

Three Suktams, Many Versions

The Purusha Suktam, Narayana Suktam, and Sri Suktam

By Bill Francis Barry

The Purusha Suktam, Sri Suktam and Narayana Suktam are among the most important¹ Sanskrit hymns used in Puja and Yajna ceremonies. In learning these hymns students of Vedic ceremonies may discover that there are many versions of each of these three hymns. These alternative versions can be from different scriptures and endorsed by well-respected Vedic lineages.

Some people advocate that the version offered by their teacher, is *the only legitimate version*, and anything else is incorrect. Sometimes these advocates point to the claimed authority of their version in Devanagari and their famous lineage in a way that implies inferiority to all other versions of these great hymns. In an absence of some simple facts about the scripture-based sources of multiple versions of these hymns, this situation can be very intimidating to new students of Puja and Yajna. This article offers a brief look at the issue of why there are differing but valid versions of the Purusha Suktam, Sri Suktam and Narayana Suktam.

My priority has been to learn the versions of these three hymns as taught by Namadeva Acharya (Thomas Ashley-Farrand) and Sadguru Sant Keshavadas. My acceptance of them as a trusted authority of these three hymns has been reinforced by my growing appreciation for the tangible energies that can be experienced when chanting these hymns. What follows in this article further strengthens my confidence in the versions of these three great hymns as taught by Namadeva.

The Purusha Suktam

The Purusha Suktam, the ‘Hymn to the Transcendental Oversoul’, is widely used in most vedic ceremonies^{2,3,4}. In the Mahabharata, Sage Veda Vyasa stated that “This Purusha Sukta is more important than all other suktas of all the vedas”⁵.

Namadeva taught the 16 verse Purusha Suktam found in the Rig Veda. While some other authors make reference to a Purusha Suktam “long version” implying just two versions, there exist at least several versions of the Purusha Suktam among well respected books and internet sites.

Some perspective on this multiple version issue is offered in the following quote, from “The Concept of Upasana: Worship in Sanskrit Literature” by Rajani Pataki:

*Purusa Sukta is included in all the four Vedas. In the Rgveda it comes in the 9th sukta of the Tenth Mandala, it has sixteen stanzas. It finds its place in the 31st adhyaya of the Yajurveda with additional six stanzas. It is placed in the sixth sukta of 19th kanda of the Atharvaveda, it has sixteen stanzas similar to the Rgveda with some differences in the order of stanzas and with change in some words. In the Samaveda it appears with five stanzas. It is also seen in the Taitriya Samhita with eighteen stanzas.*⁶

The widely respected Swami Harshananda of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda lineage offers a similar list of sources for versions of the Purusha Suktam in his booklet titled “The Purusasukta, An Exegesis” and he also states that there are differences in the order of the verses in many of these versions. Swami Harshananda, writes that the Purusha Suktam “...text as is now commonly used has 24 mantras or stanzas “, and that even though the additional verses included in the 24 verse version “... do not seem to have any coherence with the 16 mantras of the Rgveda Samhita, tradition has somehow clubbed them together”.⁷

These references explain why there are multiple Purusha Suktam versions with valid claims of being based on Vedic scripture.

The Sri Suktam

This popular hymn honors Lakshmi as Vishnu's spouse and source of power. This hymn also invokes powerful healing energy in the solar plexus (manipura chakra)⁸.

Namadeva and Sant Keshavadas taught the Sri Suktam as a 16 verse hymn from the Saubhagya Upanishad. Although Namadeva also taught an additional "less commonly available" 23 verses of a "Sri Suktam Supplemental Verses", he was clear that these optional verses were distinct from what most traditions refer to as the Sri Suktam hymn.

So we have a 16 verse Sri Suktam based upon the Saubhagya Upanishad. There is an 11 verse version based upon the Padma Purana. I've seen another version similar to the 16 verse version, which has small word changes throughout, plus several additional verses inserted into it. There is also a 32 verse version on various respected internet sites.

