

Mundaka

Introduction to the next mantra 2.2.3

If you find it difficult to understand *Brahman* in this manner, then there must be an *upāya*, a method, to make it easy. Like, for instance, if you cannot lift a heavy stone you use a lever. If you cannot do it one way, there is another way of helping you do it. It is called *upāya*. There is an *upāya* for knowing *Brahman*. We have a sound symbol Om that encompasses all the states of experience. We load on it all the worlds that are experienced, and not yet experienced, and understand *Brahman* through Om.

Om can be taken as mantra for simple chanting, invoking *Īśvara's* grace. Like any other *japa*, this chanting also gives you the grace of *Īśvara*. The difference between the chanting of *Om* and any other mantra is this. In any other mantra like '*Om namaśśivāya*' a particular deity is invoked. Om also is the Lord's name, but it is general in nature. Through the chanting of Om you invoke the grace of *Īśvara* in all his aspects. Om itself is a mantra, or it can be part of a mantra.⁷² The difference will be clear with the following example.

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Suppose, you want to use a programme in a computer, you click on a particular icon or a code word and the whole programme opens up. A particular function in the programme is then invoked by clicking a sub-menu. Chanting Om is like opening up a programme that invokes *Īśvara*, the ruler of everything, of every function. Hence Om is included in all the mantras, regardless of whether it is part of the mantra or not. If you are interested only in the *śakti*, the power of the Lord, you chant '*hrīm*'. It means, "I invoke the power in *Īśvara*." It is like the sub-menu in the main programme. Power also implies destruction. Since you want the power which is a blessing, '*śrīm*' is added to '*hrīm*'. '*Śrīm*' is Lord's blessing power called *Lakṣmī*, all that is good. It is another sub-menu. You address *Īśvara* in the form of a particular deity, depending upon what you are interested in. It is very similar to a computer programme.

If you continuously chant Om, you will get *virakti*, dispassion. In chanting Om you are invoking *Īśvara* as the giver of self-knowledge. As a result, you feel like dropping everything and running to the Himalayas. But if you are not ready for it, it is a problem, which is why *sannyāsins* alone are asked to chant Om the whole day, so that they will not run back! One requires a few other things before the 'running away' takes place. When others are not supposed to chant Om, the rule-makers will come and say that women should not chant Om. Previously, when *varṇāśrama-dharma*, a code of conduct based on birth and stages in life was prevalent, women were at home and men left home to become *sannyāsins*. Home became the *āśrama* for the women. It is how the whole thing was conceived.

Whenever you go, you need to understand Om. You can gain that understanding in your current situation itself. There is no need to run away. You can add '*namaśśivāya*' to Om. A renunciate has to keep chanting Om all the time. This is the *tātparyā* of chanting Om. What is this Om? You can look at it in a three-fold way, linguistically, phonetically and scripturally.

The linguistic meaning of Om

One looks at Om as a word with a specific linguistic derivation. In Sanskrit, one traces the derivation of a word from its root. Om is a derived word. It comes from the root '*av, rakṣaṇe*, to protect, to bless.' *Avati, rakṣati* it Om, that which protects or sustains a person is Om.

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To get the meaning of Om in the sense of agency, one adds a suffix, 'man' to the root *av*.⁷³ There is a rule in grammar which says that both the 'a' and 'v', of the root 'av' will be substituted by 'ū' when 'man' is added.⁷⁴ Now we have '*ūman*'. When there is a 'man' suffix, 'ū' takes its *guṇa* form and becomes 'o'-man. Now, '*ṭi-lopa*,' dropping of the last syllable,⁷⁵ takes place. Here, the 'an' in the 'man' drops off. What remains is Om, the protector.

Om is the cause of everything. Om is, therefore, looked upon as *maṅgala-sūcaka*. The very chanting or hearing of Om itself implies *maṅgalam*. As a word, Om means the one which is a source of blessing. One always seeks blessing; the blessing of Om is that it helps one recognise the *vastu*.

