

Sai Speaks to a Spiritual Aspirant

Veda is the very breath of God

Spiritual aspirant: All those who are loyal to *Bharathiya* (Indian) culture accept the *Vedas* as authoritative sources for every aspect of life. They assert that the *Vedas* are the roots of their faith. What exactly does *Veda* mean? Why has the *Veda* acquired such importance?

Sai: My dear fellow! You were born in India, that is, Bharath, and you parade yourself as a *Bharathiya*, but you aren't aware of what *Veda* means! Well. *Veda* is the name for a mass of divine knowledge. *Veda* teaches the truth that cannot be revised or reversed by the passage of time through the three stages —past, present, and future. The *Veda* ensures welfare and happiness for the three worlds. It confers peace and security on human society. The *Veda* is the collation of words that are truth, that were visualised by sages who had attained the capacity to receive them into their enlightened awareness. In reality, the Word is the very breath of God, the Supreme Person. The unique importance of the *Veda* rests on this fact.

Veda includes all spiritual knowledge

Spiritual aspirant: But in the field of worldly life, on the daily, material stage, what light can one expect from the *Vedas*?

Sai: Every being that lives in the world strives to possess what it desires and avoid what it dislikes. Know that the *Veda* instructs how to succeed in both these endeavours. That is to say, it lays down what has to be done and what should not be done. When these prescriptions and prohibitions are followed, one can earn the good and avoid the evil. *Veda* is concerned with both the material and the spiritual, both this world and the beyond. If the truth must be told, all life is *Veda*-filled. One cannot but observe its injunctions.

Veda is derived from *vid*, which means “to know”. So *Veda* means and includes all spiritual knowledge (*jnana*). People are distinguished from other animals by the spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) with which they are endowed. Devoid of spiritual wisdom, they are only beasts.

One Veda, divided into five collections

Spiritual aspirant: They say that the *Vedas* are numberless, without end (*an-antha*). Are they all full repositories of spiritual wisdom (*jnana*)?

Sai: “The *Vedas* are infinite (*anantho vai Vedaah*).” But note that, in the beginning, there was just one *Veda*. Later, it was dealt with as three and subsequently as four.

Spiritual aspirant: Why was the one divided into many? What special need was met thereby?

Sai: Since the *Veda* was vast and limitless, it was difficult for ordinary men to study it. Moreover, it would take endless time to complete the study. So, those who wished to learn were overwhelmed by fear, and very few showed earnestness to study the *Veda*. Something had to be done to bring the study within reach of those who sought to learn. Therefore, the hymns of praise in the *Veda* were separated from the rest and grouped under the titles *Rik-samhitha* and *Yajus-samhitha*. The verses capable of musical rendering (*saama* verses) were collected

under the title *Sama-samhitha*, and the *mantras* (formulae and spells) were grouped under *Atharva-samhitha* (fourth collection).

Spiritual aspirant: Who grouped them into these collections?

Sai: It was Vyasa, who was a partial manifestation of Narayana (God, Vishnu) Himself and son of Sage Paraasara. He had mastered the scriptures and spiritual treatises. He himself was a great sage. He was a skillful coordinator. In order to promote the welfare of mankind, he compiled the *Veda* into four parts and facilitated righteous living by all. He divided the *Veda* into four and prepared five collections (*samhithas*).

Divisions of Veda correspond to spiritual stages

Spiritual aspirant: The four *Vedas* are the four collections, as you just explained. How did the extra one arise? What purpose does it serve?

Sai: The *Yajus-samhitha* has separated itself into two, the *Krishna Yajur-veda* collection and the *Sukla Yajur-veda* collection. So the total became five. The process didn't stop there. Each collection developed three separate complementary components. These scriptural texts emerged in order to enlighten people in different states of awareness and different levels of consciousness. The purpose was to enable everyone to benefit by the guidance and thus to cross the sea of suffering. Therefore, there is no trace of conflict in any of these texts.

Spiritual aspirant: What are those three elaborations, those three subsidiary texts, called?

Sai: *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas*, and *Upanishads*.

Spiritual aspirant: What are the *Brahmanas*?

Sai: They are explanatory texts that deal with ritual formulae (*mantras*). They describe clearly the sacrificial rites and ceremonies that have to be observed while performing them. There are many such texts, for example, *Aithareya Brahmana*, *Taithiriya Brahmana*, *Sathapatha Brahmana*, and *Gopatha Brahmana*.

