



Mandukya Upanishad, which is the quintessence of all Upanishads, begins with this mantra:

ओमित्येतदक्षरमिदं सर्वं तस्योपव्याख्यानं
 मृतं भवद्भविष्यदिति सर्वमोङ्कार एव ।
 यच्चान्यत् त्रिकालातीतं तदप्योङ्कार एव ॥ १ ॥

Omkar — the Imperishable *Brahman* symbolized by Om is all this. The further explanation of Om is this. Whatever was in the past, whatever is in the present and whatever is going to be in future—all this is Om. And That which is beyond the three periods of time is verily Om.

With *Ek Omkar* opens the sacred scripture of Japji:

“Ek Omkar Sat Nam Kartapurukh Nirbhaya Nirvaira Akal Amurt, Ajooni, Saibhang Guru Prasad Jap, Sach Jugad Sach Haibhi Sach Nanak Hosibhi Sach.”

“There is but One *Omkar* (God). His name is true. He is the creator. He is free from fear and enmity. He is beyond time, beyond death. He is unborn, formless and self-existent. He can be realized by the Grace of Guru. He existed before the beginning of the world—He existed before the beginning of the *yugas*; He exists now, and says Nanak—He shall exist forever!!”

Mundaka Upanishad—one of the basic texts of Vedantic philosophy—asserts the practice of meditation on Om as a dynamic means for attaining Self-realization:

“Pravana (Om) is the bow, the individual soul is the arrow, *Brahman* or the Absolute is the target. O aspirant, hit the target with persistent vigilance; And just as the arrow becomes one with the target, so too become merged in *Brahman* (the Absolute).”

Patanjali Maharashi enjoins:

“Pravana or Om is the name of God (Ishwara); Its repetition and meditation should be practiced with meaning and feeling.” Raja Yoga Sutras 1-27, 28.

Lord Krishna proclaims in the Gita:

“I am the syllable Om among all the Vedas. “

In the Vedic literature, Om is considered the essence of all the Vedas. Om is the name of God, *Brahman*, the Absolute. Voluminous scriptures are written explaining the glory of Om.

The Power of Chanting OM

Om is a combination of the Sanskrit letters “a,” “u,” “m” and an *ardha matra* or half-syllable. When students see the word transliterated as “a-u-m,” in an attempt to be careful to pronounce it correctly, they mistakenly form two vowel sounds resulting in something like “ahoom.” However, the correct pronunciation is simply “om.” “A” and “U” blend into “oh” and end with the lips pressed together into a vibrating “mmm” sound.

Because of the presence of the *ardha matra* (half syllable or *halant*) at the end of Om, “M” signals the final sound. The *halant* is not pronounced; rather, it stops the chant of Om so you do not put any vowel at the end of the sound. Without that *halant*, one would say “oma” in Sanskrit pronunciation. This half-syllable is represented by a *vindu* or point.

You may chant or repeat Om vocally or mentally. Vocal chanting is of three types:

1. Short.
2. Prolonged, soft and deep, resonating with the spinal column.
3. Prolonged, out-going, loud.

To chant prolonged and resonant Oms, like the vibrations of a bell, breathe in deeply through the nose, then open the lips and begin singing O...O...O.... When the breath is running out, close your lips and terminate the sound with a humming MMMMMMMM-MMMM. Feel the sound of Om creating a resonance in your spine that moves from the base of the spine upwards to the crown of the head. Repeat the chant as often as you like, and see how effectively it promotes harmony in the vital forces (*pranas*) in the body, soothes the nervous system, generates a mystic potency in the mind, and prepares the mind for a deeper meditation.

In prolonged, vocal chants of Om, there is a natural *pranayama* (breathing exercise). Such chanting of Om causes you to control your breath as you fill your lungs deeply with air and then exhale slowly as you chant the sound of the mantra. In addition it creates a resonance in your spinal column which is a kind of sonar massage, a sound vibration that massages the spinal tissue. Thus Om *pranayama* has a great effect on your personality even if your mind does not know the subtler and profounder meanings of the Om mantra.

Mental repetition of Om along with meditation is known as *Japa Sahita Dhyana*. Seated in a meditative pose, with eyes closed, continue mental repetition of Om. Let your mind continue to flow on steadily towards the sound-form of Om; but, at the same time, let your intellect reflect upon the underlying meaning and significance of Om. This profound meaning will be elaborated upon in the text that follows.

OM—The Perfect Name of God

As we have explained, Om is a combination of the Sanskrit letters “A,” “U,” “M” and a half-syllable (*ardha matra* or *halant*). As the analysis of these letters in *Mandukyopanishad* makes clear, there is a profound implication in choosing Om as the symbol of God, *Brahman*, the Absolute.

