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The Winds of Change

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Abstract

Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* is a powerful poem about nature, destruction, transformation, revolution, poetic inspiration, and renewal. Shelley presents the West Wind as an invisible but mighty force that moves through earth, sky, and sea. It carries away dead leaves, spreads seeds, creates storms, and disturbs the ocean. The poet calls it both "Destroyer and Preserver" because it removes what is dead while preparing the way for new life. In the final sections, Shelley asks the wind to free him from weakness and spread his thoughts throughout the world. This paper studies the poem's literary devices, structure, themes, tone, historical background, audience, and purpose. It also compares Shelley's ideas with teachings from the Vedas, Upaniṣads, *Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā*, *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*, *Vachanāmṛta*, and other Indian scriptures. These texts similarly present wind as *Vāyu* or *Prāṇa*, discuss cycles of creation and destruction, and teach that inner purification is necessary for spiritual renewal. From the perspective of Akṣara–Puruṣottama Darśana, the poem's movement from dead leaves to spring can be understood comparatively as a movement from old *vāsanās* and *svabhāvas* toward ātma-realization, becoming *akṣararūpa*, and offering devotion to Puruṣottama.

Keywords: West Wind, nature, transformation, revolution, renewal, Vāyu, Prāṇa, Vedānta, bhakti, Akṣara–Puruṣottama Darśana

Introduction

Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* begins with a powerful invocation: "O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being."

The poet addresses the West Wind as if it were a conscious and divine power. Although the wind cannot be seen, its effects appear everywhere. It drives dead leaves across the earth, carries seeds into the soil, spreads clouds through the sky, produces storms, and disturbs the Mediterranean and Atlantic seas.

The poem presents the wind as a force with two opposite but connected functions: "Destroyer and Preserver."

The wind destroys old and dead forms, but it also protects seeds until spring gives them new life. Destruction is therefore not shown as meaningless. It becomes part of a larger process of renewal.

In the first three sections, Shelley describes the wind's power over earth, sky, and water. In the fourth section, he turns inward and speaks about his personal pain and weakness. He remembers that he was once "tameless, and swift, and proud" like the wind, but now feels "chain'd and bow'd" by life's difficulties.

In the fifth section, the poet asks the wind to make him its instrument:

"Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is."

He wants the wind to scatter his thoughts throughout the world like dead leaves, ashes, and sparks. The poem ends with a famous question:

"If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"

This question expresses hope. Winter represents pain, oppression, death, and silence; spring represents renewal, freedom, creativity, and new life.

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The present paper also compares the poem with Indian scriptural teachings. There is no historical evidence that Shelley based the poem directly upon the Vedas or Vedānta. The comparison is philosophical rather than historical.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

1.1 Apostrophe and personification

The entire poem is an apostrophe because Shelley directly addresses the West Wind:

“O wild West Wind.”

The wind is personified as a conscious being that can hear, move, destroy, protect, and inspire. Each of the first three sections ends with:

“O hear!”

The poet speaks to the wind as if offering a prayer to a higher power.

The wind “chariotest” seeds to their winter resting place. It awakens the Mediterranean Sea, moves clouds, disturbs forests, and carries the poet’s words. These actions make nature appear alive and purposeful.

1.2 Metaphor

Shelley calls the wind:

“thou breath of Autumn’s being.”

The wind is presented as the breath or living spirit of autumn. This metaphor suggests that the wind gives movement and power to the entire season.

The poet calls dead leaves:

“Pestilence-stricken multitudes.”

The leaves represent large groups of people suffering from disease, oppression, or social decay. They may also represent dead ideas and outdated institutions.

The poet asks:

“Make me thy lyre.”

A lyre is a musical instrument. Shelley wants the wind to move through him as it moves through the forest. His poetry will then become the music of the wind.

His thoughts are later described as:

“ashes and sparks.”

The sparks represent ideas that can ignite intellectual, political, and spiritual change.

