

# The Evolution of Mantra from the Vedas To Tantrism

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## Introduction

Mantra has been an ontological tool and means to traverse the metaphysical universe from as early as c. 1500 BCE on the Indian continent. The evolution of *mantra* appears to be a complex amalgamation of different practices and soteriological methods with an ever-evolving metaphysical framework. Since the early Vedas, the power of the word channelled by the Kavi or Vedic poet/priest held clans together by rousing a devoted heart through the invocation of inspired speech. As spiritual praxis diverges from the central Vedic fire, we can see a development of ‘tools of awakening’ through the ritual use of mantra. This paper examines the function of *mantra* in its soteriological habitus from the early to middle Vedas (1500 to 500 BCE) to the Tantric era (up to 1400 CE) and how its maturation parallels the evolving metaphysical framework of the *Sāṅkhya Tattwa* system. To draw a more distinct comparison between the changing function of mantra we take a closer look at the different theories which surround the mechanism of speech, sound, thought, ritual and awakening at specific points on the continual and complex evolving timeline of mantric practice.

## The Inspired Kavi

A notion we often see in the Vedic religious structure is the power of the Brahman priest. An insight into the initiation of the caste system of India could be argued through Findlay’s (1989) ideas of the Kavi or inspired poet. There is a strong notion that earlier power structures within the Vedic ritual community surrounded not the priest but the formulation of words themselves. Let us look at the definition of the word *mantra* in order to begin to frame its function. According to Staal (1993, 191), *man* means to think and *tra* means designated tool. We can take this to mean agency of thought. The agency of divine awareness was the central pillar to ritual in early Vedic times; therefore, the power of the spoken word relied on the truth within the words. It was the one who ‘sees’ who had access to the true word. The recitation of truth was a re-enactment of creation itself (Findlay 1989, 24). In the Rig Veda 6.9.5 we see the

prayer of a young poet who aspires to Agni the original Kavi, so that he can align his mind, his heart, his ears so to the one original thought.

(2) I do not know how to stretch the thread nor weave the cloth<sup>1</sup>, nor what they weave as they enter the contest. Whose son could speak here such words that he would be above his father below?

(3) He is the one who knows how to stretch the thread and weave the cloth; he will speak the right words. He who understands this is the guardian of immortality; though he moves below another he sees above him.

(4) He is the light firmly fixed for all to see; the thought swiftest among all who fly. All the gods with one mind and one will rightly come to the one source of thought.

(5) This is the first priest of the oblation; look at him. This is the immortal light among mortals. This is the one who was born and firmly fixed; the immortal growing great in his body.

(6) My ears fly open, my eyes open, as does this light that is fixed in my heart. My mind flies up straining into the distance. What shall I say? What shall I think?  
(Rig Veda 6.9.5 (O'Flaherty 1981, 116))

The true words of the *kavi* had the power to lift a heavy mind through inspiration and it was a 'dull mind' that people feared. Dull mindedness or *amati* was a fall from grace and it was grace which was central to the Vedic ideology (Findlay 1989, 31). The way of the gods was a path of protection and abundance. It was the inspired Kavi who was able to channel this truth and give power and purpose to the people.

(11) When questioned I speak reverently of the Order, if I may, trusting in you who know all creatures. You rule over all this, over all the riches in heaven and earth.

(12) What is ours of this? What riches? What treasures? Tell us for you who understand, you who know all creatures. Hidden is the furthest end of our road, where we have gone as those who fail follow a false path.

(13) What are the limits? What are the rules? What is the goal? We wish to go there as racehorses speed towards the victory prize. When will the dawns, the goddesses, the wives of immortality spread over us their light with the colour of the sun?

(14) Those who's speech is empty and contrary, insipid and petty, leave one unsatisfied, what can they say here, Agni? Unarmed, let them fall defeated.  
(The Rig Veda 4.5.14, O'Flaherty 1981, 115)

Findlay (1989) states that the two-fold nature of *mantra* lies in the formulaic coherence. The equally poignant part to a *mantras'* significance is the content. Wilke (2011) supports this view by describing the early R̥gVeda hymns as being the real food for the gods and primary

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<sup>1</sup> The cloth was considered all of manifest existence which was woven together by the gods (O'Flaherty, 1981)

to the sacrificial offering. At this point in time, there is no clear distinction in sacred speech or profane speech.

