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AUM: The healing sound to eliminate ills of humanity

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Abstract

Many activists today talk about pollution but quite a few mention sound pollution. Yet, sound pollution is rampant and affecting our nervous system in unprecedented ways. Sound pollution does not only imply being subjected to the sounds of traffic in the middle of a crossroad. It also implies being bombarded by the sounds of commercials or films on TV, by people speaking out loud on their cell phones in a shop, by planes roaring in the air, by loudspeakers in the villages playing all sorts of tunes (all different, all at the same time). How can we protect our nervous systems and ourselves? Dr. Larry Dossey writes: "High levels of unpleasant sounds cause blood vessels to constrict; increase blood pressure, pulse and respiratory rates; release extra fats into the bloodstream; and cause the blood's magnesium level to fall." The Pranava, containing all sounds, is a most powerful tool for mind-body healing. Medical research is aware of the important benefits that proper breathing and pranayama practices bring to health and well-being. Breathing is an arrow on which chanting can fly. The results of chanting the Pranava AUM are exactly opposite to the detrimental effects of sound pollution. In ancient cultures and in the folklore of many societies, sounds – and particularly prayers and ritual formulas such as mantras – were and are used to polarize the bodies of man and regain a state of balance and harmony. In this paper the chanting and listening AUM and its effects on the health is highlighted.

Keywords: AUM, sound pollution, pranava, pranayama

Introduction

In ancient cultures and in the folklore of many societies, sounds – and particularly prayers and ritual formulas such as mantras – were and are used to polarize the bodies of man and regain a state of balance and harmony. In the Mediterranean world, the Egyptians, and much later the Greek with Pythagoras, studied the relationship between acoustic ratios and their effects on the human body. We know that much of the wisdom of these cultures came from India and that Pythagoras himself either traveled to India or studied with Rishis traveling through the Middle East and the Mediterranean (see H. Kahn). In Southern Italy, where Pythagoras founded his school, music has been used as a healing art in a method that I conceptualize as *acoustic homeopathy*: the musicians/doctors see the dis-eased and try to diagnose the illness of body, emotions and mind by playing certain tunes. Once the vibration of sound matches the vibration of the affliction, that tune is played for a certain period of time, in small dosage but consistently, until the vibratory patterns match each other and neutralize themselves. This is the basis of the healing of the ritual. If various sounds can heal various afflictions then the Pranava AUM, Sound of All Sounds, can heal them all. Embracing the ancient Rishis' wisdom and the modern scientific results that all is vibration and that all comes from the Void or Brahman, what is more auspicious and efficacious than intoning the vibratory sacred Mantra that is the closest we can get to that state of Perfect Stillness and Absolute Reality?

Yoga practitioner and sound healing Russil Paul quotes the result of the research of doctor and yoga practitioner Dr. Dharma Singh Khalsa. "Mantra stimulates the secretion of the pituitary gland, which is located only millimeters from the palate. These secretions strengthen our immune and neurological systems, protecting us from disease and negative emotions. In various clinical and therapeutic applications, chanting has been found to control the production of stress hormones and increase the production of endorphins, the body's natural painkillers. (Paul, 2004:6) When we speak the sound enters the eardrums of all people around us. Unfortunately there are no "ear-lids" that we can use. When we utter any sound, this sound travels in air and touches other's skins, enters the eardrum, moves their *cilia*,

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and transformed into electric impulses is codified by their brains as “a word”, “a song”, “a sigh”, “a laughter”. We need to cultivate the concept of *sonic responsibility* towards others, the environment and, most of all, ourselves.

Why AUM?

Since ages, Indians have believed in the supremacy of chanting the sacred syllable *AUM*, which is generally referred to as Hindu's sacred symbol. For many of us, it may be just a word created out of our rich mythological/legendary past. But we will be astonished to know that even scientific research has now agreed with the outstanding healing, philosophical, mystical, psychological and spiritual benefits that we acquire from chanting *AUM*.

If we recite the syllable *AUM* without using our tongue, we will feel a certain amount of vibration/pulsation in our body. According to Vedas and even if we observe the nature of sound we'll find that all the ordinary audible sounds are produced by the striking of two objects like: drumstick striking a drum head, two vocal cords, wind rustling the tree leaves, raindrops falling on leaves, clearing your thought, tiers against the road etc. In short all sounds that are within audible range are produced by visible or invisible object, vibrating or striking each other, resulting in pulsating waves of air molecules that we decode as sound.