1.3 Simile

The poem contains many similes:

- Dead leaves are driven “like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing.”
- Seeds lie “each like a corpse within its grave.”
- Spring buds are driven “like flocks to feed in air.”
- Clouds are compared with “earth’s decaying leaves.”
- The poet asks to be carried “as a wave, a leaf, a cloud.”
- His dead thoughts will be driven “like withered leaves.”

These comparisons connect the natural world with death, sleep, movement, human society, and rebirth.

1.4 Imagery

The poem contains vivid images from earth, air, fire, and water:

- Yellow, black, pale, and red leaves;
- Dark seeds sleeping in the soil;
- Clouds spreading across the sky;
- Lightning, rain, and hail;
- The blue Mediterranean Sea;

- Underwater plants and forests;
- Ashes and sparks from an unextinguished fire.

The colours of the leaves suggest decay and disease, while the “azure sister of the Spring” suggests brightness and renewal. The poem moves from the dark colours of autumn toward the hope of spring.

1.5 Symbolism

Symbol	Meaning
West Wind	Natural power, change, revolution, and inspiration
Dead leaves	Old ideas, suffering, decay, and exhausted institutions
Seeds	Hidden possibility and future life
Winter	Death, oppression, pain, and silence
Spring	Renewal, freedom, creativity, and hope
Storm	Sudden transformation
Lyre	The poet as an instrument of inspiration
Ashes and sparks	Ideas capable of awakening society
Trumpet	A public call to change
Forest	Humanity or the poetic mind

1.6 Paradox

The clearest paradox appears in:

“Destroyer and Preserver.”

The same wind performs apparently opposite functions. It destroys dead leaves but preserves seeds. The paradox suggests that destruction and renewal may be parts of a single natural process.

The seeds appear “like a corpse within its grave,” yet they are not truly dead. They are sleeping and waiting for spring. The grave is also a place of future life.

1.7 Alliteration and sound

The opening phrase “wild West Wind” repeats the **w** sound. This creates the sound of rushing air. Other examples include:

- “leaves dead are driven”;
- “dark wintry bed”;
- “black rain”;
- “tameless, and swift, and proud.”

Shelley also uses long flowing sentences and repeated exclamations. The rhythm moves rapidly, like strong wind passing through trees and clouds.

1.8 Rhetorical question

The poem ends with:

“If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?”

The question does not require a literal answer. Spring must follow winter. Symbolically, Shelley asks whether suffering and oppression can last forever. The expected answer is no: renewal will eventually come.

2. Structure and Form

Ode to the West Wind contains five sections or cantos. Each section has fourteen lines and follows a form influenced by the sonnet.

Each section contains four tercets followed by a concluding couplet. The interlocking rhyme pattern is based on *terza rima*:

ABA BCB CDC DED EE

Terza rima was famously used by the Italian poet Dante. Its connected rhymes create continuous forward movement. One stanza leads into the next, just as the wind moves without stopping.

The poem is written mainly in iambic pentameter. However, Shelley introduces variations that give the lines energy and speed. The form is highly controlled, even though the subject is a wild and “uncontrollable” wind. This creates a productive contrast between poetic discipline and natural force.

The five sections develop as follows:

Section	Subject
Canto I	The wind's power over earth and leaves
Canto II	The wind's power over clouds and sky
Canto III	The wind's power over seas and underwater life
Canto IV	The poet's personal suffering and desire for freedom
Canto V	The poet asks the wind to spread his ideas

The first three cantos focus mainly on nature. The fourth moves from the outer world to the poet's inner life. The fifth joins nature, poetry, and society.

3. Main Themes

3.1 Nature as a powerful force

Shelley does not present nature as a quiet background. The West Wind is wild, invisible, and uncontrollable. It affects land, sky, and sea. Human beings cannot command it.

3.2 Destruction and preservation

The wind destroys dead forms but preserves the possibility of future life. This is the poem's central idea. Destruction becomes meaningful when it removes decay and prepares the way for renewal.

3.3 Transformation and rebirth

The poem moves from autumn toward spring, death toward life, silence toward speech, and weakness toward inspiration. Shelley wants both personal and social transformation.

