

Green Knight Multimedia Project



Saraswatī, the goddess of Intellect

Śakti Vāk, the creative power of sacred sounds

Episode 3:

Namaskar,

Today, we shall explore the symbolism of goddess Saraswatī in the universe of Hindu mythology. With the help of mythological metaphors, let's understand what *Śakti Vāk*, the power of speech personified by Goddess Saraswatī, is? This presentation has four main themes:

- *Śakti Vāk and the materialization of essences*
- *The creative power of sacred sounds*
- *The four stages of Speech*
- *Saraswatī as Gnosis*
- A Bharatnāṭyam performance and an interview with Guru Dr.

Sucheta Chapekar explaining the concept of Saraswatī representing *Jñānamārga*, the Path of Knowledge, will follow at the end of this presentation.



“Om Aim

*O auspicious and resplendent Devi, all that comes in contact with you is
purified.*

O goddess who bestows wisdom.”

The Hindu worldview is all inclusive, perceiving life and the cosmos as a whole that is interconnected, interacting at each moment. The Hindu's imaginative minds are inspired by an eternal unseen Reality which they translate into a variety of rich symbols. They personify all that can uplift them, may it be a stone, a tree or a sacred word, as they are always in the perpetual search for Oneness. From the early observation of the natural powers interacting with their own life, they started personifying these natural elements of Mother Earth, such as rivers, thunder or fire in order to create a close and intimate connection with them. Personifying natural powers was a means for strengthening their own natural potential.

Nourishing their lives and souls in the quest for liberation, the seers of ancient India contemplated on the “nature of things”. The contemplation of these symbols have been the fervent inspirations for their devotional souls. It has been like this for millennia. In a deep level of understanding,



sacred symbols are sparks of light which perpetuates the wisdom of *Bhārata*. (*Bhārata* is the ancient Sanskrit name for India long before the concept of a country.).

I shall start presenting the goddess through the symbolism of her attributes.

The Iconographic image of Saraswatī is often depicted with the attributes: a vīṇā, a swan, a lotus, a peacock, a crystal, a japamāla, and the book which stands for the Vedas. Her iconography is typically in white themes from dress to flowers to swan, the white color symbolizing *sattvaguna* or purity, standing for discrimination, true knowledge, insight, and wisdom. Her *dhyāna* mantra describes her to be as white as the silver shining moon. (The moon reflecting the Light of the Sun intellect) A haṁsa or swan is often shown near her feet. In Hindu mythology, the haṁsa is a sacred bird, to whom is offered a mixture of milk and water. The swan has the ability to drink the milk alone, symbolizing the ability of discrimination between good and evil, essence from the outward show, and the eternal from the evanescent. The swan is also a symbol for spiritual perfection, transcendence and *mokṣa*. In this sense Saraswatī embodies not only knowledge but also the experience of the highest Reality.



The description of the goddess in the Sarasvatīvandanā is as follows: “The one who is fair like the jasmine-colored moon and whose pure white garland is like frosty dew drops. She is adorned in radiant white garments and carries a tuned vīṇā in her hands. Her throne is a white lotus. She is surrounded and respected by the prominent Gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śaṅkara, who always praise her. That Goddess, Oh Sarasvatī, the blessed one, protects me. From the root, remove my weariness, sluggishness, and ignorance”.

In Sṛīmaddevībhāgavatapurāṇa's 1st book and 4th chapter it is stated: Brahmā! You will be the generator of the universe; the Goddess Śārādā (Sarasvatī) is your consort, she will be recognized as the goddess of wisdom and the primeval sound. Lord Brahmā, this goddess will be with you when you create the universe.

In the manifestation of the created world, essences are crystalized in specific forms whose attributes generate distinct creative powers. In Hindu tradition, to create, maintain, and regenerate the universe, the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are evoked. Their śakti or manifesting power are



the Tridevī: Saraswatī, Lakṣmī and Pārvatī. In this trinity each śakti embodies a specific power.

