby made

198 Pāṇini sūtra IV,3,98
quite explicit. The godhead of Vāsudeva and Vāsudevism or the religion centering round Vāsudeva (which has to be regarded as the primary form of the classical Vaiṣṇavism) must have become fairly well established in Pāṇini’s time (5th Century B.C.) —indeed, so much so that Pāṇini thought it necessary to compose a special Sūtra in respect of them. The tradition of the Vāsudeva religion continued almost uninterrupted, since Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to Chandragupta Maurya’s court (4th century B.C) makes reference to this in his book ‘Indica’. He speaks of Śauruseni (people of the Śaurusena or Mathurā region) and their veneration of Herakles (the name given by them for Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa). A passage in the Buddhist Niddeśā points to the prevalence of Vāsudeva worship in the 4th century B.C. The Bhagavadgītā (3rd Century B.C) eulogises the man of knowledge, who at the end of many births, betakes himself unto the god in the conviction that “Vāsudeva is All.” The historical tradition that Vāsudeva originally belonged to the tribe of the Vṛṣṇis is also well attested wherein Lord Kṛṣṇa declares that ‘of the Vṛṣṇis He is Vāsudeva’. The Mahabhashya of Patanjali (150 B.C) also clearly speaks of Vāsudeva as belonging to the Vṛṣṇi tribe. The inscriptions of Ghosundi and Nānāghāt (1st century B.C) and the grammatical work Kaśika all of which associate Vāsudeva with Saṁkarṣaṇa (another deified Vṛṣṇi hero) further confirm the Vṛṣṇi lineage of Vāsudeva. In the Mahābhārata Saṁkarṣaṇa (or Balarama) is depicted as the elder brother of Vāsudeva. Due to their original Vṛṣṇi affiliations Saṁkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva came to be closely allied. With the development of the doctrine of the Vyūhas (standing for the individual

200 BhG VII.19
201 Ibid.,X.37
202 Vārtika 7 of 4.1.114
self) subordinate to Vāsudeva (standing for the Highest Self), the Saṁkarśaṇa religion lost its independent existence. Srinivasachari, a staunch supporter of the Vedic origin of Vaiṣṇavism, however, is against the view that Vaiṣṇavism, as a religion, has been developed primarily from the Vaiṣṇava Āgamas, the numerous Pāncarātra treatises, more than the Vedānta texts. He is also against the view that there existed in the ancient past a Bhāgavata religion or the religious practices of the Bhāgavatas who worshipped Bhagavān and that Rāmānuja imposed this religion on Vedānta philosophy to fuse the two to make it a philosophy of religion. His contention is that the origin of Vaiṣṇavism, without doubt, is in the RgVeda and as a monotheistic religion it has been in existence from the time of the RgVeda and it has passed through successive stages of development upto the time of Rāmānuja and his successors. Vaiṣṇavism is not a mere cult; it is a religion which has developed out of the Vedānta and has thus a strong philosophic foundation. “True Vaiṣṇavism”, according to him “is the one which has been in existence from the time of RgVeda and which developed through successive stages over several centuries culminating in the reformulation as a systematized philosophy of religion at the hands of Rāmānuja.”

He further adds, “It is in fact a cult having universal appeal as it believes that Viṣṇu is the Supreme Deity who is immanent in all and that the worship offered to other deities will ultimately reach Him even as rain water fallen from the sky into the different streams eventually join the ocean. The Western Indologistst and some Indian scholars hold the view that Viṣṇu mentioned in the RgVeda is one among several deities such as Agni, Rudra, Prajāpati, Indra, Varuṇa, Soma etc and Viṣṇu is therefore not the Supreme Deity.

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204 Ibid.,xxxvii
S.M.S.Chari denies this view and says that a dispassionate study of the hymns related to Viṣṇu on the basis of interpretations by ancient commentators such as Yāska and the exponents of Vedānta will bring about the true implications of the Vedic statements and reveal beyond doubt that the view of the Indologists is incorrect.\(^{205}\) Jan Gonda who also supports the Vedic origin of Viṣṇu expresses the view that “Viṣṇu might have been a God of greater eminence among the masses of Indian population in early Vedic times, whether these masses were Aryans or belonged to the so-called original inhabitants of the country-the ancient Indian views of the god Viṣṇu show a remarkable degree of consistency.”\(^{206}\) In his opinion, “the Vedic poets, whose attention and energy were almost absorbed by the worship of other gods, the most important of whom was the great deity of the warrior class Indra, did not accept all the aspects of Viṣṇu’s personality.”\(^{207}\) Again Srinivasachari is against the view of some ancient as well as modern scholars that Pāncarātra is non-Vedic in origin and hence not authoritative. He argues that the Vaikhānasa Āgama is based on Vaikhānasa kalpa-sūtras compiled by the Vedic SageVaikhānasa and claims that it has taken its teachings direct from the Vedas. Viṣṇu in this system is identified with Nārāyaṇa, the very Brahman on the authority of the TaṅtirīyaNārāyaṇa Upaniṣad,\(^{208}\) thus confirming that Viṣṇu referred to in the RgVeda is Nārāyaṇa, the Brahman of the Upaniṣads. The validity of Pāncarātra system has been vindicated by Yāmunācārya in his Āgama-prāmāṇya, by Rāmānuja in his commentary on the relevant Vedānta sūtras and in a more emphatic way by Vedānta Desika in the Pāncarātra-rakṣa. The

\(^{205}\) Ibid., p.3

\(^{206}\) Jan Gonda, Aspects of Early Vaiṣṇavism, Delhi,1993, p.10

\(^{207}\) Ibid

\(^{208}\) Vimānaracanā kalpa,p.492

तत्समावेशते -नारायणं पर इति श्रवकि quoted by S.M.Srinivasachari, Op.cit., p.43
Mahābhārata extols it because it is taught by Lord Nārāyaṇa. The Pāncarātra Samhitās claim their origin from the Vedas. It is, therefore, pro-Vedic. The names which are generally used for Viṣṇu in these Āgamas are Bhagavān and Vāsudeva which are identical to Nārāyaṇa and all the names represent the Supreme Being, the very Brahman of the Upaniṣads.\textsuperscript{209} The Nārāyaṇiya section of Śāntiparva of the Mahābhārata records for the first time the doctrines of Pāncarātra and the identity of Viṣṇu with Vāsudeva, Nārāyaṇa and Bhagavān as well as Krṣṇa is well established in that great epic.

R.G.Bhandarkar, however, holds that “three streams of religious thought, namely the one flowing from Viṣṇu, the Vedic god at its source, another from Nārāyaṇa, the cosmic and philosophic god, and the third from Vāsudeva, the historical god, mingled together decisively and thus formed the later Vaiṣṇavism.”\textsuperscript{210} So it is, according to him, the amalgamation of three streams of thought and not merely Viṣṇu, or Vāsudeva from whom Vaiṣṇavism originated. To this he adds one more stream, that of Vāsudeva Krṣṇa, which in modern times has acquired an almost exclusive predominance.

Whatever may be the origin of Vaiṣṇavism, the fact remains that it is a vibrant living religion whose followers worship Viṣṇu in His different forms and eulogise Him with His thousand different names (sahasra nāma) including Vāsudeva, Nārāyaṇa and Krṣṇa.

\textsuperscript{209} \textit{Lakṣmi Tantra} II.5 and 6
\textsuperscript{210} R.G.Bhandarkar, \textit{op.cit.}, p.35
The Essential Characteristics of the Approach of the Āhvārs

i) Bhakti or devotion to a personal or loving God

Love and devotion to a Personal God is a dominant theme of the Āhvārs as against impersonal, abstract deities. The Ultimate Reality (paratattva) to them was very personal and was the Puruṣothama, the Supreme person, Śrīman Nārāyana (the support and abode of the hosts of souls) with all auspicious and glorious attributes. The most important attribute is his compassion represented by ‘Śrī’ (Goddess Lakṣmī) who is eternally resident in his heart. She acts as the mediatrix (Puruṣakāra) between man and God. They project the Hindu divinities as intensely human, sharing the joys and sorrows of human beings. An ardent craving for a direct vision of God is the predominant theme of the Āhvār hymns. They gave expression to their emotional feelings in different ways, like assuming the role of a nāyakī or consort of the lord (nāyaka nāyakī bhāva) e.g. Nammālvār and Tirumaṅgai Āhvār or the role of a milk maid (Āṇḍal) or a mother to the divine child Kṛṣṇa (Kulaśekhara Āhvār and Periālvār)

ii) The Icon or Arcā form of the Deity as Arcāvatāra

The beautiful icon or arcā form of the deity in the temple, which a common man can worship with flowers, fruits, milk etc. and meditate upon, is emphasized. The Āhvārs describe the icon as ‘arcāvatāra’; a concrete, visible object alive and vibrant to their salutations. Temple is the abode of God and the Āhvārs repeatedly mention that the idol in the temple is none other than Lord Viṣṇu, thus reconciling Vedic worship with temple worship.
iii) Rituals

Elaborate rituals of Vedic Brahminism were deemed quite unnecessary by the Āḻvārs. What was needed was bhakti and self surrender. There was no need for a priest or ceremony. Here we find the metamorphosis of rituals and sacrifices turning into temple worship and the Purānic gods, Viṣṇu and Śiva representing Indra of the sacrificial religion.

iv) Puranic Allusion

The hymns of the Āḻvārs are replete with the story of Viṣṇu and his avatāras. Feat of Vāmana measuring the universe with his three strides and Kṛṣṇa stealing butter are pet themes. By quoting the avatāras they could present the extraordinary divine deeds līlā-s of the Lord) to promote bhakti among the masses. But according to Srinivasachari, more than to promote the Bhakti movement these hymns addressed to the arcā deities are intended to establish the fact that the incarnation of God as an arcā form is real and to reveal “without any shadow of doubt the central philosophy of avatāra viz., that the one Supreme Being, the Ultimate Reality of Metaphysics assumes different forms and names for making Himself easily accessible to the devotees. Existentially He remains the same Reality.”

v) Saulabhya or Easy Accessibility

The mischievous but lovable feats of the cowherd boy Kṛṣṇa, first described in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa are celebrated with great devotion and feeling by he Āḻvārs. The reason for the extensive use of Kṛṣṇāvatāra is to show God’s saulabhya or easy accessibility to his devotees.

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211 S.M.Srinivasachari, op.cit., P. 94
The one Supreme Being, the Ultimate Reality, assumes different forms and names for making himself easily accessible through His avatāras.

vi) Caste System

Hailing from different strata of society the Āḻvārs were very liberal towards caste system. For the Āḻvārs anyone could become the devotee of God irrespective of caste, creed or sex, provided he/she had his/her mind firmly set on God. There were low-caste people among the Āḻvārs and Āṇḍal was a female poet. In a number of places the Āḻvārs emphasize the idea that for a true Bhāgavata there is no caste barrier. Tondaradippodi Āḻvār states in his ‘Tirumālai’\(^{212}\) that the true devotees of Viṣṇu or the Bhāgavatas, even if they belonged to the outcaste are worthy of our highest veneration. On the contrary, if a Brahmin with a full knowledge of the four Vedas were to ill-treat a devotee of a lower caste he should only be treated as an outcaste.\(^{213}\) Periāḻvār says ‘we will forsake our old castes and become members of one large community serving God.’\(^{214}\)

Can the Āḻvārs be considered as social reformers? Not really, because the Āḻvārs were not concerned with social relations among people, but dealt only with God. However, it laid down the principle of equality among all people in the presence of God and of social respectability of pious people even belonging to the lower castes. We have the traditional account of Tiruppanālvār, an ardent but low caste born devotee of Lord Ranganātha of Śrīrangam temple who, because of his caste, was not allowed to enter the precincts of the temple. But at the behest of Lord Ranganātha

\(^{212}\) ‘Tirumālai’ means ‘sacred garland’

\(^{213}\) Divya Prabandham, v. 913 and 914

\(^{214}\) Peri TM: 1:5
Himself, the Brahmin priest of the temple carried him on his shoulders to enable him have a direct vision of his favourite deity, Ranganātha.

vii) Karma

The Āḻvārs had laid a great emphasis on the human bondage caused by ‘karma’ or the deeds of past lives which is ‘anādi’ (beginningless). Nārāyana is the deity who is associated with countless souls which are of the nature of jñāna and ānanda (bliss). Jīva exists even during the period of dissolution in a subtle form devoid of body and sense organs. Īśvara causes its birth associating the Jīva with a physical body. The soul assumes a body in accordance with the ‘puṇya’ (good) or ‘pāpa’ (evil) from past deeds.

viii) Bhāgavata Šeṣatva

Jīva’s relation to God as well as to the devotee of God is known as Bhāgavata Šeṣatva, which means the individual Self is subordinate to God's devotees. This concept is clearly expressed in the Āḻvār hymns. The worship of the bhāgavatas (Bhāgavata kainkarya) is considered to be one step above the worship of God Himself. Madhurakavi, one of the twelve Āḻvārs is a standing example of supreme devotion of a disciple to his preceptor (Acārya bhakti). He chose Nammālvār as his guru because he found in him qualities of God and he knew no other God. He wrote only a poem of 11 verses (which forms part of the Divyaprabhāndham) portraying ten virtues of his guru equal to those of God which offer protection and salvation to a soul. This poetical work of Madhurakavi Āḻvār presents the doctrine of Acārya bhakti which is the corner stone of the Vaiṣṇava theology. Though the concept can be traced to the Itiḥāsas and Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas, the credit of developing it into a doctrine goes to the Āḻvārs.
ix) Prapatti or Šaranāgati

In accordance with the teachings of the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavadgītā the Āḻvārs hold bhaktiyoga as the means of attaining God. They also lay emphasis on the absolute self-surrender to God i.e., prapatti as the direct as well as easiest way to God realization and liberation. Prapatti, ātmanikṣepa or bhāranyāsa is to place the burden of protection on God; it is absolute dependence (śeṣatva) on God as the sole power in the universe, taking refuge in Him and relying upon His grace alone. So prapatti means devotion without worldly interests, remembrance of God in one’s thought, words and deeds and flinging oneself on God’s compassion with absolute self-surrender, thinking that He will save and He alone will save. The Rgveda is replete with hymns of devotion, the seers expressing meek submission to one or the other divinity pleading for protection from natural forces like fire, water, storm, solar heat or for cattle, wealth and progeny. But this is not devotion born out of selfless love. Varuṇa is eulogised with devotion, more out of fear for punishment at the hands of the god for breaking his moral laws than out of pure love. The Upaniṣads have given expression in clearer terms to prapatti as an upāya (means) for Mokṣa. Later in the Itihāsas and the Purāṇas we find the concept of prapatti in its fullest form. There are six angas or accessories with which one has to submit his/her self-protection at the feet of the lord.

1. ānukulasya sankalpaḥ – the intention to do whatever is favourable to the lord

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215 Śr. Up VI, 18
योब्रह्माणि विदेशति पूर्वम् यो नेवेदाष्ट्र प्रहिणाति तस्मी।
तत्तद्वेद आनुब्रह्मण्यंकार शुभव शरणमप्रपधे॥
2. \textit{pratikulasya varjanam} – the avoidance of whatever is displeasing to him

3. \textit{mahāviśvasah or rakṣisyati iti viśvasah} – supreme faith in his capacity to protect us

4. \textit{gopātīvavaraṇam} – enabling oneself to be selected or picked up by the lord

5. \textit{Kārpanyam -kārpanyam} means utter helplessness which indicates that one does not know or search for any \textit{upāya} (means) like \textit{Bhakti Yoga} or \textit{jñāna Yoga} to attain His feet other than surrendering to the Lord (\textit{ākincanyam}) and the absence of any other interest than \textit{Mokṣa} and the absence of any other refuge than the Lord (\textit{ananyagatītvam})

6. \textit{Ātmanikṣeṇaṇam or Ātmasamarpaṇam}-Flinging oneself at the feet of the lord with utter submissiveness and meekness. The Lord becomes his care-taker like the mother cat which carries its kitten wherever it goes. This is known as \textit{mārjāra bhakti}.

