

THE SACRED SOUND SYMBOL OM:
AN EXPLORATION OF ITS ORIGINS, RELEVANCE, AND
INTEREST IN TODAY'S WORLD.

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Abstract

The paper explores the origin of the sacred syllable OM, and its relevance and interest in today's world. Starting with the concept of sacred sound and the importance of mantras in the sonic theology of Hinduism, highlighting the chanting tradition of which OM plays an important part. The importance of OM in the discursive and liturgical setting of Hinduism is then introduced. The discursive settings include the scriptures of the Upanishads while the liturgical is OM's role in rituals, sacrifices, and prayers based on the Vedas. After the introduction to the sound aspects and importance of OM, the syllable is presented as the visual symbol which is so well-known in the western world and often seen as a symbol of yoga. The paper then moves on to explore the presence and importance of OM both in the revealed Hindu teaching from the Vedas, the Brahmanas, Aranyaka and Upanishads. To the authored teachings, the epics where the Bhagavad Gita holds a special importance and Patanjali's Yoga Sutra. Revealing that OM is seen as the path to understanding the Self, the cosmos and liberation from the circle of rebirths. To look at the relevance of OM in a modern western setting research, the physiological and psychological effects of the chanting of the mantra OM as a practice in today's world is explored together with the value that this ancient wisdom may still hold in present time in a western setting.

***The sacred sound symbol OM:
An exploration of its origins, relevance, and interest in today's world.***

1. Introduction
2. Sacred Sounds
3. Mantras
4. The importance of *OM*
5. The visual symbol *OM*
6. *OM* in the Hindu Teachings
 - 6.1 In the shruti – ‘that which is heard’.
 - 6.1.1 The Vedas, Brahmanas and Dharma Sutras
 - 6.1.2 The Upanishads
 - 6.2 In the smriti – ‘that which is remembered’.
 - 6.2.1 The Itihasas (the epics)
 - 6.2.2 The Puranas
 - 6.2.3 Patanjali's Yoga Sutra
7. Recitation of the mantra *OM*.
8. Conclusion

Biography

1. Introduction

According to ancient Indian beliefs, the sacred syllable *OM* is said to be the sound of the universe. A primordial sound which resonates in all existence and from which creation emerged. The thought of sound and vibration being collective and omnipresent is intriguing. The teachings of the Vedic lineage, which will be further explored in this paper, hold that the ancient sages of India, *rishis*, detected universal and sacred sounds, and vibrations in moments of deep, possibly transcendental, meditation. And that these *rishis* discovered laws of sound alliance between man and nature, where nature is represented by a primal sound of *OM*, and where man, through the use of certain mantras and chants, have access to the control of natural manifestations¹. In today's world, modern sciences such as quantum physics and Einstein's theory of spacetime are connecting to the concept with a scientific approach. If there exists a sound and a vibration of *OM* which resonates with all living beings, does this universality make *OM* relevant and felt even in a modern non-Hindu setting as a seed that can grow in all beings irrespective of cultural and religious backgrounds? And does *OM* have the potential to provide a path or gateway to the numinous and sense of an absolute reality?

This paper will commence by exploring sacred sound, which throughout the history of man has been seen as means to connect with the universe, the divine, the elements and achieving states of balance. This leads to the description of the concept of Nada Brahma, a sound code behind the universe and present in all, and mantras as tools of the mind to harmonise the mental field and aim for liberation. The paper will proceed to describe the importance of *OM* in the liturgical, discursive, and sonic tradition. The emergence of *OM* as a visual symbol, so well-known worldwide today, will also be described before moving on the *OM* in the Hindu teachings and the philosophy and theology communicated through these teachings. The last sections of this paper will look at the physiology and psychological effects attributed to the recitation of the mantra, *OM*, and the relevance it may have in today's world.

As *OM* is considered to be 'the origin' in Hindu philosophy, it is thereby the base of everything. *OM* is seen to permeate so many, if not all aspects of human life, and provides an insight into understanding of states of consciousness, time, nature, cosmos, and God as *Ishvara* or *Brahman*. These aspects will be further explored through the study of Hindu teachings with a special focus on the text of Mandukya Upanishad. As a rich and accessible source of knowledge on the application of ancient wisdom on *OM* in recent times and as a link between Indian and western understanding, texts written by recent religious teachers, *Swamis*, such as Satchidananda, Vivekananda and Yogananda will be highlighted. To these teachers, *OM* is not an abstract principal but a way of understanding and merging with the divine cosmic energy in the universe. The different lineages within the Hindu philosophy have slight variations in their interpretation of *OM* in accordance with their cosmic religious views. This paper will mainly focus on the non-dualist school of Advaita Vedanta² which hold that the divine, the self and cosmos encompasses everything. Everything is *Brahman*. *OM* in dualism, will also be described. Vedanta is a systematic interpretation the Self, God, and Cosmos through the classical teachings of Vedas, the Upanishads, the Brahmasutras, and the Bhagavad Gita.³

¹ Paramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, 13th ed. (California: Self-Realization Fellowship, 2015) p. 177.

² The other schools of Vedanta being *Dvaita* (plurality exists, and that God and Self are separate) and *Visistadvaita* (God and Self distinct but not separate).

³ W.J. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 'Vedanta'

This paper seeks to explore and analyse the link between the mantra *OM*, the Hindu teachings and their understanding of individual and collective consciousness, the cosmos and time. This will concurrently bring in the relevance in a modern western setting. For this purpose, the classic authoritative teachings of Hindu philosophy, the *shastra*; the Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras will be further described and used to form the basis for the philosophy surrounding the sacred symbol and mantra *AUM/OM*.

To describe the link of the philosophy into modern times, texts, and teachings by recently swamis and scholars will be use. The doctoral dissertation by Finnian M.M Gerety⁴ brings an interesting and thorough analysis of the attempt to find the origins of *OM*, and will be used in this paper to explore the academic angles and what the different approaches add to the understanding of *OM*. Furthermore, this will explore the effect the chanting of AUM has on people in a non-Hindu western setting, contemporary, less academic, and classic texts, many with a link to yoga and meditation practices. While this paper relies much on Gerety's research on *OM* from the liturgical and discursive side, other sources are used to approach *OM* from a more "passionate" side. The numinous so to say relying on faith in vibration, emotions, and intention.

The syllable can be written as *OM* or *AUM*. They are written identically in Sanskrit as ॐ⁵ although *AUM* is tri-syllable while *OM* is monosyllable. In this paper, the two will be used interchangeably, using AUM where the tri-syllable has importance for the understanding. Only in a few cases has the Sanskrit text in Devanagari been added; this is solely due to constraint in wordcount. These Sanskrit texts are important as they contain the root words for the translation into *OM*. The Sanskrit words are written in italic for easy recognition. Although a more precise pronunciation will be achieved by using the Sanskrit spelling with diacritics, the spelling without the use of these such as in the writings of Christopher Bartley⁶ is used to facilitate typing and word recognition. Following the lines of Finnian Gerety and Guy L. Beck, Om and Aum have been capitalised to *OM/AUM*. This aims to signify the importance of the word.

2. Sacred Sounds

Sacred sounds are seen in many traditions as a direct link between humanity and the divine⁷. And the utterance of *OM* as a sacred syllable is very much part of these traditions. The sacred sounds may be in the form of prayer, incantations, chants, song, and music. They are instruments for the invocation of spirits, connection to elements of the universe and in some belief systems, to the healing of mind, body, and soul.

Sounds expressed through the intentional passage of air and vibration through the vocal cords can be laden with powerful intention and energy which through the ages have been used in religion, occult sciences, mysticism, shamanism, and many spiritual paths. There is universally, a recognised transformational and creational power of 'the word'. And in many religions a vibrating ontology –

⁴ Finnian Gerety, *This Whole World is OM: Song, Soteriology, and the Emergence of the Sacred Syllable*. (Harvard: Harvard University, 2015)

⁵ The devanagiri styles of Sanskrit writing.

⁶ Christopher Bartley, *Indian Philosophy A-Z*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005)

⁷ Ted Andrews, *Sacred Sounds: Magic & Healing Through Words & Music*. (Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2021) p. 3.

sounding creation. In Judaism and Christianity, the Old Testament says “And God said, let there be light: and there was light”⁸ starting a creation through the word. The New Testament says, “In the beginning was the word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”⁹ Verse 12.5 of the Krishna Yajurveda says “In the beginning was Prajapati (God the Creator), with Him was the word and the Word was truly the Supreme Brahman”¹⁰ Within the religions, which do not believe in the ‘creation’ of the world, such as Buddhism, sacred sounds hold great importance as manifest vibrations of the universe. Buddhism uses mantras and Shamanism healing powers through chants and prayers. In Sufism, the repetition of prayers and divine names are used. In Taoism, sounds and words are used in healing the body, mind, and spirit.¹¹

In many religions, God is heard not seen, relying on the ears as gateways.¹² And as we will see later, the teachings of the Vedas are in the form of *shruti* – that which is heard. In the Hindu philosophy, sacred sound is a primal sound which, according to David Frawley, is “a sound code or vibratory pattern behind the universe itself, embedded in the fabric of existence that holds the intelligence, information and energy forms through which all processes of life operate.”¹³ Prajapati (God the Creator) is the “earlier” form of Brahma (the creator).¹⁴ This sound is called Nada Brahma, and it is regarded as the subtle inner sound, Nada, of God the creator as Brahma. In Nada, ‘na’ stands for *prana* (breath or life force)¹⁵ and ‘da’ stands for *agni* (fire or heat energy) and it is the merging of these two that create sound. Brahma is part of the trinity of supreme deities in the Hindu mythology; Vishnu (the preserver), Shiva (the destroyer) and Brahma (the all-creator), which together form a oneness, and each are aspects of this oneness. Brahma is often depicted as having four heads which symbolises that he is constantly looking towards the four cardinal points of the world. Nada Brahma does not only mean that God, the creator, is sound, but also, and above all, that creation, the cosmos, the world is sound. And that sound is the world.¹⁶ In the Hindu context, the world is viewed as a creative energy which is immortal.¹⁷ Nada has been described as an inner sound current, the celestial music within us, and it thereby the inner power behind mantras.¹⁸ In the Rig Veda, the creator is Prajapati, and his consort is the Goddess Vac, the Goddess of speech or voice (vac) and the feminine aspect of the creation. Goddess Vac is described in more detail in section 5 of this paper. It is through her as a medium that Prajapati’s acts of creation take place.¹⁹ ‘Vac’; speech, is a manifestation of creative power through sound, in a similar way to Shakti as a manifestation of Shiva. In the Vedic²⁰ tradition, ‘Vac’ (speech/voice) is considered to have four phases from the grossest to the subtlest. Starting with manifest, audible speech, *Vaikhari-vac*; then intermediate speech (speech as thought), *Madhyana*; third subtlest is visible speech (the urge to manifest), *Pashyanti* and at the subtlest phase supreme speech, *Para-vac*, which is the inner subtle sound also called Nada.²¹

⁸ The King James Bible, *Book of Genesis 1.3*. < <https://thekingsbible.com/Bible> >

⁹ The King James Bible: *John 1:1*.

¹⁰ Nirmalananda Giri, *Om Yoga, Its Theory and Practice*. Atma Jyoti Press 2006. p. 14.