Spiritual aspirant: And, what are *Aranyakas*?

Sai: *Aranya* means “forest”. Thus, these texts, in verse and prose, are to be perused and meditated upon silently in lonely hermitages. They are intended mainly for the guidance of those who, after passing through the stages of spiritual studies (*brahma-charya*) and family life (*grihastha*), assume life as recluses in forests (*vanaprastha*). They deal with the duties and responsibilities of the final stage of active life, the stage preliminary to the totally spiritual stage (*Brahma-kanda*)

Spiritual aspirant: Swami! I have heard the term *Brahma-kanda* used for some texts. What does it relate to?

Sai: Those texts are concerned with sacrificial rites as well as rules of right conduct. They deal with the special features of ceremonial rituals and special elaborations of moral codes.

Upanishads form Vedanta, highest spirituality

Spiritual aspirant: And, Swami, what are *Upanishads*?

Sai: They can be mastered only by intelligent discrimination (*viveka*). They deserve to be so mastered. Four goals are laid down for humans in the scriptures: righteousness (*dharma*), prosperity (*artha*), moral desire (*kama*), and liberation (*moksha*). Learning (*vidya*) can be classified under two heads: The lower and the higher. While the four *Vedas*, the earlier portion of ancient scriptures, deal with the first three, lower, goals, the later portion of the

ancient scriptures, the *Upanishads*, deal with the last, the higher, goal.

Spiritual aspirant: But how did the word *Vedanta* (meaning the doctrine of the identity of *Brahman* and the *Atma*) arise?

Sai: These *Upanishads* themselves form the *Vedanta*. Memorising the *Vedas* is of no avail; *Vedanta* has to be understood and assimilated. Knowledge can never reach consummation until *Vedanta* is mastered

Vedas bear nine names, or features

Spiritual aspirant: Swami! Why are the *Vedas* often referred to as that which was heard (*sruthi*)?

Sai: The *Vedas* are denoted by nine names, and *Sruthi* is only one of the nine.

Spiritual aspirant: What are the nine names?

Sai: *Sruthi*, *Anusrava*, *Thrayee*, *Aamnaya*, *Namamnaya*, *Chandas*, *Swadhyaya*, *Aagama*, *Nigamaagama*.

Spiritual aspirant: Each of these names must indicate some distinct feature. I would like to know how they arose and what those features are. Please instruct me.

Sai: Of course, those names have inner meanings. *sruthi* means “That which was heard”. The guru chants the *Vedic* hymn, and the pupil listens with one-pointed attention and reproduces it with the same voice modulations. This process is repeated until the pupil masters the hymn. Hence, the name *sruthi* is relevant.

The name *Anusrava* means the same, “That which was heard serially.”

Now, the word *Thrayee*. It means “the Three”. In the beginning there were only three collations in the *Vedic* scriptures —the *Rig*, *Yajur*, and *Sama-vedas*. These three alone were considered important. So this word was used, and it has stayed.

The word “*aamnaya*” is derived from the root “*mnaa*” which means “learn”. Since the *Vedas* had to be learned continuously and in a steadfast manner, they were collectively known as *Aamnaya* and also as *Namamnaya*.

“*Chandas*” means a poetic metre, which can be set to music, as in *Sama-veda*. So the *Vedas* themselves were indicated by that name.

The name *Swadhyaya* was applied to the *Vedas* because they were handed down from father to son and generation to generation by the process of teaching and learning (*swadhyaya*).

Aagama means “that which has come, originated”. “*Nigamaagama*” is an elaboration of the same word. The *Vedas* originated from the breath of God, and each syllable is sacred. Each word is a *mantra*. The *Vedas* are all *mantras*.

Vedic mantras are powerful aids to liberation

Spiritual aspirant: *mantra*? What does that mean?

Sai: *Mantra* is the exposition of the goal that is set. That is to say, *mantra* is that which prompts and promotes probing through the mind (*manana*). The syllable “*man*” indicates the process of probing, and the syllable “*thra*” means “the capacity to take across, to liberate, to save”. In short, *mantra* is that which saves when the mind dwells

upon it.

While rites and ritual sacrifices are performed, people have to remind themselves constantly of their nature and significance. To achieve this end, they have to repeat certain formulae, called *mantras*. But, today, those who perform the rites either recite the *mantras* mechanically or allow them to roll on the tongue. They pay no attention to the meaning of the *mantra*. When *mantras* are uttered as rigmarole, they yield no fruit! People can reap the full reward only when they recite the *mantras* with knowledge of the meaning and significance. Each *Veda* has many branches, and the total direction and purpose of each branch has also to be known by the *Vedic* scholar.

