

YOGA AND
BEYOND

Essays in Indian Philosophy

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&
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Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
1 The Essence of Yoga (G. Feuerstein)	i
2 Some Notes on R̥gvedic Interpretation (J. Miller and G. Feuerstein)	48
3 The Hymn of Creation. A Philosophical Interpretation (J. Miller)	64
4 The Meaning of Suffering in Yoga (G. Feuerstein)	86
5 Forerunners of Yoga: The <i>Keśin</i> Hymn (J. Miller)	95
6 The Heart of R̥gvedic Religion: Agni, Flame Divine (J. Miller)	121
7 Meister Eckehart—Mystic or Yogin? (G. Feuerstein)	152
<i>Appendix</i>	
<i>Diagram I: The ontological elements of Pātañjalayoga</i>	170
<i>Diagram II: The stages of enstasis (samādhi) according to the Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali</i>	171
<i>Index</i>	173

3 The Hymn of Creation. A Philosophical Interpretation

- I The Unmanifest was not then, or the Manifest;
spatial depths or heaven beyond were not.
What encompassed, where, who nurtured it?
What ocean, profound, unfathomable, pervaded?
- II Death was not then or immortality.
Neither night's nor day's confine existed.
Undisturbed, self-moved, pulsated the One alone.
And beyond that, other than that, was naught.
- III Darkness there was; at first hidden in darkness
this all was undifferentiated depth.
Enwrapped in voidness, that which flame-power
kindled to existence emerged.
- IV Desire, primordial seed of mind, in the
beginning, arose in That.
Seers, searching in their heart's wisdom,
discovered the kinship of the created with the uncreate.
- V Their vision's rays stretched afar.
There was indeed a below, there was indeed an above.
Seed-bearers there were, mighty powers there were;
energy below, will above.
- VI Who knows the truth, who can here proclaim
whence this birth, whence this projection?
The gods appeared later in this world's creation.
Who then knows how it all came into being?

- VII Whence this creation originated;
whether He caused it to be or not,
He who in the highest empyrean surveys it,
He alone knows, or else, even He knows not.

Of all the Rgvedic hymns, the celebrated *nāsadiya-sūkta* (X.129) has perhaps received the highest praise and the worst condemnation, according to the depth or lack of understanding of the commentators. Nevertheless, one may still wonder whether the full philosophical implications have been fathomed out and sufficiently appreciated by Western exegesis.

This ancient poem contains within its short compass not merely an outline of subsequent Indian metaphysics—it heralds the Advaita-Vedānta and the Sāṃkhya ontology—but also touches upon the core of mystical doctrines East and West, particularly the philosophy of Plotinus.¹ No later speculation, whether philosophical or religious, has ever gone completely beyond its range, or has ever solved the ultimate mystery of the Absolute which, in the poem, is left to silent contemplation. Considered in depth, it reveals the essence of all metaphysical thought.

About the seer-poet (*ṛṣi*) of this hymn nothing is known. To all intents and purposes he remains anonymous, as so many great figures of past ages who cared for the quality of their work rather than for themselves. That the hymn has been ascribed to Parameṣṭhin Prajāpati can mean only one thing, that it was revealed in the highest state of *samādhi* to a person endowed with the gift of formulating what he 'received' or 'saw'.

I *na-asad-āsīn-no sad-āsīt-tadānīm*
na-āsīd-rajo no vyomā paro yat,
kim-ā-avarīvaḥ kuha kasya śarmann-
ambhaḥ kim-āsīd gahanam gabhīram.

The Unmanifest was not then, or the Manifest;
spatial depths or heaven beyond were not.
What encompassed, where, who nurtured it?
What ocean, profound, unfathomable, pervaded?

¹ Plotinus, very probably influenced by Indian thought, conceived the ultimate cause and source of all being as transcendent and unknowable. His only positive way of describing this indescribable *ens a se* was 'the eternal One' or 'the Good' (*ἀγαθόν*).