¹¹ David Frawley, *Mantra Yoga and Primal Sound - Secrets of Seed (Bija) Mantras* (Lotus Press, 2010) p. 21.

¹² Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *The World is Sound Nada Brahma - Music and the Landscape of Consciousness* (Vermont: Destiny Books, 2019) p. 6.

¹³ Frawley, *Mantra Yoga and Primal Sound*, p. 21.

¹⁴ There are other creators within Hinduism; as in Shaivism, where Shiva is seen as the creator.

¹⁵ All life is a manifestation of prana.

Swami Vivekananda, *The Yoga of Knowledge Jnana Yoga*, 9th ed. (Kolkata, Advaita Ashrama, 2022) p. 67.

¹⁶ Berendt, *The World is Sound Nada Brahma*, p. 18.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁸ Frawley, *Mantra Yoga and Primal Sound*, p. 31.

¹⁹ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 128.

²⁰ Vedic meaning that which is related to the Vedas.

²¹ Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition; It's History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice* (Hohm Press 2008) p. 359.

3. Mantras

In Indian tradition, sacred sounds are often recited through mantras, and as we shall see, the utterance of *OM* is deeply connected to mantras. Mantra is derived from the words ‘*manas*’ meaning mind and ‘*tra*’ meaning tool, so “tool for the mind”. A second and similar interpretation of the word mantra is ‘*manana*’ (thinking) and ‘*trana*’ (liberation).²² While the definition of mantra is said to be “*Mananaat traayate iti mantrah*,” meaning that sustained repetition (*mananat*) of that which protects (*trayate*) from all miseries arising from bondage or cycles from birth and death is called mantra.²³ Mantras are said to harmonise the mental field by drawing our consciousness into a state of stillness.²⁴

Mantra has become a common word in the western world, used both for the recital of existing spiritual mantras and as a motivating personal chant. Mantras can stand alone or there may be an element of repetition associated with mantras. This repetition is called *japa* and can be done spoken aloud ‘*vaikhana japa*,’ whispered or hummed ‘*upamsu japa*,’ or silently in the mind ‘*manasika japa*’.²⁵ A *mala*, which resembles a rosary with one hundred and eight beads is often used to keep count of the mantras chanted as the number of repetitions can hold specific intentions and meaning.

Mantras are ‘*upayas*’, meaning that they are “means by which physical energies can be channelled into currents that carry the spirit forward instead of derailing it.”²⁶ These means, *upayas*, are “the three Ms,” mantras, mudras, and mandalas. Mudras are seals or gesture in Sanskrit, used to control and seal energies in the body. They are also symbolic of the inner emotions.²⁷ The best-known hand mudras would be the Indian Namaste greeting or chin mudra hand gesture, which link to *OM* will be described later in this paper. Mandalas are visual diagrams symbolic of a safe spiritual space and are used in rites and as an instrument of meditation in manifesting deities.²⁸

Mantras have been and are still used in varied manners, all converting noise into sound and into a powerful formula. They are often used as a kind of ‘magical’ tool to ward off the undesirable and attract the desirable.²⁹ In the Vedic context, mantras chanted are often sections of the Vedas used in rituals, and single syllable mantras like *OM* are called *bija*, seed mantras. The seeds, *bijas*, should be seen as ‘the small containing the immense.’ The analogy is often described in the following way, “Just as a tiny seed ‘contains’ an enormous tree, so each *bija* ‘contains’ a great reservoir of spiritual energy.”³⁰ The appreciation of the power and immense aspects of seed, *bija*, is significant in understanding the impact of the mantra *OM* and other classic single syllable mantras. As we shall see later it also indicates a central aspect of understanding the Self as Atman/Brahman. As a sound utterance *OM* is seen by some as the seed to all words irrespective of religion.³¹

²² Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, p. 358.

²³ Parthasarathi S.K., *Ancient Science of Mantras – Wisdom of the Sages*. International Journal of Yoga. 2020 Jan-Apr;13(1):84–6. <DOI: 10.4103/ijoy.IJOY_81_19>

²⁴ Frawley, *Mantra Yoga and Primal Sound*, p. 24.

²⁵ Hindu Encyclopedia, <https://vedapurana.org/index>.

²⁶ Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York, HarperCollins 1991) p. 148.

²⁷ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, p. 359.

²⁸ ‘Mandalas’. W.J. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

²⁹ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, p. 52.

³⁰ Richard Rosen, *Yoga FAQ: Almost Everything You Need to Know about Yoga-from Asanas to Yamas*. (Colorado: Shambhala Publications, Inc. 2017) p. 211.

³¹ Ganagarajan Inbaraj and others, *Immediate Effects of OM Chanting on Heart Rate Variability Measures Compared Between Experienced and Inexperienced Yoga Practitioners*. International Journal of Yoga 15(1) (2022): p 52-58.

Mantras are frequently used in healing and balancing practices as according to Frawley,³² mantras contain specific energetics, which depend on three primal factors: sound, life-force, and mental factors. The sound factor is the ‘body’ of the mantra meaning that it contains the different qualities of the vowels and consonants and requires precise pronunciation. The life-force (*prana*) factor of the mantra will depend on how the sound is made in terms of regulating strength, intensity, velocity, and breath, while the mental factor is the ‘mind and heart’ of the mantra. This depends on the intention, thought, emotion and meaning put into the mantra. In section 7 of this paper, the effect of mantra recitation of *OM* will be further explored.

The sacred syllable *OM* has been in active spiritual practice for more than 3000 years.³³ And it is probably the most recognisable and best-known symbol of Indian philosophy and religion worldwide. However, scholars and researchers have not been able to provide a clear explanation of the *OM* in linguistic, historical, and cultural terms. Seen from an Indian philosophy point of view, there is little point in looking for the origin *OM*, as it is seen as being beyond human origin. It is *apauruseya*, meaning that is it uncreated, authorless, and self-validating³⁴. This will, to some extent, hold an element of faith, and western scholars are more likely to see *OM* as a multiform without a single origin and see the understanding and use of *OM* as a process rather than origin.³⁵ Gerety calls *OM*, an ‘unknown known’, saying that “*OM* in its simplicity as a chant holds such a range and scale of meaning that it embodies the whole meaning of existence.”³⁶ In Indian philosophy, *OM* is said to be the sound of the universe, the audible embodiment of ultimate reality and the reverberation that sets the world in motion. “It is the hum of the planet and universe.”³⁷

4. The Importance of *OM*

Finnian Gerety has researched the origin of *OM* and although no clear origin is found, he writes that the relevance, importance and above all sacredness of *OM* is due to three main factors, primacy of sonality, authority and soteriology.³⁸

Sonality should be understood as the primacy of sound, or the sonic aspects and sounding of sacred texts. Sonality as the primary use of *OM* liturgically is recitational. There are variations in volume, pitch, duration, pronunciation, and timbre depending on the texts, the rites and time.³⁹ Sonality should not only be understood as a part of Indian religious rituals, music, and mantra, but closely connected to the Sanskrit language itself. The Sanskrit alphabet consists of fifty-two (52) letters: sixteen (16) vowels and thirty-six (36) consonants, as compared to twenty-six (26) in the English alphabet. The Sanskrit alphabet is closely connected to the physiology of creating sound and is made up of every possible sound that a person can verbally make.⁴⁰ Therefore leaving little space for alterations in the

³² Frawley, *Mantra Yoga and Primal Sound*, p. 37.

³³ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 18.

³⁴ ‘Apauruseya’. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*.

³⁵ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 120.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁷ Bipin Shah, *Mystery and Origin of “Aum/OM” Mantra, often recited during meditation and yoga*, ResearchGate, May 2012, p. 1.

³⁸ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 426.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p.120.

⁴⁰ Alexis Smith, *Resounding in the Human Body as the ‘True Sanskrit’ of Nature: Reading Sound Figures in Novalis’ The Novices of Sais*, *The Journal of Somaesthetics* Volume 5, Number 2 (2019)

pronunciation. The number of syllables and arrangement of words also determine the meter, *chandas*. Sonality is not only important in recitation, it is suggested to be the organising principles of Hindu traditions.⁴¹ This importance of sound and music in religious studies may have been somewhat overlooked as Beck writes.⁴² However, sonality holds such an importance in Indian traditions that it has been recognised as key to understanding *OM*, in philology by Max Müller, in religio-cultural study by Dermot Killingley, in evolutionary study by Frits Staal, in historical linguistics by Joshua Katz and in phenomenology by Rudolf Otto.⁴³

The authority of the Vedas depends mainly on performance during rituals especially with focus on the three-fold wisdom '*trayi vidya*' of the Rig Veda, Sama Veda and Yajur Veda. It is believed that liturgical Brahmin singers of the Samaveda were responsible for transforming the syllable *OM* into a locus for hermeneutic use.⁴⁴ Samaveda means "knowledge of chants."⁴⁵ The Vedas are considered divine and seen as non-human in origin '*apauruseya*' and a source of timeless and infallible knowledge about religion and social duties.⁴⁶ The Vedas are *shruti* 'that which is heard'. The other types of authoritative texts are *smriti* 'that which is remembered'. These are considered less authoritative as they are mediated through human authorship.⁴⁷ The *smritis* include the puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and within this the Bhagavad Gita.

The Vedas first appeared with the Aryan migration into northern India between 1700 and 1000 B.C.⁴⁸ The Vedas are difficult to date as they were orally transmitted, most agree that they date to between 1200 to 500 BCE. Historically and culturally *OM*, as the essence of the Vedas, has a uniting effect by revealing a secrets essence common to all directions of Hinduism.⁴⁹ There are four layers or subdivisions of Vedic works, and *OM* appears across all four.⁵⁰ Though not only as *OM* but also in the forms of *Pranava*, *Udgitha* and *Akshara*. These will be explored in following sections of the paper.

- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| 1 st layer | <i>Samhitas</i> - Samhita means joined together. It is the collection of the mantra based shruti of the Rig-, Sama-, Yajur- and Atharva-Samhitas. |
| 2 nd layer | <i>Brahmanas</i> – meaning prose related to Brahman and seen as explanation to a mantras and ritual. The Brahmanas are divided in to the same 4 parts as the Samhitas. |
| 3 rd layer | <i>Aranyakas</i> - the 'wilderness texts', called so because they were written or studied in the wilderness meaning outside the village grounds. They are closely related to the Brahmanas. |
| 4 th layer | <i>Upanishads</i> – these are also referred to as Vedanta (Veda anta – the texts of the essence or conclusions of the Vedas). There is a vast collection with some considered major and some minor. |

Gerety makes a division into a liturgical *OM* and a discursive *OM* and writes that it was the interplay between these two uses which ascended *OM* to sacred syllable. As noted earlier, *OM* is used

⁴¹ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 22.

⁴² Guy Beck, *Sonic liturgy: Ritual and Music in Hindu Tradition*, 1st ed. (University of South Carolina Press, 2012), p. 4.

⁴³ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 119&120.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 23.

⁴⁵ There is a fourth Veda, Atharva Veda, contains special hymns, incantations and magic charms used by certain priests. This Veda is not part of the trayi-vidya.

⁴⁶ Christopher Bartley, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2019), p. 9.

⁴⁷ 'smriti'. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*.

⁴⁸ 'Vedas'. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*.

