

The sacred syllable Aum

Meaning symbolism and practical relevance

Introduction

*“Aum is the one Eternal Syllable of which all that exists is but the development.
The past, present and the future are all included in this one sound,
and all that exists beyond the forms of time is also implied in the word Aum.”*

Mandukya Upanishad¹

Most people in the world will have come across the symbol Aum one way or another – it has been absorbed into western culture from the east as a symbol of unity, piece and spirituality, has enjoyed high visibility in any New Age related context and has been tattooed onto bodies and chanted throughout yoga classes across the world – often without further explanation of its meaning.

I had also been chanting Aum in yoga classes without much perception of any deeper meaning until I learned more about the characteristics of Sanskrit language generally and the symbol Aum specifically in a lecture in an ashram in India. A was intrigued and also surprised that no yoga teacher had ever provided additional information with the habitual opening or closing chant. Meaning and symbolism of Aum reach into deeply philosophical, esoteric realms widely described in the ancient Sanskrit literature, where concepts for 'normal' people like me can become quite aloof and hard to comprehend. However some aspects of Aum are quite accessible and based in practical application. I'm largely focusing on those in the context of this essay, as I feel they are elements that could be conveyed to everyone in a yoga class or workshop situation.

¹ Mandukya Upanishad, 1, from Ratna Ma Navaratnam, Om Ganesh: the Peace of God, http://www.himalayanacademy.com/resources/books/lg/lg_ch-08.html

Symbolism and origin of Aum

Aum – often referred to as Om – is considered the most sacred syllable in ancient Hindu philosophy. It is believed to be the primordial underlying seed from which all sounds manifest¹, the first sound to originate in the cosmos triggering the creation of the universe, as described in some of many Hindu creation stories. Aum is said to constantly reverberate throughout the universe and its vibration builds the basis for all material objects, all living beings, all languages and scriptures – it is therefore considered the all-connecting sound of the universe.

Sound vibration generally is believed to be the subtlest and highest expression of nature in Hindu philosophy and Aum as nature's 'hum' is considered a symbol of God in the Upanishads and other ancient scriptures conveying concepts of omnipotence and auspiciousness².

The syllable Aum is sometimes referred to as the Udgitha or pranava from the root *nu* 'to praise' and *pra* denoting superiority – so literally a prayer to god³. Pranava can also be understood as derived from the word prana, our life force – a power pervading life through our prana or breath.⁴

The letters A, U, M

“Without the three letters of AUM no words can begin, resound or end – these three sounds are universal, the seed of all words.”⁵

BKS Iyengar

¹ Sri Swami Satchidananda, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, p45

² Nitin Kumar, Om, www.exoticindiaart.com/article/om/

³ BKS Iyengar, Light on Yoga, p28

⁴ Subhamoy Das, Om: Symbol of the Absolute, hinduism.about.com/od/omAum/a/meaningofom.htm

⁵ BKS Iyengar, Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, p76

Aum is made up of three Sanskrit letters aa (A-kara), au (U-kara) and ma (Ma-kara). Just opening the mouth and making a sound produces A – it's the beginning of all sounds, the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet (and many others).

The A emerges from the throat at the root of the tongue. The sound then continues coming forward between the tongue and palate up to the lips to produce U – the mid-point between A and M with the openness of the A still, but shaped by the closing lips.

The M ends on the lips, the mouth closed – the last sound, no sound can be produced afterwards.

Between A and M all sounds are enclosed, all parts of the mouth accessible by Sanskrit pronunciation are touched when chanting Aum, from the back of the throat up to the lips. It is therefore said that all letters, words or mantras that can emanate from the throat are contained within the three letters of the syllable Aum.¹

If repeated with the correct intonation, the sound of Aum resonates not only through the voice box but throughout the whole body. A (aaah) vibrates in the lower and central portions of the torso, U (ouu) vibrates in the chest and throat and M (mmm) resonates in the throat and head. On a subtle level this means that when the three sounds flow into each other correctly, the chanter's prana or energy moves through the roots of all sacred sounds to produce Aum.²

Fourfold meaning

A, U and M have a multitude of meanings both as syllables and as sounds. Beyond that the silence after chanting Aum or the symbol as a whole represents a state beyond or transcendental to the meaning of each individual letter: *“Aum as a whole stands for the*

¹ Sri Swami Satchidananda, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, p45

² Kristine Kaoverii Weber, www.subtleyoga.com/article.php?story=Om

*realization that liberates the human spirit from the confines of body, mind, intellect and ego. By meditating upon Aum the sadhaka becomes a great soul (mahatma)."*¹

The three letters are said to represent the 3 states of consciousness. A is the waking, conscious state. It stands for the physical world perceived with our sense organs, the gross aspect of our being, our body, the material world, anything that has form and shape. U is the subconscious, dream state. Here the consciousness of the individual is turned inwards, an 'in between' state where *"the compound of the consciousness of waking life [is] shaped by the unconsciousness of sleep."*² U is the thought world, which is distinctly experienced as other than the physical world – imagination, the abstract or subtle world, formless or shapeless.³ M is the unconscious, dreamless deep sleep state, neither shape nor shapeless.