Spiritual aspirant: What are branches (*saakhas*)?

Sai: *Saakha* means “limb” a text that arises out of the main *Veda*. A tree has branches, and each branch has twigs and bunches of leaves. When all these are conceived together, the tree emerges. Each *Veda* has a large number of main branches and subsidiary branches. Not all have come to light. Only a few have been identified and studied. The number of branches lost from memory and practice adds up to thousands and even lakhs (hundred thousands). Even their names have disappeared, and no one can recall them. This is why the scriptures declare, “The *Vedas* are endless (*Anantho Vai Vedaah*).” As a result, each of the great saints and sages took up for study and practice only a few branches from one *Veda* or other.

Agni (Fire God) is most adored in the Rig-veda

Spiritual aspirant: What is the *Rig-veda*? How was that name applied to it?

Sai: *Rig-veda* is the collection of *mantras* or hymns in praise of Gods. The term *Rig-veda* can also apply to the Gods who are praised.

Spiritual aspirant: Which God is most adored and glorified in this *Veda*?

Sai: Many Gods are praised in it. The *Rig-veda* deals with thirty-three of them as important.

Spiritual aspirant: Do these Gods have specially distinct forms, or are they of the human form?

Sai: They have forms akin to the human.

Spiritual aspirant: Please instruct me on their form (*swarupa*) —at least, about one or two of them.

Sai: Surya, the Sun God, has “rays” as His arms. The flames of Agni, the Fire God, are His tongues. This is how they are pictured.

Agni, the Fire God, is born when hardwood (*arani*) is churned. Agni has parents, but as soon as He is born, He eats up His father and mother, that is to say, the pieces of wood whose friction produced the spark. Agni is described as having ten maids. They are the ten fingers that hold the hardwood and operate it.

Since Agni is born every time the stick of hardwood is ritually operated, He is called the Multiborn. The column of smoke (*dhuma*) indicates His presence; it is His flag (*kethu*), so to say. Therefore, He has another name by which He is invited: Dhuma Kethu.

Agni is also named *Yajna-Sarathi* (the charioteer for the sacrifice), for He brings to the place of sacrifice, in a chariot, the Gods to whom offerings are made in the ceremonial flames. He conveys the offerings to the Gods to whom they are dedicated. In every sacrificial rite (*yajna*), Agni is the most important participant. So, He is praised as officiating in all four roles: priest, reciter of prayers, performer of rites, and *Brahma* (supervisor of ritual).

Agni is the closest friend of humanity, for without fire a person can scarcely hold on to life. The principle of fire is at the basis of human activity —both inside the body and outside. So, Agni is addressed as Master of the home (*Grihapathi*). Agni has no preferences and no prejudices. Agni treats all living beings, all races and castes equally, with no distinction. Therefore, He is addressed as Equal Friend (*Samamithra*).

Rig-veda proclaims universal unity

Spiritual aspirant: What is the main lesson taught by the *Rig-veda*?

Sai: The *Rig-veda* teaches unity. It exhorts all people to pursue the same holy desires. All hearts must be charged with the same good urge; all thoughts must be directed by good motives toward good ends. All must tread the one Path of Truth, for all are but manifestations of the One. Today, people believe that the lesson of the unity of mankind is quite new and that the idea of progressing toward it is very praiseworthy. But the concept of human unity is not at all new. In *Rig-vedic* times, the concept was proclaimed much more clearly and emphatically than now. It is the preeminent ideal of the *Rig-veda*.

All are parts of God, His power, His energy. The *Atma* that is the Reality in everyone is, in truth, the One manifesting as the many. The *Veda* demands that difference and distinction should not be imposed. This universal inclusive outlook is absent among men today. People have multiplied differences and conflicts, and their lives have become narrow and restricted. In the ancient past, the *Rig-veda* pulled down restrictive barriers and narrow feelings and proclaimed unity.

Yajur-veda describes methods of sacrifices

Spiritual aspirant: What is the *Yajur-veda*? Why is it known by that name?