⁴⁹ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 427.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

liturgically in mantras and ritual performance as found in the Samhitas. The syllable started being used as a part of rituals where *OM* was seen as the sound of the Sun (Gayatri)⁵¹ and later became a symbol of God (Ishvara) and Brahman (ultimate reality). Rituals in form of worship, offerings and sacrifice are an essential part of Hinduism. They can broadly be divided into two, pujas and yajnas. Yajnas were the most dominant during Vedic times and pujas most dominant post-Vedic times. The Pancha Maha yajnas are sacrifices to living beings, to human beings, to ancestors, to Gods and to Brahman as the ultimate reality. While pujas take many forms and may be worship of a personal God or deity '*Ishta devata*,' the five elements, or for a specific goal or wish. Pujas are performed in front of icons or shrines, yajnas do not require these. *OM* has continued to be used as a spiritual incantation where it is used at the beginning of devotional mantras such as '*OM Namah Shivaya*'. The discursive *OM* is used in theological reflections about ritual, such as those found in the Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads.⁵² More will be written about these in section on '*OM* in the Hindu scriptures'.

The chanting of and contemplation on *OM* serves as a soteriological strategy through the principle of *moksha*, *nirvana* or *kaivalya*, which refer to realising freedom from the circle of death and re-birth (*samskara*). It is believed that by focusing on *OM* at the time of death "a man ascends through the veins of his heart along solar rays to the world of Brahman."⁵³ As will be described in later in this paper the soteriological principal of *OM* holds great importance in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita.

5. The visual Symbol *OM*

The emergence of *OM* as a sacred and spiritual visual symbol as well as the prominence and association with Hinduism arose with the written texts. The *OM* written symbol was not needed during the Vedic period as all was orally transferred. The *OM* symbol was used later in manuscripts and printed editions of Vedic texts especially those using Devanagari script.⁵⁴ The *OM* symbol is a cursive ligature of ओम्, ॐ = अ (a) + उ (u) + chandrabindu (ँ, ण). The Devanagari script was developed and used from the 7th century C.E and reached a mature form around the 11th century C.E. Devanagari literally means scripture of the city of gods; *deva* "gods", *nagari* "script of the city".⁵⁵ According to Gerety, the oldest written texts Indian script is Brahmi and *OM* is also written in other scripts and languages. It is very possible that the earliest representation of the written *OM* was in Chinese texts rather than Indian tantric texts.⁵⁶

The sacred vocable of Sanskrit is sacred as vibrations in the air not as written objects. The written objects are representations for meditations and not in themselves sacred.⁵⁷ Yet today, the visual or graphic sign for *OM* has become an icon, in its own right, symbolising Hinduism, India, yoga, meditation and eastern spirituality.⁵⁸ The symbol of *OM* is often called the '*OM Shanti*' sign in the

⁵¹ Gerety, *The Whole World is OM*, p. 3.

⁵² Ibid. p. 24.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 428.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

⁵⁵ Devanagari'. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*.

⁵⁶ Finnian Gerety, *Writing the Sacred Syllable: The History of OM in Script and Image*, SOAS Centre of Yoga Studies (video), 2020 <<https://youtu.be/iC0Bi9PTzXQ?si=OAJ6JlQp5eJ7B0OC>>

⁵⁷ Griffiths, Paul J., *Nontheistic conceptions of the Divine*. In William J. Wainright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, pp.58-79. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 61.

⁵⁸ Gerety, *Writing the Sacred Syllable: The History of OM in Script and Image*. (video).

western world although there is no direct link between *OM* and peace as *shanti*, instead it might be because it represent a desired state and because the simple mantra of “OM shanti, shanti, shanti” is used in yoga studios and meditation centres on a regularly basis. The *OM* symbol is a shorthand representation of three separate letters *AUM*. This is the only word in the entire language that has a special symbol – another indication of how important it is.⁵⁹

The symbol *OM* in Devanagari script:⁶⁰



The most prevalent “explanation” of the *OM/AUM* symbol is as states.

1. The bottom curve - Wakefulness (*Jagrat*) associated with the ‘A’.
2. The mid curve - Dreaming (*Swapna*) associated with the ‘U’.
3. The upper curve - Deep sleep (*Sushupti*) associated with the ‘M’.
4. The semicircle – *Maya*, illusion
5. The dot, Bindu – Infinite consciousness (*Turliya*) associated with silence.

These states are central in the Mandukya Upanishad and in the non-dualistic Advaita Vedanta philosophy and will be described in depth in this papers section on the Upanishads.

OM may also be written in other scripts than devanagiri.⁶¹



As written above ॐ = ॐ (a) + ॐ (u) + chandrabindu (ँ, ँ).

Yet the right curve variates and no other word in Sanskrit follows this pattern.⁶²

According to Gerety, the importance of the symbol *OM* as a stand-alone and not only part of a ritual took place in the context of tantric ritual culture, which emerged as a new approach to spirituality around the 1st millennium C.E. The tantra philosophy is dedicated to the feminine psycho-cosmic

⁵⁹ Dennis Waite, *A-U-M to Reality* (Winchester: Mantra Books, 2015) p. 13.

⁶⁰ By The Unicode Consortium - Derivative work of Om symbol.svg, Public Domain, <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=54100842>>

⁶¹ Gerety, *Writing the Sacred Syllable* (video).

⁶² Gerety, *Writing the Sacred Syllable* (video).

principle of Shakti⁶³ and to the balancing of forces in nature. The tantric use of yantra in meditating on geometric spiritual drawings is seen to have promoted the use of *OM* as a visual symbol. The *bindu* in the *OM* symbol attracts the eye and makes it useful for meditation as it sees ‘*bija*’ point. The *OM* symbol is a ‘*bija akshara*’: a powerful seed-letter mantra.⁶⁴ Every deity, *devata*, has his or her own *bija-akshara*, though the greatest of these is *OM*. The chandrabindu, ॐ, symbolises a nasal sound and, also the merger of female and masculine energy through Shiva and nada-Shakti.⁶⁵ Shakti is the feminine counterpart to the masculine Shiva. In religious practice, the boundaries between Shaivism, seeing Shiva as the main deity, and Shaktism, seeing Shakti as the main deity, are rather fluid according to Feuerstein⁶⁶.

Tantra practices are found within Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. Although practiced in different ways within these, tantra overall builds on the principle that the universe which we experience is nothing other than divine energy of the godhead manifesting itself in concrete experiences in this world, and that the creative and maintaining energy is channelled within the human microcosm in creative and emancipatory ways.⁶⁷ Although it is believed that Tantra may have existed already in the Vedic times and perhaps even earlier, tantra practices became popular among mainly lower castes and is seen historically as a dialectical and more practical response to the more abstract philosophy of Advaita Vedanta popular among the higher castes.⁶⁸ Both philosophies are advaita (non-dual)⁶⁹ but Advaita Vedanta sees the Self, *atman*, as never to be known as it is not an object, while the focus of tantra is the “integration of the self with the self of bodily existence with a spiritual existence.”⁷⁰

The Goddess Vac, mentioned earlier, is said to abide in the highest heaven as a cosmic cow and it is from the udders of the cosmic cow that inspiration and creativity flow.⁷¹ *Vac* is the feminine quality of creation and is considered to be “the force behind nature which holds all the powers of the cosmic evolution.”⁷² It is a feminine principle while the masculine principle is *prana* (life-force energy). As mentioned earlier, the Goddess Vac is the consort of the creator Prajapati, and it is through *Vac* that the first creation is achieved. The divine voice or speech of *Vac* is closely connected to *Akshara*, a polyvalent imperishable syllable or the great primordial syllable, which is at once irreducible and infinite, the primordial syllable is never exhausted but always flows along. Gerety states that perhaps the most decisive moment in the emergence of *OM* is when it is linked to this great syllable⁷³. When *OM* merges with *Akshara*, a whole range of inherited teachings of the Vedas follow. Including the doctrines on Brahman and Vac.⁷⁴ Goddess Vac gradually merges with the deity Saraswathi in the Vedic texts as speech became more and more connected with Saraswathi, and completely merged

⁶³ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, p. 342.

⁶⁴ Gerety, *Writing the Sacred Syllable* (video).

⁶⁵ Guy Beck, *All Roads Lead to OM: From Ancient Vedic Roots to Hindi, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh Dharma*. (Journal of Vaishnava Studies 28.1:51-67, 2019) p. 53.

⁶⁶ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, p. 342.

⁶⁷ David White. *Tantra in Practice*. Princeton University Press, 2000. JSTOR, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3hh53v>. Accessed 21 Jan. 2024>

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 342.

⁶⁹ The non-dual aspect in tantra lies in the union between the female and male forces in nature.

⁷⁰ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, p. 343.

⁷¹ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 13.

⁷² Frawley, *Mantra Yoga and Primal Sound*, p. 47.

⁷³ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 14.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 136.

with *vac* in sections of the Yajurveda.⁷⁵ In the later Mahabharata, *vac* simply becomes speech as a function of Saraswathi.⁷⁶

Another important meaning of the *OM* symbol is Medha Dakshinamurty Pranavarthaya. Pranavarthaya meaning “of the *Pranava*, the *OM*”. The sage Sri Dakshinamurthy is an aspect of Shiva as a teacher of all types of knowledge and the bestower of knowledge ‘*jnana*’. Dakshinamurti literally translates to “the deity who faces south”, south being the direction of death which represents change, Shiva. The sage Dakshinamurthy is said to be the first teacher of Vedanta.⁷⁷ When one chants *OM*, it emerges from silence and when the chant is completed it emerges back into silence. The origin is silence, conclusion is silence.⁷⁸ The silence refers to Nirguna Ishvara, meaning the featureless (*nir* = without, *gunas* = features or qualities) absolute being which is the essence or the pure consciousness. The sound symbol *OM* is connected to saguna Ishvara, meaning that the symbol is in a tangible form which has *gunas* (qualities). The *gunas* will be described in more detail, later in this paper. The chin mudra meaning “consciousness seal”, is associated with Medha Dakshinamurty Pranavarthaya and provides an insight into the understanding of the Self, the *atman*.



The thumb is *paramatman*, the Supreme Self. The index finger is the *Jiva* (individual/ego/self/sense of self) and in identification with gross, subtle, and causal body. The middle finger is the gross body (*sthula sharira*) or waker, the ring finger the subtle body (*sukshma sharira*) or dreamer, and the little finger, the causal body (*karana sharira*) or the deep sleeper. The 4 fingers depend on the thumb, *paramatman* for strength and ability to do practically everything. The thumb touching the index finger indicates that the three bodies (gross, subtle, causal) are not needed. They are just a costume. The unbroken circle of thumb and index finger recognises that *jiva* and *paramatman* are one, unaffected by the three dependent, *mithya*, states of consciousness.⁸⁰ This state is *turliya* as will be described in the section on Mandukya Upanishad.

Although a later edition to the history of the syllable *OM*, one can in summary say, that “once we have the knowledge, a symbol can convey a world of information – just as with the symbol *OM*.”⁸¹

⁷⁵ Catherine Ludvik, *Sarasvati: Riverine Goddess of Knowledge: From the Manuscript-Carrying Vina-player to the weapon wielding Defender of Dharma* (Leiden: Brill. 2007) p. 53.