3.4 Revolution

The wind can represent political and social revolution. Dead leaves symbolize unjust systems and old ideas. Seeds and sparks symbolize new values that may grow after oppressive structures have been removed.

Shelley does not clearly describe the exact political system that should replace the old one. His main concern is the need for freedom, awakening, and change.

3.5 Poetic inspiration

The poet wants to become the wind's instrument. He hopes his words will travel across the world and awaken people:

“Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!”

Poetry is therefore not merely personal expression. It can become a force for moral, political, and spiritual awakening.

3.6 Suffering and hope

The poet admits that life has weakened him:

“I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!”

Yet he does not end in despair. His suffering becomes a prayer for renewal. The final question expresses hope that pain will not continue forever.

4. Tone, Mood, Historical Context, and Audience

The tone changes throughout the poem. It begins with wonder and praise, becomes dark and stormy, turns personal and sorrowful, and finally becomes hopeful and prophetic.

The mood may be summarized as:

Awe → Fear → Sorrow → Prayer → Hope

Shelley wrote the poem near Florence, Italy, in 1819, and it was published in 1820 in *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts, with Other Poems*. The Bodleian Libraries describe the West Wind as an agent of seasonal, personal, and wider social change.

The poem belongs to English Romanticism. Romantic poets emphasized imagination, emotion, nature, freedom, and resistance to oppressive authority. Shelley believed that poetry could help change society.

The poem may be addressed to several audiences:

1. The West Wind itself;
2. The poet's own spirit;
3. Oppressed and discouraged people;
4. Political society;
5. Future readers.

Its purpose is to transform personal pain into a wider message of hope and renewal.

5. The West Wind as *Vāyu*

The Vedas describe wind as *Vāta* or *Vāyu*, a powerful cosmic force. Like Shelley's wind, Vedic *Vāyu* is invisible but known through movement, sound, and effect.

The *Rgveda* 10.168.4 declares:

आत्मा देवानां भुवनस्य गर्भो

यथावशं चरति देव एषः ।

घोषा इदस्य शृण्विरे न रूपं

तस्मै वाताय हविषा विधेम ॥

ātmā devānām bhuvanasya garbho

yathā-vaśaṁ carati deva eṣaḥ

ghoṣā id asya śṛṇvire na rūpaṁ

tasmai vātāya haviṣā vidhema

Wind is described as the life-breath of the gods and the seed or vital force of the world. Its sound is heard, but its form is not seen.

This closely resembles Shelley's description of the West Wind's:

“unseen presence.”

Both traditions recognize wind through its effects rather than visible form. However, the comparison should not erase their differences. Shelley personifies a natural force through Romantic imagination, while the Vedic hymn addresses *Vāta* within a sacred and ritual worldview.

6. Wind, Breath, and *Prāṇa*

Shelley calls the wind the “breath of Autumn’s being.” Indian scriptures connect wind and breath through the concept of *prāṇa*, the vital force that supports life.

The *Praśna Upaniṣad* 2.13 states:

प्राणस्येदं वशे सर्वं त्रिदिवे यत्प्रतिष्ठितम् ।

मातेव पुत्रान् रक्षस्व श्रीश्च प्रज्ञां च विधेहि न इति ॥

prāṇasyedaṁ vaśe sarvaṁ tridive yat pratiṣṭhitam

māteva putrān rakṣasva śrīś ca prajñāṁ ca vidhehi na iti

All this is under the power of *Prāṇa*. The prayer asks *Prāṇa* to protect living beings as a mother protects her children and to grant prosperity and wisdom.

The West Wind is not identical with the Upaniṣadic *Prāṇa*, but the comparison is meaningful. Both are invisible forces known through movement and life. The wind moves through the world as breath moves through the body.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* 10.31 also states:

पवनः पवतामस्मि ।

pavanah pavatām asmi

“Among purifying forces, I am the wind.”

