

Om – The Primordial Sound by Simon Heather

According to Vedic philosophy, Om is the primordial sound from which the whole universe was created. It is a sacred sound in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Om is also known as Omkāra (Aum syllable). It appears at the beginning of most Vedic chants and is said to be the essence of the Vedas.



The Upanishads are full of references to Aum - “*Om ityetadaksharam idam sarvam, tasyopavyakhyanam bhutam bhavat bhavishyaditi sarvam omkara eva.*”- Mandukya Upanishad (translation below).

“The Imperishable is OM, and it is 'all this'. All this, whatever is visible, whatever is cognisable, whatever can come within the purview of sense-perception, inference or verbal testimony, whatever can be comprehended under the single term, creation all this is Om.”
– Mandukya Upanishad

“If he meditates on the Supreme Being with the syllable Aum, he becomes one with the Light, he is led to the world of Brahman [the Absolute Being] Who is higher than the highest life, That Which is tranquil, unaging, immortal, fearless, and supreme.” – Prashna Upanishad

“God is the Syllable Om, out of Him proceeds the Supreme Knowledge.” – Svetasvatara Upanishad

In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna says: *“of vibrations I am the transcendental Om.”*

Om or Aum has three aspects –

1. It is the sound of creation that is heard in deep meditation
2. It is the most sacred of all Sanskrit mantras
3. It is a symbol which represents the four levels of consciousness

Swami Krishnananda says, “We do not create Om by a chanting of it, but we only produce a vibration sympathetic with the vibration that is already there by its own right and which is called Om. Om is a cosmic vibration. It is not a chant made by us, created by us or initiated by us. Why do we chant Om? To establish a connection between ourselves and that which exists by its own right and which manifests itself as a sound-vibration in the form of Om.”

Om is a sacred syllable representing Brahman, the impersonal Absolute, omnipotent, omnipresent, the source of all manifest existence. Brahman, in itself, is incomprehensible; so a symbol is used to help us realise the Unknowable.

The vibration of Om is the manifestation of God in form (‘sāguna brahman’). Om is the sound of the infinite. Om is said to be ‘Adi Anadi’, without beginning or the end and embracing all that exists.

Om is called ‘pranava’, that which pervades all life. Literally, ‘pranava’ in Sanskrit means ‘humming’. ‘Pranava’ also means ‘controller of prana’ or ‘to roar, sound, or reverberate’.

Om is said to be the essence of all mantras, the highest of all mantras, the Divine Word or Shabda Brahman. It gives power to all mantras. Hence all mantras begin with Om and without it are said to be deprived of power. Sounding Om clears the mind for meditation.

Om consists of three sounds; the vowel 'A', the vowel 'U' and the nasalised 'M' sound. Hence it is sometimes written as Aum.

When taken letter by letter, A-U-M represents the divine energy (Shakti) united in its three elementary aspects: Brahma Shakti (creation), Vishnu Shakti (preservation) and Shiva Shakti (liberation, and/or destruction).

The three portions of Aum relate to the states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep and to the three gunas (tendencies or qualities) of rajas, sattva and tamas. They are ruled by the Gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, the Divine in its threefold role as the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the universe.

Quotes from the Saints

Kabir - “This is the Ultimate Word: but can any express its marvellous savor? He who has savored it once, he knows what joy it can give. Kabir says: Knowing it, the ignorant man becomes wise, and the wise man becomes speechless and silent.”

Ramakrishna - “‘What will you gain’, some sages ask, ‘by merely hearing this sound?’ You hear the roar of the ocean from a distance. By following the roar you can reach the ocean. As long as there is the roar, there must also be the ocean. By following the trail of Om you attain Brahman, of which the Word is the symbol. That Brahman has been described by the Vedas as the ultimate goal.”

Ramana Maharshi - “In order to get at this true significance, one should meditate on the Pranava. ...The fruition of this process is samadhi which yields release [moksha], which is the state of unsurpassable bliss.”

Yoga

Om represents all time: past, present, and future; and is beyond time itself. Om represents the eternal oneness of all that is, and is the ultimate goal of yoga: to become unified in body, mind and spirit.