In the early RigVeda, we start to see the qualities of speech which allow them to become powerful. Eloquence, with direct and carefully chosen words which, most importantly, come from the heart. This was the hymns' medium to power (Findlay, 1989). The most potent principal of the *mantra* is truth or insight. According to Findlay, the truth does not exist in language and it is the job of the skilled seer to weave the unseen forces into clear language in order to share the divine sphere with the human sphere. In the early Vedas, we see that the formulas which define speech as *mantra* take a different form. They are not bound by social rules and strict codes of recitation (Staal, 1998). Social hierarchical systems and complex ritual procedure is something which develops over time.

The Rig Veda 10.71.1 -11 renders Findlay's observations true with the added dimension that the ritual sacrifice was a communal gathering. It was friendship which brought people together and it was in this love that the truth could be understood. Gonda (1963, p278) also describes how it is in the heart that feelings and experiences are fashioned into thoughts.

The Rig Veda 10.71.1 -11

(1) Brhaspati, when they set in motion the first beginning of speech, giving names, their most pure and perfectly guarded secret was revealed through love.

(2) When the wise ones' fashioned speech with their thought, sifting it as grain is sifted through a sieve, then friends recognized their friendships. A good sign was placed on their speech.

(3) Through the sacrifice they traced the path of speech and found it inside the sages. They held it and portioned it out to many; together the seven singers praised it.

(4) One who looked did not see speech, and another who listens does not hear it. It reveals itself to someone as a loving wife, beautifully dressed, reveals her body to her husband.

(5) One person, they said, has grown awkward and heavy in this friendship; they no longer urge him forward in the contests. He lives with falsehood like a milk less cow, for the speech that he has heard has no fruit no flower.

(6) A man that abandons a friend who has learned with him no longer has a share in speech. What he does hear he hears in vain, for he does not know the path of good action.

(7) Friends have eyes and ears, but their flashes of insight are not equal. Some are like ponds that reach only to the mouth or shoulder; others are like ponds that one could bathe in.

(8) When the intuitions of the mind are shaped in the heart, when Brahmins perform sacrifices together as friends, some are left behind for lack of knowledge, while others surpass [...]

(O’Flaherty 1981, 61)

The importance of purity or truth as the central platform during the early Vedic period is frequently expounded in the hymns of the Rig Veda. The truth being *ṛta* or cosmic order in the universe witnessed by the inspired poet. From the above hymn we can see a proto-social hierarchy emerging from the power of the priest creating an organic social stratum, organised by love and respect for the truth. Should a priest become dull-minded then their position would be null and void, Rig Veda 10.71.5 (see above). This idea is also reinforced in Book 7 of the Vedas where we see a collapse in this structure and *Vaśiṣṭha*<sup>2</sup> has to restore the true pure relationship of the priests with the gods.

In the Rig Veda 10.130 we gain insight into how the fabric of our metaphysical reality or *puruṣa* is woven into existence by “Man” and the means to ontological salvation is through the chants or listening to the chants. Rig Veda 10.130.4 describes which metre is ‘yoked’ or joined to each deity as a means to *puruṣa* or salvation

(2) The Man stretches the warp and draws the weft; the Man has spread it out upon this dome of the sky. These are the pegs, that are fastened in place; they made the melodies into the shuttles for weaving.

(3) [ . . . ]

(4) The Gāyatri metre was the yoke-mate of Agni; Savitṛ joined with the Uṣṇi metre, and with the Anuṣṭubh metre was Soma that reverberates with the chants. The Bṛhatī metre resonated in the voice of Bṛhaspati.

(5) The Virāj metre was the privilege of Mitra and Varuṇa; the Triṣṭubh metre was part of the day of Indra. The Jagatī entered into all the gods. That was [ . . . ]

Rig Veda 10.130.4 (O’Flaherty, 1981, 33)

Gonda (1963, 54) adds to this idea that the metaphysical framework of the Vedic hymns was based on the visions of the Kavi. Gonda describes a precise process from the Kavi’s flash of inspiration to inferred divine truth.