⁷⁶ Ludvik, *Sarasvati: Riverine Goddess of Knowledge*, p. 112.

⁷⁷ Waite, *A-U-M: to Reality*, p. 224.

⁷⁸ Nilofer Ji, Online Advaita Vedanta 18 November 2022. (Unpublished)

⁷⁹ Deviant Art <<https://www.deviantart.com/betterbrain/art/Chin-Mudra-213922429>>.

⁸⁰ Waite, *A-U-M: to Reality*, p. 225.

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 224.

6. OM in the Hindu Teachings

As mentioned earlier, the Hindu teachings, *shastras*, can be divided into two main groups, the *smritis* and the *shrutis*. The *shrutis* is ‘that which is heard’ passed down through *rishis* (sages) as revelations. Swami Vivekananda writes that the exact definition of *rishi* is “seer of mantras.”⁸² *Shrutis* are in essence authorless and mainly passed on verbally. The *smritis* are ‘that which is remembered’, these are mediated through authorship⁸³ and generally written down. In the section below, sections of the *shastras* have been selected to show the importance, relevance, and development of *OM*. As we shall see *OM* is represented as *Pranava*, *Akshara*, *Vac* and *Udgitha* in some places. Due to the vast scale of teachings, limitations in the access of translations of material and scope of this paper, only the most important and perhaps well-known *shastras* have been included.

6.1 OM in shruti – ‘That which is heard’.

In Hinduism, the *shruti* is regarded as the highest and only reliable means of knowledge of absolute reality which is beyond human sensory perception and reasoning.⁸⁴ *Shruti* teachings can be divided into *karmakandas* and *jnanakandas*. The *karmakandas* focus on religious duties, rituals, and actions, while *jnanakanda* focus on the philosophical understanding and knowledge.⁸⁵ The Vedas, the Brahmanas along with the Dharma Sutras belong to *karmakandas*, while Aranyakas and Upanishads belong to the *jnanakandas*.

6.1.1 OM in the Vedas, Brahmanas and Dharma Sutras

The *Shruti* include the teachings of the Samhitas listed in section 4 of this paper: Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, Atharva Veda. Although *OM* is not directly mentioned in the Vedas, it is represented through ‘*vac*’ and ‘*akshara*’. Gerety writes that *OM* is the single Vedic term which encapsulates; *Brahman*, *vac* and *akshara*.⁸⁶ In the riddle hymn⁸⁷ 1.164 of the Rig Veda, verse 1.164.41, scholars have found a link between *OM* and the Goddess Vac, representing speech, as the one-footed cow (*eka-padi*) and thousand being her infinite potential.⁸⁸ The syllable counting is part of the previous described Hindu hermeneutic counting system of meters (*padis*).

“The buffalo cow (Vac) bellowed, fashioning seas. She the one-footed, the two-footed, the four-footed. She who has become eight-footed, nine-footed. She of a thousand syllable in the highest heaven.”⁸⁹

⁸² Vivekananda, *The Yoga of Knowledge Jnana Yoga*, p. 19.

⁸³ ‘Smriti’. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*.

⁸⁴ Bartley, *Indian Philosophy A-Z*, p. 146.

⁸⁵ Bowker, John, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)

⁸⁶ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p.126.

⁸⁷ Called riddle hymn because it is structured as a series of riddles, which can be read in multiple ways and therefore also be translated in multiple ways.

⁸⁸ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 143.

⁸⁹ Thompson, George, *The Pursuit of Hidden Tracks in Vedic*. Indo-Iranian Journal, vol. 38, no. 1, 1995, pp. 1–30. JSTOR, p. 5/30.

In the following verse 1.164.42 of the Rig Veda, a link is found to *OM* through *akshara*.⁹⁰ This leads to a perceived link from Vac and Akshara to *OM*. Furthermore, Gerety writes that the *bija* mantra, single syllable, ‘Him’ is mentioned several times in the Rig Veda and also appears to represent ‘*akshara*’, leading to an assumption that ‘*him*’ may have been a kind of ‘proto-*OM*’.⁹¹

Another link to *OM* in the Rig Veda (3.62.10) is through the most powerful and well-known of the Hindu mantras, the Gayatri Mantra. Gayatri means eight-syllables and it is the worship of the sun God, Savitur. The mantra is said to contain all the knowledge and revelations of the Vedas and said to fill the chanter with the potential energy on the cosmos. In the same way as *OM* said to signify the entire Vedas.

Gayatri Mantra:⁹²

om bhūr bhuvah svah
tat savitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhīmahi
dhiyo yo nah pracodayā

The eternal, earth, air, heaven
That glory, that resplendence of the sun
May we contemplate the brilliance of that light
*May the sun inspire our minds*⁹³

The Brahmanas belong to the second layer of Vedic works, where the Vedas are said to be the first layer. The Brahmanas are “explanations of Brahman” and are ‘by Brahmins for Brahmins’⁹⁴ as they contain teachings on how best to conduct rituals for material and spiritual goals. The Brahmanas are considered very difficult to read and perhaps therefore, there are not many translations available.

In the Aitareya Brahmana, appears to be the oldest of the brahmanas⁹⁵ and is one of two brahmanas attached to the Rig Veda, verse 5.32 says:

*“From these gods, all heated up, the three Vedas were born: the Rgveda was born from Agni, the Yajurveda from Vayu and the Samaveda from Aditya. Prajapati heated up these Vedas, and from these Vedas, all heated up, the three pure ones were born: ‘bhur’ was born from the Rgveda, ‘bhuvah’ from the Yajurveda and ‘svah’ from the Samaveda. He heated up these pure ones, and from these pure ones, all heated up, the three sounds a, u, and m – were born. He brought these together as one, so that was Om. That’s why the Hotr utters the pranava with “om-om”. Om is the heavenly world. That one up there who burns is Om”.*⁹⁶

Prajapati is, as stated earlier in this paper, the creator God whose consort is the goddess Vac, speech. With ascetic practice and the creative power of the universe, *OM*, the physical realm of ‘*bhur*’, the life force and mental realm of ‘*bhuvah or bhuvah*’, and the spiritual realm of ‘*svah*’ is born.

Although the Jaiminiya Brahmana is attached to the Samaveda, it is considered to be part of the aranyakas, the wilderness texts or called forest teachings by some⁹⁷. Verse 1.322 says:⁹⁸
“This syllable is that sun up there / asau vā āditya etad akṣaram.”

⁹⁰ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 138.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 141.

⁹² McGonigal, Kelly, *Develop Gratitude with the Gayatri Mantra*, Yoga Journal, 2021 Issue 321, p. 59.

⁹³ Translation by Douglas Brooks.

⁹⁴ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 153.

⁹⁵ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, p. 124.

⁹⁶ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 156.

⁹⁷ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, p. 124.

⁹⁸ Gerety, *This Whole World is OM*, p. 28.

Meaning that when he begins with *OM* (akshara), he places the Sun (Aditya) at the beginning. In other words that *OM* begins a song, just as the sun begins the day. In thereby places *OM* as akshara at the start of mantras. The Jaiminiya Brahmana continues by linking *OM* (akshara) with truth (satya) in verse 1.323. “*This syllable Om is truth*” / “*tad etat satyam akṣaram yad om iti.*”⁹⁹

The ancient laws of Hinduism, the Dharma Sutras state that “since *OM* is the gateway to heaven, and the best means to remove defilements, it should be intoned at the beginning and end of all mantras and rituals.”¹⁰⁰ This has been largely followed and as *OM* is said to mean ‘yes, verily, so be it’, it is a way of energising and affirming what is said after.¹⁰¹

6.1.2 *OM* in the Upanishads

The Upanishads are the concluding portion of the Vedas, and the base for Vedanta philosophy. Vedanta derives from ‘anta’ Veda, meaning end or culmination of the Vedas. There are over 200 Upanishad. Many more are assumed to be lost. Eleven of the Upanishads are considered major (*mukhya*), these are Isha, Kena, Katha, Prashna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Tattiriya, Aiteraya, Chandogya, Brihadaranyaka and Svetasvatara. Some places Svetasvatara is not considered major.

The word Upanishad is derived ‘upa’ (near), ‘ni’ (down) and ‘sad’ (sit), meaning “sitting near to the teacher.”¹⁰² The teacher would convey knowledge, *jnana*, as a means to spiritual freedom. It is this knowledge which still today guides the spiritual journey for many followers of Vedanta, such as Advaita Vedanta. Radhakrishnan writes that “though remote in time from us, the Upanishads are not remote in thought.”¹⁰³ The central themes of the Upanishads are *samsara* (the continual cycle of life and death), *karma* (actions including merits and sins), *Brahman* (Ultimate reality and Supreme being), *Atman* (true nature/Self), and *moksha* (liberation from samsara).¹⁰⁴ Many verses in the Upanishads end with ‘*OM! Shanti, shanti, shanti*’ meaning *OM* peace, peace, peace. Also one of the most used mantras in the yoga studios of the West, to the extent that the *OM* symbol is occasional confused with *OM Shanti*. Shanti, peace, is repeated thrice to symbolise peace in cosmos, peace in close surroundings, and peace within.

The Taittiriya Upanishad is part of the Yajurveda and one of the older major Upanishads. It is best known for its doctrine on the “five sheaths (*koshas*)”¹⁰⁵ of the self. The understanding of the self is seen as a way of getting to the knowledge of Brahman. The technical teaching on the *koshas* is also used in the western world in teachings on yoga and healing. The verses below indicate both the ritual and spiritual importance of *OM*, as the ultimate reality. And shows how *OM* can be equated to Brahman by stating that *OM* is this whole universe. *OM* is chanted at the beginning of rituals and as a sign of compliance. It is chanted for self-knowledge and realisation of Brahman.

⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 28.

¹⁰⁰ Beck: *All Roads Lead to OM*, p. 52.

¹⁰¹ ‘OM’. Monier Williams: *Sanskrit -English Dictionary*. <<http://www.monierwilliams.com>>

¹⁰² Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli & Moore, Charles, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* 12th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) p. 37.

¹⁰³ Radhakrishnan and Moore: *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁴ Bartley, *Indian Philosophy A-Z*, pp.165-166.

¹⁰⁵ The five koshas are: food (*Annamaya*), breath (*Pranamaya*), mind (*Manomaya*), intellect (*Vijnanamaya*) and bliss (*Anandamaya*).

1.8.1 'Om' is Brahman. 'Om' is all this or "this whole world is OM".