This verse introduces a spiritual meaning particularly relevant to Shelley’s poem. The wind does not merely move objects; it purifies by removing what is dead, stagnant, and decayed.

7. “Destroyer and Preserver” and the Cosmic Cycle

Shelley’s West Wind destroys and preserves at the same time. Indian philosophy also understands creation, preservation, and dissolution as connected parts of the cosmic process.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* 9.7–8 explains that beings return to primordial nature at the end of a cosmic cycle and are manifested again when a new cycle begins:

सर्वभूतानि कौन्तेय प्रकृतिं यान्ति मामिकाम् ।

कल्पक्षये पुनस्तानि कल्पादौ विसृजाम्यहम् ॥

sarva-bhūtāni kaunteya prakṛtiṁ yānti māmikām

kalpa-kṣaye punas tāni kalpādau viśṛjāmy aham

At the end of a cosmic cycle, beings return to *prakṛti*; at the beginning of another, they are manifested again.

Shelley’s scale is seasonal rather than cosmic. Autumn destroys leaves, winter hides seeds, and spring brings new growth. Yet both views understand destruction as part of a larger cycle rather than as an absolute end.

The three functions may be compared as follows:

Shelley’s seasonal cycle	Hindu cosmic principle
Dead leaves fall	Dissolution of old forms
Seeds sleep underground	Potential existence within <i>prakṛti</i>
Spring awakens seeds	New manifestation
Wind moves the process	Divine or natural power governs change

8. Death, Sleep, and New Birth

Shelley describes seeds lying underground:

“Each like a corpse within its grave.”

The seeds appear dead, but they contain future life. Spring will awaken them. The image joins death, sleep, and birth. The *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.22 uses the image of changing garments:

वासांसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय

नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि ।

तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्ण-

न्यन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही ॥

vāsāṁsi jīrṇāni yathā vihāya

navāni grhṇāti naro 'parāṇi

tathā śarīrāṇi vihāya jīrṇāny

anyāni samyāti navāni dehī

As a person discards worn-out clothes and puts on new ones, the embodied self leaves old bodies and enters new ones.

Shelley’s “new birth” mainly concerns nature, poetry, and society. The *Gītā* discusses the *jīva*’s movement from one body to another. These ideas should not be treated as identical, but both reject the idea that the end of one form is the end of all possibility.

9. Revolution and the Restoration of Dharma

Shelley wants the wind to remove dead ideas and awaken the world. This can be compared with the restoration of dharma described in the *Bhagavad Gītā* 4.7–8:

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।

अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥

परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।

धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे ॥

yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata

abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānam sṛjāmy aham

paritrāṇāya sādṛhūnām vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām

dharmā-samsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge

Whenever dharma declines and adharma rises, Bhagavān manifests to protect the virtuous, remove destructive forces, and restore dharma.

The comparison is significant but limited:

- Shelley calls for poetic, intellectual, and political awakening.
- The *Gītā* describes divine action for the restoration of dharma.
- Shelley’s revolution is open-ended.
- The *Gītā*’s transformation is morally directed by dharma. Vedānta would therefore ask not only whether change occurs but whether that change leads toward truth, justice, self-control, compassion, and devotion.

10. Poetry as a Force of Awakening

Shelley asks the wind:

“Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth

Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!”

His words are compared with sparks that can ignite change. The poet becomes a prophet whose message travels beyond his individual life.

The *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* 1.5.11 describes the transforming power of sacred words:

तद्वाग्विसर्गो जनताघविप्लवो

यस्मिन् प्रतिश्लोकमबद्धवत्यपि ।

नामान्यनन्तस्य यशोऽङ्कितानि यत्

शृण्वन्ति गायन्ति गृणन्ति साधवः ॥

tad-vāg-visargo janatāgha-viplavo

yasmin prati-slokaṁ abaddhavyaty api

nāmāny anantasya yaśo- 'nkitāni yat

śṛṇvanti gāyanti gṛṇanti sādhaṁ

Words that express the names and glory of the Infinite Lord can bring spiritual transformation in human society.