The symbol as a whole represents the spiritually awakened state, which transcends the previous three – a soundless silence symbolizing anything beyond perception possible through our sense organs, transcending any material observation. The vibration or sound that is there even before the A and after the M, that is heard when all other sounds cease⁴ – a quieting down of all the differentiated manifestations, a peaceful-blissful state.⁵ This fourth state which combines and transcends all states is often described as the state of Samadhi.⁶

A, U, M also symbolize the three principles of existence represented by the three main Hindu gods – Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva (and with that the full spectrum of life – creating, sustaining and dissolving) and the silence beyond is the underlying reality. The 3 letters

¹ BKS Iyengar, Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, p76

² Nitin Kumar, Om, www.exoticindiaart.com/article/om/

³ Swami Dayananda Saraswati, The Meaning of the Om Symbol

⁴ Sri Swami Satchidananda, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, p45

⁵ Nitin Kumar, Om, www.exoticindiaart.com/article/om/

⁶ BKS Iyengar, Light on Yoga, p29

represent the realms of time – the past, present and future and the three gunas or qualities: sattva – harmony or clarity, rajas – passion, dynamism, and tamas – ignorance or inertia.

These are just a few symbolic meanings for A, U, M and the silence beyond. There are many more interpretations beyond the scope of this essay.

Symbolic meaning of the glyph

Aum can be written in different scripts depending on region and language. The most well known glyph is from the Devanagari alphabet, which is used to write Sanskrit and on which many Indian languages today still base their script.



The glyph is composed of a main element of a shape resembling a three with a circular swirl coming out of its centre to the right. This main element is the direct representation of the three syllables A, U, M and represents the same triad of meanings as described above. The main element is the largest in size, signifying that this is the most common state of the human consciousness.

However the written symbol contains two additional aspects centred on top of the main element: a crescent moon shape called *bindu* – from Sanskrit ‘point’ – and a dot called *raif*, which is the visual representation of the silence after chanting Aum.

The crescent shape of the bindu joins the main shape and the raif together representing the transition from one to the other achieved through spiritual practice.¹ It is also said to be a separation and symbol for maya – the illusion that prevents us from the realization

¹ Kristine Kaoverii Weber, www.subtleyoga.com/article.php?story=Om

of the highest state of bliss (represented by the dot).¹ The shape of the bindu does not touch the dot. This means that this highest state is not affected by maya.²

While the whole symbol represents the expressed universe, the raif symbolises the spiritual realm or unmanifest universe – the transcended state or creative, expressive energy.³ It implies a coming to rest of all differentiated, relative existence, an utterly quiet, peaceful and blissful state. This Absolute (non-relative) state illuminates the other three states.⁴

While I find these subtle concepts quite hard to comprehend, to me they have some inherent beauty sparking off the imagination and allowing some grasp of the concept.

Aum and sound – the vibrational energy

“Everything in creation has its own vibrational frequency and mantra, but the combination of the whole universal and vibrational frequencies pulsates to the rhythm of Aum. There is no greater mantra to repeat.”

Swami Muktibodhananda⁵

Sound in Sanskrit

Sanskrit is a phonetic language where the pronunciation of each letter and word creates a vibration in specific areas in the mouth and body. The vibration of the name of an object is also directly connected with its form. In other words it could be said that the form of an object is represented by its sound or vibration – the meaning of something is inherent in its sound. Understandably getting the pronunciation right is very important in this respect.

¹ Nitin Kumar, Om, www.exoticindiaart.com/article/om/

² Nitin Kumar, Om, www.exoticindiaart.com/article/om/

³ Swami Nishchalananda Saraswati, The Mantra Om - Symbol of Primordial Vibration

⁴ Nitin Kumar, Om, www.exoticindiaart.com/article/om/

⁵ Swami Muktibodhananda, Hatha Yoga Pradipika, p65

Sanskrit is said to put into human sound the language of the Gods manifesting from the divine word Aum, which contains within itself all sounds.¹ This is reflected in the concept of Nada yoga which describes that the entire universe is a system of sound principles and sound as vibration is at the source of all creation.² Everything in nature vibrates on an atomic level and sound is seen as the basis of all of this. According to Hindu philosophy god is beyond vibration, but as vibration is the most fundamental form of his creation, it's the nearest we can get to him in the physical world, so people use sound – chanting mantras for example – to connect with god.³

Aum and the subtle body

“Speech and breath are joined together in the Syllable Om. Verily, whenever the pair come together, they fulfil each other's desire. He who knowing this thus, meditates on the Syllable, becomes, verily, a fulfiller of desires.”