1.8.2 Om! – this verily is compliance; and on uttering 'O recite' they begin to recite. With Om they sing Sâmans. Om! Som! With this do they tell the prayers. 'Om!' - thus does the Adhvaryu convey acceptance. 'Om!' - thus assents the Brahma (priest). 'Om!' thus permits the offering of an oblation to Fire. 'Om!' – thus says the Brahmana who is about to recite. "May I obtain Brahman" – thus wishing, Brahman verily does he obtain.¹⁰⁶

The Svetasvatara Upanishad is named after the Sage Svetasvatara who taught it to his disciples. It is one for the later Upanishads and belongs to Krishnajarveda.¹⁰⁷ The Upanishad is not specific to any philosophy, as there are passages which join with the thoughts of Dvaita, Visistadvaita, Advaita and other schools of Vedanta.¹⁰⁸

1.13 "Fire is not perceived in its cause, the firestick, till it is ignited by percussion. The subtle essence of fire, nevertheless, is not absent in the stick; for fire can be obtained from the source, the fire-stick, by striking again (The state of Atman before and after realization) is like that of fire (before and after percussion). By meditating on the Pranava, the Atman is perceived manifestly in the body, (but it was there in a latent state even before realization).¹⁰⁹

1.14 "Making one's own body the lower pieces of wood, and the Pranava the upper piece of wood, and practising churning in the form of meditation, one should realise God as one would find out something hidden".¹¹⁰

OM, as Pranava, is here seen as the stick with which the self, Atman as *purusha* (the spirit or Supreme Being),¹¹¹ is rubbed again to ignite the knowledge of their true eternal nature. The true nature is dormant present, like fire is "hidden" in wood, and needs to be ignited to be realised. Realised as Brahman.

Prasna means questions and in the Prashna Upanishad, the sage Pippalada answers six questions on creation, human perception, and the metaphysical principles in man. It belongs to the Arthaveda and is assumed to be a later Upanishad due to the systematic philosophy used.¹¹² In verse 5.1 Sage Pippalada is asked what one attains by meditating or contemplating on OM until death. Here OM as AUM is important. And is answered:

Verse 5.2. "The syllable 'Om' (AUM) is verily the higher and lower Brahman. Therefore, the knower, by this means, surely reaches either of them".¹¹³

This verse of the Upanishad says that OM is a substitute for Brahman, and that he who meditate will reach one of the two Brahman. The higher Brahman is nirguna Brahman (without attributes) or *purusha* (spirit principle or consciousness) and the lower Brahman, is saguna Brahman or

¹⁰⁶ Alladi Mahadeva Sastry, *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 1903. Wisdom Library

<<https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/the-taittiriya-upanishad/d/doc79783.html>>

¹⁰⁷ Swami Tyagisananda, *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, 3rd ed. (Madras, Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1949). p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 36.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 37.

¹¹¹ 'Purusha'. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*.

¹¹² Radhakrishnan and Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy a*, p. 50.

¹¹³ Sitarama Sastri, S., *Prashna Upanishad with Shankara's commentary*, 1928. Wisdom Library
<<https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/the-taittiriya-upanishad/d/doc79783.html>>

prana/prakriti. *Prakriti* is nature principle, energy, and matter, and *prana* is the active force. The verses 5.3 – 5.7 go on to say that the road towards realisation is such that if one meditates on ‘A’, earthly greatness can be achieved through dedication (*tapas*), abstinence (*brahmacharya*), and faith (*shraddha*). If one meditates on A+U, one with the mind and will reach the world of the moons/sky (nature of dreams) but will not reach liberation, *moksha*, and therefore not end the circle of rebirths, *samsara*. However, if one meditates on the ‘AUM’, he becomes united with the sun (as mentioned earlier the sun was a central object of Hindu worship) and realises Brahman which is a place free of suffering. The Prasna Upanishad therefore holds that *OM* is Brahman and that focusing and meditating on *OM*, can lead to *moksha*.

Closely related to the essence of the above verse from the Prasna Upanishad are verse 7 and 16 of the Amrita-Bindu Upanishad. This is not one of the major Upanishads but considered to be one the most important of the five Bindu Upanishads belonging to the Atharva Veda. As the names says, these are concerned with Bindu, which holds great importance in Hindu philosophy as the latent concentrated power for consciousness, sound, and nature itself.¹¹⁴ The Amrita-Bindu is concerned with “immortal point”, as *amrita bindu* means drop of nectar of immortality¹¹⁵ The Upanishad describes the nature of the mind. Seen as either pure or impure, and the minds attachment to material objects.¹¹⁶ It should be noted that *OM* is represented as *akshara* in the Sanskrit text.

Verse 7: “One should duly practise concentration on Om (first) through the means of its letters, then meditate on Om without regard to its letters. Finally on the realisation with this latter form of meditation on Om, the idea of the non-entity is attained as entity”.

Verse 16: “The Om as Word is (first looked upon as) the Supreme Brahman. After that (word-idea) has vanished, that imperishable Brahman (remains). The wise one should meditate on that imperishable Brahman, if he desires the peace of his soul.”¹¹⁷

The Chandogya Upanishad is one of the oldest and best-known Upanishad. It contains theories on creation such as that of a ‘cosmic golden egg’ (*Hiranyagarbha*), a description of the significance of *OM* and the very famous mantra in verse 6.9.4 “*Tat twam asi*” / “Thou art that”.¹¹⁸ The Upanishad is named after the Vedic chanters known as the chandogas of the Sama Veda.¹¹⁹ *OM* is here represented as *Udgitha*.

Verse 1.1.1 “Om is the closest word to Brahman. Recite this Om as if you are worshipping Brahman. [That is, treat this Om as the symbol of Brahman and concentrate on the idea of their oneness.] How you recite this Om is being explained.”

Verse 1.1.8 “That aksaram (OM) stands for assent. A person says OM whenever he wants to say yes. This OM is the key to progress. He who worship Om as Udgitha (Brahman), knowing it thus (as a fulfiller of all desires), has all his desires fulfilled.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁴ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, p. 312.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 317.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

¹¹⁷ Swami Madhavananda, *Amrita Bindu Upanishad*, Advaita Ashram Kolkatta. Vedanta Spiritual Library, June 2018.
<<https://www.celestel.org/upanishads-krishna-yajur-veda/amrita-bindu-upanishad>>

¹¹⁸ Radhakrishnan and Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 64.

¹¹⁹ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, p. 130.

¹²⁰ Swami Lokeswarananda, *Chandogya Upanishad (English translation)*, Wisdom Library. June 2019.
<<https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/chandogya-upanishad-english>>

This Upanishad uses the words *OM*, *Udgitha* and *Akshara*, to state that the syllable, *OM*, is the most appropriate name for the Divine or transcendental reality that of Brahman.¹²¹

The Mundaka Upanishad is one of the major Upanishads and is written in a poetic form with teachings on spiritual knowledge. It is part of the Atharva Veda. This Upanishad proposes a theory of two kinds of knowledge, a higher '*para*' and a lower '*apara*'.¹²² The aim is to strive towards the higher knowledge and verse 2.2.4 says:

*"The Pranava is the bow, the Atman is the arrow, the Brahman is said to be its mark. It should be hit by one who is self-collected and that which hits becomes, like arrow, one with the mark (Brahman)."*¹²³

In this way, *OM* is the tool for the Self, *Atman*, to reach its aim Brahman. The repetitions of *OM*, represented by *pranava*, is understood to purify the *Atman*, thereby allowing it to realise or hit the mark of Brahman and move from the '*apara*' to the '*para*'. The famous teacher and founder of Advaita Vedanta, Adi Shankaracharya says: "The arrow is the Paramatman, itself conditioned as the *Atman*, having entered the body here, as the sun enters the water, as the witness of all states of consciousness."¹²⁴ These states of consciousness will be analysed in detail below in the Mandukya Upanishad as this is the one Upanishad almost entire dedicated to *OM*.

The Mandukya Upanishad is the shortest of the Upanishads with only 12 verses, however it holds great importance and has had great influence on Indian thought both metaphysically and psychologically.¹²⁵ This is mainly due to its theory on the four states of consciousness. The first verses are on self-inquiry using the states; waker, sleeper, deep sleep and *turliya* for understanding, while the following verses include investigation into *OM*, and how ignorance, *avidya*, can be removed by using the *OM* as a reminder and pointer for the knowledge, *jnana*, learnt in contemplation, *nididhyasana*.¹²⁶ and teachings. Contemplation is part of the three-part method of teaching in Vedanta consisting of *sravana*, listening to the teacher; *manana*, clearing doubts by asking questions and *nididhyasana*, contemplation. There is some discussion as to the Upanishad is part of the Athar Veda or Rig Veda, most suggesting the Athar Veda. Within Advaita Vedanta, the Mandukya Upanishad holds a special position as it is seen as the one Upanishad that alone is sufficient to attain the highest understanding and thereby gain liberation (*moksha*), enlightenment, self-realisation. This is one of the four *purushartha*, legitimate goals or pursuits in human life. These are *kama*; desire or pleasure, *artha*; acquisition of wealth, *dharma*; conduct, duty, morality, and *moksha*; liberation.¹²⁷ Before looking at the verses and the states of consciousness in the Upanishad, a closer look at the Advaita Vedanta may be useful.

The followers of Advaita Vedanta believe that anything that changes cannot be 'real' and that the world is only 'empirical' reality for practical purposes.¹²⁸ Only Brahman/Atman/Consciousness do not change and therefore only they are real. Everything else is unreal or veiled by projections or illusions, *Maya*, into named forms of manifestations of Brahman. This is also called *namarupa* (name and form) and has dependent reality, *mithya*. This means that it is neither real nor unreal. An example

¹²¹ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, p. 130.

¹²² Radhakrishnan and Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 51.

¹²³ S. Sitarama Sastri, *Mundaka Upanishad with Shankara's commentary*, 1905. Wisdom Library
<<https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/mundaka-upanishad-shankara-bhashya/d/doc145113.html>>

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Radhakrishnan and Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 55.

¹²⁶ Waite, *A-U-M: to Reality*, p. 204.

¹²⁷ Bartley, *Indian Philosophy A-Z*, p. 121.

¹²⁸ Waite, *A-U-M: to Reality*, p. 71.

often used in Vedic philosophy is that of the ocean and a wave. The ocean and the wave have no substance of their own. They are dependent on water for existence, they are therefore *mithya*. In the same way, it is believed that we are not our body-mind, in reality we are consciousness. This consciousness is reflected in the mind and leads to the illusion of a separate existence because we identify with the body and mind.

Instead, Advaita Vedanta philosophy says that the Self, Atman, is Ultimate reality, Brahman. It is non-dual as an attribute-less reality called nirguna ('nir' means without and 'guna' means attributes). There is also saguna, meaning with attributes. Saguna is a material manifestation of Brahman. God as Ishvara is a saguna manifestation of Brahman. In other words, Brahman refers to the impersonal aspects of Ishvara. OM as a sound symbol is connected to saguna Ishvara, it is tangible with form. Although the three major schools of Vedanta; Advaita, Dvaita (dualist) and Visistadvaita (qualified dualism) vary in their view on dualism, worship and spiritual practice, the underlying philosophy on the material world being temporary and illusory through *Maya*, and the attempt to move beyond the cycle of rebirth, *samsara*, by decreasing material attachment, is shared.¹²⁹

Advaita Vedanta recognises saguna Ishvara as significant in the path to understanding the true identity. It also recognises that the understanding of non-dualism is difficult to realise, as it is thought that Brahman cannot be understood by reason alone as it cannot be described. Advaita Vedanta argues that for something to be describable, one of five conditions must be present: It must be available for direct perception using at least one of our senses; it must take the form of something which we are already familiar with; it must have describable properties such as colour, smell, weight and more; it must have a function which can be described and/or have a relationship, which can be described, with something we know.¹³⁰ Therefore, Brahman cannot be described. Instead, Brahman is often spoken of in terms of what Brahman is not. This approach is called *neti-neti*,¹³¹ 'not this, not this'. It is a method consisting of progressive withdrawal of attention from aspects of being, leading to the removal of a false sense of identity.¹³² The approach says that whatever one can experience, see, or think, cannot be who we really are, as there would then be a sensing subject witnessing objects whether physical or mental. Anything that can be grasped has a birth and can be negated,¹³³ it is therefore not real. One of the most classic used examples of why there is a misconception about our true identity, is the example of the rope and the snake. Where in dim light, a rope curl up on a floor, is mistaken for a snake. The reaction by the witness is as it was a snake, the snake was real for the witness, only once the dimness is removed, does the true nature as a rope appear.

