



Awakening to the Sun:

The Gayatri Mantra

This time-honored practice embodies the wisdom of the Vedas and leads us toward self-realization.

By Rolf Sovik

The twilight hours—morning and evening—call us to make the journey back to our inner selves. That is why the Vedas sing: “O pair of divine powers, Night and Dawn, come near...like two boats, take us across.” In ancient times ardent seekers rose early, bathed, performed their rituals, recited mantras, and sat in meditation. Then in the evening they washed away the day’s fatigue with another period of meditation. Even today, among yoga practitioners, the morning and evening transitions are still the traditional meditation hours.

Meditation that is performed at these junctures of day and night is called *sandhya* meditation (in Sanskrit, the word *sandhya* indicates a juncture). Sandhya meditations, some dating from Vedic times, continue to be observed throughout the world. These meditations infuse the daily lives of millions with a sense of devotion and introspection. Like the early morning light sweeping away the darkness as it illumines the landscape, sandhya meditation purifies, enlightens, and nourishes the mind.

Symbolism of the Vedas

The spiritual themes of sandhya practices are transmitted through Vedic symbols. The Vedas venerate an intangible reality through hymns to a tangible cosmos. They praise the sun, the moon, wind, fire, and rain; they render universal such human archetypes as mother, daughter, sister, brother, and father; and they recognize human inventions like the pot, the door, and the wheel as expressions of universal truth.

Put another way, the Vedas tell us that the cosmos in which we live is the highest reality itself, but it is veiled by the dramas and dreams of life. We see only a portion of the whole—the cycles of the day, the turning of the seasons, birth and death, planting and harvesting. These are the manifest appearances of an unmanifest whole, the visible blush of the invisible.

But just as a first view of the ocean awakens in us a sense of wonder at the apparent limitlessness of the earth’s waters, so with every dawn and dusk, every birth and death, the mind overflows momentarily with wonder at the unseen whole. The pervasiveness of the unseen in the seen, the unmanifest in the manifest, is described thus in the *Rig Veda*:

Three-fourths of the Divine
Person ascends above,
One-fourth manifests
again here.
Thereafter it spreads
everywhere,
Into both the animate
and inanimate world.
—(*Rig Veda* 10.90.4)

Verses such as this are doorways—revelations of the infinite reality as it appears in the immensity of this cosmos. But the Vedas do not oversimplify. They recognize that the symbols of reality are ever-shifting and may overlap. For example, during the day, light is the product of *aditya* (the sun), while at night it is the product of *agni* (fire). So *aditya* and *agni* are described as brothers. Similarly, the power of illumination is symbolized both by light in the cosmos and intelligence within the human personality. So the word *light* may mean both the sun’s light and the power of intelligence.

Thus the highest reality is not limited to one particular symbol, or personified by any single force of nature. It is not the sun god, the

moon god, or the god of lightning that are ultimately eulogized in the Vedas. These are merely the “priests” of a cosmic ritual, an ongoing ceremony that takes place right before our eyes in the form of the universal rhythms of life. We are all, gods and man, a part of this ritual; each has a role to play.

The Gayatri Mantra

As individuals, then, how do we share in this vision? The question is answered by the gayatri mantra, which embodies the collective wisdom of the entire Vedic revelation. Found in the *Rig Veda* (3.62.10), the *gayatri* mantra takes its name in part because it is written in the gayatri meter (twenty-four syllables divided into three lines of eight syllables each). But *gayatri* also means “she who protects the singer” (from *gai*—“to sing,” and *tra*—“to protect”). Thus, *gayatri* is a name for the Divine Mother, she who protects her children and leads them toward self-realization. The gayatri mantra reads:

Tat savitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimahi
dhiyo yo nah prachodayat

When the mantra is recited in meditation, however, an additional line is added at the beginning. This line contains the sound *Om*, followed by three short sounds called the *maha vyahritis* (the “great utterances”: *bhur*, *bhuvah*, and *svah*). Thus the complete mantra as it is used in meditation is:

Om bhur, bhuvah, svah
tat savitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimahi
dhiyo yo nah prachodayat

The *Chhandogya Upanishad* explains the significance of the first line. It tells us that once Prajapati, the Lord of the Universe, contemplated the nature of the three worlds—earth, sky, and heaven—and through intense concentration he was able to discover the essential guiding force of each: *agni* (fire) governed the earth; *vayu* (the vital force) governed the sky; and *aditya* (the sun) governed the vault of heaven.