We have the finest example of \textit{saranāgati} in the Rāmāyaṇa when Vibhīṣana takes refuge in Rāma saying that he had sought Śrī Rāma as refuge abandoning his sons and wife.\textsuperscript{216} “I have come to you forsaking Lankā, friends and wealth.”\textsuperscript{217} In spite of stiff opposition from Sugrīva, Hanūman and others, Rāma gives him shelter by saying, ‘I vouchsafe

\textsuperscript{216} Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakānda XVII.16

\textsuperscript{217} \textit{Ibid}; XIX 5

परिशद्यत्वा मया लंका मित्राणि च धनानि च ।
security against all beings, to him, who comes to me only once and seeks protection from me, saying, “I am yours”, such is my vow.\textsuperscript{218}

The ‘carama’ slokas or final verses of the Varāha purāṇa, Rāmāyaṇa, and the Bhagavadgītā form the basis for the very important doctrine of prapatti of the Āḻvārs / Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. The Varāha carama sloka which is not extant in the Varaha Purāṇa says:

The man who, when his mind is in normal condition, when the body is not shattered and when the elementary constituents of his body are in perfect equipoise, meditates on Me, who has the world as my body and who is not subject to births due to karma when that man lies like a log of wood or a piece of stone in his dying moments, I think of this devotee of mine and lead him to attain the supreme abode.\textsuperscript{219}

These are the words spoken by Lord Viṣṇu in his Varāha avatāra to Śrī Bhū-devī, his consort, when she requested him to tell her an easy way for ordinary people to attain him. In the Bhagavadgītā Lord Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna,\textsuperscript{220} “having given up all dharmas or rites unintentionally surrender to Me alone, I’ll release you from all sins and give Mokṣa.” When Lord selects his favourite it becomes His entire responsibility to look after his welfare. The highest honour of being chosen by the Lord is possible only by devotion. Vaiṣṇavism gives great importance to this grace of God.

\textsuperscript{218} \textit{Ibid; XVIII 33}

\textsuperscript{219} Varāha Purāṇa

\textsuperscript{220} BG XVIII. 66

\begin{verbatim}
सुकुमार त्रिशति च वाचके त अभि रे सर्व भूतेभो ददायेतेत् दत्ते मम ||

स्थः स्थिते मनं शुरुस्ते शान्तीर सति यो नन: धातु साये स्थिते सत्ते विश्रुतुथं च मामण् मम ||

तदस्त्र ब्रिमण तु काहि यांचाण शनिर्मिज्जम् ||

अहं सरामि महेन्द्र स्वामयो परम गतिम् ||

 advantary

र्व धर्मानु परिश्रमण ममेक्स्म शरणम व्रज ||

अहं त्व र्व पापेभो मोक्षविष्ठामि मा शुक्क ||
\end{verbatim}
x) **Mokṣa or Supreme Goal**

The Āḻvārs use the Tamil word ‘vīdu’ for *mokṣa* which means literally liberation. In the present context it denotes the existence of the soul in an eternal abode of God which is called ‘paramapada’ or *Vaikunṭha*- a place free from suffering and full of bliss. The *jīvātman* enjoys a state equal to that of Brahman after it is totally liberated from bondage. Even though this philosophic concept of *Mokṣa* or *Brahmānubhava* is accepted by the Āḻvārs they lay greater emphasis on the theological concept of *Mokṣa* which means *Bhāgavata kainkarya*, i.e., uninterrupted, appropriate service to God at all times, at all places and in all states. This is known as *parama puruṣārtha* because it is made available to the *Jīvātman* by the Supreme Lord only in the state of *Mokṣa*.

**xi) Language**

The Āḻvārs who were born long before Śrī Rāmānuja taught the same already prevailing Vedānta philosophy and Śrīvaiṣṇava religion to the masses through the vernacular language, Tamil, equally understandable to the high and the low and man and woman unlike Sanskrit which was the language of the elite class of society. The saints used simple language to express their experiences and sentiments which had a remarkable effect on the Tamil society. For the first time the complete philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita was sung as songs by the Āḻvārs. All the Āḻvārs have directly or indirectly dealt with the fundamental doctrines of Viśiṣṭādvaita *viz*, *tattva*, *hita* and *puruṣārtha*.

**The Divyaprabandham as Tamil Veda**

Right from the time of Nāṭhamuni (9th century) the Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas have regarded the four thousand hymns of the Āḻvārs, and especially, the
Tiruvāimoli of Nammāḻvār as Tamil Veda. Nathamuni, the first and foremost Ācārya to recognize the greatness of the Divyaprabandham, describes Nammāḻvār’s Tiruvāimoli as Drāvida Veda-sāgara or the ocean of Tamil Veda. Parāṣara Bhattar calls it Drāvida Brahma Samhitā. Vedānta Desika has named it as Dramidopaniṣad. Though these Ācāryas and many other orthodox Vaiṣṇavas consider that the Āḻvārs' prabandham is Tamil Veda, Srinivasachari has a different view. He says that even though the philosophic character of Tiruvāimoli is unquestionable it is important to know the correct sense in which the Tamil hymns are Veda or Upaniṣad. Prima facie, the very term Tamil Veda appears to be a self-contradiction. The term Veda refers to the Revealed Scripture in Sanskrit because it is regarded as anādi or beginningless, nitya or eternal and apauruṣeya or not ascribable to human authorship. If we accept this technical meaning of the term, it will not be correct to regard the Tiruvāimoli of Nammāḻvār as Veda for the reason that it does not fulfil the normally accepted criteria for the Veda. Some Ācāryas, like Maṇavāla māmuni, however, argue that the Tiruvāimoli is anadi, nitya and apauruṣeya.\(^\text{221}\) Vedānta Desika regards it as a sanhita or branch of Veda in Tamil intuited by Nammāḻvār in the same way as The Vedic seers intuited the Veda.\(^\text{222}\) Srinivasachari’s argument against this view is that even though the Tamil Hymns represent the utterance of God through the media of a human being, as stated by Nammāḻvār himself, the fact that God sang them renders it pauruṣeya or as a composition of a person. He cites other examples of Pāncarātra Samhitā which is claimed to be taught by Nārāyaṇa Himself, and Mahābhārata, authored by Sage Vyasa, who is supposed to be an incarnation of Nārāyaṇa, which have not

\(^{221}\) All Sūtras 45

\(^{222}\) Vedanta Desika, Padukāsahasra 1,3, www.prapatti.com
been given the status of the Veda. So it will not be justifiable to accept
the *Tiruvāimoli* as Tamil Veda in the strict technical sense. However, it
can be considered as Veda as claimed by the Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas on an
totally different basis. It is Veda in the sense that it reveals the
knowledge of God (*vedayati iti vedaḥ*). It can be treated as Veda or
Upaniṣad because it contains the essential teachings of the Vedas
including the Upaniṣads. Madhurakavi Ā.lvār substantiates this view
when he says that the essence or purport of the Vedas was taught to him
by Nammālvār. “Saint Satakopa (Nammālvār) has sung and made my
mind absorbed in his works permanently; has sung them in such a way
that the inner meaning (purport) of the Vedas, which are recited by the
ancient Vedic scholars (*vediyar*), is clearly understood and well-fixed in
my mind.”223

The *Tiruvāimoli* is neither a translation nor a paraphrase of the Veda.
Vedānta Desika, in his poetical composition in Tamil, which deals with
the lives and works of the Ā.lvār poets, states clearly that the Ālvārs have
collected together the purport of the eternal four Vedas and presented it in
pure Tamil language out of compassion for the benefit of humanity.224 In
another context, he points out that the Ālvārs as divine incarnations have
given to us the essence of vedic teachings in a language accessible to all
in the same way as the clouds gather the moisture from the ocean and
pour it down as fresh cool water that is beneficial to all living beings.225
“In view of these authoritative statements” states Srinivasachari, “it is but
appropriate to regard the Tamil *prabandhas* in genral and *Tiruvāimoli* in

223 Kaṇṭhinmusrutāmbru.9
225 Ibid., RTS Guruparamparā-sara, Srikrishna Sabha, Bombay, 1951
particular as Veda in a restricted sense.  

He further goes on to say that the Divyaprabandham is actually an upabrāhmaṇa or a work that elucidates what is taught in the Vedas like other Smṛti texts such as Manusmṛti, Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, including the Bhagavadgītā, and the Viṣṇu Purāṇa which are regarded as upabrāhmaṇas. But Vedānta Desika goes one step further, stating, “it is a distinctive upabrāhmaṇa because it expounds and elucidates the Vedāntic theories in a better way than the Itihāsas and the Puranas.”

Another reason for giving the Prabandham a special status is that even though the Tamil poems are basically devotional in character, they present a comprehensive account of Godhead in all its aspects, viz; svarūpa, rūpa, guṇa, vibhava and līlā. It is different from other religious texts in that it deals with the doctrine of God with Bhagavad-guṇas in a superb way that would capture the mind of a devotee.

The Theory of Udbhaya-vedānta or Dual Vedānta

The term Vedānta means end of Vedas (vedasya antāḥ) and as such refers to the Upaniṣads. It also denotes the system of thought (darśana) developed on the basis of the Upaniṣads. It is commonly applied to the Brahmaśūtra of Bādarāyaṇa on the basis of which different schools of thought such as Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita have come up. The Tamil compositions of the Ālvārs cannot be called Vedānta in this strict technical sense but in a secondary sense they can be called so because they contain the essential teachings of the Upaniṣads, just as the Bhagavadgītā, which contains the cream of the Upaniṣads. The two Vedāntas, as generally understood in Vaiṣṇavism, are the Tamil Vedānta

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226 S.M.Srinivasachari, Philosophy and Theistic Mysticism of the Alvars, Delhi, 1997 p.224
227 Vedanta Desika, Drididopanisat-tātprya-ratnāvali, 4, Srikrishnasabha, Bombay, 1951
of Divyaprabandham and the Sanskrit Vedānta of the Upaniṣads and together they represent Udbhaya-Vedānta or Dual Vedānta. The Śrīvaiṣṇava community considers both the Sanskrit scriptures and the four thousand hymns of the Ālvārs as the basis of their theology. This is because “the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition”, as John Carman aptly puts it, “contains elements from the culture that developed around the river Ganga in North India (a culture that wrote principally in Sanskrit) as well as from the culture of Kaveri basin in the South where Tamil flourished… We may perceive the Ganga and the Kaveri civilizations forming the cultural and geographic analogue to Athens and Jerusalem as the joint ancestors of a new way of thinking. The complexities of the Hellenistic and the Hebraic heritages seen in western thought are paralleled in the twofold inheritance of the Śrīvaiṣṇava culture. Like the literatures of Athens and Jerusalem, the Sanskrit and Tamil literatures perpetuate two distinct ways of perceiving the universe and a human being’s place in it, and the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition is the product of these two ways of thinking.228 Another justification for giving the status of the Vedānta to the Prabandhams in general and the Tiruvāimoli in particular, by the Ācāryas, is that all the Tamil poems of the Ālvārs cover topics on the nature of the Ultimate Reality (tattva), the means of attaining it (sādhanā) and the supreme goal of life (parama purusartha). From the standpoint of Vaiṣṇava theology the entire Divya-prabandham is an exposition of the inner meaning of the mūla-mantra or Nārāyaṇa-mantra or aṣṭākṣara-mantra (of eight syllables), the dvaya-mantra which refers to śaranāgati or surrender to God and the carama-śloka of the Bhagavadgītā enjoining the self-surrender or prapatti. These mantras contain the quintessence of Vedānta. Both the Nālāyira Divyaprabandham and the Sanskrit Vedas

228 John B.Carman, The Tamil Veda, Chicago, 1989, p.3
are considered as the most sacred books in the Tamil country. The practical application of the concept of *Udbhaya-Vedānta* can be seen in Vaiṣṇava weddings, funerals and other rituals when Vedic mantras and verses from the *Prabandham* are recited, switching from one to the other. It is an interesting sight, indeed, to witness this Dual Vedānta at work during processions of the temple deity through the streets. In these processions a group of Śrīvaiṣṇavas chanting the Tamil Veda go in front of the deity and a group chanting the Sanskrit Vedas follows behind.

**The Philosphic Implications of the Āḻvār Poems**

Viśiṣṭādvaita is a *darśana* because it is a philosophical system which has a spiritual perception of reality or an integral intuition of Brahman. The *rṣis* and the Ālvārs realized the existence of Brahman by directly experiencing Him and thus proved the truth that Brahman is the intuitional as well as the philosophical Highest. Their experience is justified by philosophic thinking. In extreme monism Brahman is *jñāna* and attained by *jñāna*; extreme theism relies on scriptural faith and not on *jñāna*. But in Viśiṣṭādvaita Brahman can be enquired into as well as experienced. Jñāna is inspired by *bhakti* and *bhakti* is illumined by *jñāna* and they together constitute *bhaktirūpāpanna jñāna*. It is Śrī Rāmānujācārya who integrated the experiences of the *rṣis* and the Ālvārs and expounded them as one single coherent whole called *Udbhaya Vedānta*. As a philosopher-saint Ramanuja established the truths of Viśiṣṭādvaita as embodied in the *Brahmasūtra* and at the same time thought of each *adhisthāna* as a *Brahmānubhāva* or experience of the Brahman. The *Bhagavadviṣaya* is the logical exposition of the spiritual experiences of Nammālvār just as the Śrī *Bhāṣya* sums up the Vedāntic experiences systematized in the *Sūtras*. The entire system is explained in a twofold way as *tattva, hita, puruṣārthha* and *arthapancaka*. The first is the
co-ordination of the metaphysical, moral and religious aspects of experience, tattva, hita and puruṣārtha respectively. The arthapancaka deals with the five truths of the philosophy of religion, namely, prāpya, prāpta, upāya, prāptivirodhi, and prāpti. Brahman is the prāpya or the end to be attained. The prāpta is the jīvātman that seeks Brahman as its śarīri. Bhakti and prapatti are the upāya or means of attaining Brahman, by ceaseless devotion or absolute surrender to the Lord. Prāpti virodhi or chief obstacles in the realization of the goal are avidyā-karma, ahamkāra and mamakāra or the concept of ‘I’or ‘mine.’ Prāpti is the realization of Brahman, the highest end to be attained. Viṣistādvaita is the only Philosophy of Religion which affirms the self-identity of Brahman as the metaphysical, ethical and intuitional highest. As elucidated in the Śrībhāṣya, the first two adhyāyas (chapters) of the Brahmāsūtra form a meta-physical enquiry into the nature of the sat as the supreme tattva or saguṇa Brahman; the third chapter defines the nature of hita or means (sādhanā) as vedanā, upāsanā, or bhakti, and prapatti and the last chapter brings out the meaning of paramapuruṣārtha (the supreme goal of life) as the attainment of Brahman. Brahman is the root of philosophic thinking and the root of religious feeling and is the first cause and the final cause. The four chapters of the Vedānta-sūtras are a systematic elucidation of the truth step by step from the first sūtra to the last. Every adhikaraṇa or section of the Śārīrika-sāstra is an amubhava, experience or intuition of Brahman. What is metaphysically determined as the ultimate ground of all existence is also the supreme goal of man’s spiritual quest and yields a specific amubhava of the divine perfection. “This synthetic insight corrects the ordinary idea that the Vedānta-sūtras are a mere theoretic study of Viṣistādvaita and that the Bhagavadviṣaya of Nammālvār
embodies the practical aspect of spiritual experience and confirms the 
theory that Viśiṣṭādvaita is Udbhaya Vedānta.”

**Tattva or Reality**

Nammālvār, the holy saint ‘experiences’ the Supreme person as he really 
is. Says the Ālvār, “This is the Supreme Person who has transcendence, 
extra-ordinary divine ornaments, weapons, consorts and attendants and 
whose sport is the creation, sustenance and destruction of universe.”