Advaita Vedanta teachers say that we are subject to self-ignorance in not knowing who we are, and at the same time thinking that we are something which we are not. So, the followers of Advaita Vedanta see the difficulty in realising nirguna Brahman being due to self-conceit, *deha Abhimana*, as to who we really are. They say that we have binding likes and dislikes (*raga-dveshas*) which makes us run towards things and away from things, that we identify with being doers, *kartas*, enjoyers, *bhoktas* and knowers, *jnanis*, while not 'being' any of these. For when the senses are turned outward, we cannot see ourselves. They would say that a mirror would be needed for this, but that the reality

¹²⁹ Beck, Guy L, *Sacred Music and Hindu Religious Experience: From Ancient Roots to the Modern Classical Tradition*, Religions (Basel Switzerland) 10.2, 85-, 2019) p. 113.

¹³⁰ Waite, *A-U-M: to Reality*, p. 57.

¹³¹ First described in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad. Radhakrishnan and Moore, p. 77.

¹³² Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, p. 5.

¹³³ Waite, *A-U-M: to Reality*, p. 145.

of the reflection may easily be distorted. Instead, Advaita Vedanta turns to the scriptures especially the Upanishads, as a ‘mirror’ to see who we truly are or who we are not.

Verse 1: OM! This syllable is this whole world. Its further explanation is: The past, the present, the future. everything is just the word OM. And whatever else that transcends threefold time, that, too, is just the word OM.

*Verse 2: For truly everything here is Brahman; this self is Brahman. This self has four fourths.*¹³⁴

The following verses describe consciousness as the four states of waking, dreaming, deep sleep and the soundless states of bliss (this state is called *turliya* in Advaita Vedanta). The four states are represented through A, U, M plus the nasalised echo of the ‘M’. The first three states are considered to be temporary and only a reflection of our true nature.

*Verse 3: The waking state, outwardly cognitive, having seven limbs¹³⁵, having nineteen mouths¹³⁶, enjoying the gross, the Common-to-all-men, is the first fourths.*¹³⁷

A Waking (jagrat) state:

In the waking state, the conscious mind interacts with the body’s senses and actions. The mind is turned outwards toward the gross world in identification with the body. “We know that we exist but not what we are. Instead, we take ourselves to be a separate person limited by the physical body, which is prone to illnesses and doomed to decay, and by a mind with hopes and fears, inadequate intellect, and poor memory, and so on.”¹³⁸

*Verse 4: The dreaming state, outwardly cognitive, having seven limbs, having nineteen mouths, enjoying the exquisite, the Brilliant, is the second fourth.*¹³⁹

U Dream (svapna) state:

Here, the mind is turned inwards and creates a subtle world made up of memories, fears, and desires. An internal world which while being dreamt will appear as real, we are ignorant of dreaming. “Take the dream ego and dream world for reality.”¹⁴⁰ It is a state of partial ignorance.

*Verse 5. If one asleep desires no desire whatsoever, sees no dream whatsoever, that is deep sleep. The deep - sleep state, unified, just a cognition-mass, consisting of bliss, enjoying bliss, whose mouth is though, the cognitional is the third fourth.*¹⁴¹

M Deep sleep (sushupti) state:

The mind and sense are turned off, and we are not aware. There is no subject, no object, no divisions. However, we still exist. It is not a conscious state; rather, it is state of being conscious of nothing. It is a non-dual reality and thereby total ignorance. There are no errors in this state, as we know neither the world nor the self in this state. There is a temporary bliss of ignorance.

¹³⁴ Radhakrishnan and Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 55.

¹³⁵ These are: head, upper, and lower trunk, two legs and two arms.

Charles Johnston, *Mandukya Upanishad and Commentary* (Lamp of Trismegistus, 2021) p. 17).

¹³⁶ These are: five senses of perception (sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste), five powers of action (elimination, procreation, movement, grasping and speech), five breaths (*prana*, *apana*, *samana*, *udana* and *vyana*) plus the inner organ of mind (*manas*), memory (*chitta*), the personal sense or ego (*ahamkara*) and the intellect (*buddhi*). (Johnston, *Mandukya Up.* p. 17).

¹³⁷ Radhakrishnan and Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 55.

¹³⁸ Waite, *A-U-M: to Reality*, p. 67.

¹³⁹ Radhakrishnan and Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 55.

¹⁴⁰ Waite, *A-U-M: to Reality*, p. 67.

¹⁴¹ Radhakrishnan and Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 56.

Verse 6. This is the lord of all. This is the all-knowing. This is the inner controller. This is the source of all, for this is the origin and the end of beings.

Verse 7. Not inwardly cognitive, not outwardly cognitive, not both-wise cognitive, not a cognitive mass, not cognitive, not non-cognitive, unseen, with which there can be no dealing, ungraspable, having distinctive mark, non-thinkable, that cannot be designated, the essence of the assurance of which is the state of being one with the Self, the cessation of development, tranquil, benign, without a second (a-dvaita) – they think is fourth. He is the Self. He should be discerned.¹⁴²

This fourth state is also called ‘*turliya*,’ the Absolute or ‘*caitanya*’.¹⁴³ Consciousness beyond individuality.¹⁴⁴ Here there is absence of both ignorance and error.¹⁴⁵ It is the silence after the *OM* and another name for Brahman.

The waking and dream state have reality relative to the state; what they do not have is absolute reality. In the two states, the reality depends on the observer, the I. It is *mitya*. “I, the waking person, cannot have absolute reality because “I” will disappear, to be replaced by the dreamer or deep-sleeper, when I go to sleep. I, the ego, also has only relative reality.”¹⁴⁶ In realising that we are not always a waker nor a sleeper nor a deep sleeper, we realise that none of these are our real nature. For real nature is not subject to change. Our real nature cannot be described, it is “ungraspable, invisible, inapprehensible”¹⁴⁷ as noted above on Brahman, instead we can only say what it is not.

Verse 8, 9, 10 and 11 says that *OM* is the elements, and the letters A, U, M for each of waking, dreaming and deep sleep state. While verse 12 says; *The fourth is without an element, with which there can be no dealing, the cessation of development, benign, without second. Thus OM is the Self (Atman) indeed. He who knows this, with his self enters the Self, yea, he who knows this!*¹⁴⁸

In summary, the Upanishads teaches that the understanding of *OM* is the key to understanding the Self, life, the universe, that is to understand everything.

6.2 *OM* in the smṛiti – That which is remembered.

As a contrast to the *shrutis*, the *smritis* cover authored or composed Hindu literature and include the Dharmashastra, Itihasas (the epics), the Puranas, Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra and other texts outside the Vedas and Upanishads. As there is no clear line between *smritis* and *shrutis*, it should be noted that some schools of Hinduism consider their texts as shruti, with the belief that these were communicated directly from the divine while others consider them authored. The teachings of the smṛiti have traditionally been communicated through Brahmin priests but also very much through story tellers and bards, through music and songs.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴² Radhakrishnan and Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 56.

¹⁴³ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, p. 5.

¹⁴⁴ Johnston, *Mandukya Upanishad*, p. 19.

¹⁴⁵ Waite, *A-U-M: to Reality*, p. 67.

¹⁴⁶ Waite, *A-U-M: to Reality*, p. 84.

¹⁴⁷ Johnston, *Mandukya Upanishad*, p. 19.

¹⁴⁸ Radhakrishna, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 56.

¹⁴⁹ Andrews, *Sacred Sounds*, p. 117.

The Dharmashastra contains teachings on right conduct based on the puranas, unlike the dharma sutras which are based on the Vedas. The puranas are very difficult to date, as the texts have been expanded and contracted over time. Many Puranas are on the mythologies of Vishnu, mainly the incarnations, *avatars*, as Rama and Krishna, and Shiva and family including Parvati, Ganesh, Skanda and myths on Devi and Shakti. The Puranas have held great importance, and it is said that most of the major concerns of Hinduism, including prayers, *pujas*, and other rituals as well as popular stories about the gods, originate from the Puranas.¹⁵⁰ The two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are found among *Itihasa*. The Bhagavad Gita (“Song of God”) is a section of the Mahabharata. It can be considered the holy book of Vaishnavism today as it summarises the teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads. According to Radhakrishnan, the Bhagavad Gita contains teachings on metaphysics, ethics, the science of reality, *brahmavidya*, and the art of union with reality, *yogasastra*.¹⁵¹ The Mahabharata and thereby also the Bhagavad Gita are said to be authored by the sage Vyasa. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go further into the story of two rivalling lineages of families in the Mahabharata. It is such an elaborate story and is said to contain all possible conflicts for people on earth. The Bhagavad Gita, although referring to the situations of the Mahabharata, is the story of an upcoming battle, where Arjuna consults his charioteer and cousin Krishna (as an incarnation of Vishnu) on the good and evils.

6.2.1 The Itihasas (epics)

In the Ramayana, the epic with a backdrop of the conflict between the Aryans and the original population of India,¹⁵² told through the story of Rama and Sita, *OM* is identified as Rama. Rama being another incarnation of Vishnu. The yuddha kanda of Ramayana (6-117-20) says: *"You are the sacrificial performance. You are the sacred syllable 'Vashat' (on hearing which the Adhvaryu priest casts the oblation to a deity into the sacrificial fire). You are the mystic syllable 'OM'. You are higher than the highest. People neither know your end nor your origin nor who you are in reality."*¹⁵³

In the Bhagavad Gita (9.17) Krishna says to Arjuna:

*"I am the father of this world, its mother, supporter and grandfather, its object of knowledge, its purifier, the syllable OM, the collection of sacred verses, the collection of chanted hymns, and, indeed, the collection of sacrificial formulas."*¹⁵⁴

Here *OM* is equated with Brahman or for saguna Brahman followers, *OM* is Ishvara or Bhagawan.¹⁵⁵

And in chapter 17 of the Bhagavad Gita:

*Verse 17.23 The traditional threefold designation of Brahman is "om tat sat". with this, the Brahmins, the Vedas, and the sacrifices were ordained in ancient times.*¹⁵⁶

*Verse 17.24 Therefore, the sacrifices, gifts, and austerities mentioned in the precepts and performed by the experts on Brahman, always start with the exclamation 'om.'*¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁰ ‘Puranas’. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*.

¹⁵¹ Radhakrishnan and Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 101.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁵³ Desiraju H. Rao, *Valmiki Ramayana*, November 2009. Sanskrit Documents.
<https://www.valmikiramayana.net/utf8/yuddha/sarga117/yuddha_117_frame.htm>

¹⁵⁴ Lars Fosse, *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: YogaVidya.com, 2007) p. 87.

¹⁵⁵ Both Ishvara and Bhagawan are names for the Lord (God). Bhagawan often used in by followers of Vishnu (Vaishnavism).