Sai: The name is derived from the root “*yaj*”. It has a large number of derivatives, each with a particular meaning. But the meanings most current are “worship of God” and “charity, granting gifts”. The *Yajur-veda* describes the modes and methods of performing sacrifices and rites (*yajnas* and *yagas*) to propitiate the Gods. *Adhwara* also means “a sacrifice”, so the *Yajur-veda* is sometimes referred to as *Adhwara Veda*.

Spiritual aspirant: What lesson does the *Yajur-veda* convey?

Sai: The *Yajur-veda* has two recensions (editorial revisions), one centering around the tradition of Sun (Aditya) and the other around the tradition of *Brahma*. The latter is called *Krishna (Dark) Yajur-veda*; the former, *Sukla (White) Yajur-veda*. The *Krishna Yajur-veda* is widely current in South India, while the *Sukla Yajur-veda* prevails in North India. The *Krishna* recension is closer to the hymns of the *Rig-veda* collection. The *mantras* or formulae contained in it are used in the worship of Gods and while placing offerings to the Gods in the sacrificial fire.

The *Krishna Yajur-veda* contains eighty-six branches (*saakhas*), each with its special explanatory texts. But they have mostly disappeared from memory for want of people to study and practise them. Only four have survived. Eighty-two have been drowned in the whirlpool of time.

Sukla Yajur-veda had seventeen noteworthy branches, but they too have succumbed to the ravages of time. Only two of them are now available. When we consider how momentous and meaningful these two are, one has to conclude that the unique value of this *Veda* is well-nigh indescribable.

No one can fulfil the task of estimating the glory and grandeur of the *Vedas*. The *Vedas* are unreachable by

means of either language or imagination —”that from which words recoil, inaccessible even to the mind (*yatho vaacho nivarthanthe, apraapya manasaa sah*).” Know that this is the truth and exult that you could know that this is the truth and exult that you could know it thus. Those who have become aware of this are really blessed; diving into the depth, they have gained the precious gem; they have won the goal of life, the *purusha-artha*.

Veda contains pure or untainted wisdom

Spiritual aspirant: Swami! You said the *Veda* is known by nine other names. Does it have more?

Sai: Ah! Can it be designated by only nine? It has many more names. For example, it is known as *Prusni*, also as *Prathamaja*. The names reveal the various facets of the *Veda*, the context and character of the teachings.

Spiritual aspirant: *Prusni*? What does it mean?

Sai: The Almighty (*Parameswara*) is *Prusnigarbha* (He who contains all clarity and wisdom). *Prusni* connotes purity, clarity, and sanctity. So the word indicates that the Almighty has intelligence that is devoid of taint of any kind. The *Veda* is the concretisation in words of that wisdom. Sages who possess purified consciousness and clarified intellect win the grace of the all-pervasive *Brahman* (Cosmic Self). *Brahman* prompts them and blesses them to visualise the hymns and sacred formulae (*mantras*). While adoring the Almighty, they became aware of the truth, they too recognised and described *Brahman* as *Prusnigarbha*.

The sages who visualised the *mantras* were not bound by the consequent coils of works (*karma*); they merge in *Brahman* and emerge from *Brahman* when the cycle of manifestation starts again. So, they are hailed as unborn. The *Veda* acclaims them thus. Their very nature is immaculate purity. Therefore, they too are called *Prusni*. They yearned so agonisingly for grace that, in the state of superconsciousness (*samadhi*), *Brahman* manifested out of self-will and awarded them the vision of *Brahma Yajna*.

Mantras are revealed to holy sages

Spiritual aspirant: What is *Brahma Yajna*?

Sai: *Brahma Yajna* is intense study and observance of the *Veda* (i.e. *swadhyaya*). The sages who are “unborn” and therefore authorised by *Brahman* to transmit the truth formulated (according to the vision they earned) sacrificial rites designed to promote peace and prosperity in the world. The *Vedas* acknowledge as sages only those who treasure in their hearts awareness of *mantras*, of the supreme truth, and of the meaning and significance of *Brahman* (the Cosmic Self) and *dharma* (the laws of social harmony and individual rights and duties). The ritual sacrifices authorised and accepted by such sages are called *yajnas*.

Yearning for truth is asceticism (*tapas*). Since *Brahman* is won through asceticism, *Brahman* is referred to as “attained by asceticism” (*thapoja*). *Brahman*’s response to the ascetism is described as the Word of God (*Deva-vaak*) and the Voice of God (*Deva-vaani*).