Experiencing thus he speaks to his own heart that God is opposed to all 
defects and is a great ocean of innumerable, auspicious qualities such as 
bliss etc., which are limitless. The term uyānalam (Tamil word) in the 
first line of the Tiruvāimoli defines the supreme tattva or prāpya as 
Brahman, the absolutely ‘Blissful.’ The first aphorism in the Brahma- 
Sūtra is an enquiry into the nature of Brahman. It does not mention the 
name of any deity or cult while attempting to determine the nature of 
Brahman. Nammālvār adopts the same kind of philosophic approach in 
dealing with the theory of Reality. He does not state the name of any 
deity in the first ten hymns. The Ālvār himself states that his teachings 
have the support of the authoritative scriptural texts. “The Supreme 
Lord”, according to him, “is peerless at all times, past, present and future, 
the embodiment of bliss and knowledge in their perfection, much beyond 
the grasp of the senses, outside the ken of comprehension of even the 
thoroughly cleansed mind of the Yogi. Even the Yogi can comprehend 
Him only as infinite and immeasurable.” The first verse defines the

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229 P.N.Srinivasachari, *The Philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita*, Madras, 1943, p.467  
230 *TVM* 6.10.10  
231 *BS* 1.1.1  
232 *TVM* 1.1.7  
233 *TVM* 1.1.2
nature of Reality as *saguṇa* with transcendental bliss (*uyarnalam*) as the essential quality and with a beauteous form of His own. The second verse states that He is different from *cit* and *acit* and has a self luminous nature of His own. According to Nammālvār and all the other Ālvārs the Ultimate Reality is the Supreme Personal Being. At the very outset he defines it as the one who is endowed with infinite auspicious attributes *par excellence*. In his own words, he who possesses infinite unsurpassable bliss is the Reality.\(^{234}\) He is essentially of the nature of the spiritual knowledge and bliss.\(^{235}\) For the Ālvārs, “the most striking feature of the Reality is that the Supreme Being of Vedānta is personal God in the name of Nārāyaṇa who possesses not only infinite auspicious attributes but also a spiritual body bedecked with weapons and ornaments.”\(^{236}\) While speaking about the Ultimate Reality Rāmānuja says, “The texts of the Vedas define the substantive nature of this Nārāyaṇa, the supreme Brahma, as infinite knowledge, infinite bliss and infinite purity. They also sing of his unsurpassed, perfect and countless holy attributes like knowledge, power, sovereignty, strength, vigour and radiance. They describe him as one by whose will all other entities, both sentient and non-sentient, are sustained in their very being and controlled in all their activities.”\(^{237}\) Again he says, “He, the supreme One, is unique, transcending in character every other entity, because his nature is opposed to all evil and is of the sole nature of supreme bliss. He is the abode of countless auspicious attributes unsurpassed in their perfection. He is Bhagavān Nārāyaṇa, the highest Spirit. He is presented by the entire Vedānta, through variations of terminology as the ‘Soul of all’, ‘Highest

\(^{234}\) *TVM* I.1.1  
\(^{235}\) *Ibid.*, I.1.2  
\(^{236}\) S.M.Srīnivasacharī, *Philosophy and Theistic Mysticism of the Ālvārs*, op.cit., p.39  

Thus the Āḻvārs firmly establish that Brahman is *saviśeṣa* or differentiated and not *nirviśeṣa* or undifferentiated. In Srinivasachari’s opinion “the *saviśeṣa Brahma-vāda* which the Āḻvārs upheld obviously appears to have been in vogue long before Śaṅkara. The teachings of the Āḻvārs, therefore, tend greater support to Rāmānuja than Śaṅkara.”

The Upaniṣadic passage relating to the cosmic creation states that in the beginning, (prior to creation) only *sat* which is also known as Brahman and Ātman existed and the same one Reality without a second willed to become many. These passages emphasize that *sat* or Brahman is the source of the universe. Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār describes the Supreme Being as *adikkum adi*, meaning that it is the primary source of the universe. In conformity with the Vedantic theory, the Āḻvārs repeatedly point out that the Supreme Being is the one who creates, protects and dissolves the universe. They also mention additional cosmic functions referred to in the Vedas and Puranas viz; pervasion of the entire universe by three strides, retention of it in the body during deluge and the restoration of the universe hidden in the ocean. They describe these functions in the metaphorical terms of ‘swallowing the universe’ (undu) implying the dissolution and retention of it in the stomach indicating the protection during the period of deluge and ‘spitting it out’ (umilndu) signifying the act of creation. For Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār there is an element of protection in

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238 Ibid., §2, 4
239 S.M.Srinivasachari, *Philosophy and Theistic Mysticism of the Āḻvārs*, op.cit, p.38
240 Ch Up VI. 2.1
241 PTM 1 X.7.1
242 TTM 1.9.1
the act of containing the worlds, like that of a mother protecting an unborn infant.  

Immanence of God in the world is very prominent in the Upaniṣads. With the immanence of God is associated His transcendence also. The third verse of the Tiruvāimoli stresses the immanence of Brahman in all sentient and non-sentient beings and affirms the intimacy between ātman and Paramātman. Tirumāṅgai, addressing the Supreme Lord, says, “You are the transcendental universe (nitya vibhūti) and the physical universe, so also the variety of living beings existing there.” “You have become all the sentient beings and non-sentient entities.” In one of the hymns he speaks the very physical elements such as, fire, water, earth etc; as God. The Āḻvārs have given a detailed exposition of the nature of the Ultimate Reality in the hymns scattered all over the Divyaprabandham. The most important is the seventh verse in the Tiruvāimoli as it explains the truths of transcendence and immanence in the light of the śarīrātmabhāva and Bhagavān is described as the śarīrin that sustains and controls cit and acit. The Upaniṣad says: ‘Whose body is the earth, whose body is water, whose body is fire, whose body is air, whose body is ether, whose body is untransformed matter, he is the inner identity of

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243 PTM 11.6.6  
244 Mund Up III.1.3  
245 PTM IV.1.3  
246 Ibid. IV 1.2  
247 PTM IV.9.5
all entities, he is devoid of all defects, he is the divine Lord, he is the one Nārāyaṇa.\textsuperscript{248}

The \textit{cit} and \textit{acit} have no existence apart from Brahman and they are only for His satisfaction. Brahman is the \textit{ādhāraka}, \textit{niyantaka} and \textit{šeṣi} of both \textit{cit} and \textit{acit}. The \textit{ātman} pervades the self as its \textit{śarīri} and is therefore accessible to it and attainable by it. All these facts are well-established by the Āḻvārs on scriptural authority. In conformity with these Upaniṣads, Nammāḻvār says:

‘The Supreme Being abides in every particle of water of the wide-spread cool ocean, in the same way as it pervades the gross physical elements of the cosmic universe; it also abides in the infinitesimal souls and in every minute particle of earth.’\textsuperscript{249}

In conformity with the Upaniṣadic teaching Nammāḻvār points out in another hymn that \textit{Paramatman} enters into the three worlds which are comparable to the impenetrable forest cave and pervades the entire place.\textsuperscript{250} As immanent in all entities Brahman becomes the \textit{antaryāmin} or Inner Controller. This is the philosophic basis for admitting the theory of organic relationship between the Supreme Being and the universe (\textit{śarīrātma-sambandha}) which constitutes the distinctive doctrine of the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. Nammāḻvār who lived long before Saṅkara and Rāmānuja has upheld this important theory.

The fact that \textit{Paramātman} though abiding in all entities of the universe is free from defects and also endowed with auspicious attributes reveal the

\textsuperscript{248} \textit{Subālopanisad 7}
\textit{अन्ते शरीर गिनिहितो------यया प्रियिलो शरीरं}
\textit{सु एष सर्व भूतान्तरम्------देव एको नारायणः}
\textsuperscript{249} \textit{IVM 1.1.10}
\textsuperscript{250} \textit{IVM IX.10.8}
twofold character-istic of Brahman known as *ubhaya lingatva* pointed out by *Vedānta-sutra* and strongly upheld by Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. Nammāḻvār expresses with wonder how the Lord immanent in the entire universe remains unaffected with His transcendent character, “The Lord is the very sentient beings and non-sentient things but He is not touched by their defects. He is also beyond the comprehension of the sense organs. He is constituted of spiritual knowledge; the *jivātman* inside the body is not affected by the defects of the body; if this is possible the same principle holds good of *Paramātman*.”

The Upaniṣad states, “This Supreme Being is free from evil, free from old age, free from death, free from grief, free from anger and thirst.” So also Tirumāṇgai Āḻvār says that God is free from birth, death and old age. Nammāḻvār uses the analogy of the soul and body to support this theory. Rāmānuja also states that all scriptural and *smaṭī* texts declare that Brahman by its very nature is free from all defects even though it abides in all things. He describes Brahman as *samasta-heya-pratyanīka* or the one who is opposed to all defilements. This is one of the essential characteristics of the Supreme Being. The Upaniṣads describe Brahman as *param jyotis*. The Āḻvārs also use the terms *param-śodi, param-śudar* to describe the Supreme Person as possessing a lustrous divine form. Tirumāṇgai Āḻvār addresses the Lord as *nandā-vilakku* meaning the unchanging eternal light. All these terms imply that the Supreme Being is the very personification of spiritual knowledge. In the same sense the

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251 *TV* III.4.10
252 *Ch Up* VIII.1.5
253 *PTM* IV.3.2
254 *TV* III.4.10
255 *SBh* III.3.33
Antaryāmi Brāhmaṇa, while speaking of the immanence of Brahman in all entities, uses the word amṛta along with the term antaryāmin to reveal the fact that Paramāman as a transcendental Reality remains unaffected by the defects of the universe though He is hidden in all objects as antaryāmin. Besides the philosophical view of the Reality which is in conformity with the Upaniṣads, the Āḻvārs also present a comprehensive theological view of the Godhead. Srinivasachari observes that, “for the first time in the history of Vaiṣṇavism we come across a description of Godhead in all its glorious aspects. It enjoys credibility since the Āḻvārs, as mystic saints gifted with spiritual knowledge are claimed to have intuited God and spoken them from the depth of their experience.”

Paratva and Saulabhya (Transcendence and Immanence)

In the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta a distinction is drawn between the svarūpa and the svabhāva of an entity. This epistemological principle is applied to God also in this system. The Āḻvārs have, by their intuitive power, perceived God’s essential nature (svarūpa) and His attributes (svabhāva) and have presented them in their hymns.

In his introduction to the Gītābhāṣya Rāmānuja describes both the transcendental and non-transcendental qualities of the Supreme Being. In the first part of the introduction he describes the Supreme Person, the Consort of Śrī as one who is an ocean of auspicious attributes of matchless excellence inherent in his nature, the first six of which are knowledge, untiring strength, sovereignty, immutability, creative power, and splendor. His essential nature consists of Being (sat), Consciousness (cit) and Bliss (ānanda). He is the antithesis of all evil and incomparable.

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256 S.M.Srinivasachari, Philosophy and Theistic Mysticism of the Āḻvārs, op.cit., p.69
to any other. The projection, maintenance and dissolution of the entire cosmos filled with multifarious, variegated and innumerable objects is His transcendental pastime. Yet in the midst of creating the ever-changing universe He remains unchanged in His essential nature. This is not the Supreme Person with qualities, a Personal Lord, which is necessary for devotional worship. In the later part of the Introduction Rāmānuja describes His earthly form and accessibility. The Supreme Being, Srīman Nārāyaṇa, projected the entire universe, beginning with Brahma (the creator) down to plants and minerals. Being inaccessible in His transcendental form for meditation and worship by sentient beings including Brahma, gods, humans etc: and being an ocean of compassion and loving condescension, maternal affection and generosity, He took forms in the likeness of various kinds of beings. In this act of self-embodiment His own transcendental nature was not in any way compromised. Thus the Supreme Lord took birth in the world in order to receive the worship of devotees and in order to grant them their desired goals comprising of Dharma (righteousness, duty), Artha (material prosperity), Kāma (sense gratification) and Mokṣa (liberation), each in accordance with his/her individual desires.

Tirumāṉgal Āḷvār has presented ten hymns at a stretch to portray the paratva and Saulabhya of the Lord in the form of a dialogue between two gopikas one praising the quality of paratva and the other extolling saulabhya. Here is an example of one such hymn from that decad:

One gopika says, “Friend! Your Bhagavan is a cheat! He cheated Mahabali coming as Vamana, begging three feet of land and measured it turning Himself into Trivikrama. Moreover He is lying on the milky ocean, where we cannot go and in Tirumala Hills where it is difficult to go.” For this the other gopika replies, “O Friend! You know very little
about Him. Perhaps as you say He is difficult to approach in the milky ocean and Tirumala Hills. But He is sarvasulabha, that is, one who is easily accessible and comes where we are, if only we surrender to Him. Didn’t He come to Tirumanaṅgai Āḻvār’s heart?”

Divine Incarnations

The Āḻvārs have made a distinctive contribution to the understanding of the doctrine of *avatāra* which is a distinctive feature of Vaiṣṇavism. *Avatāra* is a more powerful demonstration of the nature and nearness of God than the mere immanence of *antaryāmin*. The wonder of the *bhaktimārga* is that the Lord does not remain distant from finite humanity, but graciously condescends to allow individuals to have contact with Him, to provide release for His devotees and to allow them to take refuge in Him. Under the pretext of relieving the earth of its burdens, but really in order to make Himself available for frail humans to take refuge in Him, the Lord incarnated on the earth. Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Being, the God of all gods, overwhelmed by His love for those devotees who had taken refuge in Him, took upon Himself the humble role of the charioteer of Arjuna, so that He could be seen by all the people. God awakens the desire for union with Himself in the soul of every person, and *bhakti* is the devoted response to God’s inner prompting.

The concept of *Avatāra* can be traced to the ṚgVeda. The *Puruṣa-Sūkta* states that the *Puruṣa* (God), though unborn, takes birth in many forms.258 This statement implies that God who is eternal has no origin or birth but yet He manifests Himself in different forms. Such a manifestation is

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257 *PTM* XI.5.10  
258 *Puruṣasūkta Yajurveda Recension* 11.2  
अजायमानी बुद्धाया विजायते।
termed as pradurbhāva which means that which already exists reveals itself in different forms, as distinct from the term upatti or birth. Another RgVedic passage describes Viṣṇu as descending from His heavenly abode when He is invoked through Vedic mantras to be present in a sacrificial pillar (yūpa). This Vedic statement conveys the idea of the avatāra or avatāraṇa which means ‘descent’. There are several Vedic passages which speak of a few avatāras, such as Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Trivikrama or Vāmana.

The Itihāsas and Purāṇas have presented prominently the various Avatāras of God with descriptive details. The Bhagavadgītā explains briefly the philosophy underlying the nature of divine descent, the purpose, the timing and its significance. Both the Pāncarātra and Vaikhānsa Āgamas have accorded greater importance to this doctrine and in particular to the incarnation of God in the form of icon to be worshipped (arcā) along with the details of the modes of worship and the rituals with which the icons are consecrated. The Āgamas also enunciate clearly the five forms of Avatāra viz. para, vyūha, vibhava, arcā and antaryāmin. The doctrine of vyūha is developed in greater detail in the Pāncarātra Āgamas. Presenting arcāvatāra within the context of the five forms of Viṣṇu highlights the integration of Viṣṇu’s various manifestations to humanity. Viṣṇu in heaven is seen in the image. The deity’s accessibility is the heart of the Sri Vaiṣṇava conception of arcāvatāra. The arcāvatāra represents the ultimate in God’s descent, coming down to a level even lower than that of God’s human worshippers. Srivaishnava theologian Pillai Loacarya describes the accessibility of the Lord, using the metaphor of water:

\[259\] RV III.8.4

युध्यु पुनर्जन: परिश्रीत आगाल उ श्रेयामवति जायमान।
The Lord as an Inner Controller (antaryāmin) is like water deep down in the earth; the Emanation (vyūha) is like the sea of milk, incarnations and manifestations on earth (vibhava) are like rivers in flood, but incarnations as images (arcāvatāra) are like deep pools that are easily accessible.\textsuperscript{260} \textit{Avatāra} is a more powerful demonstration of the nature and nearness of God than the mere immanence of antaryamin. The wonder of the path of \textit{bhakti} is that the Lord does not remain distant from finite humanity, but graciously condescends to allow individuals to have contact with Him, to provide release for His devotees and to allow them to take refuge in Him.