Saraswatī is mentioned as a significant river deity in the Rig Veda, the goddess of abundant waters. Personified as a Hindu holy river of the northwestern of India known as Saraswatī, she is recognized for her blessings of nourishment being considered the best of mothers. She represents the flow as well as the power of purity and the gift of transmission. Her presence is wisdom as she is the one “who possesses speech”. The etymology of Saraswatī points to the very significance of her essence. From Sanskrit सरस् (saras) meaning “fluid, water, essence” and वती (vati) meaning “she who possesses”. The goddess possesses the flow of speech, (essences) that purifies the mind as knowledge or gnosis. She represents the feminine power of creation through truthful speech.

By the lotuses (which surround Thee).

O auspicious and favorable Devī!

Forest fire, of the forest of evil thoughts,

Whose lotus feet are worshiped by the Universe.



*O lotus seated upon a lotus,
Joy you cause to those who salute Thee,
Destroyer of Ignorance,
Spouse of Hari,
Substance of the world.*

(Saraswatīstotram from the Tantrasāra)

Saraswatī is known by many names in ancient Hindu literature. Some of her epithets include Brahmanī (power of Brahmā), Vāgdevī (Goddess of speech), Vidyādhari (Goddess who provides knowledge) and Brāhmī (goddess of sciences). In all these attributes we can see her essence as "knowledge that purifies". Her presence remained significant as a goddess from the Vedic period until today. However, through the passage of time, from a river deity, the concept has evolved and Saraswatī has been known as the goddess of knowledge, music, art, wisdom, and learning. She is the inspiration of the poet, the vision of the artist, the sound heard by the musician and the lightning inspiration of the seeker. Thus, this feminine deity embodies healing and purifying potency which bestows the power of creation.



Śakti Vāk —

The power of speech and the materialization of essences

India has an unbroken tradition of speculations about the sacred sound or the Word, of elaborations about the cosmogony and the magic powers of certain forms of sounds. These sounds are the mantras involving myths and diagrams where the primordial sound or Speech plays a vital importance.

Myths and speculations about the powers of the Word, occur as early as the Rigveda. They are also found later in the Atharvaveda, replete as it is, with prayers and magical formulas. They are part of the Vedic mythic vision of the cosmos.

The Word with capital W, was from early times regarded as a symbol of the Godhead, or more exactly as revealing the divine presence within the cosmos, as the force that creates, maintains, and upholds the universe. *Vāk* (a feminine word) occurs in several isolated stanzas in various books of the Veda, including those held as the oldest ones: the creative role of the Word seems therefore a notion present from the greatest antiquity with hymns exclusively devoted to *Vāk* such as on Book X. The goddess *Vāk* (in Latin



Vox) represents this creative power of sound which is hidden in the sacred words of the Vedas.

*AIM, AIM is Thy favorite mantra,
Thou who art both form and formlessness,
Who art the wealth of the lotus face of the lotus-born,
Embodiment of all guṇas, yet devoid of attributes,
Changeless, and neither gross nor subtle.
None know Thy nature, nor is Thy inner reality known.
Thou art the whole universe.
And Thou it is who existeth within it.
Thou art saluted by the foremost of Devas.
Without part, Thou existeth in Thy fullness, everywhere.
Ever pure art Thou.*

(Saraswatīstotram from the Tantrasāra, P.75, 76)

Ancient scriptures speak of the universe as created by sound or cosmic vibrations. *Nāda Brahman* is known as the initial primordial sound of



extremely high frequencies. From Revelation of the sacred sound, emanated the Vedas (*śruti*), which is “seen”, or “heard”, not made, by its human authors. This is the eternal *Logos*, “breathed forth by Brahman”, in whom it survives the destruction and creation of the Universe. From frequencies of these cosmic vibrations are issued four levels of sounds which correspond to the various levels of subtle creation in manifestation. They are:

The four stages of Speech

1. *Parā-Vāk* is the highest form of sound issued forth from the Supernal Ether (*paramam vyomam*) where all the sound vibrations that build the various worlds pre-exist in an undifferentiated state. It is the subtlest aspect of sound in its transcendental aspect. It is the *logos*. *Para Vāk* is the fully un-manifest level of language, the supreme *Śabdabrahmam*; the Absolute expressed as transcendental Sound.