### **Ritual Mantra as Formula**

As we move forward in Vedic history, we see a change from hymn to *mantra* which lays more emphasis on the formulaic structure thus evolving its function in the ritual setting. As ritual becomes more established so do the structures of the hymns and their pronunciation and

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<sup>2</sup> *Vaśiṣṭha* is a revered sage from the early Vedas whose ideas were so influential he became one of the first sages of Vedānta philosophy. He is the chief author of Mandala or Book 7 of the Rig Veda.

repetition. It is through precise pronunciation that the power is released. We can see a reflection of this development of hymns into *mantra* in the Rig Veda 10.90.9.

(7) They anointed the Man, the sacrifice born at the beginning, upon the sacred grass. With him the gods, Sādhyas, and sages sacrificed.

(8) From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the melted fat was collected, and he made it into those beasts who live in the air, in the forest, and in villages.

(9) From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the verses and chants were born, the metres were born from it, and from it the formulas were born.

Rig Veda 10.90.9. (O’Flaherty 1981, 30)

In the latter Vedas we see that there are more hymns dedicated to *Vac*, the goddess of speech rather than to Brahman. This indicated that speech itself starts to take on a sense of objective sacred importance (Wilke 2011, 136). Annette Wilke (2011, 134), describes the early hymns as “evocative calls to the gods and magic poetry” which later evolved into esoteric word formulas.

Staal 1993, theorised that the meaning within a *mantra* during the late Vedic period was secondary to the function. He argues that Vedic *mantras* were chanted out loud or muttered; they were neither the ritual acts nor did the *mantra* contain significant meaning to the ritual act, those that did were exceptionally rare. The *mantra* was recited with their acts as if following a technical operation. An example of this would be the consecration of space filler bricks for the central ritual alter. Each brick was so powerfully charged with a *mantra* they even had to be pacified with milk to be brought under sway (Staal 1993, 217).

According to Staal (1996, 208), the power within a *mantra* was manifest through the formulaic ordering of *stobha* or syllables and sounds common in the *Samaveda*. The outcome was that the *mantra* appeared to make no sense, the power generated, however, made the ritual action come alive. The *stobha* were added to make rhythmical musical sound structures, these sound structures created a subtle architecture which was the agency to the divine realm. Similar to the early Vedic hymns, the precision of speech, the powerful projection of word, the confidence in recitation, created power in the *mantra*. However, now we have a notion that the *mantra* exists as its own instrument and the inspired poet is no longer needed, only the most competent priest. The complexity of these syllabic *mantras* became so intricate and complex the priest needed markers on a stick to guide the recitation (Staal 1993, 231 -232).

Staal (1993, 221) argues that the musical element had a much more important significance than the meaning in the *mantra*. He suggests that the meaning and poetic value of the *mantra* was “uninteresting and mediocre” but it was the sounds which made them remarkable. Wilke (2011, 137) argues this idea by saying that the “nonsensical” *stobha* did have meaning, not in a linguistic sense, but they transported the listener out of the logical brain and into a field where the divine could be sensed. This connection could be on the basis of *soma* causing a liminal state enhanced by the repetitive rhythms and soundscapes described by Staal. It is not clear on what *soma* refers to directly however, there is speculation that it was a concoction of plants which was drunk and brought the ritual participant into an altered state.

In the Rig Veda 10.130.4, a connection is made between the *Anustubh* metre (a particular form of rhythmical metre) and *soma*. The liminal state allowed direct experience of the deity. According to *Mīmāṃsā* philosophers it was the name of the deity which personified an aspect of existence.

(4) The Gāyatri metre was the yoke-mate of Agni; Savitr joined with the Uṣṇi metre, and with the Anuṣṭubh metre was Soma that reverberates with the chants. The Bṛhatī metre resonated in the voice of Bṛhaspati.

Rig Veda 10.130.4 (O’Flaherty 1981, 33).

To ritualise this deific structure was to bring this structure into reality. This was done by the means of mantric recitation whereby the ritual was the main factor concerned. Any performance of speech with a linguistic means of conveying an intention is a speech act (Taber 1981, 145). Timalisina (2010) describes the *Mīmāṃsā* view that *Śabda* or word has two properties. One that is seen and one that is not seen. The meaning of the word is what is seen. The meaning conjures an image in the mind of the perceiver and therefore triggers a form. What is not seen is the power that lies within the form.