Chanting Om is perhaps the oldest of yoga’s spiritual practices. In the Mandukya Upanishad we find this beautiful passage –

“The Syllable Om is the bow: one’s self, indeed, is the arrow. Brahman is spoken of as the target of that. It is to be hit without making a mistake. Thus one becomes united with it [Brahman] as the arrow becomes one with the target.” (Mandukya Upanishad 2.2.4)

Thus sounding Om directs our awareness toward the supreme Self, the true nature of the universe.

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali instruct the seeker to contemplate Om as a direct path to enlightenment. “The repetition of the sound of Om, along with a deep contemplation of the meaning of what it represents, brings both the realisation of the supreme Self (Atman) and the removal of obstacles that normally block this realisation.” (Yoga Sutras 1.27-1.29)

The Himalayan Academy says, “The word pranava in Sanskrit means humming. This sound can be heard as the sound of one’s own nerve system, and meditators and mystics hear it

daily, like the sound made by an electrical transformer or a swarm of bees, or a thousand vinas (a stringed instrument) playing in the distance.”

“Hearing Om is a strong, inner experience, one that yogis hold with great reverence. The yogi is taught to inwardly transform this sound into the inner light which lights up ones' thoughts, and to bask in this blissful consciousness of light. Pranava is also known as the sound of the nadanadi sakti (the energy current of sound). Hearing Om draws one near to God Consciousness.”

“When the world too strongly dominates our mind, this sound may not be heard. It is heard when the mind becomes perfectly quiescent, silent, still. If you listen for this sound in your quietest moments and you will experience the Divine energy that lives within all men, within all creatures, within all existence.”

Sounding Om

Om is used as a mula-mantra, the root and beginning of most mantras. Om is the bija (seed) mantra of the third eye chakra and chanting Om activates this energy centre. Om is also known as the adi-bija, the primary seed mantra. Om is used within sacred chants to increase their power as well as to draw the practitioner into a state of deep meditation.

It is very important when repeating Om to pronounce the ‘O’ sound correctly. In Sanskrit, the sound ‘O’ is a diphthong, a subtle sound that begins with one vowel and changes to another vowel within the same syllable. Thus ‘O’ sound begins with an ‘A’ sound as in ‘law’ and ends with a ‘U’ sound as in ‘put.’ That is why it is often written as AUM.

When these two vowel sounds are combined in this diphthong, it produces a single, pure vowel sound. When we sound Om it should sound like the word ‘home’ without the beginning ‘h’ sound.

Though indivisible, Om has four subtle sounds that correspond to four levels of consciousness. The first sound of ‘A’ represents Vaishvanara, the conscious waking state. The second sound of ‘U’ represents Taijasa, the subtle, unconscious dream state. The third sound of ‘M’ represents the Prajna, the casual, subconscious deep sleep state. The fourth sound is the silence that follows the sound of Om that represents Turiya, the absolute consciousness that illumines and pervades the three prior states.

When chanting Om, equal measure should be given to both the ‘O’ and the ‘M’ sounds, i.e. ‘ooooommm’ and not ‘oommmmmm’ or ‘oooooomm.’ The mantra Om may be chanted aloud, whispered, or repeated mentally. The chanting of Om should be easy and natural, without strain. Usually when Om is chanted out loud it is long and when chanted mentally is it short, but experiment and do what feels most comfortable for you. When chanting Om we can focus our gaze on the third eye chakra. If using Om in mantra meditation we may wish to use a mala to count repetitions of 108. (Unlocking the Mystery of Om - Timothy Burgin)

In the correct pronunciation of OM the sound proceeds from the navel, with a deep and harmonious vibration, and gradually manifests itself by stages at the upper part of the nostrils where the ‘Anusvara’ (‘end sound’) is sounded.

Anusvara is the nasal ‘M’ sound that is half way between an ‘M’ and an ‘N’ sound. In the Devanagari script, ‘Anusvara’ is represented with a dot (bindu) above the letter. In International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST), the corresponding symbol is an ‘M’ with an underdot.