2. *Paśyanti-Vāk* That which “sees”, or that which “witnesses”. It is the finest relative level of *Vāk* where there is no distinction between word and meaning. At this level there is no temporal sequence. *Paśya* means ‘to see’,



beholding a particular sound through revelation. Knowledge is acquired by sight without the use of the reasoning faculty or sensory data. Thus, *Paśyantī* refers to the visible sound which is experienced as a feeling or a mental picture and this is the seed of all thoughts, speech, and action. *Paśyantī Vāk* is experienced in the case of sages whose consciousness perceives Truth in a vision or revelation. There is no rational apprehension but visionary intuition.

3. *Madhyamā-Vāk* It is the sound phenomenon that exists in between the formation of a thought (as an idea, feeling or image) and its expression on the material level as speech or action. It is the sound as perceived in the subtle or the Pranic level, *manas*. It represents the thinking level, or the thought-forms held in our minds. This is a more ordinary type of speech. They are our thoughts without sounds.

4. *Vaikhari-Vāk* It is the gross form of sound, and it signifies outward expressions. This is the spoken word emerging from our throat.



Each level or state of sound corresponds to a certain plane of existence or a certain state of consciousness. The ability to experience the different levels of sounds depends upon the refinement of consciousness.

This theory with the four levels of speech consistently and logically connects the existential situation of our mental process and speech to its metaphysical ground. For example, the starting point of speech originates in the mind in the form of an ideation, with the mental process (*madhyamā vāk*). This is a silent sound of thoughts, and this is the actual origin of the spoken word which manifests in a grossified form, (*vaikharī-vāk*) or speech. These are the two ordinary levels of speech.

As Bhartr̥hari, a *Sanskrit* grammarian (from the 5th century) propounded in his *Vākyapadīyam*, Ultimate Reality is *śabda*, “Word” in the sense of transcendental sound or vibration or *Parā-vāk*. Bhartr̥hari states it thus: “*vāgeva viśva bhuvanāni jajñe*”, it is *Parā-vāk* which has created all the worlds. Similarly, in Tantra, it is said that the universe was set in motion by the primordial throb (*ādya-spanda*) and that all objects of the universe are created by sound “*artha-sṛṣṭeḥ puram śabda-sṛṣṭiḥ*”, meaning that sound precedes the formation of objects. This is the highest form of sound or speech.



The Ṛgveda 1.164.45 says “*catvāri vāk parimita padāni tāni vidur brahmaṇā ye maṇiṣiṇah, guha triṇi nihitā nīṅgayanti turiyaṃ vāco manuṣya vadanti*” (i.e. The learned Brahmaṇas, the wise ones who have control over their minds know the nature of *Vāk*, speech. That it exists in four forms. Three are hidden and the fourth is what men speak)

The whole material world is thus the manifestation of *Śabda Brahman*, the Word of *Brahman*. Through the subtle vibrations, Saraswatī personifies this power of Speech. As the consort of Lord Brahma, she is the mother of the universe, the creative *śakti* holding and bestowing the power of creation. How does she create the cosmos? Being the *śakti* of the creator, she manifests and consolidates the Word, bringing about the materialization of essences. She is *Vāk* (powerful speech). And the Word becomes the world.

In a beautiful quotation from *Esoterism as a Principle and as a Way*, chapter: The mystery of the veil, pg 38, Frithjof Schuon honor the eternal feminine that we are discussing in Hindu tradition, in the form of the Blessed Virgin: “In Sufism, the Blessed Virgin personifies the pre-existential and existentiating Sophia: the Logos inasmuch as it “conceives” creatures, then “engenders” them and finally “forms” or “embellishes”



them; if Mary thus represents the un-manifested and silent Logos — nigrasum sed formosa —, Jesus is the manifested and law-giving Logos”.

The creative power of sacred sounds

The finest and subtlest stuff that underlies all physical existence, the primal vibration of the universe, in Hinduism is symbolized by the sacred sound AUM. Saraswatī evokes this primordial substance existing before the manifestation of the world.