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The phonetic meaning of Om

Since creation is non-separate from the Lord, all forms are his forms. Each form has a name; so all names are his names. Now, we have to have a name for the Lord that includes all names in all languages and in all dialects. Every word, consisting of one or more syllables, is only a group of sounds. If one has to transcend all the languages and still have a word that is a name for the Lord, it has to be a group of sounds, it has to be phonetic and, at the same time, meaningful.

Phonetically Om is the symbol to cover all names. It has three phonetic elements, 'a' 'u' and the nasal 'm.' When one opens one's mouth and makes an effortless sound what comes out first is only 'a' as long as one is a human being. It is how the acoustics of the human voice is set. Similarly, when one closes one's mouth and makes a sound, it is 'm'. One cannot make any other sound.

No wonder the first word that an infant discovers is a combination of these two sounds and that word becomes a name for the mother. Almost all languages in India refer to the mother as '*amma*.' 'Ma' is the phonetic name for mother in most of the world's languages. The child's world begins with the basic word '*amma*.'

Every other sound is in between 'a' and 'm' in all languages. Even though in Sanskrit, 'h' is the last letter, we are considering phonetics here, not linguistics. When one rounds one's lips and produces a sound, 'u' comes out. So 'u' stands for all sounds in between 'a' and 'm'. The sound 'a' + 'u' combined becomes phonetically 'o'. With 'm' at the end, we get the sound Om. That is the name for *Īśvara*.

The Vedic meaning of Om

Scriptures present Om as everything.⁷⁶ Everything comes out from Om, everything is sustained by Om and everything goes back to Om. Om is well-known in the *Vedas* as the name for *Brahman* because it covers all names. Once we utter Om, every name and form is covered, and whatever is left after chanting Om is also *Brahman*, that is *satya*.

Chanting of Om

Brahman is non-dually one, and Om is a monosyllable. The letters 'a', 'u' and 'm' are all within *Om*, and even as the three prevail, Om is still one. Therefore, it is incorrect to chant *Om* as and 'a-u-m' distorting and prolonging the sound. The tradition tells us that it is tantamount to coming between husband and wife, causing a separation. Grammarians and the orthodox say that it is wedging yourself between the *mātrās*, and they consider it a *pāpa*. There is an internal sandhi between the letters a and u and so one should not break the vowels and chant 'a-u-m'. *Pluta*, three *mātrās*, the time unit for chanting *Om*. It is chanted in this three-unit length of time with a short gap between chats.

The *sāstra* now gives a contemplative meditation upon Om.

66 अर्चिमद् दीप्तमत् तद्दीप्त्या ह्यादित्यादि दीप्यते इति दीप्तिमद् ब्रह्म । (मुण्डक भाष्यम्)

67 Refer to the mantra 2.2.10.

68 च-शब्दात् स्थूलेभ्योऽपि अतिशयेन स्थूलं पृथिव्यादिभ्यः । (मुण्डक भाष्यम्)

69 वाक् च मनश्च सर्वाणि च करणानि तदन्तश्चैतन्यम् । (मुण्डक भाष्यम्)

70 मनसो मनो यद् वचो ह वाचम् : । (केनोपनिषत् १ ॥२)

71 चैतन्याश्रयो हि प्राणेन्द्रियादि-सर्व-सङ्घातः । (मुण्डक भाष्यम्)

72 In the chanting of '*om namaśśivāya*' where one offers salutation to Lord *Śiva*, om is not an integral part of the mantra. This mantra is called *pañcākṣarī*, because it adds up to five syllables without counting om. In the *gāyatrī-mantra*, which is of 24 syllables, *om* is an integral part of the mantra.

73 अवतेः टि लोपश्च । उणादि सूत्र १ ॥१४२ ॥ मन् इति अनुवर्तते ।

74 धातोरुपधा-वकारयोरूठ् ।

75 The last vowel and what is associated with it is called 'ṭi', the tail.

76 ओमित्येतदक्षरम् इदं सर्वम् । (माण्डूक्योपनिषत् १)

To be continued....