



# *Vedanta Letters*

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*Ohm*



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# A brief note on the sacred syllable



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In Srimad Bhagvadgita, Lord Krishna says, “प्रणवः सर्ववेदेषु” which means—I am the sacred syllable **Om** in all the Vedas (Chapter 7, Verse 8). Thus the syllable Om is regarded by some as the basis of all mantras. Many of the prayers and recital of passages from the Vedas are preceded by the utterance of Om. It is said that the study of the Veda must always be preceded by using the syllable Om, which is considered to be *the door of heaven*. Its utterance at the beginning and end of a lesson on the Veda ensures that the student will retain the knowledge gained. Its utterance also counteracts errors in the performance of a sacrifice, and protects the devotee against misfortune. Its connection with the beginning of all rituals associates it with Lord Ganesa, who is worshipped before any new undertaking.

According to Sanskrit grammar (A) and (U) when connected together coalesce into (O) which when pronounced quickly have the sound of 'O'. "A" is the sound emanating from the base of the throat.. "U" is the sound produced by the impulse rolling forward in the mouth. "M" is the sound produced by closing lips, which gives to the whole a resonant, humming sound. There is no sound beyond these two extremities, i. e. throat and lips. So Om covers the full range of sounds.



It represents the entire phenomenon of sound. The past, present, and future are all included in this sound, and all that exists beyond the three forms of time is also implied in it. Sometimes AUM is said to consist of five sounds: A+U+M+bindu (the point, signifying the anusvara = nasal m, sometimes said to symbolize Sadasiva) + nada (here in the sense of a kind of echo, sometimes said to symbolize Isavara).

The three letters (A-U-M) or constituents of Om signify different things to different people. To some it signifies the gunas where A and U together mean truth and immortality. For others it signifies the three great gods—trimurti, where A represents Brahma, U Vishnu, and M Siva. AUM also stands for the One Being pervading space, time, and all forms.

The sound of Om is said to have emotional effects too subtle to be defined, so that its utterance is regarded as a very personal act. Thus wherever it is uttered, in temple or home, it must not be heard by others. The chant of Om has an extraordinary effect on human beings. It produces harmony, peace, and bliss to one and all. Om brings the individual being in perfect attunement with the eternal being.

The syllable Om is discussed in a number of Upanishads, and it forms the entire subject matter of the *Mandukya Upanishad*. The Mandukya Upanishad belongs to the Atharvaveda and contains twelve verses. It is an exposition of the principle of AUM as consisting of three elements, a, u, m, which refer to the three states of waking, dream, and dreamless sleep. The Supreme Self is manifested in the universe in its gross, subtle and casual aspects. The four states of consciousness—wakefulness, dream, dreamless sleep, and transcendental consciousness are aspects of the Godhead, and the last alone being all inclusive and ultimately real. The Katha and Prasna Upanishads add that meditation on this sacred syllable satisfies every need and finally leads one to liberation.

*Om* is only a mantra by courtesy, and that it becomes a true mantra only when it is formally imparted by a guru to a disciple in accordance with a particular ritual. *Om* is usually referred to as *Pranava*, but occasionally as *Aksara* or *Ekaksara*, and in later times as *Omkara*.

## References for Om:

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2. Radhakrishnan, S. : *The Principal Upanishads*, Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York, USA, 1953.
3. Parthasarthy, A. : *The Symbolism of Hindu Gods and Rituals*, Vedanta Life Institute, Bombay, India, 1983.



## Hymn of Creation from the Rigveda Mandala 10, Sutra 129, Sloka 7

इयं विसृष्टियंत आबभूव यदि वा दधे यदि वा न ।  
यो अस्याध्यक्षः परमे व्योमन् सो अङ्ग वेद यदि वा न वेद ॥

That from which this creation came into being,  
whether It had held it together or It had not,  
He who surveys it in the highest region,  
He truly, knows it, or maybe He does not know!

"Whatever you may fail to guard,  
guard well your tongue; for flawed  
speech unfailingly invokes  
anguish and affliction."

Tirukural Verse 127