Chandogya Upanishad⁴

On a subtle level according to yogic tradition sound is associated with the element ether. Contrary to all other elements which only have one aspect ether has two – speaking and hearing. Ether has the capacity to both generate and enable to hear sound.

As well as external or gross sounds there are also subtle sounds in our body – infinite sound vibrations in the different layers of our consciousness,⁵ described as sheaths or layers of the subtle body in the scriptures. Anandamaya kosha – the body of bliss and highest sheath – is the seat of sound or speech.⁶ Sound is therefore considered the direct access point to bring our awareness to the inmost level of our being. The energetic

¹ Dr. David Frawley, Sanskrit, the Language of the Vedas

² Swami Satyananda Saraswati, Dynamics of Yoga, p82

³ BKS Iyengar, Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, p75

⁴ Chandogya Upanishad, 1.1.6, 7

⁵ Swami Satyananda Saraswati, Dynamics of Yoga, p82

⁶ Swami Nirmalananda Giri, Om Yoga – Its theory and practice, www.atmajyoti.org/me_om_yoga_book_11.asp

response triggered through the intonation of Aum as the essence or root of all this sound provides access to these levels of consciousness in the subtle body.¹

In the chakra system Aum is connected to ajna chakra – the chakra of the mind, the centre of wisdom and intuition – representing a higher level of awareness.² It is through this chakra that the disciple receives guidance from his guru and from the divine or higher self.³

Mantra and Japa

A mantra is a syllable, word or group of words that when chanted is considered to have special transformational power, cleaning the mind of impurities, purifying the nadis (the subtle energy channels in the body) and enabling meditation by calming the restless mind and focusing it on a single point.

The word mantra consists of the root *man* “to think” and the suffix *tra* which denotes a tool or instrument, literally 'instrument of thought' or more loosely translated ‘that which liberates by contemplation’.

Mantras are believed to receive their power through the way vibrations are created in the subtle body through the chanting of Sanskrit syllables. This is said to work particularly well with *bija* 'seed' mantras like Aum.⁴ These seed syllables are described as eternal, conscious, living sounds. They are the roots of the power of speech and express the structure of consciousness.⁵ As well as being a seed syllable, Aum is also

¹ Swami Nirmalananda Giri, Om Yoga – Its theory and practice, www.atmajyoti.org/me_om_yoga_book_11.asp

² Swami Satyananda Saraswati, Kundalini Tantra, p132

³ Swami Satyananda Saraswati, Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha, p519

⁴ Swami Muktibodhananda, Hatha Yoga Pradipika, p600f

⁵ Layne Redmond, Chanting The Chakras, The Roots of Awakening Article 6, www.dwij.org/forum/cerritomni/r6_layne.html

the most fundamentally basic and powerful mantra and therefore appears at the beginning and end of Hindu prayers. It is known as the source of all mantras.

Not every sound is considered a mantra. Hindu mythology describes that a mantra has been realized or heard by an enlightened seer and that every mantra has a secret power that unlocks the energy residing in it.¹

The repetition of a mantra is called *japa* 'prayer'. Japa focuses the mind inwards and can calm down thought movements and induce heightened states of awareness.² Japa is common throughout religions and often garlands or prayer beads – like Buddhist malas or Christian rosaries – are used to provide a tangible support for focusing the mind on the practice of japa.

Chanting Aum

The intonation of Aum should be balanced – beginning, middle and end should be of the same duration.³ Then chanting Aum sets up a vibration in the whole body, originating at the navel area, travelling down to muladhara chakra and then all the way up along the spine through all chakras, resonating in the head and 'evaporating' out through the crown of the head - sahasrara chakra.⁴

I heard this description first from a teacher in an ashram in India and it really changed my perception of chanting Aum in a yoga class. I didn't think much about it before, probably just associated some higher meaning with it that I didn't understand or know of. I wasn't aware of – or didn't pay attention to – any vibration in my mouth let alone in my body when chanting. This explanation was certainly an esoteric concept for my personal beliefs – as it might be for many western yoga students – but it got me

¹ Swami Satyasangananda Saraswati, Sri Vijnana Bhairava Tantra, p49

² Swami Satyasangananda Saraswati, Sri Vijnana Bhairava Tantra, p296

³ Swami Satyasangananda Saraswati, Sri Vijnana Bhairava Tantra, p191

⁴ Lecture by a teacher at Sivananda ashram, Kerala

fascinated in the phonetic aspects of Sanskrit language generally and the syllable Aum in particular. I couldn't particularly feel the sound travelling up my spine and certainly not through the chakras, but I could *imagine* what I was supposed to feel. To me this made the subtle perception more accessible and I could appreciate the underlying concept.