The goal of Viṣṇu’s descent, the reason for this gracious accessibility is self-revelation. Beholding the image the devotee sees Viṣṇu. This evokes an outpouring of emotion, a deep love and devotion to God. The beauty of the \textit{arcā} which is the beauty of Viṣṇu evokes love and longing on the part of the worshipper. Transcendence and immanence mix as the Supreme Lord descends to draw in those he loves.

The Ālvaars were influenced by all these ideas. Though they have not explicitly discussed the doctrine, they have referred to all types of \textit{avatāra} extensively in their hymns providing a deeper insight into their significance. “This has in turn influenced the later Vaiṣṇava Ācaryas who have offered a rational justification for the theory in general and in particular for the worship of God in the form of icon at temples.”\textsuperscript{261}

The Ālvaars also express a simple conception of the local presence of God; the transcendental God as localized. For the Ālvaars, “the universal God becomes a personalized God, almost ‘visible’, his presence must be tangible, almost physical, ‘here and now’, contrasting with non-iconic

\textsuperscript{260} Srivacanabhūsanam sūtra 39
\textsuperscript{261} S.M.Srinivasachari, \textit{Philosophy and Theistic Mysticism of the Ālvaars}, op.cit., p.91
Vedic worship—a person with whom one may enter into an individual, highly personal, intimate, exclusive relationship and close contact. The Ālvārs regarded the figure in the temple simply as (a manifestation of) Viṣṇu and, “in fact, many of the Ālvār songs about temples are motivated by the desire to establish or stress that the local god is no other than the universal, transcendental Viṣṇu.” The god in the local temple is identified with Viṣṇu who in his Krṣṇavatāra lifted the mountain Govardhana and killed Kamsa.

The arcāvatāra notion is that Viṣṇu “incarnates” himself in the temple image (arcā) in the mode of a mythical avatāra, but unlike the mythical ones, which were distributed over different periods in the past, these Avatāras are spatially distributed and in the present time. Srivaisnava theologian Pillai Lokacarya defines arcāvatāra thus: (The concept) ‘arcāvatāra’ denotes (Viṣṇu’s) state of permanently abiding in the temples and in the houses, of coming close (to man) in objects which are attractive to people, without restrictions of space, time, or privileged persons (being in these points) unlike the special (mythical) manifestations. The arcā form is an image created or chosen by man according to his own liking and is accepted by Viṣṇu for the sake of man, in order to be close to him everywhere and always. Again, “hiding his own lordship, he pretends to be ignorant, powerless, without independent will, becoming enslaved to boundless compassion, he grants all that is

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263 Friedhelm Hardy, Ideology and Cultural contexts of the Srivaisnava Temple, The Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol.XIV, No.1, Kings College, University of London, p.124
265 Ibid., sūtra 194
desired.\textsuperscript{266} That he gives rise to bliss, that he is a splendid refuge, that the whole world must resort to him, and that he can be experienced (by the whole world) – all this finds its fulfillment in the \textit{arcāvatāra}.\textsuperscript{267} Taking off his perfections and relinquishing his total freedom, he abides in it by showing great love even to those who do not love him.\textsuperscript{268} Desika speaks of the alluring power of the \textit{arcāvatāra}. “It redirects the attention of man who, engrossed in sensual pleasures, had turned away from him; he is capable of increasing his love - something the \textit{sāstras} (the scriptural injunctions) are not able to achieve.\textsuperscript{269} For the Vaiṣṇava, the \textit{arcā} is the actual full presence of the transcendent God Himself. Richard Davis observes, “The devotional eye takes the icon enshrined in the temple as the living presence of God, sees through its translucency brief glimpses into the fullness of his Being, and then occasionally turns back on itself to observe the paradoxical quality of this transcendence within immanence.”\textsuperscript{270} According to him the devotional eye does not view the image in the temple as simply a partial emanation of God, but rather envisions it as a gateway to see the fullness and totality of Him, thereby fusing image and God.

**The hita or upāya or the Means of Liberation**

In accordance with the Upaniṣads and the \textit{Bhagavadgītā} the Ālvārs, who were the pioneers of the \textit{Bhakti} Movement in India, upheld \textit{bhakti-yoga} as well as absolute self-surrender to God (\textit{prapatti}) as the means of God-realization. Etymologically the term \textit{bhakti} is derived from the verbal root \textit{bhaj} meaning, “to apportion” or “to share.” In religious usage \textit{bhakti} is a

\textsuperscript{266} \textit{Ibid.}, suṭra 202  
\textsuperscript{267} \textit{Ibid.}, suṭra 201  
\textsuperscript{268} \textit{Srivacanabhūṣanam}, suṭra 38  
\textsuperscript{269} \textit{Ibid.}, ...suṭra 40  
shared relationship between a devotee and God; it is the devoted response to God’s inner prompting. Rāmānuja defines bhakti as a contemplation of God, unbroken as the smooth and ceaseless flow of oil. He also describes this ceaseless contemplation as having its main source in the love of God, who is so dear to the devotee. God awakens the desire for union with Himself in the soul of every person, and bhakti is the devoted response to God’s inner prompting.

The Ālavār use the Tamil word ‘patti’ for bhakti describing God as easily accessible to those who have bhakti in Him. The type of bhakti where there is a sincere devotion on the part of the individual and a longing for the close relationship with God form the seed of mysticism. When it is nurtured and made to grow and become ripe it becomes what Rāmānuja calls parabkakti. The Ālavārs considered that the path of bhakti was far superior to the paths of karma and jñāna. The hita or upāya by which Bhagavan is attained is indicated, in the Tiruvāimoli, by the term matinalam or bhaktirūpapaṇna jñāna or intellectual love of God. The term toludu indicates absolute self-surrender to the raksaka. God Himself is the upāya and upeya. Devotion or bhakti was in the Bhagavadgītā also and was accepted as one of the ways of salvation along with karma and jñāna. It was a meditation or concentration of one’s thoughts on the deity. In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, as for the Ālavārs, it is a passionate devotion of one’s whole life in complete surrender to the Lord, a way of life that is not one among many, but the only way to true salvation. Bhakti is one-pointed devotion, unswerving faith and love.

\[271\] SBh IV.1.1
telādhāraṇam ənvichchīṇnārūpaṁ |

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In Srivaiṣṇava understanding intense devotion or bhakti is the way to union with the Divine. Once the devotee has achieved the difficult task of one-pointed focus on the Divine, he is irresistible to the Divine. So does Lord Kṛṣṇa say, “For the one who constantly remembers Me and never lets his thoughts stray away to any other object, for this disciplined yogi, I am easily attainable.”\textsuperscript{272} The jñāni meditates on Brahman as his self and cultivates exclusive devotion to Him or ekabhakti and is the true bhakta, as his devotion is controlled by the single idea of of attaining mukti. When Bhakti Yoga thus becomes a means to moksa it is called parabhakti. This bhakti is wakened only by sastraic knowledge purified by karma and sanctified by jñāna and when it develops into a thirst for the direct intuition of Bhagavan it is called para jñāna. Then the view of God becomes a vision of God, but it is still not perfect; love leads to a continuous longing for God; and then parabhakti becomes parama bhakti. “The bhakta at this stage is not satisfied with mere visions and voices and auditions which are only intimations of immortality, but he eagerly and restlessly seeks the stability of eternal bliss. The bhakta longs to see the beauteous form of Bhagavān with the eye of the soul and hear the music of love with the spiritual ear.”\textsuperscript{273} While the philosopher in him cogitates on Brahman as the ultimate unity of all existing things, the bhakta hungers for union and communion with the Self who has established His home in the interior of his heart. He does not desire gifts like āśvarya and kaivalya, but seeks the Giver Himself. When the bhakta seeks God, God also seeks him and the lover and the beloved are finally united in the realm of mukti. The Bhagavadgītā says, “I am easily attainable by that ever steadfast Yogi, O Pārtha, who constantly and daily

\textsuperscript{272} BG XII.2
\textsuperscript{273} P.N.Srinivasachari, op.cit., pp.376-77
is mindful of me, not thinking of anything else.” In the experience of God by the bhakta is followed by love (prīti) for him culminating in the desire to serve at his feet. This is analogous to the stages which succeed śaraṇāgati in Rāmānuja’s Šaraṇāgati-gadya. In this gadya, the stages of parabhakti, para jñāna and paramabhakti led to the direct experience of God. This experience, in turn, generated a desire for service at the divine feet.

In Periyavaccan-Pillai’s commentary to the Šaraṇāgati-gadya superior devotion (parabhakti) is a variety of love in which one has the delight and sorrow due (respectively) to union and separation; superior knowledge is the immediate knowledge (para jñāna) which comes with the ripening of that love, and, in terms of the mood that follows union and supreme devotion (paramabhakti) is the state in which one is unable to bear separation even for a moment. We can see the parallels to these definitions in the Tiruvāimoli.

Bhakti requires much effort on the part of the seeker. It is open to the higher castes only, for the performance of Vedic duties is an essential preparatory requirement for progressing towards bhakti. Hence the Ālvārs advocate another means for liberation, which is known as Prapatti meaning unqualified and absolute self-surrender to God as one’s only refuge. In the Bhagavadgītā Kṛṣṇa teaches Arjuna “to surrender himself with all his heart to God (the Ruler) who abides in the heart of all things and moves them--. He is further instructed to dedicate his whole mind to Bhagavat, to become his devotee, to worship him, to bow to him, and in

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274 BG VIII.14  
275 Rāmānuja, Šaraṇāgati-gadya, Sec.2.4,i  
276 TVM X.10.11
this way he, (Arjuna) would reach him. Arjuna is asked to set aside all other methods of salvation and surrender himself to Bhagavat alone and then He would free him from all sins. By virtue of complete and total surrender to the Lord, the Lord too out of his vātsalya grants him protection.

The main emphasis on prapatti is on śaraṇāgati which means the devotee, trusting in God, throws himself at the feet of the Lord and surrenders the fruits of his actions to Him. The bhakta feels that he is totally dependent on God and is fully controlled and guided by Him. He lays the entire burden of his salvation on God Himself and then lives a tranquil life, consecrated to the service of God. This is the doctrine of universal bhakti called prapatti, open to all persons who seek God’s grace, who seek His fellowship and are devoted to Him and worship Him with utmost love. Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār’s Peria Tirumōḻi is an exposition of śaraṇāgati. In several hymns addressed to the arca deities at different shrines, he explicitly states that he surrenders himself to the feet of the Lord. Thus, while glorifying the deity of Naimiśāraṇya, he says:

O Lord of Naimiśāraṇya, I surrender myself to your feet.

All the Āḻvārs and Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas, starting from Yāmuna, speak of taking refuge and śaraṇāgati as the only way to attain the deity. The gadyas of Rāmānuja also prioritize prapatti over the bhakti- mārga.

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277 R.G.Bhandarkar, op.cit., p.26
278 PTM V.4.5
Mokṣa

Mokṣa, according to the Brahma Sūtras and the Upaniṣads, is a state where the individual self, after freeing itself from bondage, manifests itself in its true form, which means that after it attains Brahman it becomes free from the fetters of karma and after this there is no return to the mundane world.279 It becomes free from its past merits and demerits and manifests itself in its innate nature of intelligence and bliss.280 The jīva is compared to the lustre of the gem hidden by dirt and which is made manifest by removing the dirt. It is not merely freedom from bondage of karma for the jīva but also a blissful existence without losing its individuality. Vedānta Desika describes it as paripūrṇa-brahmānubhava. The jīva becomes omniscient and is now able to see Brahman in all its splendour. After reaching this state there is no return for the jīva to the state of bondage. The jīva attains a status almost equal to Brahman. Equality does not mean the jīva being equal to Brahman in every respect, since the functions of creation, sustenance and dissolution of the universe are unique to Brahman only.281 The Āḻvārs have expanded this concept by adding kaiṅkarya to it, that is, besides a positive state of existence enjoying the bliss of Brahman, the jīva also enjoys the pleasure of doing kaiṅkarya or divine service to God in a transcendental realm known as paramapada, the supreme abode of God. Even after liberation the individual soul, which is the sēṣa, though totally free, continues to be subservient to God who is the sēṣi. The freed soul remains in full dependence on and obedience to the Lord for any service required of him.

279 Br.Śū. IV.4,22
280 Ch Up VIII.12,3
281 Br.Śū 4.4.17

by the Lord. In this state paripūrṇaśeṣavṛttiḥ (complete dependence) is fully realized. The mukta reaches the same place (sālokya) as of the Lord. Then he enjoys the bliss of doing divine kaiṅkarya to the Lord. He reaches the presence of God also (sāmnidhyā). He becomes like Him (sārūpya) and enjoys fellowship with Him. The freed soul enjoys the life of perfection in Vaiṣṇavī. In the state of mukti the jīva gets the power of beholding the Lord, gets all his wishes fulfilled. Finally he enjoys all the powers of the Lord except the power of creation and destruction of the world. According to Advaita Vedānta the self is released even when it is embodied when it gets Brahmajñāna. The body persists with a trace of avidya, but eventually both of them will come to an end on their own accord. Rāmānuja as well as the Ālvārs do not subscribe to the Advaitin’s view of jīvan mukti or sadyo mukti. Liberation of the soul, according to them, is only after it leaves the physical body.

The Mysticism of the Ālvārs

The mysticism of the Ālvārs is distinct from that of other mystics, whether Eastern or Western, though they may share some common characteristic features. The biographies of the Ālvār saints, as narrated in the Divyasūricarita and Guruparamparā-prabhāvam, speak of the special events in the lives of the Ālvārs that placed them in direct and continuing relationship with God. Their poems bear ample testimony to the ongoing relationship between them and God and the enjoyment they derived from their communion with Him. These poems appear as intense love poems, complete with carnal passion, but when put in their right context they become ecstatic songs of intense longing for God. Here, human desire becomes sacred because it is directed towards the chosen One. The Divyasūricarita cites that on one occasion, Bhagavān brought the three first Ālvārs who till then had not met each other together in the Vāmana-
kṣetra (Tirukkovalūr). All of a sudden He created a cloudless (artificial) rain in the night and thereby forced them to take shelter in a narrow passage. Poygai Āḻvār and the other two were squeezing each other in that confined space, but then they realized that apart from them another person was present, and separately they made lamps which revealed the manifestation of the Highest Being. The three Āḻvārs express their experience of Viṣṇu in three poems, and then walk away on their separate ways.

The poems of the Āḻvārs, says, Ramanujan, “evokes the primal, the essential experience of bhakti: not ecstasy, not enstasy, but an embodiment; neither a shamanic flight to the heavens or soul loss, nor a yogic autonomy, a withdrawal of the senses – but a partaking of the god. He may pass through enstasy (withdrawal) and ecstasy (out-of-body experiences) as stages...A bhakta is not content to worship a god in word and ritual, nor is he content to grasp him in a theology; he needs to possess him and be possessed by him.”