As we have demonstrated earlier, Staal believed that *mantra* had a function in the ritual. That function was to establish cosmic order or *rta*. Staal was clear that *mantra* is not a speech act performed by a priest but rather *mantra* is an autonomous thing which holds power in the sound and not in the linguistic meaning (Staal 1993, 4). This theory lies contrary to Timalisina’s idea of power manifest in the thought form. According to Staal (1993, 158), the esoteric power lies in the formula itself. As a result, anyone could learn the formula and create the desired outcome of the ritual provided they were the right caste. This idea in itself is a very western empirical idea; however, Wilke (2011, 136) extends this concept as *mantra* originating from a

primordial sound. These are potentially proto-Tantric notions of *mantra* which will be discussed later on.

According to Staal (1993), it was the *mantra* which created a bond between the ritual and the cosmic entity. This bond or *bandhu* was the means by which the deity could communicate with the people. It was the *mantra* which clarified the ritual and thereby allowed others to see the power of Agni.

Wilke offers another idea that the symbolic meaning in the word was the tie to ritual objects and acts, contrary to Staals' idea that the words were meaningless. Wilke (2011, 137) argued that if the word was not pronounced correctly the *bandhu* would not be made between the word and the symbolic action or sound, and the word would be empty of power.

### **The Tantric Ritual Transformation Through Mantra**

The transformation from the *Brahmanic Vedic mantra* to the *Hindu Tantric mantra* can be seen in the soteriological practices which came to be. In the Vedic world, *mantra* had an external and communal function. Although Findlay (1988) argues that *mantra* was recited internally during the ritual as a form of meditation, it was not the central idea. This was the case, however, for the *tantrika*. Although there are many distinct and merging paths and outcomes for the *tantrika*, the fundamental practices and principles which make up reality are common.

According to the *tantrika*, our universe is a composition of subtle elements or *tattwas* which are created from each other from the most subtle principle, being pure awareness itself to the grossest, being the five elements. In this ontological hierarchy are the mechanisms which discern awareness from things (*buddhi*), the 'I' making (*ahamkhara*), sense processing or mind (*manas*) the senses (*jnanendriyas*), physical movements (*karmendriyas*), sense objects (*tanmatras*) and five elements (*bhutamatras*). Thought, speech, sound, feeling is the result of an interaction between the *tattwas*. This interaction creates forms which exist on a subtle plane. Each plane of existence exists as a vibration. Our universe is a projection of vibrations onto vibrations which give us the illusion of this solid reality. It is from this theory that we can understand the sonic relevance of *mantra* (Flood, 2006).

Bhartr̥haris' philosophy looks into identifying the true nature of "word" or *sphoṭa* on an esoteric level. A word exists on four levels, *Para* or transcendental sound of pure awareness, *Paśyantī* which manifestation as a thought form, *Madhyama* which takes form in the sense organs, and *Vaikhari* which is the physical sound pronounced. As we can see the manifestation of sound follows the same soterio-ontologica framework of the *tattwas* (Timalsina 2010, 409). Gavin Flood (2006, 65) describes in detail the practice of the path of *mantra* as a transcendental

sound which arises from within the self and causes speech. Equally the faculty of hearing and feeling allows the transcendental sound to awaken the individual. It is through the very same human faculties from which the *mantra* was manufactured, that the *mantra* can be felt by another (Timalsina 2010, 405). We can see a reference to this practice in the *Khecarīvidyā* 1.28c–40b (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 657).

7.12 *Khecarīvidyā* 1.28c–40b. The *Khecarī* mantra:

(28d) Now hear [the mantra and practice of] *Khecarī*. (29) And one should go, O goddess, to where there is a guru who has perfected the divine yoga and, after receiving the mantra (*vidyā*) called *Khecarī* spoken by him, (30) one should begin by scrupulously and tirelessly carrying out the practice described by him.

I shall proclaim the *Khecarī* mantra, which grants success in yoga, O goddess. (31) Without it a yogi cannot enjoy the *Khecarī* power. Practising the yoga of *Khecarī* by means of the *Khecarī* mantra preceded by the *Khecarī* seed-syllable, (32) [the yogi] becomes lord of the *Khecaras* and dwells among them for ever.

The abode of the *Khecaras* [and] fire, adorned with the mother and the circle, (33) is called the *Khecarī* seed-syllable. By means of it yoga is successful [...]