Once more Prajapati applied his intense concentration to these three “seed” sounds, or guiding forces, and obtained their essences: from fire he was given the verses of the *Rig Veda*; from the vital energy he was given the *Yajur Veda*; and from the sun he was given the *Sama Veda*.

He applied his concentration once more, now to the three Vedas themselves, and from the *Rig Veda* he obtained the syllable *bhuh*; from the *Yajur Veda* the syllable *bhuvah*; and from the *Sama Veda* the syllable *svah*. Thus the three *maha vyahritis* are the essence of the Vedas, the seeds of fire, vital energy, and the sun—as well as the seed sounds of the earth, sky, and heaven.

Finally, Prajapati focused on these three vyahritis together, and through intense concentration he obtained a single, pure sound, the syllable *Om*. *Om*, it is said, “is all this.”

The next two lines of the gayatri mantra venerate the concept of solar light, energy, purity, transcendence, illumination, and compassion (the sun shines for all). They read:

tat savitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimahi

This translates as: “We recall within ourselves and meditate upon that wondrous Spirit of the Divine Solar Being.”

The final line (*dhiyo yo nah prachodayat*) changes the tone. It makes a request—a petition for inner clarity and intuitive awareness. “Guide us,” the mantra asks. The essence of this final line is contained in its first and last words. The final word, *prachodayat*, means “may he guide, lead, direct.” The first word, *dhiyah* (*dhiyo*), may mean simply “thoughts,” but, more important, it refers to the mind’s higher faculty and intuitive vision. The mantra asks that the finest force of the mind, its intuitive capacity, be guided by “that wondrous Spirit of the Divine Solar Being.” Thus, the complete translation of the gayatri mantra is:

Om. In each of the three planes of existence, we recall within ourselves and meditate upon that wondrous Spirit of the Divine Solar Being; may he guide our inner vision.

Gayatri is a prayer as well as a mantra. As a mantra, it is a set of sounds used by meditators to realize a higher state of consciousness—a state symbolized by the sun. As a prayer it petitions God for guidance. “Direct my mind,” it asks. Contained in this prayer is an elaborate exposition of spiritual philosophy. It describes the *bhargah* (the solar spirit), who is the essence of *Savitri* (the solar being), who is yet the inner identity of *Surya* (the sun). The gayatri as a prayer is a petition to *tat* (that) which is the infinite light of pure consciousness.

But what is this pure consciousness? The Vedas tell us that pure consciousness, which dwells in the highest heaven (and thereby pervades all), is also that which dwells in every human being. Consciousness is the light of awareness:

Now, the light which shines above in heaven, pervading all the spaces, pervading everywhere, both below and in the farthest reaches of the worlds—this indeed is that same light which shines within man.
—(Chhandogya Upanishad 3.13.7)

In its dual role as mantra and prayer, then, the gayatri both purifies the mind and invites the finest forces of the mind to awaken.

Sandhya Meditation

If you would like to practice the gayatri mantra, dedicate time for it in the morning or evening, or both. (Your meditation does not need to coincide precisely with the actual rising or setting of the sun, especially in the extreme latitudes of North America). Here is a brief practice you can do:

Sit in a comfortable seated posture. Establish relaxed breathing and spend a little time feeling the breath flowing in the nostrils. This will calm and focus your mind.

Now visualize a golden, sunlike orb, and bring that golden light into yourself. Let it enter at the eyebrow center, and then have this light travel slowly down to the region at the center of the chest. There, feel the golden rays of the sun spreading out through your whole body and mind.

Give a moment of thanks to the seers of the Vedas. Then, at the center of this golden orb, which rests at the *anahata* chakra (heart center), begin to mentally repeat the gayatri mantra. Recite it as if the consciousness at your heart has merged with your internal sun, and the sound now flows from the core of that sun. From there, let the sounds of the syllables resound in your entire being.

Repeat the mantra as many times as seems natural. For a longer practice you can use a mala (a set of 108 beads for counting mantra repetitions). Let the sound resonate in you. Let it fill the entire space of your inner being.

With time and practice, the rhythm of daily gayatri practice will illumine your mornings and evenings with quiet joy. The mantra will elevate you above troubled places and restore spiritual confidence. Quiet daily practice and upliftment—these are the needs of the soul. You will find both in the gayatri mantra.+

Rolf Sovik, PsyD, is co-author of Yoga: Mastering the Basics and is the director of the Himalayan Institute of Buffalo, New York.

To hear the pronunciation of this mantra, go to www.YogaPlusExtras.org and click on “Gayatri Mantra.”

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Himalayan Institute 952 Bethany Turnpike, Honesdale, PA 18431

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