The Śrivaishṇava theology considers the concepts of antaryāmin, avatāra and arca to be the modes of God’s approach to the human self for its salvation. This is explained by Pillai Lokācārya through a beautiful analogy of the five forms of water: a man thirsting for water is similar to the soul thirsting for salvation; the antaryāmī is like water underground, the para form like water surrounding the world-egg, the vyūhas like the milk-ocean, the vibhavas like seasonal rivers while the arca is like standing pools in these rivers. The poets seek and value closeness and proximity to God, and see distance and separation as obstacles and sources of suffering. The icon acts like a magnet drawing the devotee

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closer enabling the saint overcome for a moment the pain of separation. Vedánta Deśika tells us how a prapanna who has surrendered himself should adopt a behaviour towards the arcāvatāra in accordance with the type of relationship he may want to choose and with (Viṣṇu’s) paratva and saulabhya, as is illustrated by the following stanzas: "Like a faithful wife towards her dear husband, like a mother towards her child, like a disciple towards his teacher, or like a friend towards his friend, one should show one’s affection to Hari; he should always be considered as as lord, friend, teacher, father, or mother.283 "One should treat Bhagvān with awe, like a young king, an elephant in rut, or a dear guest who has arrived."284

The poetry of the Ālvārs contain numerous verses which speak of the bliss of serving the Lord in His shrine. The Śrīvaiṣṇava word for beholding the image in the temple (darśana) is called sevai or service which means offering worship with flower garlands etc. The four thousand hymns of the Ālvārs are packed with multi-dimensional emotional-devotional themes such as the Lord's creation as play (līlā), Viṣṇu's incarnations, Krṣṇa's childhood, and Lord and devotee as lover and beloved. The various forms of human love-loving the Lord as a mother loves her baby, as the mother cow loves her newborn calf (vātsalya), as the loyal servant loves his master or mistress, as a friend loves a friend, or as a woman's passionate love for her lover or husband have been assumed by the Ālvārs in expressing their relationship with the Divine. They delighted in identifying themselves with the mythic gopis and their struggle with physical and spiritual union with the Lord. The

283 Vedanta Desika, Rahasyatrayasāram, ch.15, p.512
284 Ibid., p.131 quoted by Friedhelm Hardy, Ideology and cultural contexts of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Temple, The Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol.XIV, No.1, University of London, p.514
romantic love between man and woman was exemplified by the love for Kṛṣṇa by Rādhā, the parental love between mother and child by the highly emotional love between Yaśoda and the boy Kṛṣṇa. Their relationship to God was a kind of passionate devotion based on viraha or longing. Their spiritual yearning is most evident and most poignantly expressed in the mode of separated lovers. The Āḻvārs refer to the legends of Kṛṣṇa’s early life in Brindāvan and many of them play the role either of Yaśodā, the friends of Kṛṣṇa, or of the gopīs. Even in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa we hear of devotional oral intoxication through intense devotion. But we do not hear of any devotees identifying themselves with the legendary personages associated with the life of Kṛṣṇa and expressing their sentiment of love proceeding out of such imaginary identification; we hear of the Gopī’s love for Kṛṣṇa but we do not hear of any person identifying himself with Gopī and expressing his sorrow of separation. The Āḻvārs were led to imagine themselves as being one with those legendary personalities, and to pass through the emotional history of those persons as conceived through imagination. The Āḻvārs were the earliest devotees who moved forward in the direction of such emotional transformation. The devotional songs of the Āḻvārs show an intense familiarity with the various parts of the legendary life of Kṛṣṇa. The emotions that stirred them were primarily of the types of parental affection (as of a mother to her son), of friends and companions, servants to their masters, sons to their father and creator as also that of female lover to her beloved. In the case of Nammāḻvār, Āndāl and Tirumāṅgai Āḻvār, the last mentioned type assumes an overwhelming importance. A deep sense of viraha dominates this poetry. But at the same time we find the Āḻvārs expressing the joy born out of their mystical union with the

285 Bh P XI,xii
divine, or of viraha intensified after, and due to, an experience of union. Dasgupta observes, “The spiritual love which finds expression in their songs is sometimes an earnest appeal of direct longing for union with Kṛṣṇa, or an expression of the pangs of separation, or a feeling of satisfaction, and enjoyment from union with Kṛṣṇa in a direct manner or sometimes through an emotional identification with the legendary personages associated with Kṛṣṇa’s life.”

Bhakti is an experience (anubhava) of the entire range of the Lord’s auspicious qualities such as His being the Lord (swāmin) as well as the means to the attainment of this experience leading to the goal, that is kainkarya. The Bhagavadgītā tells us about a true bhakta: “Such a devotee of Mine eats and drinks, walks and moves, sleeps and keeps awake, and carries on all other activities for My sake alone, and has no personal interest in those activities as I alone is the enshrined darling of their heart and My mystic crest jewel devotees when they meet together their very entertainment is to delve deep into the most esoteric love of My transcendental pastimes. They enjoy spiritual communion with Me in discoursing on My ever-blissful glories, attributes and pastimes.” The Ālvārs were such devotees as defined by Lord Kṛṣṇa; possessed of divine knowledge and were totally dedicated to God and they also displayed their dedication in their thought, word and deed. For Nammālvār God is everything, the food for appetising hunger, the water for quenching thirst and the beetle leaf to satisfy the pleasure. Poigai Ālvār says, "My mouth will not praise anyone but the Lord; my eyes will not see anything except the image of God; my ears will not hear anything except the name

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286 S.N. Das Gupta, A History of Indian Philosophy. Vol.III, Delhi, 1922, p.81
287 BG X.9
288 TVM, 6.7.1
of the Lord; my hands will not worship anyone but the Lord.”

Periālvār is called Viṣṇunucitta because he has all the time Viṣṇu alone in his thought. He says, “I have placed you inside me and I have placed me within you.” Poigai Ālvār, like the Vedic seer Vāmana, was gifted with God-experience even in the pre-natal condition when he was lying in the womb. He had not only the experience of God while lying in the womb, but also the extraordinary power to recall that experience. The Ālvār speaks of his experience thus, “Even then (before birth) I was lying in the womb did I worship with the hands united in the direction of the Lord who has taken his abode in Srirāṅgam, and saw Him. Even for a moment I have not forgotten the Lord whose colour is like that of the ocean full of waves. O ye poor! How can I forget Him now?” The Ālvār is quite certain about his experience and says that he saw God because he worshipped Him even while he was lying in the womb. It will be interesting to note that the Ālvār did not get this experience through any process of reasoning because his mental faculties would not have developed at that stage. Even then, the Ālvār recollects his God-experience and claims that he was in touch with a reality outside and beyond himself. This experience, though purely subjective, the object of experience is trans-objective. It is not a mere emotional state but a direct experience of God.

The Ālvārs also make statements based on direct intuition. These are not mere imaginary descriptions because the mystic saints actually perceived God in this form. The Upaniṣad says that the divine body is of gold

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289 Mudal Tiruvandāti, 11
290 Peri TM 5.4.5
291 Mudal Tiruvantādi, 6
complexion from the toe to the head.  

Peyālvār, at the very first glimpse of God, goes into raptures and expresses his joy of the vision in the words, “I beheld Goddess Laksmi, I beheld the gold-coloured body” (Tirukkanden ponmeni kanden). Tirumāṅgai Ālvār who had visited a large number of shrines describes the beauty of the divyamangala vigrahā of each deity in a mystic language which is unmatched for its intensity of devotion. When the Ālvār saw the image of Soundararāja for the first time, he feels overwhelmed at the sight of the bewitching beauty of the deity. “His body is made of gold. It is glowing like the hillock of emerald; the ornaments worn in the body (necklace) is shining like the lightning, the lips appear animated as though they are the ones reciting the Vedās; what a wonder that He possesses such a beauty.” The description of the divine body in terms of lustrous golden colour is intended to emphasize its spiritual or non-material character which is not only eternal, self-luminous but is also not subject to any modification. The Ālvārs, quite often, describe God in terms of the colour of the dark blue cloud. The Puranas also present the same idea. The comparison to the clouds implies the generosity of God (udāra svabhāva). Just as the clouds voluntarily shower on earth cool fresh water, likewise God showers boons to devotees generously. A few Ālvārs mention different complexion for God in different yugas or epoch. The Ālvārs are also very fond of comparing God with the freshly blossomed red lotus. Such descriptions of the divine body comparing it to the best attractive and colourful objects of nature are offered to convey to the human minds the aesthetic beauty of the Divine Being. Tirumāṅgai Ālvār says, “I do not know (this deity) is the same as the Lord who resides in the inner recess of the lotus-like heart or is He the

\[ \text{292 Ch Up 1.6.6} \]
\[ \text{293 Munram tiruvandāti 1} \]
\[ \text{294 PTM IX.2.1} \]
one who is found in the orb of the sun which causes lotus buds to bloom. The moment I see Him I bow down involuntarily in adoration. Why is my mind captivated by the sight of Him? He must be my Lord. His eyes are beautiful like the lotus petals. His palms resemble the lotus flower. His body resembles the dark clouds. How wonderful!\(^{295}\) Besides the visual portrayal of God, the Āḻvārs delight even more by comparing Him to sweet nectar. They address Him as \textit{amuda} or nectar, or honey, or sugarcandy and sometime a combination of all the sweetest objects in the universe.\(^{296}\) The \textit{Upaniṣads} speak of Brahman as \textit{ānanda} and \textit{rasa}. These terms mean that Brahman is the very bliss \textit{par excellence} and it is also blissful. God is conceived as Arāvamuda or nectar that brings no satiation. Physical beauty of the divine body is visually enhanced by the ornaments and weapons worn by God. The description of God with such weapons and ornaments is in conformity with the \textit{Viṣṇu Purāṇa} which describes God as possessing divine weapons and beautiful ornaments.\(^{297}\) The Epics, \textit{Itihāsas} and \textit{Āgama} treatise present the same picture. Mysticism is nothing but a manifestation of intense loving devotion to God (\textit{bhakti}) leading to the longing of the soul to see God in His full splendour. The mystic's God-thirst is insatiable and he tries all possible ways to enjoy God and His glory. Meditation on God which is the means to attain communion with God includes the contemplation of His \textit{svarūpa}, the essential nature, \textit{guṇa}, the attributes, \textit{rūpa}, the spiritual enchanting body, and the \textit{Līlās}, the deeds of God. These are the means prescribed by the \textit{Bhāgavata Purāṇa} and the \textit{Nārada Bhakti-sūtra}.

\(^{295}\) \textit{Ibid.} IX 2.7
\(^{296}\) \textit{IITM} II.3.1
\(^{297}\) \textit{Viṣṇu P.} I.22.76
The songs of the earlier Āḻvārs express a submissive devotion to a supreme and sublime God, meditation on whom is its own end. However, Nammālvār, Tirumāṅgai, Periāḻvār, Āṇḍāḷ and to a lesser degree Kulasekharar, often speak in more intimate terms with their Lord. While the motif of the girl in love with her divine beloved is the most striking one, there are poems in the parental voices of Devakī, Yaśodā and Daśaratha. This immersion in the lord was not, however, a consistently joyful experience as indicated by the hymns of the Āḻvārs. Despair fights with ecstasy, and helplessness is seen as often as expressions of fulfillment upon a meeting with the lover-God. Loving wisdom was induced in the Āḻvārs by God’s spontaneous grace. Love to God, in this context, is none other than the heart and mind, perfectly blended and attuned to the loving service of God.

Periāḻvār's Mysticism

Periāḻvār's mysticism, where he chose the role of Yaśodā to enjoy the deeds of God-incarnate Kṛṣṇa, is an example of the mother-child motif of relation depicting instinctive love and affection. His poems are focussed on the divine deeds and attributes of Lord Kṛṣṇa. Periāḻvār, also known as Viṣṇucitta, assumes the role of Yaśodā, the mother to pour out his devotional love to Lord Kṛṣṇa. In his poetical composition, known as Periāḻvār Titumoli, the Āḻvār gives expression to his mystic experience of God in the form of enjoying the glorious deeds (līlas) of Kṛṣṇa as a child. Playing the role of Yaśodā, the Āḻvār indulges in the pleasure of feeding, nursing, cradling and playing happily with the baby in several ways. The Āḻvār's experience is full of joy and not sorrowful like the mental disposition caused by pangs of separation from God. The love that overflows spontaneously from the heart of the Āḻvār is vātsalya, that is, the natural love of the mother to her affectionate child. The opening
decad of his *Tirumoli*, which is known as *Tiruppallāndu*, indicates that the Ālvār is blessed with a direct vision of God. Overwhelmed with joy he addresses the Lord and says, “May thou live long for many years and millions of years.” The Ālvār, being blessed with divine knowledge, could see in his mind's eye every detail of the deeds of God during the period of His *Avatāra* as Kṛṣṇa starting from His birth to the final stage. Periālvār visualizes the joy and jubilation with which the folks of Gokula hailed the birth of child Kṛṣṇa. Visualizing the miraculous event in which Yaśodā perceived the entire universe in child Kṛṣṇa's mouth the Ālvār, in the words of the Gopis, expresses with dismay that this is no ordinary child but the very divine being. Sometimes the poet becomes one of the cowherd girls, who is complaining about Kṛṣṇa to Yaśoda about his apparent childish mischief that is tinged with erotic sentiments. In one of his hymns Periālvār conceives himself as Yaśoda and describes the infant Kṛṣṇa as lying in the dust and calling for the moon:

He rolls down in the dust, so that the jewel on his brow keeps swinging and his waist bells tinkle! Oh, look at my Son Govinda's play, big Moon, if thou hast eyes in thy face - and then be gone!\(^298\)

The Ālvār asks the Moon whether he would like to play with little Kṛṣṇa:

My little one precious to me as nectar, my blessing is calling thee, pointing with his little hands! O big Moon! If thou wishes to play with this little black one, hide not thyself in the clouds, but come rejoicing.\(^299\)

The poetic description of the events even excels the narration of the same in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa, Harivamśa* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

\(^{298}\) *Periālvār Tirumoli* 1,5

\(^{299}\) *Ibid*
Kulasekhara Ālvār’s Mysticism

Kulasekara, an ardent devotee of Lord Rāma, belonged to a royal family and ruled over the Chera kingdom, the present Kerala in South India. He used to listen rapturously to the Rāmāyaṇa being recited to him by bhāgavatas. As he listened he became so excited that, when he heard of Rāma’s venturing forth against Rāvana, his enemy, he used to give orders to mobilise his whole army to forward march towards Lanka as an ally of Rāma. Not being interested in ruling the country, he abdicated his throne and started serving Lord Rāma and His devotees. The Ālvār says,

“I do not cherish this wealth of crown and glory surrounded by dancing girls decked with gold and finery. In the cool glens of Venkatam where flowers spill nectar, may I be born as a little fish.”

I do not wish to enjoy the pain-ridden life that follows birth if I am not to serve the feet of the Lord, who wears the coiled conch on his left shoulder, and stands in Venkatam. May I be born as a humble stork in the Swami Puskarini lake there.

I do not crave for the music and dance of Urvasīs and Menakas of lightning-thin waists. On Venkatam where bumble bees sing I shall have the supreme bliss sitting snug as a hillock.

I do not wish to rule over kings as a celebrated monarch under a white parasol held like a full moon in the sky. I wish to run like a stream on Venkatam, amid groves of nectar-dripping flowers.

