

The Meaning of the Om Symbol

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Om is a very beautiful, single syllable word. In *Kaṭopaniṣad* (1-2-15) it is said that:

sarve vedā yatpadamāmananti
tapāṃsi sarvāṇi ca yadvadanti
yadicchanto brahmacaryaṃ caranti
tatte padaṃ saṅgraheṇa bravīmyomityetat

All the Vedas talk about that goal, to know which, people take to a life of study and discipline, that I will tell you briefly. That is *Om*.

So, this is something desiring which, people take to studious, contemplative and disciplined life – sacrificing a lot. And what is that? *Om*. You cannot be any briefer.

Linguistic meaning

In Sanskrit, the meaning of *Om* is *avati*, or *rakṣati*. *Rakṣati* means ‘One who protects, sustains’. So that which sustains everything is *Om*. And that which sustains everything is what we have to see as the order. We can go one step further. That order, which is the reality of everything. The order itself is a reality. And so, that which is the essence of the order itself, is *Om*. That means *Om* is the name of the Lord, who pervades your being, who pervades everything in the world in the form of *niyati*, the form of the order that sustains. Let’s see how.

When we say order is behind everything, it is not ‘behind’ anything that is here. It is the very thing as such. This is a cup. What makes it a cup? What is the material of the cup? Why does it appear in this particular form?

¹ Transcribed by Amisha Upadhyaya. Edited by Vikas Tipnis and Sharad Pimplaskar. Published in the 10th Anniversary Souvenir of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, 1996.

Why it doesn't have another form? Why its material, stainless steel, is not subject to rusting? Why other steel is subject to rusting – one which is pig-iron? It is all order. And, this form is retained by the order. It is order that makes a thing as it is. That a chair is a chair, is because of the order. Anything that is here is pervaded by this order. This order is Īśvara. What you see is the object and that you can see is the order. In the object itself there is order. Therefore, you are not getting 'behind' the object to find the order. Today it is steel cup. Tomorrow you can call it a steel cup. Therefore, it is in order. If tomorrow it is not a steel cup, then also it is in order. We see that also. Today we see the form of a flower. Tomorrow we find the flower is gone and there is a fruit. Therefore, that is also order. Order means how things are as they are. Everything there is, is maintained by the order, called *niyati*. That *niyati* is Īśvara, the Lord, and is the meaning of *Om*.

bhūtaṃ bhavad-bhaviṣyad-iti sarvaṃ Omkāra eva

What had happened before, what is now and what will be later
– everything is just *Om*. (Māṇḍukyopaniṣad, 1)

And the teaching here is to connect that meaning to this word. If the meaning is in my head, and when I bring that vision to you, then there is the whole transaction or, communication. That is teaching.

A word or an object, *abhidhānam*, and its meaning, *abhidheyam*, are one and the same. When I ask you to bring a pot, you don't write pot "P – O – T" and bring it to me. The name and the object which is meant by the name are identical in the sense you cannot think of the word without thinking of the meaning. If you don't know the meaning, then it is not a word – it only becomes a group of sounds. Once you know that for this

group of sounds this is the meaning, then without thinking of the meaning, you can not think of the word.

Thus, *Om* is a name of the Lord and what He means, the truth of the Lord. *Om* is not, as they say, the primordial sound. This is all silly. *Om* is the name for the Lord who is everything. When I say the word *Om*, you see the meaning.

Vedic meaning of *Om*

Om is also used as a symbol, what we call a *pratīka*, for everything - this entire universe – because *Om* sustains everything. The entire universe means not only the physical universe, but also the experience there of. That's the meaning Vedas load in this symbol.

Being an oral tradition, Vedas explain *Om* as made up of three parts. These are phonetic parts of that '*Om*' sound and each of those parts are loaded with certain meaning. That is called superimposition, *adhyāsa*. You superimpose a meaning upon those sounds. In *Om*, there is '*a*' there is '*u*', and there is '*m*'. '*A*' is a vowel, '*u*' is a vowel and '*m*' is the consonant. Thus, this '*a*' plus '*u*' plus '*m*' together becomes '*Om*'. '*A*' plus '*u*' becomes '*o*', a diphthong. If you see how the '*a*' and '*u*' is pronounced, as a combination at the *sthāna*, the place where the sound comes from, then you will see that '*a*' plus '*u*' can not be but '*o*'. And with '*m*' ending, it becomes "*Om*".

