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Oh, the Glories of Om! "Aum" is a variant spelling of "Om". The word can be spelled either way because the letter "o" is regarded as a diphthong consisting of "a" and "u". There is quite a division among people as to how Om is actually pronounced. Many people try to accentuate the "au" sound in *aum*, trying to make it sound like "ow-m" or "awe-m". However, "aum" is pronounced "om" as in "home". The "au" sound is an extremely subtle intonation that naturally arises, when Om is intoned, and can be heard when the pitch is increased. One does not have to accentuate the "au" sound in Om to hear it. Just intone Om as "om" and you will hear it naturally. Just intone the mantra slowly.

Information on Om and all about Om and Aum

Of all the mantras, the most powerful and the significant one is the single-syllabled incantation called the Pranava. This is the OM. The available literature upon the significances of the Vedic mantra is almost voluminous. Nowhere in the world can we meet with a more sacred symbol that has got such a vast amount of significance.

From Vedic times until the present day the word 'OM' has been taken as a symbol and as an aid to meditation by spiritual aspirants. It is accepted both as one with 'Brahman' and as the medium, the Logos, connecting man and God. The entire history of the syllable is in the revelations of the Vedas and in the declarations of the Upanishads.

There is a verse in the Vedas: 'Prajapathi vai idam agra asit' (In the beginning was Prajapathi, the Brahman): 'Tasya vak dvitiya asit' (With whom was the Word): 'Vag vai Paraman Brahma' (And the Word was verily the Supreme Brahman).** This sphota has its symbol in the word OM. The sound of OM is also called 'Pranava', meaning, that it is something that pervades life, or runs through prana or breath.

The very central theme of the Mandukya Upanishad is the syllable OM through which the mystery of Brahman is gathered to a point. The text of this Upanishad first treats OM in terms of the Upanishadic doctrine of the three states of waking, dream, and deep sleep, but then passes on to the 'fourth' (turiya), thus transporting us beyond the typical Upanishadic sphere into that of the later 'classic Advaita Vedanta'. Speaking of OM, the Taittiriya Upanishad says: "Thou art the sheath of Brahman." That is, OM is the container for the Supreme and, therefore, invoking OM is invoking the Supreme.

In every piece of music there are three aspects, namely (1) the meaning of the song; (2) the laws of music, and (3) the sound of the song. Similarly, on OM there are three aspects. The first is the mere sound, the mere mantra as pronounced by the mouth; the second is the meaning of the syllable, which is to be realized through feeling; and the third is the application of OM to your character, singing it in your acts, and so through your life.

OM represents the Self which is the Supreme Nondual Reality. The Self is known in four states, namely, the waking state, the dream state, the deep-sleep state, and the fourth state called the turiya. All these states are represented in the three sounds of OM (i.e., A, U, M***), and the silence that follows and surrounds the syllable.

The sound A represents the waking state; the sound U represents the dream state, and the sound M represents the deep sleep state. The waking state is superimposed on the A sound because it is the first of the three states of consciousness, and so is the sound A the very first of the letters of the alphabet – in all languages. The dream is but a view within the mind of the impressions that had reflected on the surface of the mental lake during the waking state. Besides, the dream state occurs between the waking and the deep-sleep state, and comes second among the three states of consciousness. And so, U, being next to A in order of sounds, and also since it is between A and M, is treated as representing the dream state. On the M sound of OM is superimposed the deep-sleep state. The comparison between the last sound of the OM and sleep lies in that it is the closing sound of the syllable, just as deep sleep is the final stage of the mind in rest. A short pregnant silence is inevitable between two successive OMs. On this silence is superimposed the idea of the fourth state, known as turiya. This is the state of Perfect Bliss when the individual Self recognises the identity with the Supreme.

In OM, the sounds A, U, and M are called mantras or forms; there is also in AUM the common principle called the amatra-OM, that which signifies the things-in-itself, running through and pervading the threefold phenomena of waking, dream, and deep sleep. The law of memory is that the rememberer and the experiencer must be one and the same individual, or else memory is impossible. So, as we can remember all our experiences in all three planes, there must necessarily be a single common factor which was a witness of all the happenings in all the three planes. There must be some entity within ourselves who is present in the waking world, who moves and illuminates the dream, who is a distant observer in the deep sleep world, and yet who is not conditioned by any of these three realms. This entity, conceived as the fourth state (turiya), is the Real, the Changeless, the Intelligent Principle.