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300 Perumāl Tirumoli 4,1
301 Ibid., 4,2
302 Ibid., 4,6
303 Ibid., 4,7
As a God - intoxicated mystic Kulasekhara expresses his yearning to worship the Lord at Srirangam and the devotees of God residing there. The Āḻvārs expresses his longing thus:

O when will my eyes feast on the glorious Lord's subtle form and rejoice? He lies in Srirangam lapped by Kaveri waters touching his feet, on a spotless white cushion of the serpent Ananta's body; the serpent spreads a thousand hoods each with the holy mark and sparkling gems on the forehead.\textsuperscript{304}

Again in another hymn he says:

The lord of Śrīrangam wears a beautiful vanamala making his chest a fit place for the lady of the lotus to live in. True devotee's think of the hard-to- get Lord, sweet as honey, sing and dance in ecstasy, weep and call and forget themselves. O if I could only see such a band, these eyes would have served their purpose.\textsuperscript{305}

He perceives mentally the glory of Srirangam and longs to go there. Kulasekhara's experience is also confined to God- incarnate Kṛṣṇa and Rama. But unlike Periālvār he manifests both joy and sorrow. He assumes the role of the gopis to enjoy the playful deeds of Kṛṣṇa and also conveys his anger caused by the misbehaviour of Kṛṣṇa with regard to his love affairs. In a series of hymns the Āḻvār, in the garb of the gopi shows his anger by saying,

O Vāsudeva, though I am aware that in this very town several other gopis with attractive hairdos decked in fragrant flowers do not like to embrace you, yet I entertained some faith in your deceitful words and stood on the

\textsuperscript{304} Ibid.,1,1
\textsuperscript{305} Ibid.,2,1
sand dune of the river Yamuna until dawn in the expectation of your arrival, with a sense of fear of being seen by others and also enduring the chill fog.\textsuperscript{306}

In the words of another gopi he says:

O Damodara, I have actually witnessed the way you entered the house on the eastern side where an attractive maid was churning the curd all by herself and by pretending to offer your help you churned the curd along with her and aroused her passion.\textsuperscript{307}

He also puts on the role of Devakī, the mother who gave birth to Kṛṣṇa to express the sense of grief for being deprived of the opportunity to nursing the baby. He cries out through the medium of Devakī by stimulating her emotion of motherly tenderness to the child:

What an unfortunate mother I am that I could not sing the lullabies to my dear child. How unlucky I am that I could not enjoy the beauty of the infant. How unfortunate is Vāsudeva, the father of the child, to have not witnessed the delightful gestures of the baby that were enjoyed by the foster-father Nandagopa.\textsuperscript{308}

Similarly, in the case of Rāma, theĀlvār imagines himself as Kousalya and bursts into joy singing cradle-songs (lullabies) for child Rāma. He assumes the role of Daśaratha and expresses his immense sorrow over the banishment of Rama to the forest. Kulaśekhara Ālvār assumes the voice of King Daśaratha, Rāma's father, who is separated from his son:

Without hearing him calling me "Father" with pride and with love,

\textsuperscript{306} \textit{Ibid.},6.1
\textsuperscript{307} \textit{Ibid.},6.2
\textsuperscript{308} \textit{Perumāṭ Tirumoḷi} VII,1,2,3
Without clasping his chest adorned with gems to mine, without embracing him, without smoothing his forehead
Without seeing his graceful gait, majestic like the elephant,
Without seeing his face (glowing like the lotus,
I, wretched one,
having lost my son, my Lord
Siti live.  

Theologically the hymns signify the special attachment of God towards the devotees. In order to intensify their devotion, He only provokes them with situations or events that cause disappointment, anger or even grief.

**Tiruppaṇāḷvār’s Mysticism**

Tiruppaṇāḷvār was a musician as well as an ardent devotee of Lord Ranganatha. Because he was born in a family belonging to a low caste Tiruppaṇāḷvār was not permitted to enter the precincts of the temple. However, he used to sing songs in praise of God sitting on the banks of the river Kaveri facing the temple. Tradition goes that one day the temple priest named Lokaśāranga Muni hurled a stone at the Āḷvār for obstructing the way to the river. The Āḷvār, who was in a state of ecstacy was hurt and after realizing his mistake he repented. That night Lord Ranganatha commanded the priest in his dream to bring the saint inside the sanctum. Following Gods command, the priest carried the Āḷvār on his shoulders and took him inside the temple so that he could worship Lord Ranganātha. On entering the sanctum, the saint was so enchanted by the bewitching beauty of the deity that he gave expression to it in his hymns.

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While he was in a state of trance he is believed to have vanished and become one with the deity.

**The Mysticism of Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār**

**Life and Works of Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār**

Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār, the last of the Āḻvārs, is also known as Kaliyan, Neelan, Parakālan and Kalikanri. The Āḻvār signs his name with the title kalikanri which means, says Hudson, “He puts down Kali with a mighty hand. This title mostly refers to his skilful generation of Bhakti in this dark Kali Yuga by means of poems crafted of refined pure Tamil.”

Born in Tirukkararaiyalūr in Tamil Nadu (South India) in a family of tribal dacoits, Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār was considered to be the amsa (incarnation) of the divine bow ‘śaraṅga’ of Lord Viṣṇu. Majumdar states, “From what we gather from Tirumaṅgai Alvar’s hagiography, he seems to have been a chieftain of the Chola King Senganan, who finds a place in the hymns of the Alvar.” He was a well-trained archer and in recognition of his valour and skill the Chola king made him the chieftain of a group of villages with Tirumaṅgai as its headquarters. He thus earned the title of Tirumaṅgai-mannan or the Chief of Tirumaṅgai which continued to be his name even after he became a saint. There is an interesting story behind Kaliyan (as Tirumaṅgai was called earlier) as to how he, once a robber, became an ardent devotee of Lord Viṣṇu and a very famous Āḻvār (mystic saint). According to traditional account, which is also substantiated by biographical details given by the Āḻvār himself in his hymns, came to know about a heavenly beautiful lady called

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311 Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, *The Vakataka Gupta Age*, Delhi, 1986, p.224
Kumudavalli, daughter of a Vaisnava doctor whom he wanted to marry. She laid two conditions for him before she would marry him; One was that he must embrace Srivaisnavism by taking proper instruction from an Acarya and the second was to feed 1008 Bhagavatas (devotees) every day for one year. The spiritual journey of the Alvār, through the path of bhakti, started after he married Kumudavalli. Having spent all his fortune in feeding the Bhagavatas he began to lay his hands on government revenue thereby incurring the wrath of the Chola Emperor and was imprisoned. The Lord appeared in Alvār’s dream and showed him the location of a hidden treasure with which he paid off the Emperor’s dues. However, he was still left without the wherewithal to do the kainkarya to the Lord’s devotees. In order to fulfil the expensive promise the Alvār started indulging in highway robbery. One day the Lord assumed the garb of a rich merchant returning with his newly-wed wife and retinue carrying a huge fortune in the form of jewels, gold coins etc: Kaliyan duly intercepted them and stripped them of all their valuables, but for a tiny toe ring that had not been removed from the groom because it was very tight. So Kaliyan used his teeth and pulled and pulled, but did not succeed. The toe tasted like honey. When he tried to walk away with the bundle of jewels he found that he could not lift it despite putting all his effort to it. Convinced that this was the result of some magic perpetrated by the groom he drew out his sword in anger and asked the groom what mantra he used that stood in the way of his lifting the bundle. Immediately the Lord drew him near, asked him to close his eyes, and whispered the Astaksara mantra into his ear. When the Alvār closed his eyes he saw him within himself and it was him whom he saw outside himself - he was the sky, he was the blinding light that pervades all the space, all the people, he was him, he was everything. In the words of the Alvār:
The tender feet of the Lord are on my head.
He is the subtle essence of all these forms,
the four Vedas, light of the lamp, the rising moon,
the more sublime, the ageless, diseaseless,
birthless, deathless one, the golden image, the gem-form,
The five elements, the fluid, the fiery, the radiant form within me.\(^{312}\)

The *Aṣṭāksramantra*, ‘*Om namo nraryanaya*’, according to the Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas, is the most important *mantra* which contains the quintessence of Vedānta. We are supposed to propitiate the Ācārya by prostrating at his feet, please him through personal service and beseech him to bless us with the *mantra*. In spite of doing all this, Ācārya Rāmānuja had to wait for many years and he had to make many trips to his Ācārya’s house before he got initiated to the sacred *mantra*. The *Guru* who was to initiate him with the traditional whispering into the ultimately significant *mantra* had been withholding this final blessing from him for a very long time. In utter contrast to this, here, the devotee (the Āḻvār) is forcing the Ācārya at sword-point to impart the *mantra* to him. And paradoxically enough the Āḻvār is blessed with the *mantra* and this exalted *mantra* is given by none other than Lord Nārāyana Himself who also takes the role of his Ācārya. When finally the Ācārya did impart the *mantra* to Ramanuja, he climbed up the roof of a building and shouted out the secret *mantra* so that everyone present could hear it. His spontaneous response was to communicate this special insight into the meaning of the Vaiṣṇava vision of reality to as many people as possible. The immediate reaction of the Āḻvār also was to pour out the greatness of the *mantra* in the first decade of his *Periatirumoli*. The Āḻvār got the unique privilege of receiving the *mantra*

\(^{312}\) *TND* 1
directly from Viṣṇu Himself and also Viṣṇu revealing Himself to him in His true nature of things. Āḻvār is also blessed with the presence of Goddess Lakṣmi in the process of mantropadeśa. The Lord had a keen desire to transform Kaliyan into a saint and so he imparted to him the spiritual knowledge. At Tirunaraiyur the Lord initiated the Āḻvār into the lofty lineage of Vaiṣṇavite saints. The mortal love that Kaliyan had for Kumudavalli blossomed into a love for the Almighty. The robber now turned into a mystic and started pouring out his overwhelming experience in the form of poetry.

The Poetical Compositions of Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār

Among the twelve Āḻvār's Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār was one of the most learned Tamil poets and the most prolific writer with a total of six works and 1361 stanzas of the Divyaprabandham. These works constitute a major part of the Nālāyira Divyaprabandham. They not only exhibit the enormous poetic skill of the Āḻvār but also convey important theological teachings of Vaiṣṇavism. In Hardy’s words, "The six poems of Tirumaṅgai are the aṅgas to the four Vedas which the other Sudra, Nammāḻvar composed. This symbolism is important. Viṣṇu expressed saving knowledge through the mouth of a Śudra, a newVeda comprehensible to the Tamil people, and then instigated another Śudra to add to its splendour to surround it with further Tamil messages of salvation and to defend it against the attacks from rival systems. It is here that the whole of Parakala’s violence and aggressiveness acquires a totally new dimension; He is on earth (his origin is after all a weapon, the bow) to fight against the darkness of ignorance and of Kali and to protect the light of the Vedas and those who
adhere to them. In that role he is prayed to and venerated in the temples."\(^{313}\) The poetical works of Āḻvār are the following:

1. *Periatirumoḷi* with 1084 hymns of high literary excellence is the magnum opus of Āḻvār.
2. *Tirukkuruntandakam* with 20 verses
3. *Tiruneduntandakam* with 30 verses
4. *Tiruvelukkāṭirukkai*, a long poem with 47 lines
5. *Siria Tirumadal* consisting of 155 lines
6. *Peria Tirumadal* consisting of 297 lines.

Kaliyan ‘overpowered’ the Lord at Tirumanakkollai with the power of his sword and received the *mantra* directly from Him. The *mantra*, exhibiting its true power made the Āḻvār rid of his ignorance. Kaliyan became immediately blessed with knowledge combined with love (*jñāna-bhakti*) which effaced the weakness of the intellect that doubts, confuses, argues and fails to see what ought to be seen. That extraordinary blessing from the Lord Himself stirred Kaliyan and made him burst into rapturous poetry in praise of the Lord and His devotees. This is the background of the composition of his first poem ‘*Peria Tirumoḷi*’ which is a profound celebration of the meanings of the *Aṣṭāksara-mantra*. This *Mūlamantra* is an explanation of the most important auspicious attributes of the Lord, namely, His lordship or *swāmitva* and His easy accessibility or *saulabhya*. Nārāyaṇa blessed the Āḻvār by presentig Himself at eightysix *Divya-deśas* he visited and in turn received garlands of chaste Tamil verses of *Peria Tirumoḷi* steeped in God-experience. So *Peria Tirumoḷi* is the most important work of Āḻvār which contains a large number of devotional verses speaking the greatness of various Vaiṣṇava shrines, the

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\(^{313}\) E.W. Hardy, *The Hagiography of Parakāla*, Germany 1992, p.102
area deities within them and praising the numerous auspicious qualities of God as experienced by the mystic saint. Other than speaking about God and His attributes he also speaks about human suffering caused by bondage and the ways and means of overcoming it leading ultimately to the attainment of God.

According to tradition Lord Narayana presented Himself before the Āḻvār at the end of Peria Tirumoli and blessed him and as a reflection of his ecstatic state of mind he poured out his joyous feelings into the verses of Trukkuruntandakam which are testimony to the unshakable belief of the Āḻvār in the rakṣakatva and bhakta- vātsalya of Lord Nārāyaṇa. The literal meaning of dantakam is a staff used as a support while walking up a hill. In the context of the poetry, it refers to a particular type of poetical composition addressed to God as comparing Him to such a support or in other words, a source of sustenance for the soul. God is love, a supporting love and once this loving staff has been found one can neither leave it nor live without it. Kuru in Tamil means short and nedu means long, denoting the meters adopted. The main theme of the Tirukkuruntandakam is that the soul is wholly dependent on God who is the sole supporter and it can hope to escape the suffering by means of sincere prayers and worship to Him. The twenty moving verses of Tirukkuruntandakam celebrate the rakṣakatva of Śrīman Nārāyaṇa and the mahāviśvāsah (absolute faith) of the Āḻvār himself.

In the words of the Āḻvār:

“Thus, who am His slave cannot leave Him, who is the treasure, One likened to a pillar of pearl, who is the gradually attainable goal of all those who remember Him, who ended the life of Kamsa, who is the Ruler of the
universe, who remembers His devotees, Who loving me has come and entered my mind so that it could humble itself and praise Him.”

The Ālvār further says that Nārāyaṇa is the Supporter of the world and He is also the Self of all the world with all its elements, namely earth, water, fire, air and space. It is He who saves the world from the activities of the evil forces. This is the One who has all the auspicious qualities and he asks every one to meditate on Him who like a bull destroyed the terrible rākṣasa (Demon), king of Lanka, and who is sweet as nectar, and who is the Protector that slew Hiraṇyakaśyap.

The Tiruneduntandakam is a longer poetical composition portraying the mystic experience of God by the Saint. It is called the Divya-sāstra and Parāśara Bhatta made use of its valuable points to win an argument against an Advaitin who eventually became a Śrivaśṇavite. In this poem the Ālvār speaks in the voice of a nāyaki or consort of God who is separated from her beloved Lord (Nāyaka). He conveys his anguish caused by separation from God in the mystic language through the media of the mother of the maiden and also directly as the maiden.

Tiruvelukāṭirukkai is a single poem of 47 lines. It deals with the concept of absolute surrender of the soul to God who out of his supreme saving power can rescue it from bondage. The nature of God, the means of attaining him and the supreme goal to be attained are all briefly presented in this poem. Kaliyan is celebrated for all his poems and is popularly known as Nālukavi Perumāl (four kavis or poets in one). The four kavis are;

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1. Āsukavi meaning one who readily composes a poem when ordered by anyone to do so without any hesitation (extempore)

2. Madhurakavi meaning one who composes sweet songs with suitable words, pregnant with meaning and most enjoyable by the introduction of several figures of speech.

3. Vistārakavi meaning one who composes a poem in several metres called kalivenpā etc: in Tamil in an elaborate manner. Peria Tirumoli, the two Tandakams and the two Madals belong to this category...