On the contrary, the sound of *AUM* is not a result of vibration or striking of two objects. It develops on its own. It is believed to be the humming sound of the universe that encompasses all the sounds within itself. Moreover, meditating on *AUM* mantra can bring us closer to other human beings and lift the veil of detachment. Further, we can get many valuable benefits by chanting this *AUM* like:

- It drives away all worldly thoughts and removes diversion and infuses new energy in the body.
- It makes the mind tranquil and sharp, and infuses the religious credentials, which ensure self-realization.
- It swings us out of our usual discursive mind and into a more meditative mode.
- It validates oneness and harmony in life.
- It helps to reduce stress, improves concentration, and gives positive energy and many more.

Origin and historical background of AUM

The origin of the word '*AUM*' is wholly indecisive. There are many theories concerning its origin. It has been traced to a pronominal base “av” and its formation has been compared with of ay-am, “this”. But the evidence in support of this view is quite inadequate. It does not appear at all in the *Rigveda*, but it is mentioned in the other Vedas and several Upanishads allied with them. Primarily, in the early Vedic period, because of the sacredness allied with it, the word was kept as a secret and never voiced in public domain. It was used in private discussions and passed on from teacher to student or father to son directly and in secrecy. It was also not used in the rituals. We find its increasing popularity in many Upanishads that were composed in the Post *Rigvedic* period such as *Chandogya*, *Brihadaranyaka*, *Taittiriya*, *Katha* and *Mandukya Upanishads*. These Upanishads draw its symbolic importance by linking it with the Ultimate Reality or Supreme *Brāhman*. They directly refer to it as *Om*, *Aum*, *Udgita*, *Pranava* and *Omkaara*.

Meaning of AUM

AUM is made up of three syllables: A, U, and M, or, phonetically, “aaah,” “oooh,” and “mmm.” A is the first of the

guttural sound, so it is the very first sound that man can utter, M is the last of the labial sounds and U is the sound produced by rolling the wind over the whole of the tongue. Hence the conjunction of these three primary sounds can be comprehended to contain the rudiment of all sounds that man can ever give utterance to and so it can be taken as the fittest sound symbol of Brahman. Moreover, the syllable *AUM* represents several important triads: Worlds - Earth, Atmosphere, and Heaven; Major Hindu Gods - Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva; Gunas: Tamas, Rajas and Sattva; Sacred Vedic scriptures - *Rg*, *Yajur*, and *Sama*; Actions: Creation, Preservation, and Destruction; Time: Past, Present, and Future; Stages of survival: Birth, Life, and Death, Elemental Deity: Fire (*Agni*), Sun (*Aditya*), Wind (*Vayu*).

Symbolism of AUM

Just as the sound of *AUM* represents the above-mentioned triads as well the sound of Brahman, the visual symbol of *AUM* written in Sanskrit also represents everything. The symbol of *AUM* contains three curves, one arc/semicircle and a bindu/dot. Each aspect of its appearance is said to symbolize something deeper. First of all it symbolizes human figure: the large lower curve represent the lower part of the human form, the upper curve represents upper part, the third curve which lies between the two curves represents arms (*bhujaya*) and the semicircle with dot represents head (mind) of the human form.

Similarly the symbol also represents four states of consciousness (waking, dreaming, deep sleep and *turiya*) and four types of soul (*vaishvanara*, *taijasa*, *prajna* and *atman*), which we will discuss in length with reference to *Mandukya Upanishad* in the next point.

Relevance of AUM in Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and the Epic Bhagavad-Gita

Buddhism

In Buddhism, *AUM* is often placed at the beginning of mantras. Probably the most well-known lotus mantra begins with *AUM* and is chanted as “*Om Mani Padma Hum*”. For the Buddhists the syllable *AUM* neither represents the absolute reality nor an eternal self. Instead it represents the outer aspects of a human being, namely the body, the speech and the mind respectively.

Jainism

In Jainism, *AUM* is considered as a short form of the initials of the five *Parameshthis*: *Arihanta*, *Ashiri*, *Acharya*, *Upadhyaya* and *Munis*.

Sikhism

AUM plays a prominent role in Sikhism also. The Sikh prayer, known as the Mool mantra, starts with the idiom, *Ek Onkar* (meaning “God is One”). *Ek Onkar* is the root basis of all Sikh holy thought, and the first phrase of the Sikh Guru embodied in the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Bhagavad-Gita

According to *Bhagavad-Gita* there is a harmony, tranquillity and bliss in this simple but deeply philosophical sound and while chanting it, if one thinks of the Ultimate Reality and relinquish his body, he will certainly reach the highest state of "stateless" eternity.