The syllable OM symbolizes both the spheres:(1) the phenomenal, visible sphere of the 'jagat', wherein the manifestations of time and space appear and perish, and (2) the transcendent, timeless sphere of the Imperishable Being, which is beyond and yet one with it. Thus, A the 'waking state', U, the 'dream', and M, the 'deep sleep', and the silence, 'turiya', all the four together comprise the totality of this manifestation of Atman-Brahman as a syllable. Just as the sound M manifests itself, grows, becomes transformed in its vocal quality, and finally subsides into the silence that follows****, so too the four 'states' or components of being ultimately merge into the homogeneous silence of the 'fourth' (turiya). The other three states are transformations of the one experience, which taken together constitute the totality of its modes, whether regarded from the microcosmic or from the macrocosmic point of view.

The A and U are essential to the sound as M, or as the silence (turiya) against which the sound appears. Moreover, it would be a mistake to say that AUM did not exist while the silence reigned; for it would be still potentially present even in the silence. The actual manifestation of the syllable, on the other hand, is fleeting and evanescent, whereas the silence abides. The silence, indeed, is present elsewhere during a local pronunciation of the AUM - that is to say (by analogy), transcendentally during the creation, manifestation, and dissolution of the universe.

It may be asked as to why this particular word 'OM' should be chosen as the word representative of the 'thought' out of which the universe has become manifested. The answer may be given in Swami Vivekananda's own words: "This OM is the only possible symbol which covers the whole ground, and there is none other like it. The sphota is the material of all worlds, yet it is not any definite word in its fully formed state. That is to say, if all the particularities which distinguish one word from another be removed, then what remains will be the sphota. Therefore, this sphota is called the Nada-Brahman, the sound-Brahman.

Now, every word symbol intended to express the inexpressible sphota, will so particularise it that it will no longer be the sphota. That which particularise it the least and, at the same time, most approximately expresses its nature will be the truest symbol thereof; and this is the OM, and the OM only; because, these three letters A, U, M, pronounced in combination as OM, can alone be the generalized symbol of all possible sounds. The letter A is the least differentiate of all sounds. Again, all articulate sounds are produced in the space within the mouth – beginning with the root of the tongue and ending at the lips – the throat-sound is A, and M is the lip-sound; and U exactly represents the rolling forward of the impulse which begins at the root of the tongue, continuing till it ends in the lips."

If properly pronounced, this OM will represent in itself the whole phenomenon of sound production, and no other word can do this; and this, therefore, is the fittest symbol of the sphota, which is the real meaning of the OM. And as the symbol can never be separated from the thing signified, the OM and the sphota are one. And, as the sphota, being the finer side of the manifested universe, is nearer to God, and is indeed the first manifestation of Divine Wisdom, this OM is truly symbolic of God.

OM thus represents the entire manifested world and the unmanifest, and also that which lies beyond both the manifest and the unmanifest – the Brahman, which is the changeless substratum for the changing objects of the world of experience.

To every mantra, OM, the Pranava, is added on. And without 'OM' no sacred chant has its power. Just as a living body has no vitality when the life-giving breath is not flowing through its veins, so too, a mantra

has no life in it without the addition of the Pranava.

Vedantic students generally practise the repetition of and the mediation upon the symbol provided by the Pranava - this is called the Pranava upasana. OM represents, in its silent significance, both the manifest and the unmanifest, which together constitute the entire subtle and gross world. The word loka in Sanskrit is generally translated as 'world', but, in its etymological meaning, it signifies 'a field of experience'.

The entire possibility of experience in life has been terraced by the rsis into fourteen worlds; seven higher lokas and seven lower worlds. There are three worlds in which a limited ego-centre comes to play its game of reincarnation and repeated deaths: these are (1) Bhur-loka, the physical earth; (2) Bhuvan-loka, the world next to the physical and closely connected with it, but constituted of finer matter; and (3) Svah-loka, the heavenly world. Beyond these are the four other 'worlds' wherein the ego comes to move about and enjoy in its higher evolutionary life, and they are called the Mahar-loka, Jana-loka, Tapa-loka, and Satya-loka.

In the Hindu literature we also find conceptions of other 'worlds' such as Indra-loka, Candra-loka, Surya-loka, Pitra-loka, etc., which are special 'realms of experiences' located within the above regions.

Below these seven 'worlds' there is yet another set of seven 'worlds' called the talas. They are named as Pa-talam, Maha-talam, Rasa-talam, Tala-talam, Su-talam, Vi-talam, and A-talam.

Of these fourteen 'worlds', Bhur-Bhuvan-Svaha, denoting the 'three worlds', are called the vyahrtis. In the Gayatri Mantra, when these vyahrtis are chanted, the meditator can visualise the 'three worlds' as arising from, existing in, and disappearing into AUM. He can subjectively identify them with the waking, dream, and deep-sleep conditions of consciousness, transcending which extends the realms of the Infinite. All of them are represented in the symbol OM. In this sense, the vyahrtis in the Gayatri represent in one sweep the entire 'world' of the subjective and the objective experiences of man.

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