Om encompasses the limits of the field of human speech. With “A” you open your throat and mouth, with “M” you close your lips. “U” denotes all that is between the opening and closing of sound in human sound production. When you have said Om (A+U+M) you have used the entire vocal range from the throat to the lips, thus symbolizing the fact that you have uttered all that is to be uttered. When you have used up the entire range of sound production, nothing more can be said. Thus, all the sounds and words that can be produced in human experience are implied and contained in Om.

For this profound reason, the Sages chose Om as the verbal symbol or name of the all-encompassing God or *Brahman*—the Supreme Self who is all that exists. Through the Divine name of Om, they intended to direct the human mind to the transcendent reality of God.

Beyond the Waves of Names and Forms to the Ocean of the Self

Every meaningful word or “name” in the human language conjures up in your mind a form. The word “rose” immediately conjures up the form of the tender flower. “Waterfall” brings to mind the form of water dynamically cascading from a great height. The names of people whom you like and dislike bring to your mind the forms of those people. All objects of this world have names and forms, and in this vast world of

multiplicity projected by the conditioned mind, names and forms hide the Divine Self. Just as the ocean is “hidden” by its own waves and the sun is hidden by its own rays, so God is hidden by His names and forms.

Therefore, the world is described as *prapancha* or five-fold: It consists of pure Existence-Consciousness-Bliss (the essential nature of *Brahman* or the Divine Self) plus names and forms. In Sanskrit, Pure Existence is *Sat*, Pure Consciousness is *Chit*, and Pure Bliss is *Ananda*. Thus the Divine Self is known as *Sat-Chit-Ananda*.

The unalterable Existence behind all things is called *Sat*. It is not dead existence, but it is knowable. So Pure Existence implies Pure Knowledge or Consciousness or Awareness—Pure *Chit*. That Pure Consciousness, again, implies Bliss. When you have pain and suffering, consciousness contracts. When you have joy, consciousness expands. If you think of a consciousness that is limitless, such a state is by its very nature blissful. So what is *Sat* is *Chit*; what is *Chit* is *Ananda*—*Sat-Chit-Ananda* underlies all things.

On this three-fold screen of *Sat-Chit-Ananda* or *Brahman*, names and forms are projected by *Maya* or cosmic illusion. These names and forms are merely illusion, not the solid reality they appear to be. However, the human mind, conditioned by ignorance, sees only the multitude of names and forms that it has given to objects, ignoring the screen of *Brahman* underlying them at every moment.

How then, reflected the Sages, can we invoke the name of God so that the human mind goes beyond these

limited names and forms of the world of multiplicity to dwell on the Reality that supports and transcends them? With the deep revelation of the Sages, the scriptures derived the symbol Om. The melody of Om silences the impressions of the world within your mind and carries you joyfully to an awareness of the Divine Self, *Brahman* or God. You realize that God is like the ocean. All names and forms are merely waves within the infinite Ocean of fullness that we refer to as God.

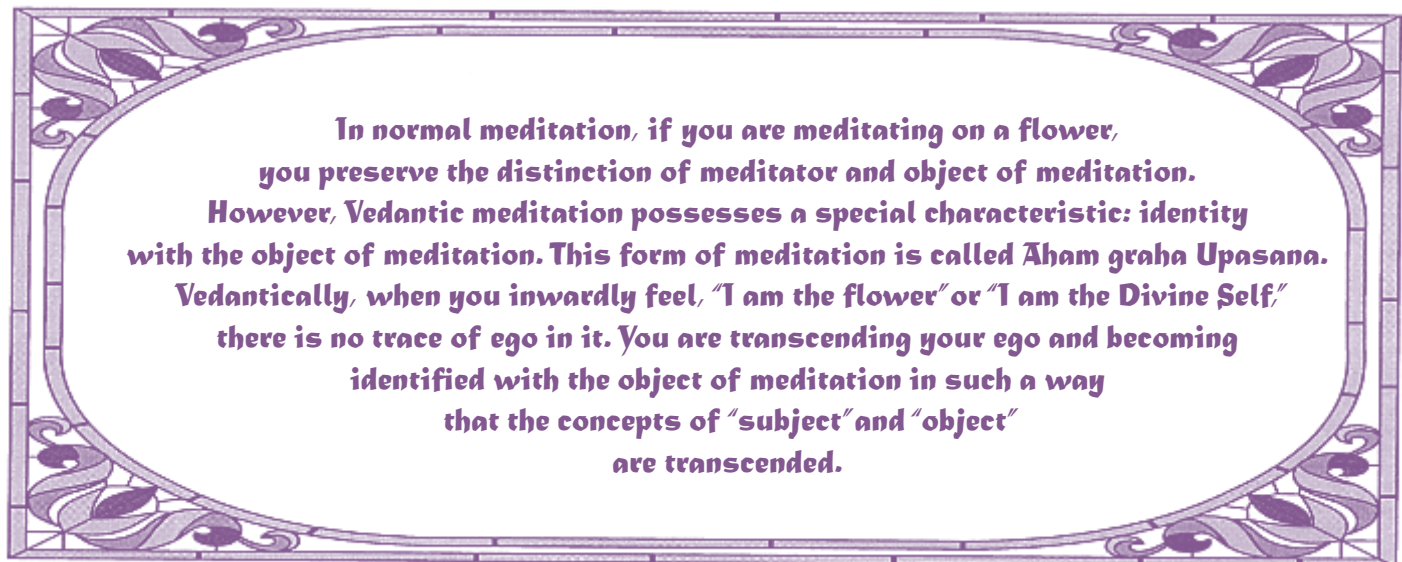
THE MYSTIC FORMULA OF OM (Ā-U-M)