¹⁵⁶ Fosse, *Bhagavad Gita*, p. 154.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 154.

The verses highlight the importance of religious rituals starting and ending with *OM*, its ritual importance. “Om Tat Sat” is a classic mantra used to begin and end prayers, rituals, and teachings to awaken and cultivate higher consciousness¹⁵⁸. The mantra means “*OM* that is the truth/ultimate reality” or “*OM* is the sound of Brahman, the ultimate reality.”

6.2.2 The Puranas

According to Motilal Banarsidass, the Vayu purana¹⁵⁹ introduced a new concept of *OM*, expanding it into theistic use in connection *OM* (as *omkara*) with the ‘Trimurthi’.¹⁶⁰ *Trimurthi* means having three forms.¹⁶¹ This opens for *OM* to be a representation of many trinities. In Hinduism, there is only one ultimate reality, Brahman. However, this ultimate reality can be represented in different ways according to religious aspects, philosophy, needs and ambitions or desires. *OM*, although a representation of the ultimate reality and the all-pervading, can be seen as a non-differentiated sound/symbol which gets differentiated into trinities of the *AUM*. The central classic trinity of saguna Brahman, God as form/with attributes, is Brahma (A), Vishnu (U), and Shiva (M)¹⁶². Traditionally, Brahma as creator, Vishnu as preserver and Shiva as destroyer of the universe. Though in Vaishnavism, Vishnu is the central divine force, directing Brahma to create and Shiva to destroy, while in Shaivism Shiva is the central God who has the power to create, preserve and destroy, as depicted in Shiva as Nataraja creating with sound, destroying with fire, and preserving with boons.

The *trimurthi* also represent the principles of the three qualities of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, the *gunas*. Swami Satchidananda writes “that the *OM* vibration that reverberates throughout the universe has three manifestations or *gunas*, those of creation, preservation, and destruction. Each time a man utters a word, he puts into operation one of the three qualities of *AUM*.”¹⁶³ According to the Samkhya system, creation is seen as being made up of three qualities, *rajas* (creation, activity, or passion), *sattva* (preservation, pure thought, and purity) and *tamas* (destruction, darkness, or inertia).¹⁶⁴ Everything is made up of these, it is *pradhana*,¹⁶⁵ the most important and essential part of everything or *mula-prakriti*,¹⁶⁶ the “root nature.”¹⁶⁷ Initially between the creation of a differentiated cosmos, the three *gunas* were in balance, but with the cosmic emergence the balance was upset and the *gunas* appear in different proportions in all parts of “nature” including of bodies, thoughts, feelings.¹⁶⁸ When all three *gunas* are balanced in the Atman, a state of *moksha* can be attained. When the *gunas* are out of balance the Atman will be attached to this physical world through the sense organs and the mind. The *gunas* are present in all living beings and things in the world. There are quite a number of ‘trinities’ associated with *AUM*, in addition to those described earlier, some of these are; meters (*gayatri*, *tristubh*, *jagati*), times of the day (morning, midday, evening), seasons (spring, summer, winter), manifestations of speech (voice (*vac*), mind (*manas*), breath (*prana*)), spheres (*earthly*, *heavenly*,

¹⁵⁸ Bowker, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*.

¹⁵⁹ Chapter 55 verse 33 and chapter 24 verse 50.

¹⁶⁰ Motilal Banarsidass, *The Vayu Purana*. (New Delhi: Shri Jainendra Press, 1960)

¹⁶¹ ‘Trimurthi’. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*.

¹⁶² Alain Daniélou, *The Myths and Gods of India* (Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1991) p. 338.

¹⁶³ Swami Satchidananda, *To Know Your Self*, The essential teachings of Swami Satchidananda, 2nd ed., (New York, Doubleday & Co. Inc 2012) p. 24.

¹⁶⁴ ‘Gunās’. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*.

¹⁶⁵ Translated as: ‘the most important or essential part of anything’ (Common Sanskrit Technical Terms).

¹⁶⁶ In the Advaita Vedanta system, mula-prakriti is seen as maya or illusion.

¹⁶⁷ Bartley, *Indian Philosophy A-Z*, p. 61.

¹⁶⁸ Advaita Vision, *Common Sanskrit Technical Terms*, < <http://www.advaita.org.uk/sanskrit.htm> > p. 11.

intermediary) and ritual fire (at home ‘garhapatya-agni’, of ancestors ‘daksina-agni’, of invocation ‘ahavana-agni.’¹⁶⁹ B.K.S. Iyengar writes that *OM* is composed of the three syllables *AUM*, and that without these syllables no word can begin, resound, or end in any language. The three sounds are universal, the seeds (*bija*) of all words and what hold all speech together.¹⁷⁰ The trinity of *AUM* holds many meanings which in sum gives an understanding of the all-pervading power of the syllable.

“As leaves are held together by a twig. all speech is held together by aum. Aum is the everlasting spirit, a symbol of serenity, divinity, majestic power, omnipotence and universality”.¹⁷¹

6.2.3 Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras

Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, along with the Bhagavad Gita, are likely to be the most studied Hindu texts in the yoga communities of the West. Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras belong to one of six famous Indian schools of thought, *darsanas*, the others being Nyaya, Vaiseika, Samkhya, Purva Mimamsa and Vedanta.¹⁷² The Sutras were written around 200 B.C and contain teachings on the attainment of liberation, *moksha*, through disciplined activity. These disciplined activities included his ‘eight limbs of Yoga’ which are much studied in yoga circles around the world and included *yama* (moral conduct), *niyama* (religious observances), *asana* (right posture), *pranayama* (breath control), *pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses from external objects), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation) and *samadhi* (superconscious experience).¹⁷³ The Yoga Sutras are therefore more practical than metaphysical though they still maintain a theistic element. For Patanjali, yoga is the discrimination between subject and object, the *purusha* (self/spirit) and *prakriti* (nature).¹⁷⁴ In the Yoga Sutras’ *OM* is represented by Pranava.

1.27 ‘tasya vacakah pranavah’ -

“He is represented by the sacred syllable aum, called Pranava.”¹⁷⁵

1.28 ‘taijapah tadarthabhavanam’ -

“The mantra aum (tat) is to be repeated constantly, with feeling, realising its full significance.”¹⁷⁶

Iyengar writes that sound is vibration and that science tells us that it is the source of creation. However, though God is beyond vibration, vibration is the nearest we can get to God as the subtlest form of his creation.¹⁷⁷ Patanjali has a saguna Brahman approach, seeing Brahman in a manifest form as Ishvara and seeing *OM* as a way of reaching Ishvara. Though it is a manifest form, it is still subtle, as a vibration which can be sensed.

1.29 ‘tatah pratyakcetana adhigamah api antaraya abhavah ca’ -

“Meditation on God with the repetition of aum removes obstacles to the mastery of the inner self.”¹⁷⁸

The obstacles and distractions to self-realisation are listed in the verses 1.30 and 1.31. Iyengar divides the obstacles into physical (illness and sluggishness), mental (doubt, pride, idleness, sense of

¹⁶⁹ Daniélou, *The Myths and Gods of India*, p. 340.

¹⁷⁰ B.K.S. Iyengar, *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* 6th ed. (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010) p. 76.

¹⁷¹ Iyengar, *Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, p. 76.

¹⁷² Radhakrishnan and Moore: *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 350.

¹⁷³ Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, p.252-253.

¹⁷⁴ Radhakrishnan and Moore: *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 453.

¹⁷⁵ Iyengar, *Light on Yoga Sutras*, p. 75.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 77.

gratification), intellectual (delusional) and spiritual (lack of perseverance).¹⁷⁹ The distractions are divided into sorrow, despair, tremor of the body and irregular breathing.¹⁸⁰ These obstacles do in some ways resemble those from Buddhism with a focus on *dukkha*, suffering or ignorance. In these three verses of the samadhi pada of the Yoga Sutras, Pranava is God. The samadhi pada is aimed at practitioners who have already reached a level of balance and understand.¹⁸¹ In the next section, the sadhana pada, God is Ishvara, perhaps as this section aims at the spiritual practice of the less trained. In the Yoga Sutras, Ishvara is presented as a metaphysical concept. Ishvara is also seen as the Supreme Being, or Supreme Self. In Advaita Vedanta, Ishvara is a manifest form of Brahman. In Shaivism, Shiva is seen as Ishvara and in Vaishnavism, Vishnu is seen as Ishvara. As Ishvara is a manifest form of Brahman, the schools of Hinduism allow freedom in choice of conceptualisation of Ishvara, and Ishvara can be worshipped as the deity of choice, *Ishta Devata*, or as the formless Brahman.

As seen above *OM* is the sound and object of concentration on the Absolute / ultimate reality whether the ultimate reality is seen as dual or non-dual, and that in Hinduism, *OM* represents both dualism and non-dualism. In dualism, as God, aspects of divine, and as a 'yes' to receiving the blessings of the divine in sacrifice, worship, and prayer. In Advaita Vedanta, *OM* is Brahman, all is Brahman. In most of the other school of philosophy, *OM* is a deity, a God. *OM* as a sacred sound syllable holds significance in other beliefs systems in India. In Jainism *OM* as 'AAAUM' represents *Arihant* (vanquisher of enemies), *Ashiri* (Siddha, one who is accomplished), *Acharya* (highly learned), *Upadhyaya* (teacher) and *Muni* (sadhu, sage)¹⁸²; the five revered personalities/supreme beings (panca-paramesthi or panca namaskara mantra). There is no creator God, instead, liberated souls are venerated as divine beings (*jinās*).¹⁸³ This is in some ways similar to Buddhism, which also reject the creator God and instead believe in the Buddha nature (and consciousness). In Buddhism, *AUM* is rarely used for *OM*, however with the central tradition of chanting, *japa*, in Buddhism, *OM* is greatly used and holds significance as a form of 'praise', as in the well-known Tibetan chant *Om mani padme hum*, translated to 'praise the jewel in the lotus' – a praise of compassion in the form of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.¹⁸⁴ Avalokitesvara is also known as Padmapani in India and is the prototype of the Chinese goddess Kuan-yin and the Japanese Kwannon.¹⁸⁵ *OM* is also used in Sikhism as Onkar in *Ik Onkar* meaning one God.¹⁸⁶ God being the ultimate reality which is beyond human comprehension, and which is only revealed according to Gods will.¹⁸⁷

This shows how *OM* is also used in Indian philosophical traditions which do not accept the Vedas such as Buddhism and Jainism. Together with Sikhism and Hinduism, these faiths are dharmic, meaning that the life in this world is determined by the karma of the being and the cycle of rebirth, *samsara* until liberation is achieved. Although they do not share common belief in what the ultimate aim of liberation is, they show a deep connection to sound, as *OM*, irrespective of doctrine and faith.

¹⁷⁹ Iyengar, *Light on Yoga Sutras*, p. 78.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 78-79.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p.101.

¹⁸² Beck, *All Roads Lead to OM*, p. 62-63.

¹⁸³ Emma Salter and Tim Dowley, "Beliefs." *A Brief Introduction to Jainism and Sikhism*, edited by Christopher Partridge, vol. 5, 1517 Media, 2018, pp. 66–70. JSTOR p. 68.