Thapoja literally means “born of ascetism”, but this does not imply that the Cosmic Self (*Brahman*) was non-existent until ascetism brought It forth! *Brahman* is ever-existent; It has no beginning; time does not affect It. “Born of ascetism” means that “It revealed Itself to the person who underwent the ascetism.” It ever IS; It has willed to be so. It projected Itself as the Word (*Vaak*).

The Word is the *mantra* of the *Veda*. So, the Almighty is described in the *Veda* as the Designer of *Mantra* and

the Creator of *Rishis*, besides the names that occur at some place or other, like Self-emergent, born of ascetism, etc.

I mentioned the name *Prusnigarbha*. That is a very meaningful name for the Almighty. It signifies food, water, immortalising nectar, and the wisdom of the *Veda*. Since the Almighty *Brahman* has all these in Him, in the womb (*garbha*), so to say, He is named *Prusnigarbha*. *Brahman* is thus declaring His own Reality as the form of *Veda*.

The “first born” in the Vedas

Spiritual aspirant: Swami! You also mentioned the name Prathamaja. What does it mean?

Sai: The Three (*Thrayee*), that is to say, the *Veda*, is extolled as “primal-born (Prathamaja)” in the *Veda*. The statement “Study the Three (*Upasthaaya Prathamajaam*)” reveals the belief that higher learning could be attained by the revered study of the Primal-born. Unless one studies the sacred Word of the *Veda* (*Veda-vaak*) with humility, one cannot master knowledge of *Brahman*. This requires not the verbal recitation of the *Veda* but constant “service”, conscious worship of the *Veda* with full awareness of what the word means and commands. This has been made plain in that statement.

Spiritual aspirant: Swami, in which *Veda* does the name Prathamaja occur?

Sai: In the *Rig-veda*. Understand that Prathamaja and another similar expression, *Purvaja* (primeval), indicate the impossibility of discovering when the *Veda* was first revealed. It is beginningless. It is for this reason that Sage Valmiki has praised this word, as the first imperceptible mysterious word. The first concretisation of the Cosmic Will was the person with the cosmic womb (*Hiranyagarbha*), who is called primal-born (Prathamaja). Knowledge of the Impersonal and its projection as Personal (*Brahma-vidya*) is also Primal Awareness, according to the *Veda*. Both *Brahman* and the cosmic wombed *Hiranyagarbha* are sometimes referred to as Primal-born (Prathamaja).

Spiritual aspirant: Of these two —Supreme *Brahman* (Parabrahman) and the cosmic womb *Hiranyagarbha*— which is really the first (prathama)?

Sai: Supreme *Brahman* is the very first. It always is and has been. *Hiranyagarbha* was born from It, and the *Veda* also emanated from it. The appellation “First-born (Prathamaja) is very apt for the *Vedas*. Since the sages heard and pronounced the *Veda*, it is also named “Related to the Sages (*Aarsha*)”.

Veda is the source of *dharma*, or moral life, righteous behaviour. Those who observe the norms relating to duties and taboos as laid down in the *Veda* and as interpreted by the *Mimamsa* rule deserve the name “*dharma*-adherents”. Those who interpret them according to their own desires are anti-*dharma*-adherents.

Vedas are highly potent revelations

Spiritual aspirant: *Aarsha*? What does that mean?

Sai: *Veda* is itself called *Rishi* (Sage), and since it is revealed by the seers, it is also called “*Aarsha*”. The *Vedas* are the expression of the highly spiritualised vision of sages. The *Vedic mantras* are the precious treasure garnered by sages for liberating people. Thus sayeth the *Rig-veda*.

The *Brahman* concept of the *Vedas* is also denoted by a word that has *sa* as the end syllable. For this reason, *Veda* means wealth (*dhana*), wisdom (*jnana*), and the highest potency (*param-aiswarya*). The wealth indicated

here is distinct from worldly gains and possessions. It is the means by which the supreme goal can be attained. In other words, the wealth acquired through the grace of Mother Veda (*Veda-matha*) is the most potent wisdom itself. For this reason, the *Vedic* sages prayed thus:

God! You are the very embodiment of the *Veda*. Fill me, not with the burden of cattle and children but with the wisdom that is the source of the highest potency (*param-aiswarya*). I shall be fully content with that wealth (*dhana*). And since such wealth is capable of being utilised for your service, you too will be glad when I have it.