Scientific Study on AUM

Chanting of *AUM* leads to mental and physical benefits to the

body, as it slows down the nervous system and tranquil the mind in a way just like meditation. Through the rhythmic pronunciation, the mind is relaxed and blood pressure reduces, eventually resulting in an improvement in heart health. In today's scenario scientific experiments/studies has proven the fact that, "meditation/chanting of AUM is a remedy to stress and therapeutic to many more mental and physical health problems. Some of the scientific benefits of chanting AUM are given below:

- AUM chanting is an effective tonic, which increases the competence of the human organism in a profound manner.
- It increases the production of endorphin so making us feeling relaxed and refreshed every time.
- It has a positive effect for cardiac vascular health by lowering blood pressure and increasing competence of all the cells and organs in the body.

Benefits of the Om Japa

While sound is amoral, the choices we make in regards to our production and consumption of sound is not. What are the sounds that surround you? Where did you choose to live? or to work? What is the vibratory environment there? What is the percentage of healthy, positive words you formulate during the day? Do we pollute the sonic environment with useless chatting, negative gossiping, or simply plain conversations? We do have a responsibility in regards to what we utter. Do you subject yourself to aggressive sounds, music, TV shows? Do you spend your "free time" in pubs and clubs with deafening music and people's small talk? We do have a responsibility in regards to what we listen to.

Maharishi Patanjali, three thousand years ago, codified the eight limbs of *Ashtanga Yoga* in the *Yoga Sutra*. In a succinct way – only 195-196 Sutra – Patanjali exposes human afflictions and their causes, the ways to overcome them until steadiness of body and mind are reached, and then the further steps to attain concentration (*Dharana*), meditation (*Dhyana*) and finally, liberation (*Samadhi*). The eight limbs (*ashtanga*) of *Ashtanga Yoga* are analyzed under many angles (*anga*) so that we may find our individual way into these coded disciplines.

In *Samadhi Pada*, the first of the four chapters, Sutra 27-29, Patanjali describes the benefit of the constant repetition of the *Pranava Aum*, the sound of all sounds, the manifestation of all worlds, the embodied vibratory form of *Isvara* (God, the Absolute). The repetition is not a mechanical one. One needs to first understand the meaning behind this seemingly simple one-syllable sound, its effects on all bodies of man, and finally release all understanding and vibrate with *bhava*, emotion, a devotional emotion in this case. The *japa*, in time, will lead one to *Samadhi* through the deep understanding of one's self as the Self, as the Cosmic State of Existence, *Purusa*.

The benefits of the *japa* of the *Pranava AUM* are listed in the Upanishads, as well as in *Tirumandiram* and in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Always it is stressed that the AUM is the *svarupa* of the Divine, its form made manifest. In the tenth chapter of the *Gita*, *Vibhuti Yoga*, Lord Krishna tells his valiant warrior and friend Arjuna:

Among the great sages, I am Bhrgu; among utterances I am the mono-syllabled "OM"; among holy offerings, I am the offering of Japa; among immovable objects, I am the mount Himalaya. (Tr. by Swami Tapasyananda, Verse 25)

By repetition of the AUM, one can attain liberation. In Chapter eight of the *Gita*, *Akshara Brahman*, Lord Krishna

tells Arjuna:

Thinking of Me continuously, with a mind trained in the practice of spiritual communion and freed from the tendency to stray away to other objects, one attains to the Divine Spirit Supreme. (Tr. by Swami Tapasyananda, Verse 8)

Established in the spiritual communion by inhibiting all sensations, concentrating on the heart centre, and drawing up the vital energies to the head, one should meditate on Me along with the utterance of the single-syllabled mantra Om denoting Brahman. Departing from this body in this state, one attains liberation. (Tr. by Swami Tapasyananda, Verse 13)

Conclusion

In this modern societies' cacophony, is there a chance that we may be able to attain that silence in which we can hear the *harmony of the spheres*? The *OM Japa* offers such an opportunity to us. When properly chanting the *Pranava AUM*, one cannot harm one's self, others or the environment. On the opposite, one brings about positive change in the vibratory systems inside and outside. One condition: the *Japa* needs to be done properly, with "right-use-ness". The *Pranava AUM*, says Maharishi Patanjali, needs to be chanted with *devotion and emotion*, with a pure intention. How can one sing with a pure intention when one is not pure? Buying any sorts of gadgets with the Sanskrit symbol of AUM won't do. The *OM Japa* is both the tool to get to *Samadhi* and the end goal as it is the *Atman* in the form of vibration. But if one is not pure in the intention, the *Pranava* does not reveal itself and remains a one-syllable utterance. One needs to have the right key to open this treasure box. Inside the box is the infinite, the ultimate, the unmanifest, the stillness of the Divine.

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