One reference that presents an explanation for the multiple versions of the Sri Suktam is the following quote from the Wikipedia internet site.

The Sri Sukta forms part of the khilanis or appendixes to the Rigveda. These were late additions to the Rigveda, found only in the Bāṣkala shakha, and the hymn themselves exist in several strata that differ both in content and period of composition. For instance, according to J. Scheftelowitz, strata 1 consists of verses 1-19 ... while the second strata has verses 16-29 (i.e., the second version deletes verses 16-19 of the first). The third strata, with verses beginning from number 23, similarly overlaps with the second version.

The first strata is the most commonly attested and is usually appended to the fifth mandala of Rigveda. Most of its verses were probably composed during the period of the Brahmanas, with a few added in the Upanishadic times. The second strata post-dates the first; while the third is attested in a single, more recent, text.⁹

The Narayana Suktam

The Narayana Suktam provides a fascinating description of the relationship of our inner bio-spiritual physiology with the divine creative forces of the universe¹⁰.

Namadeva and Sant Keshavadas taught the Narayana Suktam as a 12 verse hymn from the Maha Narayana Upanishad of the Atharva Veda, section XIII, verses 1 to 12. I've confirmed these 12 verses in several texts of the Maha Narayana Upanishad. I've also confirmed the same 12 verses in the tenth chapter of the Taittiriya Aranyaka (this tenth chapter is also known as the Narayana Upanishad)¹¹. However, on several respected websites, I've seen a different version which has some variation in verse sequence from what is in the Maha Narayana Upanishad.

Why Is This Topic Of Concern? Which Hymn Is The Best Version?

It is not surprising that multiple versions of these hymns have been created, over the span of thousands of years, influenced by evolving or competing traditions spanning regional variations in languages and

customs. While most of these traditions are built upon the same core principles, these hymn variations can impact the recommended spiritual practices offered by each lineage.

I propose that in many cases, the 'best' version of the Purusha, Narayana and Sri Suktams can often be a largely subjective consideration. From that perspective, the 'best' version is often the one that is taught by a respected tradition that the student follows. My position is based upon the belief that these hymns, when chanted as taught by a qualified teacher of a credible Vedic lineage, will invoke divine energies that can be experienced and utilized for personal spiritual advancement. For me, the 'best' version of these three hymns are the ones taught by my teacher Namadeva Acharya. Someone in another tradition, may have a different 'best' version.

While there can be a place for debate and/or correction of mistakes that can occur in either transliteration or Devanagari text, this should not detract from the importance of practicing the oral tradition as chanted by one's teacher and as energized by that teacher's lineage.

Vivek, which means discrimination and careful discernment, is essential before choosing a teacher and placing trust in their offerings. The same is true when an alternative teaching is offered. There can be times when a presumed 'correct' version of one of these hymns is advocated by a well-intended student or teacher. Sometimes that other version is presented with accompanying Devanagari script backed up by valid scriptural citations and a well-respected lineage. Those who have not pursued a study of reading Sanskrit in Devanagari script can sometimes be intimidated by an implied inferiority of relying only on transliterated Sanskrit.¹²

In writing this document, my goal has been to contribute to each student's understanding of the multiplicity of versions of available Sanskrit hymns. May all who study and chant these hymns be confident about which teacher and lineage is their trusted authority as they study with the available teachers as well as the written and audio versions of these great hymns of the vedic tradition.

End Notes

Copyright © 2011 by Bill Francis Barry

¹ These three hymns, the Purusha Suktam, the Sri Suktam and the Narayana Suktam are among the Pancha (five) Suktams, considered the most important five hymns of the Vaishnava tradition. The other two hymns being the Bhu Suktam, and the Nila Suktam. As such, perhaps their popularity and widespread use, has been a factor in contributing to these multiple versions.

² Swami Harshananda writes "The Purusha Sukta is one of the most commonly used Vedic hymns even now, in almost all rituals, or religious ceremonies" on page 4 of his booklet, The Purusasukta, An Exegesis, published by Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore, 3rd edition 1999.