Scientific interpretations of Aum

Some believe that there is a direct connection between the way Aum is assumed to work on a vibrational or energetic level and scientific concepts such as quantum mechanics and string theory. Traditional physics describes matter as consisting of particles (e.g. atoms) that are in constant motion or vibration and consequently everything in nature is in constant flow and change, and ultimately an expression of energy.^{1,2}

Quantum physics explains that it is impossible to distinguish clearly between particles and waves (vibration) or energy and matter.³ String theory takes this concept further and on a very simplified level holds that tiny strings vibrate all throughout the universe. They take various shapes and are assumed to exist beyond time and space.⁴

It is easy to see, why this particle-wave, energy-matter dualism, this 'humming, vibrating universe' is often related to the concept of Aum as the basis of all creation, the primordial vibration and underlying energy and the humming sound of the universe.⁵

Although I can understand how those connections arise, I personally find them to be a misrepresentation of science and philosophy alike and would question, whether there is actually any benefit or necessity in associating scientific facts with philosophical or

¹ Swami Nishchalananda Saraswati, The Mantra Om - Symbol of Primordial Vibration

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass%E2%80%93energy_equivalence

³ Lara Baumann, <http://www.yoga-abode.com/node/129>

⁴ http://www.yogalesson.com/basic_info/quantum.html

⁵ http://www.yogalesson.com/basic_info/quantum.html

spiritual concepts in such a way. I believe they exist very well next to each other, as what they are, rather than distorting them both in the process of mixing them up.

Aum in other philosophies

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Amen."

Bible St. John 1:1

Aum is widely mentioned and discussed in the Upanishads, the yoga sutras and other Vedic scriptures. Most focus on its all-encompassing fundamental meaning that's beyond anything worldly and assumes god-like characteristics. It is beyond the scope of this essay to go into detailed use of Aum in the scriptures, so below I just want to briefly summarize how the significance of Aum transferred to other traditions beyond ancient Hindu philosophy.

Many other religions are assumed to have integrated the original reverberations of the syllable Aum in slightly varied expressions. Aum is an integral part of the philosophies, rituals, meditations and chants in Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism using the same connotations and symbolism.¹

The ancient Egyptians might have known of Aum as 'Amen' or 'Amun'. Amen or Amen-Ra was a primordial creation deity, a supreme god considered the creator and ruler of the other gods and existing without beginning or end. Possibly, Aum was deified as Amen.² This ties in with Aum as primordial energy and source of everything.

¹ Sri Swami Satchidananda, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, p42-49

² Sri Swami Satchidananda, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, p42-49

Indian mystical thinking influenced Judaism in many ways. In this process, Aum might have become Amen and, as such, was later incorporated into Christianity. Amen is said to mean 'so be it', though this may be a later interpretation.¹

Aum as the initial sound vibration, the starting point of creation that brought into existence the whole universe is a corresponding concept to the Christian 'in the beginning was the word' of the bible.

A few centuries later the Christian 'Amen' was adopted into Islam as Amin or Alm.²

This 'adaptation' of Aum in other philosophies doesn't necessarily have all the same connotations as vibrational energy and the subtle meaning connected to it might be a different one. Fundamental symbolism and mythological meaning however are similar.

Integration into a yoga class

Aum is often chanted in the beginning and end of a yoga class – in the end often combined with the mantra for peace, three repetitions of *shanti*. Personally I think it can help students to settle in, clear their mind of whatever happened previously, it unites the group, marks a starting point for something new and sets the scene for asana practice. In my experience it is often chanted without much preceding explanation or any more information by the teacher. Although I wouldn't dive deeply into the philosophical meaning of Aum I believe that there are certain aspects that can be easily conveyed in class for example the explanation about vibration in the voice box or the subtle concept that the sound emanates from the navel and travels up to the crown of the head along the spine (as described above).