Words having the potency to materialize concepts of a supra-cosmic reality are vehicles for conveying essences as the gross level of sound is a consequence of the supra-cosmic spiritual vibrations, issued forth from transcendent Reality and its divine sounds. According to this understanding, truthful speech also has the power of conveying the quintessence of these supra-cosmic realities bringing back the appearances of phenomena to their intrinsic reality. In this sense, the purer the mind is, the more clarity of truth will be reflected in its ideation and consequently in the use of language. This is how one should honor the power of Speech, our capacity to speak the truth, to communicate and to express ourselves.

From the origins of time, the symbolism of the goddess inspires speculations about the potency of sounds and the creative and efficient



energy (*śakti*) which is both cosmic and human. This energy which humans can take hold through the formulas, mantras, or sacred Names, having a magical value are normally used in a ritual context. Through this practice, the sacred sound assumes the equal power of the primal creative Principle itself. This is the nature of sacred Words. By analogy and on a lower level any form of speech combined with truthfulness somehow partakes of this magical potency. Here we enter a more symbolic territory. The myth suggests that through the purity of language one manifests that which is cultivated in the purified mind. In this sense, the utterance of truthful words has the capacity to bring about destiny in accordance with free will into reality, when associated with truthful concordant actions. Here the Word is a force: it is active and can be used for action.

As seen in the first hymn dedicated to Bṛhaspati, the lord of the sacred formula; the knowledge, (*jñāna*) of the origin and secrets of the sacred Word, are expounded upon. According to tradition it begins: "O Bṛhaspati, that was the first unfoldment of the Word, when they stirred into action, giving a name [to things]," a formulation which points out to a major role of the Word, that of the placing of names, *namadheya* on things. Giving a name, in mythic thought (not only in India), is giving birth, thus bestowing life.



Speech symbolized by the goddess, deep rooted in the vibrational aura of the universe, has the ability to bring into existence realities which are held in the realms of archetypes.

Saraswatī as Gnosis

With the notion of “that which purifies”, “flow and transmission” the potentiality of speech personified in the primary notion of a River deity ultimately evolved into a spiritual concept of a goddess that embodies knowledge, arts, music, melody, muse, language, rhetoric, eloquence, creative work and anything whose flow purifies the essence and self of a person. In the Upanishads and Dharmaśāstras, Saraswatī is invoked to remind the reader to meditate on virtue and on the meaning and the very essence of one's activity, one's action. In some interpretations, "Sara" is translated as "Essence", and "Sva" is translated to "Self". Thus, the name Saraswatī would translate to "She who helps realize the essence (of Parabrahman) with oneself". Saraswatī like Gnosis, the feminine Greek noun referring to "knowledge" or "awareness", relates to personal spiritual or realized knowledge in contrast to purely theoretical knowledge in the sense of a set of concepts not experienced but mostly forming the guidelines for the quest of truth. On the other hand, the goddess bestows the spiritual



knowledge of our ontological nature or the insight of one's real nature as divine, through knowledge of the Self, leading one to be delivered from the constraints of earthly existence. Thus, Saraswatī is not just the goddess of intellect but also, she is the Brahmaidya herself, the goddess of the wisdom of ultimate truth.

Thou art intelligence, intelligence, intelligence,

Thy names are memory, resolution, mind, and hymn of praise.

Eternal and fleeting,

Great cause, saluted by Munis,

New and old; sacred current of virtue,

Saluted by Hari and Hara.

Ever pure, beauteous of color,

The subtlest element of things—

(Saraswatīstotram from the Tantrasāra)



Different traditions express eternal truths according to their own message. Sophia, the un-manifest wisdom of the universe, in the Greek tradition is a feminine figure, one of the feminine aspects of God as an expression of the emanation of His divine light. Saraswatī represents this gnosis, a mature understanding which indicates direct spiritual experience or intuitive knowledge, mystic rather than rational thinking. Rational thinking being a lower form of speech, *Madhyamā Vāk* is subject to convention of thought and language. Gnosis is gained through intellectual knowledge realized as inner experience or contemplation. Rather than knowledge strictly concerned with the finite, natural or material world, spiritual knowledge (*gnosis, jñāna*) represented by the goddess is the divine spark within us, which brings about the insight into the infinite, represented by the undifferentiated sound, *Para Vāk*, divine and uncreated in all and above all.