¹⁸⁴ Damian Keown, *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

¹⁸⁵ Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* 2nd printing (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974) p. 97.

¹⁸⁶ Owen Cole, *Sikhism – An Introduction*. (London: Teach Yourself, 2010) p. 16.

¹⁸⁷ Cole, *Sikhism – An Introduction*. p. 150.

7. Recitation of the mantra OM

According to Swami Satchidananda, “a mantra is not just a word. It’s a sound vibration, mystic in nature, which more or less aligns the whole system and harmonises it. The entire universe is nothing but sound vibrations.”¹⁸⁸ There has been limited research done in sound of the universe, in the effect of chanting, and in sound vibration as a source of healing, however there is growing interest in these fields from the academic sciences and the alternative sciences.

Starting with the effect, the recitation of mantras there are different ways and factors to look at. Frawley divides the three factors described earlier into; sound, life-force and mental, which, although different in division are similar to those of Perry et al.’s three kinds of focus: intention, sound and devotion.¹⁸⁹ Intention is here defined as “that consciousness is directed towards something.” Contemplation on a goal, aspiration, or affirmation. This may be related to a religious/spiritual belief as in the chanting of *OM* but may also be practised to achieve personal non-spiritual goals. A focus on sound may have psychological benefits independent of beliefs and intentions and is likely to increase attention focus, decrease awareness of bodily sensation, encourage slow breathing in vocalisation, thereby activating the parasympathetic nervous system. In Vedic chanting, there is focus on the exact pronunciation of Sanskrit words as each sound holds a specific energy. The mantra *OM/AUM* is short and relatively uncomplicated to chant, while maintaining the value of mental and breath focus. There are sounds related to devotion and spiritual symbols such as objects, deities, and qualities such as wisdom, compassion, strength, abundance, perseverance and more. Mantras such as ‘Om Namah Shivaya’ and ‘Om Mani Padme Hum’ call upon strength and compassion, allowing the chanter to feel a connectedness with something larger and a feeling of surrender.

Chanting is seen to promote self-regulation as sound encourages focus of attention, it provides a focus point for wandering thoughts to return to, discourages elaborate thinking and encourages an attitude of acceptance while chanting.¹⁹⁰ Chanting therefore encourages mindfulness; the vocalisation slows the breath impacting positively on the nervous system. Even when mantras are not vocalised, there can balance the breath and thereby the mind through counting of breath linked to the mantra.¹⁹¹ There is also a social cohesion aspect related to group chanting through synchronization and shared beliefs system.¹⁹² It is also possible that a shared practice, such as yoga or meditation practice with impact the sense of social cohesion at least this is reported by many yoga practitioners.

Altered states of consciousness are also reported during chanting, which include mystical experiences and flow states. Mystical experience is defined as extreme positive alterations of consciousness often occurring in contemplative practices, group rituals and music and dance.¹⁹³ Flow is a state of full emerging and becoming unaware or unconcerned about everything else. In an earlier article by Gemma Perry et al., chanting whether silent or vocal, individual or group is seen to be likely to induce a mystical altered experience through the features of attention, synchrony, rhythm, repetition, and belief.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁸ Swami Satchidananda, *To Know Your Self*, p. 69.

¹⁸⁹ G. Perry and others, *How Chanting Relates to Cognitive Function, Altered States and Quality of Life*, Brain Sciences, 2022, p. 2/22.

¹⁹⁰ Perry and others, *How Chanting Relates to Cognitive Function, Altered States and Quality of life*, p. 14/22.

¹⁹¹ Frawley, *Mantra Yoga and Primal Sound*, p. 115.

¹⁹² Perry and others, *How Chanting Relates to Cognitive Function, Altered States and Quality of life*, p. 16/22.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4/22.

¹⁹⁴ G Perry and others, *Rhythmic Chanting and Mystical States across Traditions*. Brain Sciences. 2021 Jan13;11(1):101 p. 4/21.

There is an increased interest in the effects of sound healing for physical and emotional wellbeing. Gong bath have become very popular and perhaps provide a link to the effects felt by chanting mantras. Frawley writes that, “the utterance of *OM*, consisting of the three letters A, U and M, covers the whole process of articulation. It is like a gong that gradually tapers to a point and merges in silence”.¹⁹⁵ Kumar et al. found in their study suggestion that mental repetition of *OM* result in a reduced physiological alertness, increased sensitivity as well as synchronicity of certain biorhythms¹⁹⁶, and an increased sensitivity to sensory transmission.¹⁹⁷

In a study conducted at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences in Bangalore, it was found that the sensation of vibration experienced during audible chanting of *OM*, deactivated the brain state in several parts of the brain and had results similar to those of vagus nerve (vagal) stimulation treatment.¹⁹⁸ In that, the vibration sensations are transmitted through the auricular branch of the vagus nerve stimulating it in the process. Deb Dana writes that the human middle ear, in the process of evolution, has developed to connect to the world through a rich and varied sound environment and that the autonomic nervous system is wired to hear certain frequencies as sounds of safety and others as alarm signals.¹⁹⁹ fMRI scans show that vibrations during the chanting of *OM* deactivates the prefrontal cortices, deactivation of the amygdala, hippocampus, thalamus and more suggesting that the chanting of *OM* may be successful in the treatment of depression and epilepsy.²⁰⁰ The studies also point towards physiological improvements such as increased awareness, improved concentration, reduced stress level, heart rate, blood pressure and skin resistance.²⁰¹ The study was conducted in India, so there could be a cultural influence on the result. However, even with limited research done on western based participants, there is seems to be a similar effect on western yoga practitioners chanting *OM*. Perry et al. have also done research on chanting across faiths and found that Hindu chanting scores the highest in feelings of oneness, fusion of personal self into a larger whole and experiencing something profoundly sacred and holy.²⁰² Given the cultural and historic significance of chanting this would be expected. Almost all Hindu teachings are chanted even the more accessible sources such as the Bhagavad Gita.

In the western world, there is an increasing interest in the theory that everything has its own vibration this includes atoms, molecules, body organs, our environment, and that all creativity a giant symphony. This is not unlike the thoughts on *Pranava*, *Akshara* and *OM*. Some believe in the vibration of emotions, where lower frequency relates to guilt and fear while higher vibrations relate to feelings of love, joy, and peace, such as in the use of Solfeggio frequencies.

¹⁹⁵ S. Kumar and others: *Meditation on OM: Relevance from ancient texts and contemporary science*, International Journal of Yoga, vol. 3, Jan-Jun 2010., p. 3.

¹⁹⁶ Biorhythms remain a debated field of science, seen by some as pseudo-science.

¹⁹⁷ Kumar et al., *Meditation on OM: Relevance from ancient texts and contemporary science*. p. 4.

¹⁹⁸ Bangalore Kalyani and others, *Neurohemodynamic correlates of ‘OM’ chanting: A pilot functional magnetic resonance imaging study*. International Journal of Yoga 4(1): pp. 3-6, June 2011 p. 1/8.

¹⁹⁹ Deb Dana, *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 2018) p. 150.

²⁰⁰ Inbaraj et al, *Immediate Effects of OM Chanting*.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Perry and others, *Rhythmic Chanting and Mystical States across Traditions*. p. 12/21.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen how *OM*, as one of the most well-known symbols of Hinduism globally, developed, through the tradition of sacred sounds and mantras, from the ancient revelations of *Pranava*, *Akshara*, *Vac*, *Udgitha* and *Nada Brahma* to *OM*. With the emergence of written versions of previously only verbally communicated *shastra* (teachings) and the tantric philosophy, the sound symbol became an easily recognised and unique visual symbol described in the section on visual importance. *OM* gradually moved from the ritual hands of Brahmin priests described in the Vedas to become available to the Hindu practitioners through domestic worship and devotional practices, chanting of sacred texts and the use of mantras which included *OM*. Explored in this paper in the sections on *OM* in the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and Patanjali's Yoga Sutra. *OM* has ritualistically meant 'yes', 'truth' and as a philosophical base means Ultimate Reality, whether in the form of an unmanifest, Brahman, or a manifest, Ishvara, and aspects of the ultimate reality is manifest forms in the trinity of *AUM*. It was shown that one of the most significant of these trinities is the understanding of states of consciousness described in the Mandukya Upanishad, as the waking, dreaming, deep sleep and *turliya* states and the delusion we have about who we truly are, seeing the world and reality through the illusion and veil of *Maya*. The Hindu *shastra* in the smritis and shrutis covers almost all aspects of living, and many of these approaches the subjects with logic, placing emphasis on logic. However, this logic can only lead to belief, not to proof. In Hinduism, the road to faith is by purifying the *jiva* to realise Atman/Brahman. Chanting *OM* is seen as an important tool whether used alone or as a part of longer sacred mantras. The chanting of *OM* is also seen to balance or merges the masculine and feminine aspects (Shiva/Shakti) of the *jiva*.

The use of sacred sound has been an important part of many religious practices. However, none more than Hinduism which is said to have a sonic theology through Sanskrit and ritual practices. The chanting of mantras can lead to altered states of consciousness through intention, sound, and devotion. as explored in the section on recitation of the mantra *OM* in this paper. It is not only seen to have a psychological effect but also physical effects, and perhaps for these reasons *OM* has been adopted and recognised in the western world. This adoption of *OM* may hold a link to a human desire to connect with the vibrations of the cosmos, the eco-systems of the world and with the cells of our bodies. *OM* may the sound and sound symbol that resonate with our inner sound and symbolises the seeking of ancient Asian wisdom and a world looking for harmony and the need to recalibrate the interactions to maintain existence on earth. The philosophical and theological background of *OM* may elude most in the western world, but the vibration and root of music may calm the perceptions, senses, and mind for long enough to experience that place of sound echoed in silence where all is connected and calm. *OM* and Brahman may in this way resonate with a universal calmness and peace, felt even without a worship aspect in the western world.

Perhaps this whole world really is *OM*, '*om itisam sarvam*' from the Taittiriya Upanishad²⁰³, it is possible that there is an innate pursuit of the Infinite or Ultimate Reality irrespective of beliefs and perhaps *OM* is the vibration that through a momentary focus allows for a realisation of the infinite or ultimate reality beyond space, time, mind, and sense '*sat cit ananda*' – 'existence, consciousness, bliss'. Does realisation bypass the senses, probably not yet but leads that way, and Beck may be right in writing that all roads lead to *OM*.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Taittiriya Upanishad verse 8.1.

²⁰⁴ Beck, *All Roads Lead to OM*.

Swami Vivekananda writes that all religions state that “the human mind, at certain moments, transcends not only the limitations of the senses, but also the power of reasoning.”²⁰⁵ Perhaps the understanding of *OM* in the West is best supported by *OM Shanti*, as we can relate to the sense of peace and care through the Christian tradition. It is much harder to understand *OM* as Brahman, the ultimate reality as we cannot use our tools of perceptions and rationality. It requires the breaking down of thought patterns and sensory habits, a process that generally needs the guidance of a teacher whether in the form of *jnana* (knowledge), *bhakti* (devotion), *karma* (action) or *raja* (control). It is possible that in western perception, a truth will need to ‘sound right’ with our senses and intellect. Yet as mentioned earlier the sacred sound of *OM* may in itself have a profound the state of consciousness of all open to the vibration.

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