³ Namadeva Acharya (Thomas Ashley-Farrand) – The Ancient Power of Sanskrit Mantra and Ceremony, A Source and "How-To" Book on Mantras and Their Use in Spiritual Disciplines and Ceremonies. Vol III, 2nd Edition, 2002, page 4, Saraswati Publications, LLC, Oregon. www.sanskritmantra.com

⁴ Namadeva Acharya (Thomas Ashley-Farrand) – Mantra A Path to Spiritual and Material Attainment (Audio CDs of 15 hour workshop), Disk 5, Track 7, recorded 2002, Saraswati Publications, LLC, Oregon, www.sanskritmantra.com

⁵ This quote is taken from the book by Rajani Patki, titled The Concept of Upasana: Worship in Sanskrit Literature, page 99, published by Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1996, "This sukta is the key to know the crux of the Vedas. Maharshi Veda Vyasa says, 'Idam Purusa suktam hi sarva vedesu parthiva. Rtam satyam ca vikhyatam rsinhen.' It means that this Purusa sukta is more important than all other suktras of all the Vedas. It conveys the truth and it is

experienced by the greatest rsis.” Rajani Patki cites as the source of this Veda Vyasa quote as Mahabharat Santiparva-338-(Punah Sankaran).

⁶ Dr. Rajani Patki, The Concept of Upasana: Worship in Sanskrit Literature , page 99, published by Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1996 - One further point to share. Written with an academic perspective, this book is based upon Rajani Patki’s doctoral thesis and offers some interesting highlights of the development of several Deity worship traditions.

⁷ Swami Harshananda in his booklet The Purusasukta, An Exegesis, published by Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore, 3rd Edition, 1999, pages 4-5.

⁸ Namadeva Acharya (Thomas Ashley-Farrand) – The Ancient Power of Sanskrit Mantra and Ceremony, A Source and “How-To” Book on Mantras and Their Use in Spiritual Disciplines and Ceremonies. Vol I, 2nd Edition, 2002, page 194, Saraswati Publications, LLC, Oregon. www.sanskritmantra.com

⁹ This quote from the Wikipedia internet site(as of 4/22/11) offers three source citations for this material. Coburn, Thomas B. (1988), Devi Mahatmya: The Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition, Motilal Banarsidass Publ. Scheftelowitz, Isidor (1906), Die Apokryphen des Rgveda, Breslau Scheftelowitz, Isidor (1921), "Sri Sukta", Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft (Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft) 75: 37–50

¹⁰ For an explanation see the translation of the Narayana Suktam, as translated by Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, presented in the book by Namadeva Acharya (Thomas Ashley-Farrand) – Chakra Mantras published by Weiser Books San Francisco, 2006. www.sanskritmantra.com

¹¹ The Taittiriya Aranyaka edited by Subramania Sarma, Chennai 2004, based on Grantha manuscripts and on this work: "The Taittiriya Aranyaka", 3 vols. in one, edited by A. Mahadeva Sastri et al., 1985 (Motilal Publishers) <http://www.sanskritweb.net/yajurveda/ta-find.pdf>

¹² My comment here is not intended as criticism of those who choose to study Devanagari. There can be many advantages to such study. However, the pursuit of learning to read and pronounce Sanskrit as Devanagari text is not a panacea. Sanskrit scholars do not always agree on translations nor pronunciations of Devanagari. “Correct” pronunciation of Devanagari can vary by region and historical period. When working with scriptural sources, the accuracy in translating the meaning of Devanagari script can vary widely according to the levels of spiritual realization of the translator. Any emphasis on learning Devanagari as a means to master the correct pronunciation of Sanskrit should be approached with a continued reliance on the pronunciations of the qualified teacher of the Sanskrit mantras or hymns that are taught by that teacher’s lineage. In other words, the ability to read and pronounce Devanagari is not a substitute for the oral component of the oral tradition of learning to chant Sanskrit mantras and hymns.