If we pronounce AUM slowly, we open the mouth wide with the sound 'A', gradually close the mouth to produce the sound 'U', and finally close it with the sound 'M'. AUM is said to embrace the whole frequency range of human speech.

In Tibetan Buddhism OM is called 'the body-vajra of all Buddhas'. It invokes the power of the universal, resonating with its omnipresence, and therefore occurs at the beginning of most mantras. In Sanskrit vajra means 'thunderbolt', 'diamond', or 'adamantine', denoting indestructibility and immutability.

Lama Govinda (1960) says that the sound of OM opens a person's being to the vibrations of a higher reality. Chanting OM helps to tear down the walls of our ego. "OM is the original, deep note of timeless reality which thrills through us out of a beginningless past, and whose sound comes to meet us when we have developed our sense of inner hearing through stilling the mind." (Govinda, 1960, p11)

"This transcendent sound is like an opening of the arms to embrace everything that lives, when it is spoken in the heart of one who is truly striving in devout faith. It is an expression not of self-aggrandisement or of self-expression, but of acceptance and sacrifice....giving and taking at the same time: a taking that is free of desire and a giving that does not attempt to impose its will on others." (Govinda, 1960, p11)

Om Symbol

AUM is composed of the three letters A, U, M. The letter 'A' symbolises the physical plane, 'U' the astral plane and 'M' the causal plane. These are seen when Om is written: -



Stephen Cross (1994) says that the three curves that are joined together stand for the three levels of reality within which man moves. The lowest curve represents the world of waking experience, corresponding to the physical body and to the material universe. The middle curve on the right hand side represents the dreaming state of man and corresponds to the mental life; the inner world of dreams, imagination and subjective experience.

The upper curve is said to represent the state of dreamless sleep, during which consciousness persists. It corresponds to the causal body, 'subtler than the subtlest' from which the other two states arise. Above these three curves is a dot, which has an arc below it to emphasise its separation from the rest. This dot stands for that other order of reality that lies altogether outside manifestation, and can never be grasped by the mind.

The entire symbol, together with the crescent and the dot, stands for the fourth state, samadhi, which combines all these states and transcends them. The crescent symbolises the veil of illusion, maya, and the dot beyond is the transcendental state. It represents the final dissolution of the universe, the blissful non-dual principle.

The whole symbol represents Brahman, the one that ever remains unchanged. The mystic symbol AUM is the bow, in meditation the mind and the senses are withdrawn from the realm of maya and directed at the imperishable principle, its target.

Sai Baba

Sai Baba (1993) says that, “Om is the primal sound that emanated with the first creation. The sound caused by creation also gave rise to movement, the movement of the earth and all the movements of the cosmos. The primordial, the first sound is ‘Om-kara’(Om-Kara). All the sounds in the universe have emanated from Omkara.” “All sounds are related and connected in some way with one another. Sound is present everywhere.”

“Sound has three different aspects. These blend together into one whole. The three aspects are Creation, Sustenance and Destruction, which are the functions of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The three aspects thus represent the Trinity of the Godhead. These aspects are embedded in the sounds of the letters of A, U and M i.e. Akara, Ukara and Makara. The combination of these three sounds result in and make Omkara.”

“Thus the three letters A, U and M make the word AUM (Om). The sound A arises at the throat, the sound U arises from the tongue and the sound M arises from the lips, when they join together, they become one sound and it arises from the navel. The navel is compared to the lotus and it is the place where Brahma resides.”

“The ‘Akara’ sound should begin in a low tone and gradually rise into a crescendo in the course of ‘Ukara’ and then slowly soften when uttering ‘Makara’. The course is like a triangle - starting at the base, rising to a peak, descending again to the base.”

“The chanting of the Omkara twenty one times will turn and direct each of our faculties towards the spiritual goal. All work will then get transformed into worship.” “We chant ‘Om Shanthi, Shanthi, Shanthi’ at the end. Peace is invoked for mind, body and soul. The peace is necessary for all three together.” (Sai Baba, 1993, p11-14).

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