The syllables of Aum can be integrated into class to bring focus to a particular area of the body in certain asanas. Chanting the individual syllables of Aum creates a resonance

¹ Sri Swami Satchidananda, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, p42-49

² Swami Nishchalananda Saraswati, The Mantra Om - Symbol of Primordial Vibration

in different areas of the body. The A resonates in the abdomen, from the waist down. It has a grounding aspect, focusing on foundation and on a subtle level the downward moving energy apana. Standing postures with a strong grounding effect like asvatanasana (horse) could be suitable asanas to underline this effect and feel the sound resonate in the abdominal area while chanting A.

U resonates in the chest area from the waist to the throat. Personally I find shalabasana (locust) with the hands interlaced behind the back a good asana to feel the resonance in the heart area. Ustrasana (camel), anahatasana (melting heart) or other backbends might also be suitable, but it could be harder to chant in those postures.

Chanting M sets up a vibration from the throat to the top of the head. Matsyasana (fish) or shalabasana with the chin on floor could be suitable asanas to feel the resonance of M.

It could also be worth exploring one asana and shifting the awareness and focus through the body. For example in setu bandhasana (bridge) A could be chanted with focus on grounding through the legs, feet and shoulders, U with focus on the opening in the heart and finally M concentrating on the throat and neck.

I realise that those might not be the easiest concepts to explore and feel. We are often asked to feel things in a yoga class, without maybe having achieved yet a subtle enough awareness of our body and mind, but personally I think even if a student can't *feel* anything, just imaging a feeling will help to focus awareness on the particular area of the body and therefore support the practice in itself.

Another option to bring Aum to life – maybe more suitable for longer classes or workshops – is to create a continuously looping intonation of Aum in the group, where everyone keeps chanting Aum in their own pace and the sounds and vibrations of the group start to merge together and become one. I've experienced that this can create a very special energy and beautiful atmosphere that can be felt by most people even without much interest in the subtle aspects of mantras and the like.

Conclusion

I feel that although the symbolism and underlying philosophy of Aum reach into deeply spiritual realms which don't fit into the space or are relevant for the audience of a yoga class, Aum can be brought into practice and made accessible relatively easily. It can be applied as a relevant theme in meditation, chanting and integrated into a physical asana practice.

I think it is interesting and valuable to provide pieces of additional information about the sacred syllable Aum to students in a yoga class to give an idea or awareness of the beauty and depth of some of the philosophical concepts relevant to yoga. And maybe ultimately Aum can be seen as a symbol for a connecting spirit of everyone and everything.

Word count: 3,346

Bibliography

- Das, S., *Om: Symbol of the Absolute*,
hinduism.about.com/od/omAum/a/meaningofom.htm
- Dayananda Saraswati, Swami, *The Meaning of the Om Symbol*
- Frawley, D., *Sanskrit, the Language of the Vedas*
- Iyengar, BKS, *Light on Pranayama*, Harper Collins, India, 2008
- BKS Iyengar, *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, Harper Collins, London, 2008
- Iyengar, BKS, *Light on Yoga*, Thorsons, London, 2001
- Kaoverii Weber, K., www.subtleyoga.com/article.php?story=Om
- Kumar, N., *Om*, www.exoticindiaart.com/article/om/
- Muktibodhananda, Swami, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, Bihar School of Yoga, 2006
- Navaratnam, R., *Om Ganesh: the Peace of God*,
www.himalayanacademy.com/resources/books/lg/lg_ch-08.html
- Nirmalananda Giri, Swami, *Om Yoga-Its Theory and Practice*, www.atmajyoti.org/
- Niranananda Saraswati, Swami, *Prana Pranayama Prana Vidya*, Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar, 2005
- Nishchalananda Saraswati, Swami, *The Mantra Om - Symbol of Primordial Vibration*,
www.mandalayoga.net/index-what-en-mantra_om.html
- Redmond, L., *Chanting The Chakras, The Roots of Awakening Article 6*,
www.dwij.org/forum/cerritomni/r6_layne.html
- Satchidanana, Sri Swami, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, Integral Yoga Publications, Buckingham, 1990
- Satyananda Saraswati, Swami, *Dynamics of Yoga*, Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar, 2007
- Satyananda Saraswati, Swami, *Asana Pranayama, Mudra, Bandha*, Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar, 2006
- Satyananda Saraswati, Swami, *Kundalini Tantra*, Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar, 2007
- Satyasangananda Saraswati, Swami, *Sri Vijnana Bhairava Tantram*, Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar, 2006
- Sivananda, Sri Swami, *Yoga Asana*, A Divine Life Society Publication, 2004
- Self-realization fellowship glossary*, www.yogananda-srf.org/tmp/about.aspx?id=76
- Wikipedia, www.wikipedia.org
- Wood, A., 'Om' – three states and one reality, *An interpretation of the Mandukya Upanishad*, www.advaita.org.uk/discourses/downloads/om.pdf