Recite Vedas with full awareness of meaning

Spiritual aspirant: Swami! Today, we don't find feelings that produce such prayers anywhere among men. People repeat these *Vedic* prayers as gramophone records do, without any knowledge of their meanings, out of sheer habit. Don't they? Do they get the wisdom that is the most precious treasure of God?

Sai: My dear fellow! You yourself said now that they recite the *Veda* as gramophone records do, didn't you? So they gain as much wisdom and power as those records get—how could they acquire the treasure of full potency? Planting a branch that has been severed, can one claim that a tree is growing there? Those who recite the *Vedas* with the awareness of their meaning, experiencing at the same time the feelings embedded in the hymns—they alone can earn the grace of *Brahman*, the knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-vidya*), the highest wisdom, the supreme treasure.

Veda is intuitive wisdom through adherence to moral codes

Spiritual aspirant: Swami! Generally speaking, everyone craves wealth. But what form of wealth is to be craved? What form is approved by the *Veda*? What has the *Veda* said about this? Instruct me.

Sai: “*Veda* is the highest treasure (*Vedam paramaiswaryam*)” “That which gives instruction is known as *Veda* (*Vedayathithi Vedah*).” “Get instructed by that *Veda* (*Sah Vedasthwam*).”

Wealth (*dhana*) is desired and sought out as a means for prosperity and progress. So, God is also known as Wealth (*Artha*). The *Veda* announces that intuitive wisdom (*jnana*) constitutes the riches (*dhana*), the means by which the Almighty is attained; this alone deserves the name “*Vedas*” or *Vedic* truth. *Vedic* scripture asserts that such wealth alone can confer the joy of satisfaction to both the worshiper and worshiped. The *Rig-veda* extols this form of wealth and refers to it as *Sruthyam*, for it is the type described and recommended in the *Vedic* scripture (*sruthi*). The *Veda* approves as *Vedic* only the wealth that is earned through adherence to the moral codes laid down clearly for human guidance.

Spiritual aspirant: *Sruthyam*? What does that mean, Swami?

Veda is the source of all moral codes

Sai: A prosperous person (*srimantha*) is one who is happily endowed with children and grandchildren and who is successful in worldly ambitions beyond even surprising heights. But moral excellence is a more valuable possession. This wealth is the concrete result of *Vedic* injunctions. It is called *dharma* or righteous action.

The *Ramayana* extols Rama as *dharma* personified (*Vigrahavan Dharma*). “*Dharma* sustains all beings (*sarva-bhuthaanaam dharanaath, dharmah*).” *Dharma* is the support (*dharana*) for all beings. Hence, *Veda* is

named *dharma*. The Almighty is that support and sustenance; the most effective mode of worship is the offering of *dharma*. So, the Almighty Itself is identified with the word *dharma*. That name is therefore meaningful.

The entire cosmos projected by the Almighty is established on *dharma* (*dharmo viswasya jagathah prathistaa*).

Dharma, imbued with profound sanctity, is being interpreted by people in accordance with their whims and fancies, their selfish interests. Hence, it has been severely distorted. The words *Veda* and God (*Deva*) take on new meanings and implications. The process can be clearly recognised in *Vedic* literature.

Itself It Knows All (*swayam sarvam vetthi-ithi Vedah*).

This statement reveals that *Veda* is the omniscient *Brahman* Itself. *Vedic* scripture is Its embodiment.

Swaaha is invocation for offering oblations to Divinity

Spiritual aspirant: Swami! In the *mantras* in the *Vedas*, the word *swaaha* occurs frequently. What does it mean?

Sai: Good! That word is generally taken to indicate only an expression used while offering oblations in ceremonially-lit fire. People imagine that it is not a *Vedic* word. They argue that it is a technical expression applicable to rituals only.

But a deity named *Swaaha Devi* is invoked by that word. Since the word is full of potency, it is revered as the manifestation of the Deity presiding over speech. And it also connotes “the offering of sacramental food to the Gods.” So the word has two meanings.

When sacramental food or other offerings are made to Divinity under its various forms and in Its various names, this word, *swaaha*, is used. However, when one invokes one’s ancestors and invites them to accept ritual offerings, the expression used is *swadha*, not *swaaha*.

The rites prescribed as unavoidable for daily life, as well as those that are laid down as optional for the observance of certain holy days, all have to begin with *swaaha* pronounced along with the sips of sanctified water. Generally speaking, there are no ritual offerings in the sacred fire without the accompaniment of the *mantras swaaha* or *swadha*.