Both Shelley and the Bhāgavata believe that language can awaken people. Their aims, however, differ:

Shelley's poetic words	Bhāgavata's sacred words
Spread intellectual and political change	Awaken devotion and spiritual knowledge
Challenge oppression	Challenge ignorance and sin
Inspire freedom	Inspire liberation and bhakti
Make the poet a public voice	Make speech a form of divine remembrance

Shelley's poem sees poetry as revolutionary; the Bhāgavata sees sacred speech as spiritually purifying.

11. Personal Suffering and Spiritual Transformation

In the fourth canto, Shelley moves from describing nature to confessing his weakness:

"I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!"

The poet feels burdened by time, suffering, and disappointment. He asks the wind to lift him:

"Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!"

Vedānta does not teach that suffering automatically produces wisdom. Suffering becomes spiritually useful when it leads to self-examination, detachment, devotion, and knowledge.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* begins with Arjuna's sorrow. His despair becomes the setting for spiritual instruction. Arjuna does not remain in weakness; through Śrī Kṛṣṇa's teaching, his understanding is transformed.

Shelley likewise refuses to remain "chain'd and bow'd." He turns pain into prayer and asks to become an instrument of renewal.

12. The *Vachanāmṛta* and Inner Renewal

Shelley wants dead thoughts to be scattered so that a "new birth" may arise. The *Vachanāmṛta* describes spiritual transformation as the removal of *vāsanā*, *svabhāva*, and attachment, followed by devotion supported by ātma-realization.

12.1 Removing old *vāsanās*

In *Vachanāmṛta* Gadhadā III-20, Bhagavān Swaminarayan explains that deeply rooted karmic tendencies are known as *svabhāva*, *vāsanā*, or *prakṛti*. He teaches that these tendencies can be removed through devotion to Bhagavān combined with realization of the self as ātman.

This provides a strong spiritual parallel to Shelley's request:

"Drive my dead thoughts over the universe."

The "dead thoughts" may be interpreted comparatively as old habits, attachments, prejudices, and harmful tendencies. They must be removed before a spiritually renewed life can grow.

12.2 Determination and progress

In *Vachanāmṛta* Kāriyānī 3, Bhagavān Swaminarayan praises the person who recognizes base thoughts, makes a determined effort to remove them, and continues until they are overcome.

This resembles Shelley's refusal to accept spiritual and emotional weakness. He asks for energy, courage, and a renewed voice.

12.3 Satsang as transforming power

The *Vachanāmṛta* teaches that association with God, the Sant, and sincere devotees transforms a person's understanding and nature. Just as wind carries seeds into fertile ground, satsang carries virtues, knowledge, and devotion into the heart.

However, the transformation described in the *Vachanāmṛta* is not uncontrolled revolution. It is disciplined renewal guided by dharma, ātma-jñāna, vairāgya, and bhakti.

13. Akṣara-Puruṣottama Interpretation

From the perspective of Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, Shelley's movement from death to renewal may be interpreted at several levels.

Level One: external nature

Autumn removes leaves, winter hides seeds, and spring awakens life. This is seasonal transformation within prakṛti.

Level Two: personal renewal

The poet desires freedom from weakness, sorrow, and mental exhaustion. He seeks new strength and creative energy.

Level Three: moral and social renewal

The poet wants his thoughts to challenge dead institutions and awaken humanity.

Level Four: spiritual renewal

Vedānta seeks the removal of ignorance, ego, attachment, and old *vāsanās*. The aspirant realizes the jīva as distinct from the body and mind.

Level Five: Akṣara-Puruṣottama realization

Through association with the manifest Akṣarabrahma Guru, the aspirant becomes *akṣararūpa* and offers devotion to Parabrahman Puruṣottama.

The movement may be expressed as:

Old *Vāsanās* → Inner Purification → Ātma-jñāna → Akṣararūpatā → Puruṣottama-bhakti

The West Wind can remove dead leaves, but only spiritual knowledge, the grace of God, and association with the Akṣarabrahma Guru can remove ignorance and lead the jīva beyond māyā.

