

1.114

Have Mercy on Us, Rudra

- 1 We bring these thoughts to the mighty Rudra, the god with braided hair,¹ who rules over heroes, so that it will be well with our two-footed and four-footed creatures, and in this village all will flourish unharmed.
- 2 Have mercy on us, Rudra, and give us life-force. We wish to bow low in service to you who rule over heroes. Whatever happiness and health Manu the father² won by sacrifice, we wish to gain that with you to lead us forth.
- 3 We wish to gain your kindness, Rudra, through sacrifice to the gods, for you are generous. O ruler over heroes, come to our families with kindness. Let us offer the oblation to you with our heroes free from injury.
- 4 We call down for help the dreaded Rudra who completes the sacrifice, the sage who flies.³ Let him repel far from us the anger of the gods; it is his kindness that we choose to have.
- 5 Tawny boar of the sky, dreaded form with braided hair, we call you down and we bow low. Holding in his hand the healing medicines that we long for, let him grant us protection, shelter, refuge.
- 6 These words are spoken for Rudra, the father of the Maruts, words sweeter than sweet, to strengthen him. And grant us, O immortal, the food for mortals. Have mercy on us, and on our children and grandchildren.
- 7 Do not slaughter the great one among us or the small one among us, nor the growing or the grown. Rudra, do not kill our father or our mother, nor harm the bodies dear to us.⁴
- 8 Do not harm us in our children or grandchildren, nor in our life-span, nor in our cows or in our horses. Rudra, do not in fury slaughter our heroes. With oblations we call you here for ever.
- 9 I have driven these praises to you as the herdsman drives his cattle. Grant us kindness, father of the Maruts,

for your kindness brings blessings most merciful, and so it is your help that we choose to have.

- 10 Keep far away from us your cow-killing and man-killing power, O ruler of heroes. Have mercy on us and speak for us, O god, and grant us double protection.⁵
- 11 Seeking help, we have spoken in homage to him. Let Rudra with the Maruts hear our call. Let Mitra, Varuṇa, Aditi, Sindhu,⁶ Earth and Sky grant this to us.

NOTES

1. Rudra's long hair is braided or piled on top of his head in a chignon.
2. As the primeval ancestor of man, Manu performed the first sacrifice by mortals for immortals.
3. Cf. 10.136.4 and 10.136.7.
4. Either our own bodies or the bodies of people we love.
5. Probably protection from his own wrath as well as from that of the other gods (before whom he is asked to speak on behalf of the worshipper), or from the killing of men and the killing of cattle.
6. A river goddess.

1.154 *The Three Strides of Viṣṇu*

Viṣṇu, like Rudra, seems prominent in the *Rig Veda* only through Hindu hindsight; though he is often invoked in conjunction with Indra (with whom Rudra also has close ties), he is merely one of several similar gods of a generally solar and beneficial character. This hymn is the basis of the later myth of the dwarf avatar who takes three steps to win the world from the demons.

Viṣṇu's three space-creating steps prop apart and thereby make the basic two-part Universe: the earthly regions and the 'upper dwelling-place' (v. 1) or 'highest footstep' (vv. 5-6), the seat of the immortal gods (vv. 5-6), particularly of Viṣṇu (or of Viṣṇu with Indra). It is significant that three steps are needed to accomplish this split into two; the paradox

becomes strikingly explicit in verse 4, where Viṣṇu supports the threefold heaven and earth; the mediating third is Viṣṇu himself, who embodies 'all creatures'.

The three steps suggest many metaphorical levels. In the solar symbolism, they may be dawn, noon, and sunset, or three phases of the year that Viṣṇu 'measures apart' (vv. 1 and 3). These steps are called strides (*vikrama*, vv. 1-2 and 5) or steps (*pada*, vv. 3-6), the latter with many complex connotations that enlarge the metaphor. Its primary meaning is 'foot' (cognate with that word as with Latin *pes*, *pedis*); it then designates 'step' (the foot's action) and 'footprint' (the foot's after-image), as well as 'stand' or 'base' in the sense of dwelling-place (later devotional Hinduism makes much of the fact that the lowest part of god is the highest part of the universe). In the final verses, *pada* refers both to the actual place where men and gods dwell and the footstep which marks the place, in which the honey-fountain springs as water fills the mark made by a cow's hoof.¹

- 1 Let me now sing the heroic deeds² of Viṣṇu, who has measured apart the realms of earth, who propped up³ the upper dwelling-place, striding far as he stepped forth three times.
- 2 They praise for his heroic deeds Viṣṇu who lurks in the mountains, wandering like a ferocious wild beast,⁴ in whose three wide strides all creatures dwell.
- 3 Let this song of inspiration go forth to Viṣṇu, the wide-striding bull who lives in the mountains, who alone with but three steps measured apart this long, far-reaching dwelling-place.⁵
- 4 His three footprints, inexhaustibly full of honey, rejoice⁶ in the sacrificial drink. Alone, he supports threefold the earth and the sky – all creatures.
- 5 Would that I might reach his dear place of refuge, where men who love the gods rejoice.⁶ For there one draws close to the wide-striding Viṣṇu; there, in his highest footstep, is the fountain of honey.

- ⁶ We wish to go to your⁷ dwelling-places, where there are untiring, many-horned cattle.⁸ There the highest footstep of the wide-stepping bull shines brightly down.

NOTES

1. Cf. the various uses of *pada* in 1.164.
2. Cf. 1.32.1, which begins with the same phrase.
3. The verb (*śkambh*) is related to the noun for 'pillar', the *axis mundi* that props heaven apart so that creation may take place. This pillar is also a measuring-stick for Viṣṇu. Elsewhere this act is attributed to Varuṇa (5.85.5), who measures out the earth with the sun as with a measure.
4. The commentator suggests that this is a lion; this seems more likely, in view of the sinister characteristics attributed to Viṣṇu here, than to interpret it as a reference to the bull who is about to appear (vv. 3 and 6). Indeed, as bulls do not usually live in mountains, this may merely be an instance of the use of the word (*vṛjan*) to denote any male full of seed, in this case a wild beast (as the Vedic gods are often said to be wild beasts).
5. This may refer to the entire triple world or to the earth as opposed to the upper dwelling-place.
6. The verb can be transitive or intransitive, to be or to make someone else happy or drunk. Here both meanings seem appropriate: the honey in the footprints acts like Soma, intoxicating the creatures who dwell there, the 'men who love the gods' specified in the next verse. The honey is in all three of his footsteps (v. 4), though the highest is the fountain of the nectar of immortality (v. 5).
7. The pronoun, in the dual, refers to both Indra and Viṣṇu.
8. Here, as elsewhere, the cattle may simply symbolize cattle (and, by extension, the riches of life), or something more. The commentator identifies them as rays of light (extensions of Viṣṇu as the sun); they may be stars. As cattle, they are untiring, as rays as the sun); 'many-horned' would mean something like 'twinkling', 'unfading'; 'widely diffused' (for sunbeams). (Cf. 1.163.11 for horns as rays.) But they may be just what the verse says, the cattle who abound in heaven.