4. Chitrakavi The Sanskrit rhetoricians have divided this ‘chitrakavi’ in various ways like Cakra Bandha, Padma Bandha, uraja Bandha, Nāgabandha and Ratha Bandha. Tiruvezhukkūrirukkai belongs to the Rathabandha type poetical composition. It has some particular specifications laid down by Tamil rhetorics. Drawing the figure of a chariot with several compartments, the words of the poem are to be used for filling up the compartments according to the specific rules in the rhetorics. The term madal refers to a traditional custom in which the man or woman who has been in love with his or her lover takes a vow to secure the person loved by openly demonstrating in public his or her love to the person concerned. The custom generally followed in the ancient Tamil country was that the person affected would take a ride in a street on a palmyra stem using it as a horse ((known as madalūrtal), so that the lover having been exposed to public scandal, will realize his mistake and come back to the aggrieved person. Tirumāṅgai Āḻvār adopts this concept of madal to express his intense love for God and thereby arouse His compassion and obtain communion with Him. Here the love expressed towards God is of a spiritual type expressing the soul’s longing for union with God. It is an aspect of bhakti expressed in the mood (bhāva) of a
maiden towards her lover. The mystic saint assumes the guise of a Nāyakī or consort and conveys the inner feelings caused by separation from the Nayaka, the Supreme Lord. The two madals portray the mystic feelings of the saint towards God. The Ālvār, as Nāyakī, pours out his devotional love to God who is the Nayaka, the beloved Lord with the usual craving for communion, followed with the agony during the period of separation and then the joyous experience during the period of communion. The Ālvār's yearning for the Lord, expressed in erotic language represents, theologically, an estranged soul's longing for its reunion with the Lord. The immense yearning, longing and impatience experienced by the Ālvār are all expressed in deeply poignant fashion in his poems.

These poems can be read as intense love poems replete with carnal passion, but put in their proper context they become ecstatic songs of extreme longing or communion with God; these poems are a celebration of human desire which becomes sacred when directed towards God. The passion for God presupposes vairagya or detachment which is absent in common man-woman relationship. More the ‘vairāgya’, more the innate desire for God which may sound paradoxical. Bhakti is a sacred sentiment because the object of passion is the Creator Himself

The Mysticism of Tirumaṅgai Ālvār

The Lord of love, ever on the watch for an occasion to turn the jīva from his career of sin and to redeem him from his wrong doings, finds a suitable opportunity and comes to him as the Brahma-guru. The Ālvār experienced in his heart that Supreme Person, as He really is, with a unique divine form, ornaments, weapons, consorts and retinue. The Ālvār could see God within his eyes and feel him enter and mingle within his heart. In an ecstatic, blissful mood the Ālvār sings that the Lord entered
his heart without any effort on the latter’s part. The Ālavār bent down and
touched the Lord's feet only to remove His toe-ring and not to get His
blessings. But the most benevolent God blessed him with the sacred
mantra. The overwhelmed Ālavār sings:

Since the day he came he took up residence
In this heart of mine, not any other one’s.
He became my pure consciousness abiding,
Protecting me from the agents of Yama-death.
He resides in fragrance among nectar groves
Kudantai dancer-of-pots in reclining,
He’s my father and Lord of my father,
How indeed can I learn to forget him?\(^\text{315}\)

Now that the Lord has entered the Ālavār's heart he does not want to let
Him go. So says the Ālavār:
O Lord, source of eternal light, our master, wish-gem,
Resident of Venkatam hills!
You came, entered my heart, and conquered it.
Now I shall never let you go.\(^\text{316}\)

Narayana's beauty attracts, for He is Bhuvana Sundara (the most
beautiful in the world) and He showed His beautiful form to the Ālavār to
attract him. Nārāyaṇa's personality begets love, while Narayana's svarūpa
engenders meditation. The devotee thus seeks both the transcendent (so
far as Nārāyaṇa remains in human form in Vaikunṭha) and the immanent
God (so far as Nārāyaṇa's blissful knowledge remains the infinite ground
of the finite jiva's being). Nārāyaṇa revealed Himself spontaneously,
without any cause, to the Ālvār due to His unsurpassed nobility (niratiśaya audārya) and compassion (dayā). The awareness of these qualities of God gives confidence to the Ālvār that God will help him. This confidence turns into the firm conviction that God will rescue him because of His previous manifestations in the past to rescue those beloved to Him. No one has the capacity to account for God’s generosity because there remains an ultimate divine mystery in salvation. The removal of ignorance of the Ālvār, generating devotion towards the sacred feet of the Lord and desire to do service at all places and at all times, was all due to God’s generosity. Normally, for becoming a jñāni one has to go through the three stages, which are, para-bhakti, para-jñāna and parama-bhakti. But, here, in our Ālvār’s case, the experience happened only due to Divine grace and without any effort on the part of the Ālvār. The mumukṣu is blessed with viveka or the discriminating power. He acquires a clear knowledge of the difference between cit, acit and Isvara in terms of śeṣi and śeṣa and his dependence on the Supreme Self as parama seṣi. The Ālvār says:

My Lord! You are the Universe,
You are the cause and effect in all the eight Quarters.
You are my wealth, You are light effulgent.
Seeking service at your feet, I worship you.
I praise you for this alone,
Make me your slave, rid me of my worries.\(^{317}\)

The Ālvār picturesquely brings forth the inalienability of the ‘Master-Servant’ relationship between God and man, whatever the vicissitudes. Addresssing the Lord he says:

\(^{317}\ TKD 11\)
When I think of you as the thief who has stolen my heart,
My eyes shower tears, my heart melts, O Lord who
Rides the bird garuda and who manifested as the boar,
O! Lord of Nārāiyūr! I cannot think of any one other than you.\(^{318}\)
The adoration of the Ālvār for the Lord reaches new heights and makes him say:
O Lord who rid the waning moon of his misery!
O Radiant Lord reclining on the five-hooded snake!
Just as a caterpillar growing on the bitter Neem tree
still eats only Neem,
I seek none other than your feet.\(^{319}\)

What the Ālvār means is that, even if the Lord, generally known to be sweet as sugarcane, turns bitter like the neem (margosa) fruit, he will covet nothing but His comely feet like the caterpillar, bred on the margo leaf, will eat nothing but that.

Reflecting on the wickedness and vanity of earthly life, the Ālvār becomes sick-minded and seized with remorse. The dawn of knowledge brings on the mood of repentance leading to \textit{virakti} (detachment).

While in the moments of insight the mystic is impressed by the community of nature between the soul and God, when he lapses from them a feeling of unworthiness, the desolation of a separate life, disturbs his soul to its depths. He shudders before the awful majesty of the great God, quivers in anguish with prayers for forgiveness of sins, for aid and protection. Healer speaks about the mood which ruled the entire religious life in the first half of the Middle Ages in Europe in this manner, “A stern

\(^{318}\) \textit{PTM} 7.2.1

\(^{319}\) \textit{PTM} 11.8.7
harsh mood of penitence rules the entire religious life; the feeling of guilt disturbs the soul to its depths, sinful man shudders before the awful insight of the great God, he trembles before the majesty of the Eternal Judge, he quivers in anguish as he faces his last hour. In his distress and dread he begs for mercy, for forgiveness of his sins, for aid and protection against the assaults of Satan, and for a happy death.\textsuperscript{320} This is exactly the mood of Āḻvār after his vision of God. But the Āḻvār gets into the mood of remorse and repentance after the vision and not before. God, out of His loving grace, appeared before him without his asking. The Āḻvār himself states that even if he was not an adhikari (one who was not entitled to) he recited the sacred mantra of the Lord and as a result he became very uneasy about his daring act (of plundering the Lord Himself). He says that the Lord of Srirangam out of His infinite kindness (dayā) entered into his closed eyes and asked him not to be afraid. In the Āḻvār's own words:

The adorable Lord is the life-breath of Arangam. I, this dirty devotee with a filth-ridden body and spit-defiled mouth, have chanted the hoary mantra of Nārāyaṇa. I was trembling inside all the while, but he came like a lotus flower before me and said, “Fear not”, and remained in my eyes.\textsuperscript{321}

Elsewhere he says:
When my soul suffers torment of hell and pain
There the Lord protects giving courage and succour,
Feet of lotus hue worshipped by gods above,
And hand that raised says, "Fear not, I am with you."
He is the Lord of cool Venkatam, Kesi-foe,

\textsuperscript{321} TKD 12
He is the child who ate butter and was tethered then,  
H's my Lord sugarcane-like and honey-milk,  
He alone resides for ever in my heart.\textsuperscript{322}

In this manner the Āḻvār celebrates the Lord’s gracefulness (\textit{sausīlya}) and \textit{saulabhya}ta (easy accessibility). According to commentators there is, indeed, a reason behind Lord Viṣṇu showing immeasurable \textit{vātsalya} towards our Āḻvār. Just like a father is attached to his last child the Lord is attached more to him because he is the last of the Āḻvārs. The Āḻvār feels immensely happy that all his erstwhile sins were wiped out by the Lord, when He entered his eyes. His body also got purified. He had a great desire to open his eyes and witness the supreme beauty of the Lord of Srirangam. He did open his eyes and drank in the beauty of the Lord to his heart’s content. In this context the Āḻvār says:

Even the water slurped by a red hot iron is of use, take it from me. All my terrible \textit{karmas} have left me. My eyes hover around the sweet Lord of Arangam, who has his temple amid bee-humming groves, enjoying his form for ever.\textsuperscript{323}

The Āḻvār celebrates the \textit{Paramātma} or \textit{Surveśvara} \textit{tatva} of Śrī Ranganātha. He states that the experience of the \textit{svarūpa} of the \textit{Paramātman} through \textit{bhakti-yoga} practised by serving the \textit{arcā- murti} at Srirangam and those of other \textit{divya desas} alone can redeem us. The sense of humility and feeling of unworthiness felt by the Āḻvār is immense. The Āḻvār contemplated his past sins with fear and felt unworthy to seek the Lord’s grace. He had confessed his unworthiness in several verses of which the following is a typical example:

\textsuperscript{322} \textit{PTM} 7.3.5  
\textsuperscript{323} \textit{TKD} 13
Without any feeling, and with cruel mind,
With actions filled with rage,
Wandering with packs of dogs,
Rejoicing in sport,
I ran and roamed, destroying several lives.\textsuperscript{324}

Hardy remarks, “A strong note of remorse is struck here. This very first song of the first work, \textit{Peria Tirumoli}, is a moving statement of a ‘conversion' experience. For a long time, Parakāla tells us, he has been wasting his life with useless and sinful pursuits, but now he has found true life and salvation through the name of Nārāyaṇa.”\textsuperscript{325} This serves as \textit{mangalasāsana}, an introduction to the series of songs dedicated to individual temples.

The Ālvār, out of immense remorse laments:

Before coming here I was a wicked man who never uttered a kind word to the poor and needy; showed no compassion for animals but killed them for mere sport. But now, because of your grace I seek you, who resides in Tirumala, a mountain on the top of which huge clouds gather to pour rain making the place cool and pleasant, and have come running to you even before the blood in my hand has dried.\textsuperscript{326}

Commenting on this song, Svelebille states, “If the story of Parakāla’s life is interesting in the sense that it shows no necessary connection between \textit{bhakti} and noted Hindu religion and so-called moral behaviour and also how a profound religious experience may leave the character entirely unaffected – counts, among his crimes committed as a prince -

\textsuperscript{324} \textit{PTM} 1.5,6
\textsuperscript{325} E.W. Hardy, op.cit.,P.101
\textsuperscript{326} \textit{PTM} 1.9,3
murder, deceit and debauchery.” 

Ālvār, as we see, has been blessed with the ‘motherly love’ (vātsalya), one of the main qualities of Lord Viṣṇu. We come across such motherly love in the Bhagavadgītā. The incarnate Lord, who is about to start teaching the ‘discipline of devotion’ to Arjuna as the means to communion with him, is said to be overwhelmed with motherly love for his devotees. These devotees are, “the persons, rare indeed, who not only recognize their metaphysical dependence upon him but are dependent on communion with him to sustain their souls.” There is a reason for the Lord’s showering of vātsalya’ on His devotee as shown in the Bhagavadgītā. Just as the devotee cannot survive without the Lord He also cannot sustain his own self without the devotee. The Lord is mystically dependent on the devotee. “His motherly love has overwhelmed the rest of his nature and produced a situation in which the self of the devotee and his own self draw very near and support one another. Into this deepest mystery of God’s nature only one who is utterly and exclusively devoted to God can hope to enter. This is the mystery of the Supreme Person, the Lord of all Lords, completely self-sufficient and independent, not only takes our mortal form upon himself in order to benefit the world, but also allows himself to become dependent, as it were, on those who utterly cast themselves upon him.”

Parāśara Bhatta draws the analogy of the relation of the cow to her calf while explaining the meaning of the word vātsalya in his commentary on the Viṣṇusahasranāma. Vatsalya means considering even a fault as a virtue. The classic example cited to illustrate this quality is the cow which

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licks the newly born calf unmindful of the dirt on its body. Vātsalya means the loving disposition of God to devotees; it is the special affection that God shows towards the devotees unmindful of their sins and defects as in the case of a mother’s love to the child. The Lord’s vātsalya is even greater than that of one’s mother. In all praise for the Lord, the Ālvār gives the assurance that through this worship all wishes will be fulfilled. He says:

It gives a good life, of wealth and family, 
and rages to ground all travails facing devotees, 
then grants the rule of the sky and earth benign grace. 
It gives a man strength, and all that there is, 
with love that exceeds a mother's. 
It gives the pure good, 
I know the mantra, 
Narayāṇa is the good name. 330

Out of sheer vātsalya Lord Viṣṇu chose the Ālvār, the last of the Ālvārs as his most favourite devotee. The only good thing the Ālvār did, before he got the vision of the Lord, was Bhagavad-kaiṅkarya or bhāgavata-śeṣatva, and that too, due to compulsion by Kumudavalli, which was enough to please the Lord. All his past sins were forgiven and Lord Viṣṇu, like a mother cow, showered His overflowing affection on him blessing him with the astaksara mantra quite unexpectedly. A reformed Ālvār, with mixed feelings of remorse and gratitude says:

I had no schooling, 
I let my senses rule and lead my heart everywhere,

330 PTM 1,1,9
I lost a good life,
O Fie-to-me wretch,
I roamed like death on all creatures.
I put an end to my roaming everywhere
seeking a life of redemption.
I found the perfect Mantra for comfort,
Nārāyaṇa is the good name.\textsuperscript{331}
The Āḻvār shows the way for others also to reform themselves. He says:
Recalling with nostalgia your bright days,
your love-life, and romances through coughs and moans,
dragging your life slowly with a staff in hand;
’ere that happens, the Lord wears a cool Tulsi wreath
humming with bees
worship him in Vadari.\textsuperscript{332}

The Āḻvār is in a state of supreme bliss after the Lord enters into his mind
and all thought of “I” and “Mine” is destroyed. He realizes his nature as
an ātman different from the deha and feels the hazards and hardships of
samsāra to which he is exposed by his rāga and dvesa and renounces
sensual pleasures and even the happiness of Vaikuṇṭha. Radhakrishnan
describes beautifully the intensity of the aftermath of a mystical
experience thus: "When the personality of the mystic rises to a level
which is disconcerting to his normal self-centred life, certain disorders
show themselves. The experience shows an intense strain on the
organism. “When the seed of the oak is planted in earthen vessels they
break asunder. When new wine is planted in old bottles, they burst. Man
must become a new vessel, a new creature, if he is to bear the spiritual

\textsuperscript{331} PTM 1.1.8
\textsuperscript{332} PTM 1.3.5
light.\textsuperscript{333} This was exactly the mental condition of the Āḻvār after his wonderful mystical experience.

To have received the \textit{mantra} from Viṣṇu and to have been granted His vision signifies Parakāla’s liberation. Liberation is the direct intuitive realization by the individual self of its own essential nature as a mode of God. Liberation is obtained by the complete destruction of the \textit{karmas}, which sully the purity of the self and the dawning of divine grace which transforms constant contemplation into immediate intuition of God. Without divine grace this transformation is not possible. The destruction of \textit{karma} and the dawning of intuitive knowledge are simultaneous and the individual soul becomes similar to Brahman. Ever retaining its individuality, the self realizes itself as the body of God, ever dwells in direct communion with him, enjoying infinite consciousness and bliss like him. Without individuality the self cannot be in bliss of communion with God. So egoism and not individuality is the cause of bondage. The experience of God is followed by love (\textit{prīti}) for Him culminating in the desire to serve at his feet. This is analogous to the stages which succeed \textit{śaraṇāgati} in Ramanuja’s \textit{Śaraṇāgati Gadya}. In this \textit{gadya}, the stages of \textit{parabhakti}, \textit{parajñāna} and \textit{paramabhakti} led to the direct experience of God.\textsuperscript{334} This experience, in turn, generated a desire for service at the feet of the Lord.