Spiritual aspirant: What benefit accrues when these two *mantras* —*swaaha* and *swadha*— are additionally pronounced at the end of *Vedic mantras*?

Sai: When offerings are given while *swaaha* or *swadha* is uttered, the Gods or ancestors to whom they are directed will be pleased. Moreover, when those who are well versed in *Vedic* practices perform the worship of fire in order to offer oblations and do not utter the prescribed *swaaha*, the offerings cannot reach the Gods. The words *swaaha* and *swadha* invoke the respective deities. They are *mantras*, which awake and alert the Divine. The *Rig-veda* declares,

Swaaha is the foundation of this hymn of praise (Swaaha sthomasya varchasaa).

Swaaha has two meanings: (1) the offering made with the utterance of that *mantra*, and (2) the *Vedic* statement that conveys praise or glorification. Whether one of the meanings is preferred or both are adopted, the Gods are pleased and confer progress on the person who pronounces the *mantras (swaaha* or *swadha)*.

Spiritual aspirant: Confer progress on the adorer! What does that mean?

Sai: As a consequence of the praise conveyed through words bearing the impress of the *Vedas*, the person is

blessed with various progressive qualities and opportunities to achieve excellence.

Spiritual aspirant: I would like to know some examples where the *mantra* “*swaaha*” is used in the *Vedas* to convey its traditional meaning.

Sai: These are some examples:

Kesavaaya swaaha (for Vishnu).

Praanaaya swaaha (for the vital energy).

Indraaya swaaha. (for Indra).

Here, the meaning of the *mantra* is: “May it be *swaahutham*. May it be *suhurtham*. (*Swaahutham asthu, suhurtham asthu.*)”.

Spiritual aspirant: What do those two words *swaahutham* and *suhurtham* mean?

Sai: They mean, “May the offering made be well burnt,” that is to say, well digested.

Fire has both a material and a divine form

Spiritual aspirant: Swami! That raises a doubt in me. Whatever is dropped into fire gets burnt totally, even when no *mantra* is uttered by us. This is the general experience. So, what special process takes place when *swaaha* is uttered?

Sai: “*Swaahutham*” doesn’t indicate the mere burning out or the total consumption of the offering placed in the fire. From the worldly point of view, only this much is observed. But the *Vedas* (*Sruthi*) concede that fire has a divine form and function besides the commonly known material form and function. The Divine Forms (Gods) are beyond the reach of the senses. So the *Vedas* recommend that the Gods be worshiped through rites and rituals. And, Agni, the deity Fire, has in It the source and sustenance of the Gods. Agni is the Divine Principle (*Agnir vai deva yonih*). He who offers oblations to the Gods through Agni becomes blessed with divine qualities. Only those who are able to understand this fact can achieve that principle.

The person who enjoys (*bhoktha*) and the object that provides joy (*bhogya*) —these two compose the world (*jagath*). When these two become one, they mix and are then known as the offering, that is to say, the enjoyer. This is the natural conclusion. It does not stand to reason that the One be known as the object to be enjoyed. Well then, who is the enjoyer? It is Agni, the Fire, who accepts the oblation.

The very first divine entity is Aditya (Sun). Its spiritual counterpart is the vital warmth in living beings, the fire of breath (*prana-agni*). Agni has in it clarified butter (ghee) and *soma* (the juice of the *soma* plant). The oblations placed in fire are called *aahithaya*, meaning “deposited, or placed”. The Gods prefer to be beyond the range of sight, so the oblations are also referred to as *aahuthis*.

Deities respond to prayerful oblations in fire

Spiritual aspirant: When Agni is within the range of sight, what is its name?

Sai: Then, it is named *Agri*. *Agri* means first. It was created earliest. Hence the name. When it is beyond the range of sight (*paroksha*), it is called Agni.

Spiritual aspirant: What does *aahuthi* mean?

Sai: Oblations offered in the fire, lit and fed as prescribed. The word denotes that God is invited (*aahvaana*) to accept the oblations. This is the special meaning conveyed by the word. The exclamation uttered at the end of the sacrifice (*vashatkaara*) only complements the effect of the *swaaha mantra*. The Gods receive only offerings for which they have been invited (*aahuthis*).