*Khecarīvidyā* 1.28c–40b (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 657)

The Tantrics mapped principal *tattwas* out onto mandalas or sacred geometric schemata where each *tattwa* was represented as a deity, the ultimate *tattwa* being the central deity from which all other deities become manifest. The Tantric *mantra* considers the Sanskrit letters (*matrka*) to be of utmost importance. They are seen as the blueprint of creation as they are a physical manifestation of principle components of original sound equivalent to the *tattwas*. The vibrational quality of each letter is a *bija* and the particular ordering of the *bija* define the nature of the deity invoked. We can see an example of this in the *Mr̥gendratantra Yogapāda 8ab* (Tantric text pre 10<sup>th</sup> Century).

(8ab) O sage, mantra-repetition (*japa*) is [the deity's] verbalization. It causes the [deity] visualized to approach.

*Mr̥gendratantra Yogapāda 8ab*. (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 641)

To each letter, a specific number of rays (*rasmi*) is allocated and each ray is associated with a different *mahabhuta* or element thus creating different emanations of the deity (Timalsina 2010, 409). The *mantra* from this perspective was seen as a form of consciousness in its own right. The resonance of each sound merges and highlights different layers of the self from the gross to the most subtle. By meditatively sounding out the *bija mantra* in the appropriate order we are accessing subtle forces which lay dormant in a conditioned mind



(Tamalsina 2010, 409). The function of the recitation of the *bija* was to recreate the energy signature of the deity and experience that bhavana or feeling within the self as opposed to an external metaphysical realm of the early Vedas and of the *Kavi*.

Staal (1993) argues that the *stobha* were in fact an earlier formation of the *bija mantra* which is somewhat paralleled by Robert Yelle's (2003) idea that the *bija* was added to various parts of the *mantra* to create palindromes. Staals' theory of *stobha* is far more formulaic compared to Yelles' idea of the *bija*. According to Yelle the recitation of the palindrome mimicked the contraction and expansion of the universe. In the instance of the *mantra so ham*, a meditation *mantra* which accompanies mindfulness of breath, we see an onomatopoeic resemblance to the in breath and outbreath of every living being. Through the repetition of this *mantra* a meditative state is induced through fixation on the breath. Mallinson and Singleton (2017) make a reference to these practices in the Svachchandantra 7.29, Parakhyatantra 14.82 and Yogabija 1.3.2.

Yelles' (2003, 21) theory of ordered *bija* opposes Staals' *stobha* theory as each *bija's* meaning is a reflection of the action, "so" the in-breath and "ham" the outbreath. Yelle added to the idea that the *mantra* was a form of pure consciousness, which like all sentient life unravels universal behaviours such as birth and death, a need for nurturing and a wholesome environment. When a palindrome was created it was enveloped or brought to life by reciting it backwards and forwards. Before the life force within the *mantra* was enhanced it had to have an initial charge. Flood (2006, 65) describes in detail the practice of the path of *mantra* as a transcendental sound arising from within the self and uttered as a word. When the word is uttered from a transcendental state then the *mantra* is enlivened. It was through this medium that the *mantra* was initiated and passed on (Tamalsina 2010, 405).

In addition to the *mantra* being alive, it needed the *bija* to support its existence. For example, by adding a *pravana* or *om* to the beginning and the end of a *mantra* we create a dam or *setu* at each end of the *mantra* and by doing so prevent its power from leaking away (Yelle 2003, 21). Here we can see that the *mantra* existed as a separate thing which had the power to awaken an individual depending on its potency and initiation.

I have only touched the tip of the iceberg regarding *Mantra* in the Indian tradition but from the few examples I have given, we can see that the Vedic *mantra* was a means to establish cosmic order and connection to the divine. After time the ritual action and the *mantric* verse began to take on a more mechanical function in comparison to its heartfelt early Vedic ancestors. The ritual itself became an amalgamation of actions and *mantra* where the division between the two became less distinct. Although the Vedic and Tantric function of *mantra*

serves as an instrument to transcendental experience, we can see that the function of *mantra* is very different. The function of the Tantric *mantra* becomes a tool to realise the principal *tattwas* which make up the self and the universe. The later Tantric practices create a more intimate connection with the divine beyond age, class or gender. We can see, however, that the early *Vedic mantric* practices lay a pure foundation for devotion, concentration and realisation of the cosmic order of things and initiated a path towards a myriad of technologies to understand the self.

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