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The yoga and the sacred word Om (Aum)

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Abstract

There are some erroneous ideas and prejudices about the mystic syllable Om, its origin and meaning. Every recitation of the sacred Vedic texts begins with the utterance "Om". The sacred syllable or more precisely and appropriately sacred Word Om (Aum) is an extremely important ingredient of the yoga practice too, to the extent that we are free to say it is in fact the ultimate goal of yoga. This explanation may seem somewhat surprising to those pursuing the path of yoga. Therefore, there arise the necessity of explaining in details why is this so, and what actually is the true meaning of the word Om.

Keywords: Om, Yajur-Veda, Upanisads, Knowledge, Um, Aumuo

Introduction

The syllable Om is used in yoga practice to count breaths and holding of breaths in prāṇāyāma viz. breathing exercises. It is also used as the basic mantra for meditative purposes. We may say it is much more than that, so it is necessary for every yoga adept to understand the true meaning of the word Om. However, there is a misunderstanding about its real meaning. Some researchers even claim (Gurjar, Ladhake, Thakare, 2009) that "Om does NOT have a translation" which is a nonsense raised by those who do not understand its etymology, semantics and proper meaning.

The First Om

The sacred word appears for the first time in the Vājasaneyi White Yajur-Veda, named after its author Yājñavalkya Vājasaneyi, 2.13, applied during the performance of sacrifice:

Om pra tiṣṭha, viz. "Om (used affirmatively, viz. yes, so be it) thou step forward!"

It also appears by the same author in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, 1.4.1.30:

aśvo na devavāhana iti. aśvo ha vā eṣa bhūtvā devebhyo yajñam vahati yad vai nety ṛci Om iti tad tasmād āha aśvo na devavāhana iti.

"Agni (Fire) as a horse that bears the Gods, for having become a horse he does indeed carry the sacrifice to the Gods, the Sanskrit word 'na' in this verse has the meaning of 'Om', viz. 'as/like', hence he says 'As a horse that bears the Gods'."

In the above, the syllable Om seemed to appear only as a sacrificial invocation. But in the Upaniṣads, there are more speculation arisen around it.

Om in the Upaniṣads

Katha Upaniṣad 1.2.15-16. explains:

15. sarve veda yat padam āmananti...bravīmi Om ity etat, viz. "The goal that all the Vedas declare... I shall tell you, it is this Om!"

16. etaddhyeākṣaram brahma, viz. "This syllable is indeed Brahman!"

Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 1.16, equates Om with Self-knowledge and with Brahman,

16...ātmā vidyā...tad brahma..., viz. "Om is Self-knowledge...it is Brahman..."

Om in the Yogasūtras

Yogasūtra 1.27, says: *tasya* (viz. *īśvarasya*) *vācakah praṇavah*, viz. "His (viz. God's) word is the Om!"

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Etymology

The word Om consists of three sounds: *A + U + M*, the vowels *a* and *u* being smoothed into the monophthong *O*, with added nasal at the end. The initial vowel *ā* authentically indicates direction “towards or pertaining to” as in Sanskrit words *ā-ghṛṇi* “towards or pertaining to heat”, and *āghṛṇi-vasu* “rich with heat”, but also without the prefix *ā-* as in *ghṛṇi-vat*, viz. “heaving or possessing heat” ! Therefore, the initial *ā*-prefix is not really essential or necessary for the expressing its true meaning, and it is indeed absent in its related Slavic variant of the word (see below). The second vowel in a sequence, viz. *u*, being the most close back rounded (labialized) sound featuring lowest (deepest) frequency formants among vowels, it indicates “psychological depth or innerness of psychic processes”, while the final nasal *-m* emphasizes “the mental process of thinking” as with Sanskrit root *man* “to think” in *mantra* “means or transmitter of thought, viz. word”! (compare also the English word *hum(ming)* of imitative origin meaning “to emit a continuous low droning sound like that of the prolonged *mmm* sound”).

Conclusion

Thus, it is clear that Om actually represents the highest Knowledge, viz. “Intellect, Reason or Logos”.

And the related Slavic and Baltic words indeed confirm that conclusion, since in Slavic the cognate word *Um* has the same meaning, viz. “intellect, mind, reason, brain, intelligence”, with prefix *raz-* + *Um* = *razum* “ibid.”, and the verb derived from, e.g. *umeti* “to know”, and *rozumeti* “to understand” !

And their Baltic cognate *aumuo* has exactly the same meaning!

For this reason, it is of highest significance to emphasize that Yoga is not just a system of physical exercises, viz. *āsanas* and other auxiliary forms, but primarily its goal is to evolve human intellectual potential to the ultimate. Like ancient Roman motto *mens sana in corpore sano*, viz. “healthy mind in a healthy body” the physical exercises are meant just to boost and enhance human mental abilities.

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