Swaaha is a name applied to Saraswathi, the deity of the word (*Vaak Devi*), the Deity of the *Vedic* word. Since the word expresses the *Atma*, the name is also *swaaha*. The *Devi Bhagavatham* declares that the Supreme Deity is both *Gayatri* and *Swaaha*. The *Lalitha Sahasranama* (the 1008 names of Lalitha, the Supreme Deity) declares *Swaaha* and *Swadha* to be Her Names. *Swaaha* also means “the close”, “the going under”, “the end”.

One God worshipped by different names

Spiritual aspirant: Which *Veda* is named *Atharva*? Is it also known by many other names?

Sai: Yes. That *Veda* has various popular names —*Brahma Veda*, *Angiro Veda*, *Atharvangiro Veda*, *Bhaishajya Veda*. Kalidasa has praised sage Vasishtha as the Treasure Chest of *Atharva* knowledge. As a result of his earning such high renown, Vasishtha was installed as Royal Preceptor and could claim mastery over all four *Vedas* (*Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama*, and *Atharva*) and the authority to supervise ritual sacrifices and perform scriptural rites and ceremonies.

Spiritual aspirant: Swami! Do the *mantras* contained in the *Atharva-veda* have any special names?

Sai: They are celebrated as *siddha mantras*, that is to say, *mantras* that guarantee the promised effects. The presiding deity of the *Gayatri Mantra*, known as Gayatri Devi, is adored as having the *Rig*, *Yajur*, and *Sama vedas* as feet, the *Mimamsa Sastra* (Science of Interpretation and Inquiry) as the passive, steady aspect, and the *Atharva-veda* as activity.

Spiritual aspirant: This is rather complicated for me. Is there no other way to explain the importance of this *Veda*, perhaps by some worldly metaphor that is more easily comprehended?

Sai: Well. Listen. The *Atharva-veda* is a huge tree; the *Rig*, *Yajur*, and *Sama-vedas* are the trunk and branches, and the codes of law (*Smrithis*) and *Puranas* are the leaves. One Sun (Aditya) is worshiped in the *Yajur-veda* as Yaju, in the *Sama-veda* as Sama, in the *Rig-veda* as Oordhwa, and in the *Atharva-veda* as Yaathu.

The triple meanings of Atharva

Spiritual aspirant: What does *Atharva* mean?

Sai: It means a steady, unmoved person, who is of stable nature. *Atharva* is also widely identified in the *Veda* as the superconsciousness that activates the vital airs (*Prana-atma*) and also as ruler of the breath (*Prana-pati*). *Atharva* is also called the ruler of all beings born (*Prajapathi*). This *Prajapathi* is credited with the achievement of first churning sparks of fire and making fire manifest.

Each of the other *Vedas* is at some time or other recognised as the first, but the *Atharva* is always called the last.

Beneficent and maleficent aspects of God and creation

Spiritual aspirant: How many forms are ascribed to the Supreme God (*Parameswara*) in this *Veda*?

Sai: It is said that God is described as having two distinguishable forms: the serene and the terrible (*Yaatho Rudrassivaathanoraghora paapa naasi-nee*).

Spiritual aspirant: I crave illustration by examples.

Sai: The Narasimha (man-lion) form of God that emerged from the pillar was mild and serene, beautiful and beneficent for Prahlada, the staunch devotee. At the same time, the form was terrible for Hiranyakasipu, the father, who hated God to the utmost. Even nature, the concretisation of the will power of God, has these two mild and the fearful aspects. And water, an essential ingredient for sustaining life in beings, is vital and health-giving as well as fatal and death-dealing.

Spiritual aspirant: Pardon me for asking again for some examples.

Sai: All living beings exist because of food. According to the scriptures, food is of three kinds: *sathwic* (promoting peace and harmony), *rajasic* (promoting passions and emotions, activities and adventures), and *thamasic* (promoting sloth and dullness). If one chooses food with discrimination and control and limits its intake, food will be health-giving medicine. On the other hand, if food is consumed indiscriminately and beyond limit, it produces illness and causes grief and pain. It assumes a fearful role.

This fact is made clear in the *Vedas* by the probe into the word “*anna* (food)”. The word *anna* has *ad* as its root, which means “eating”. That which is eaten by living beings and at the same time eats the person who eats it, that food is both beneficent and maleficent.

The sages (*rishis*) Atharvan and Angiras, who visualised the *mantras* of this *Veda*, recognised this twin nature of both God and creation. The *mantras* appear mild or terrible in accordance with the credentials of the experiencer. But in total effect, and in a deeper sense, these *mantras* are intended to reveal the *Atma* and to promote the peace and prosperity of humanity.