After having his \textit{mantropadeśa} and becoming a Vaiṣṇava, the Āḻvār gave up his ignoble profession of robbery and started engaging himself in divine service by visiting the various Vaiṣṇava shrines throughout the length and breadth of the country, from Badrināth in the North to

\textsuperscript{333} S.Radhakrishnan, \textit{Eastern Religion and Western Thought}, U.S.A, 1940, p.275
\textsuperscript{334} Rāmānuja, \textit{Śaraṇāgati Gadya}, Sec : 2.4.1
Tirukkuṟuṅgudi in the extreme South. These shrines, eighty-six in number, are immortalized in his monumental work, *Peria Tirumoli*. The Āḻvār decided to do kaiṅkarya to Ranganatha by building typical components of South Indian temple; gopuram, compound walls etc:

Āḻvār's love for arcā was special and he in turn demanded special treatment from the Lord. When he did not get such treatment or response he got angry and poured out his anger in verses as in the decad of Tiruindalūr. The Āḻvār reached the temple and found the doors closed and could not contain his disappointment. He said:

O Lord of Indalūr! Scriptures speak of you as the omniscient One! But you seem to know everything other than my presence here at your gate! The śastras declare that your glorious form belongs to the bhaktas. What then is the point in closing the doors when I have come all the way to have your darśan and to sing your praise? “Don’t consider me to be a submissive devotee like the other Āḻvārs who could sustain themselves by thinking about other manifestations of the Lord, like the para, vyūha, vibhava and antaryāmin etc: and His auspicious qualities. But I can sustain only by seeing the arcāvatāras of the Lord and doing mangalaśāsana to him.”

Nambi (the Arcāmūrti of Tirunārāiyūr) was the Ācārya who blessed him with the mantropadeśa. While commenting on the Āḻvār’s attachment to the arcāvatāra Pillai Lokācārya says, “Who will give up the Ācārya well in hand and run after God, an unknown and uncertain quantum? Will any one give up the asset on hand and go about digging deep into the earth, in search of a dubious treasure? Will a man dying of thirst have recourse to

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335 *P Tir 4.9.6*
rain water to be dropped down by the clouds, or water from the distant sea, river or well, ignoring the water in the vessel, right in front of him? The Lord operates from different regions, appropriate to His five manifestations. He who permanently resides in the service and worship of the Ācārya, as the all-in-all shall, however, sees in the Ācārya, a blending of all these five regions, namely, the High Heaven, resonant with the Sāma-gāna sung by the ever-free and emancipated souls (nitya-sūris) over there, the Milky Ocean, where the Lord brings about himself within the ear-shot of the ardent devotees, crying out their woes and calling out for help, the places where the Lord jumps into, in His incarnate forms as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, the iconic manifestation, all around, literally besieging the individuals gone astray, and the heart region of one and all where the Lord graciously stays on, sumptuously feeding those who meditate on Him.336 All five manifestations of Lord Viṣṇu are literally enjoyed by the Ālvār in his own Ācārya, that is Tirunāraiṭṭi Nambi, the arcā-mūrti of Tirunāraiṭṭi temple, who is Lord Viṣṇu Himself.

This passion of the Ālvār for the arcāvataṭa seems to have caused worry to the Lord. He gently reminded the Ālvār about the lowlines of the saṃsāric life with a view to lead him to His paramapada. Kaliyan quickly realized his helpless state and described it movingly in the last Tirumoli of his Peria Tirumoli. In that Tirumoli, filled with despondency (nirveda) about his helpless state, Kaliyan portrays the tyranny of karma and the tragedies of human sorrows by the analogies of:

A storm-tossed boat at the middle of the ocean
A person who lives in the same house with a poisonous snake
An ant that is caught in the middle of a stick that is burning on both sides

336 Sri Vacanabhūṣṇam, Pillai Lokācārya - Aphorism, 449-454
A pack of foxes caught in the middle of a flood.\textsuperscript{337}

After his deep immersion in the mysteries of the Aṣṭakṣara Mantra and after visiting the many holy shrines the Ālvār got into a sober mood. He expressed his fear of being caught in the snares of samsāra and rebirth and cried aloud seeking God’s help for mokṣa. The Ālvār appeals to the Lord:

Like the calf calling for its milch mother cow,
Unforgettingly I call for you
O Lord! who reside in Nāraiyūr,
which is encircled by nectar laden gardens,
kindly see that I am not born again.\textsuperscript{338}

Like a mother who will not give food to her child until the child is really hungry, God also did not condescend to his plea. The reason may also be that He wanted to enjoy a few more pāsurams from his dear devotee.

Seeing God’s indifference the Ālvār, who was not able to bear the separation from the Lord even for a moment started behaving like a thirsty man who would pour cool water all over his body. Out of desperation the Ālvār started engaging himself in a strenuous effort to enjoy the auspicious qualities of the Lord with his mind, body and speech and declared his utter servitude to Him under all circumstances. The Ālvār began to convince himself that the blissful experience of mind, soul and body of the Lord arose out of the mangalaśāsanas he dedicated to the deities at the holy shrines. He started celebrating the good fortune of those who could see the Lord in those holy shrines through his songs. As

\textsuperscript{337} PTM 11,8,1-5
\textsuperscript{338} Ibid., 7,1,1
a result of this rigorous exercise he got his boon of moksa and overcame the afflictions of saṃsāra. Kaliyan begged the Lord to show him the way to paramapada but the Lord did not respond. Kaliyan’s state was like that of a thirsty man whose thirst increases with more consumption of water when one is totally parched. Kaliyan’s God-hunger grew all the more and the desire to reach the Lord grew further and further. This state of feeling led to the creation of Tiruvezhukkūtrirukkai. With immense haste to reach the Lord without any further waiting Kaliyan prayed to Lord Aravamudan of Tirukku kuntai (Kumbakonam in Tamilnādu) to deflect any obstacles resulting from the bad karma and to help him to worship the Lord at His paramapada. Kaliyan thus performed šaranagati at Tirukku kundai Aravamudan temple but nothing happened. There was no response from the Lord. Kaliyan got very agitated and vowed to destroy his svarūpa as jīvātmā (śeṣa) and the Lord’s svarūpa as Paramātmā (sarvaśesi) so that Kaliyan can reach Him by any means at his disposal.

The two Madals arose from the mood of desperation. Love of God is like love of a woman for a ‘puruṣa’ here Puruṣothama or Lord Nārāyaṇa. Not able to bear the separation the Ālvār seeks God’s intervention. His only aim is to reach and serve God. The Ālvār, in the voice of a girl, says that she wants to ride the palmyra horse and pours out her heart with passion and longing. He starts the Tirumadal by declaring that kama is the real puruṣartha or goal in life. The other two puruṣarthas, namely, dharma and artha ultimately result in kāma as well. He says:

“Thus one enjoys the sweet nectar of the lover’s smiling lips; Is not this the object of righteous living? Verily this is the object of wealth as well; therefore let us pursue this divine kāma. We have heard that in the Tamil tradition it is not proper for fawn-eyed, swan-gaited maidens to commit
madal for the love of their men, earning the world's rebuke. We cannot accept that. So we shall follow the Northern Sanskrit tradition.\textsuperscript{339}

If this ‘divine kāma’ is not reciprocated, what should one do? Maḍalūrtal or riding on a palmyra stem is a powerful weapon to force the issue, but that is only for men. But Parakāla Nāyakī justifies maḍalūrtal by women on two grounds. One is the unbearable nature of unfulfilled love. She pleads that she is struggling to sustain her life; the moonlight which normally unites the lovers burns her and the cool breeze blowing on her breast torments her. The second justification deals with the repudiation of the Tamil tradition which forbids maḍalūrtal by women. The Āḻvār in his Ğiria Tīrumaḍal states that it was customary for the North Indian women to practise this maḍal (though not in the same manner as in the Tamil tradition). The Āḻvār says: "The warrior King by his father's command gave up his kingdom and went to the forest. Did not Vaidehi follow him? Then there is the maiden Vasavadatta, not finding her paramour, went to her elder brother who took her away to a distant land, but she resisted him, went to the battle-field, sought her lover and married him there itself, waited for the battle to end and safely secured the embrace with him. Then there is the example of Ulupi, daughter of the king of snakes who fell in love with Dhananjaya- the excellent Kuru warrior. Ulupi gave up her feminine grace, shyness, frailty and fear and embraced her lover and returned to her kingdom in the nether world. Then there is the story of Usha, the daughter of Asura King Bana. Her friend, Citralekha, by magic brought her lover, Aniruddha, (Krṣṇa’s grandson) and together they enjoyed many days of pleasure. Then there is Uma, the daughter of the

\textsuperscript{339} Peria Tīrumaḍal, p. 37, Commentary by P.B. Annangaracharya, www.wordpress.com
mountain-king Himavan who performed terrible penance to marry the matted-haired Siva."

"Those who do not agree with Madalūrtal", says the Ālvār, "have no idea about the soothing quality of red Sandal paste from the Southern hills. They are not the ones to be moved by the melodies of the cowherd’s flute. They would never grieve to hear the bell around the stud-bull’s neck. They will not melt their hearts on hearing the mating calls of the long-beaked Anril (love) bird-pair in the thorny nest on Palmyra trees-tops. They would not see the moonlight spilled from the full Moon in the courtyard. They will never be hit by Madana, the God-of-love’s flower shaft, and will never take to the golden dusty streets to commit Madal."

Having established a woman’s right to undertake maḍal, through various examples Parakāla Nāyakī speaks about her own unbearable passion for the Lord:

"In the fragrant bower-surrounded Tirunaraiyur, where learned Vedic seers live, the mountain-like gold-radiant doors of the temple opened and I beheld my Lord. That very moment the Lord’s chest, his lips, his feet, his hands, his eyes all appeared like a dense thicket of lotus flowers in a dark mountain pond. His waistband, his bangles, his matching earrings, his necklace, his tall crown, his diadem - all shone like the radiant Sun."  

The Ālvār Nāyakī continues, "A tender creeper stood clinging to the mountain-gem Lord. She was a swan, she was a peacock, at her waist she

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340 Ibid., p.48-55  
342 Ibid., pp.733-34
was lightning. Her lips were plump *kovai* fruit, her eyes were two *kendai* fish. Of such beauty was the dame Srī beside her Lord. I was least aware that my mind, heart and my waist belt were slipping away. Then the endless roar of the sea began to hurt me. The rays of the sweet Moon fell hot on me - wonder how the Moon changed its nature? The cool breeze wafting the fragrance of flowers and carrying the pollen of the *Śāndal* trees growing on the Southern hills, pleasing to all, blew like hot wind over me. The mating calls of the *Anril* (love) birds in the thorny nest over the Palm tree in the courtyard pierced my heart like daggers. The strong-armed Madana with his sugarcane bow and flower-mounted arrows draws it back as far as his ears and shoots, aiming at my heart. Alas! there is no one to stop him.”

The agony of separation reaches its zenith here and Parakāla Nāyakī becomes offensive and threatens the Lord and ends with the ominous, “If my Lord refuses to grant me His grace and union what follows is nothing short of extortion.” The Ālvār Nāyakī, with this final *Brahmāstra* threatens the Lord that she would ride on a palmyra *madal* through the streets and proclaim to the people all His misdeeds and expose his misbehaviour to the whole world. She says,

"Until I see my dark-hued Lord I shall expose his atrocities to the people of all the holy shrines where he resides. Heedless of public disdain - I swear- I shall ride on the Long-horned palmyra stalk, like a hobby horse and commit the forbidden *Madal*."

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344 *Siria Madal*, op.cit., p.727
Now the Lord got worried. He felt that if He still stays away from Kaliyan the world will condemn Him. Hence Lord Nārāyaṇa appeared before Kaliyan just as He appeared before Prahlāda in a split second from the pillar in the court of Hiranyakaśyap and graced him with His beautiful vision.

The Ālvār becomes the object of greatest love of the Lord in whom has arisen supreme love for the Lord. The Bhagavān says, “I am ineffably dear to the man of knowledge and he is also dear to me.” Therefore, in reality, only knowledge of the nature of supreme bhakti (devotion) is the means for attaining the Bhagavān. So the Ālvār’s ardent devotion made Lord Nārāyaṇa reveal the mysteries of the three eternal truths, namely, prakṛti, cetana and Isvara and their relationships. Kaliyan became ecstatic and poured forth his wonderful experience through the thirty pasurams of Tiruneduntandakam, known for their richness of sāstra and dealing with tattvatraya, paramahita, and parama puruṣārtha.

The Ālvār took the dantaka (staff) of Nārāyaṇa to ascend and reach Nārāyaṇa’s abode to become nityasūri and to enjoy the eternal bliss of kainkarya to Him. The Ālvār describes the need for the staff of the Lord for the lofty journey:

“Or ever age creep on us, and we need
The staff’s support; ere we are double bent
With eyes fixed on the ground in front and feet
That trotter, sitting down to rest, all spent;
We would worship Vadari
Home of Him who mightily

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346 BG VII.17
Sucked his feigned mother’s breast
Till she died, ogress contest.\textsuperscript{347}

Tirumāṅgaī Ālvār as Parakālanāyakī realizes that the Lord is far away from her. As there is no upper limit to His \textit{paratva} there is no lower limit to his lowliness.

In the Ālvār's words:

The Lord of cowherd lass (Nappinnai), who once churned, and then bridged the ocean is my Lord. He killed the demon king and all his kin with arrows shot from his mighty bow, victoriously. He lifted the mountain (Govardhana). He resides for ever in fresh water-fed Tiruvinnagaram. He is the Lord of cool Tirukkudantai. He is the eternal one. I am as low as a dog who enters wherever the door is open. Me, who is mean like this should desire him! I sincerely wish the relationship between Him and me should continue by God's grace.\textsuperscript{348}

The Nāyakī pessimistically and emphatically proclaims that she, who is like a dog, will think upon God eternally, suggesting that union is impossible and separation inevitable. The poet who insists upon his unworthiness at the very outset of his \textit{Periatirumoli} is a female, possessed by the Lord, but ultimately convinced of her unworthiness for such a blessing. Finally it all depends on God’s grace. The Ālvār sincerely wishes for God’s grace for the relationship between him and God to continue. He has to wait for the final union; till then he has to bear the pangs of separation.

\textsuperscript{347} \textit{PTM} 1,3,2
\textsuperscript{348} \textit{TND} 29
To sum up, the God-intoxicated twelve Vaisnava Saints of South India popularly known as Alvars who lived between the 6th and 9th centuries A.D. represent a significant phase of Vaisnava Philosophy and Religion which provided a solid foundation for the development of the Visistadvaita Philosophy at the hands of Ramanuja and his successors. They have bequeathed a rich heritage for the posterity in the form of four thousand devotional Tamil hymns collectively known as Nalayira-Divyaprabandham, replete with philosophical and theologocal teachings. The esoteric doctrines of Vaisnavism have drawn material both from the Sanskrit Vedanta works and Tamil Prabandhams, also known as the Tamil Veda. The Alvars claim no merit for themselves. They throw themselves upon the mercy of Visnu. For them, self-surrender is the way to salvation. One worships not by means of sacrifice or meditation, but by devotion and service, given without thought of return. One is saved not through one’s own efforts, but by the Lord’s grace. Constant remembrance of God and calling upon his name will attract that grace. Rather than seeking to transcend the individual condition in the manner of the Vedanta, they seek an intense relationship with God which implies a separate existence of the individual. They seek to enjoy His presence after death, and in life to experience His divine beauty spread throughout the world. In the penultimate verse of the Tiruppavai, Andal asks not for moksa, final liberation, but entanglement within life after life, continuous service to Him for seven lives to come.