14. "If Winter Comes": Hope in Indian Scriptures

The final line expresses confidence that darkness will not last forever:

"If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"

Indian scriptures also teach hope, but they do not base it only on the natural passage of time. Spiritual renewal depends upon right knowledge, effort, devotion, the Guru, and divine grace.

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.3.28 prays:

असतो मा सद्गमय ।

तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय ।

मृत्योर्मांमृतं गमय ॥

asato mā sad gamaya

tamaso mā jyotir gamaya

mṛtyor mā amṛtaṁ gamaya

Lead me from the unreal to the Real, from darkness to light, and from death to immortality.

Shelley's movement from winter to spring may be placed beside the Upaniṣadic movement from darkness to light. Shelley describes natural, personal, poetic, and political renewal. The Upaniṣad seeks spiritual realization and immortality.

The comparison may be summarized as:

Shelley's imagery	Upaniṣadic movement
Dead leaves	Old and exhausted tendencies
Winter	Darkness, sorrow, and ignorance
Wind	A force of purification and change
Seeds	Hidden spiritual possibility
Spring	Awakening and renewal
Sparks	Transforming knowledge
New birth	Reformed life and consciousness

15. Comparative Understanding

Question	Ode to the West Wind	Vedic-Vedāntic understanding
What does wind represent?	Nature, change, revolution, and inspiration	Vāyu, Prāṇa, movement, and purification
Why is destruction necessary?	It removes dead forms	It may prepare for renewal and restoration of dharma
What requires renewal?	Nature, poet, society, and political thought	Mind, character, conduct, and spiritual understanding

Question	Ode to the West Wind	Vedic-Vedāntic understanding
What spreads transformation?	Poetry and inspired thought	Scripture, Guru, satsang, bhakti, and knowledge
What is the poet's role?	To become a voice of awakening	To use speech for truth, dharma, and devotion
What is true rebirth?	Natural, creative, and social renewal	Inner purification and spiritual transformation
What is the highest renewal?	Spring after winter	Becoming akṣararūpa and offering bhakti to Puruṣottama

Conclusion

Ode to the West Wind presents nature as a powerful force of destruction and renewal. The wind drives away dead leaves, carries seeds into the earth, gathers clouds, creates storms, and awakens the sea. Its power reaches earth, sky, and water.

The wind is both "Destroyer and Preserver." It removes forms that have completed their life but protects the seeds of the future. The poem therefore does not treat destruction

as the opposite of creation. Destruction can become the beginning of renewal.

Shelley gradually turns from external nature to his own condition. He feels weakened and burdened by life but desires to recover the freedom and energy he once possessed. He asks the wind to make him its lyre and spread his words throughout humanity. Poetry becomes a means of social awakening.

The Vedas and Upaniṣads provide meaningful parallels. The *R̥gveda* describes Vāta as invisible yet known through sound and movement. The *Praśna Upaniṣad* presents Prāṇa as a life-supporting force. The *Bhagavad Gītā* identifies wind as a purifier and describes cycles of manifestation and dissolution. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* teaches that sacred words can transform human consciousness.

The *Vachanāmṛta* gives the idea of renewal a more specific spiritual direction. The old leaves of harmful vāsanā, svabhāva, ego, and worldly attachment must be removed through ātma-realization, devotion, disciplined effort, and satsang.

From an Akṣara-Puruṣottama perspective, the highest spring is not merely seasonal or political. It is the spiritual awakening in which the jīva becomes free from ignorance, becomes akṣararūpa through association with the Akṣarabrahma Guru, and offers eternal devotion to Parabrahman Puruṣottama.

Shelley's concluding question—

"If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"

—may therefore be reformulated in Vedāntic language:

When ignorance is removed, knowledge arises; when old vāsanās are purified, virtues grow; when the jīva becomes akṣararūpa, the spring of eternal devotion to Puruṣottama begins.

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