Another potency of the creative Word is the power of suggestion, *rasa dhvani*, which points to the essence of a thing in a subtle way, without making it explicit but by stimulating our imagination. The goddess, personification of speech is permeated with *rasa dhvani*, the power of suggestion, she invites us to experience that which is beyond phenomenon. Like true poetry, she suggests... awakening our imagination to witness as an



inner necessity, something that cannot be experienced only on the material level. This rarefied experience of the Word is a silent speech, a secret speech containing and manifesting the Divine presence in this World.

Through the power of silent sound in contemplation, one realizes that energy that brings myths and worlds into existence. But more than that, as a means to take hold through mantras or a sacred Word, a sacred Name, vehicle of the primal energy or Godhead, human beings progress toward liberation, going back to its very source, and therefore becoming freed from the chains of the becoming. This is an evidence in which the Word is above all used as a means for liberation.

Is not freedom or more exactly absolute autonomy (*svātantrya*) precisely, one of the main characteristics of the supreme Word? *Svātantrya*, as held by Abhinavagupta, a Tantric mystic from medieval Kashmir, is a fundamental notion referred to in his Trika philosophy as *Svātantrya-vāda*, the doctrine of freedom or autonomy. Absolute autonomy is the attribute of the highest aspect of the Godhead. With the cosmic flow of emanation this freedom gradually diminishes until creatures, in our world, are bound to the becoming. In a way this is “the materialization of essences” through the process of grossifying sound. Progressively, the Word



from *Para-Vāc*, losing its absolute autonomy, its nature of a pure and free act in Godhead, becomes the human language, crystallized and subject to conventions. However, if the free source, the sacred World which is the pure foundation of this universe is "recognized" , contemplated upon as the primordial sound; if human beings know how to use such forms of speech (the mantras and sacred Names), free from the limitations of language and thought, they reconnect with that Source and, as liberated while still alive, they become identified with the purity, spontaneity and creative autonomy of the very source of the Word.

The spiritual energy present in the sacred Word is identical with the primal principle. Thus, when deeply contemplated upon, its autonomy dissolves the coagulations of our thoughts and our material existence into pure Essence. Likewise, the divine spark within us frees itself from the material weight of existence in a reverse movement. From the materialization of essences, in a reverse movement, through the invocation of the Sacred Word or the sacred Name, our materiality dissolves into the Pure Being. This is because the Word is a direct expression of Reality.

The meditation and the invocation of a sacred Word is present in different traditions such as japayoga in Hinduism, dhikr in Sufism and Hesychasm



in Christian orthodoxy among others. The contemplative tradition of invoking the Word in different spiritual worlds seeks the same aim, stillness through uninterrupted prayer of the heart. The sacred Word is a universal Reality which manifests itself in different forms according to its traditional and liturgical settings, providing a direct means for attaining the knowledge of the un-manifest by manifesting a sacred presence. In this way, through vibrational sound, God himself prays in man. The Word or sacred Name is the manifestation of God in man. The sacred form of a sound transmutes the nature of man and brings the eternal formless reality closer to him. In this way, it helps man reach the formless. The formless essence, *Parā Vāk*, descending the levels of speech, becomes form, the sacred Word, so that the receptacle of the form, man, becomes his formless essence once absorbed in it. Like the goddess, the sacred Word or the primordial Principle, which is indeed pure, creative spontaneity, flashes forth in the heart of man, with its Mercy, its impetuous power, overflowing the bounty of the divine.



O Mother! Mother! salutation to Thee.

Burn, burn my sloth and grant me great intelligence.

Thou art Knowledge itself.

The Vedānta ever sings of Thee.

Śruti speaks of Thee.

O giver of liberation! O way to liberation!

Whose power is beyond all understanding.

O giver of happiness, adorned with a white necklace,

Grant to me Thy favors.”

(Saraswatīstotram from the Tantrasāra)

After the talk, presenting a Bharatnāṭyam performance and interview with Guru Dr. Sucheta Chapekar explaining the concept of Saraswatī representing Jñānamārga, the Path of Knowledge.