The letter '*a*' stands for the entire physical world of your experience. The experiencer, the experience and the experienced, all three of them are covered by the sound '*a*'. When you are awake, you are aware of your physical body and this physical world – known and unknown. You are also

aware of the experience of the physical world. At the same time, you are also aware of the experiencer – that is you. All these three you are aware of, are ‘a’.

The letter ‘u’ is the thought world, which is distinctly experienced as other than the physical world. A thought world which is distinctly experienced, as your dream, as your imagination and as abstract or subtle, *Sūkṣma* or subtle is represented by ‘u’. The thought world, the object of the thought world and its experience are the meaning of the sound ‘u’.

Then there is ‘m’. It stands for the experience you have in deep sleep, the unmanifest condition. What was there before and after the creation is the meaning of the sound ‘m’.

Thus, the sleeper and the sleep experience, the dreamer and the dream experience and the waker and the waking experience all these three constitute what we call everything that is here. All these three together represent ‘Om’. *Om* is complete.

We saw what existed before, what exists now and what will exist later is all *Om*. Even all known and unknown that is experienced, the experience and the experiencer, is also *Om*, *vidim aviditam sarvam Omkārah*. That is the Lord, *Bhagavān* or *Īśvara*.

Non-linguistic meaning of *Om*

The whole *jagat*, the manifest world, is seen as one; but severally, we can say it has many forms. Each of these you can look as one thing and if you look at it severally, you find it is a combination of a lot of other things. Each one has a form and for which we give a name. Even this physical body is one, but severally, it has various forms. We have two hands, two legs and

so on. Then, in each part, there are so many cells. The cells are different also. If we take cells, there are many types; liver-cells, brain-cells etc. Then, there are further components of the cell, DNA, etc. Thus, you find that you go on getting new words because there are different forms within each form.

All names and forms are not separate from the Lord. Now, I want to give a name to the Lord; so I can relate to him or, to see the meaning and even to communicate with him. So, what name should I give – a name that includes all forms? When I say ‘pot’, it is not ‘chair’, it is not ‘table’, nor ‘tree’, nor ‘carpet’; ‘pot’ is only pot. Now the Lord is the one who is pot, chair, table, tree, carpet...everything. So, what should we do? We have to recite the whole dictionary! But, it is not enough. You have to do it for every language! Each language, each dialect has its own names and forms. And there are a lot of objects in the world which are not yet known and we keep on inventing new facts for which we discover new names.

When you go to Sanskrit language, there is another problem. Dictionary is an apology for the Sanskrit language. Dictionary in Sanskrit language is not a dictionary at all, because Sanskrit language is full of compounds and, you can make compounds all the time and when you make a compound it is a word that is valid but not in the dictionary. So in Sanskrit, there can not be a complete, comprehensive dictionary. Word possibilities are infinite.

Linguistically, giving a name to the Lord – who is all names and forms – is an impossible task. Therefore, we give up language. Thus, we have another explanation of *Om*, which is not linguistic. Don’t look at it as a word. Look at it as something which is purely phonetic.

All names are nothing but words. All words are nothing but letters, and all letters are nothing but sounds. Letters and alphabets also differ. In English, you have ‘A’ to ‘Z’. In Latin, it starts with ‘Alpha’ and ends with ‘Omega’. In Sanskrit, it goes from ‘a’ to ‘h’. We find that letters are unique to each language. So we go beyond letters. All the individualities of languages are crossed.

Beyond letters, a name becomes a group of sounds. The French, the Arab, the African tribesman, a Sanskrit scholar or a Boston Brahmin; all make some sounds. Especially when I don’t know a language, I hear only sounds. In every language, certain sounds repeat themselves which is the unique characteristic of that language.

Now, if a Frenchman or an Indian or anybody else opens his mouth to make a sound, what will it be? When you open your mouth and make a sound, the sound that is produced is ‘a’. If you close your mouth and make a sound, then the sound is ‘m’. You don’t produce any other sound afterwards. And all the other sounds are in-between ‘a’ and ‘m’ sounds, whether they are consonants or vowels. Therefore, one sound that can represent all the other sound, in a sense round-off all the sounds, you round your lips and make a sound. It will be ‘o’. Now I can combine these three sounds which represent all the sounds; ‘a’ plus ‘o’ plus ‘m’ and make a one word, will become “Om”, the name of the Lord. Once you said “Om”, you have said everything.

Once you know the meaning, “Om” becomes the name of the Lord for you. Now you can call him, invoke him, pray to him. This is why many of the prayers, chants or *mantras* begin with “Om”.