Om (A-U-M) has been chosen as a formula for attaining God-Realization. Meditating upon this formula implies focusing your mind sequentially upon “A,” “U,” “M,” and the *ardha matra* and reflecting upon the implications and subtle meaning of each of these aspects of Om.

Reflecting on the Ā Aspect

When you start chanting Om (A-U-M), let your mind begin meditating on the A aspect of Om. Try to feel yourself as the physical body. You won’t have much difficulty doing this because you identify yourself with your body every day. But what is the physical body?

Your body is a part of universal matter. When you eat, cabbages grown in Australia or peaches grown in South America nourish your body. While you live and when you die, cells in your body are recycled back



into the earth. The physical body is formed out of five elements (earth, water, fire, air and ether) drawn from the cosmos. At every moment of your life, your cells are drawing from the cosmos and then diffusing back into it. You are drawing from the entire world of matter just as a lagoon draws water from the ocean and empties itself back into the ocean again.

Since you are inseparably related to the cosmos, you should understand and affirm, “If I am the physical body, I am also the earth, the moon, the sun, the stars, the breeze, the swirling clouds—I am the universal body, I am all.”

This form of reflection does not mean that you should crowd your mind by keeping track in a mathematical way of how many things you are identified with! Rather it implies enjoying a sense of expansion. When you look at yourself day by day, you don’t crowd your mind with the thoughts, “I the toes,” “I am the feet,” “I am the nose.” Rather, you just think of yourself as the whole body. Similarly, in Vedantic reflection on the A aspect of Om you should enjoy the expansive understanding that “I am the whole universe of matter from which the body arises, into which the body diffuses. Just as a wave is related to the ocean, so too my physical body is related to the entire physical universe.”

From a very simple observation of the world around you, you bring your mind to an elevated understanding. And all of this is quite reasonable. It isn’t some vain type of fancy. However, great imagination and insight is involved in grasping the idea that the entire universe is oneself.

When you are focusing your attention on the A aspect of Om and your physical identity, you are focusing on the waking state of consciousness. As you continue to meditate and reflect upon Om, you will also be probing into the deeper implications of the three familiar states of consciousness—waking, dream and deep sleep—which are experienced by every human being in day-to-day life.

When the mind contacts the objects of the world through the senses it is termed the waking state. When the mind withdraws the senses from the objects of the world, and yet projects experiences based upon subtle desires from the unconscious, it is termed dream state. When the mind withdraws the senses and enters into that subtle state that is devoid of both external contacts

with the objects as well as internal contacts with the desires, it is termed sleep state.

It is by delving deep into the mysteries of waking, dream and deep sleep that a student of Vedanta learns that the innermost Self in man is beyond these three states of consciousness. In the course of spiritual movement, the soul rises from the plane of the objects to the plane of the senses, from the senses to the mind, from the mind to the ego. Then, having crossed the veil of ignorance, it discovers its identity with the Supreme Self. Therefore, the first three letters of Om—A, U, and M—represent the three ordinary states of consciousness that one experiences daily along with their positive counterparts that are known through lower *samadhi* and higher *samadhi*. The *ardha matra* or half-syllable represents *Turiya*, the state that transcends the relative states of waking, dream and deep sleep.

When focusing on the “A” aspect of Om, you identify with the physical plane of existence in your waking state of consciousness. As we have seen, this identity of yours in the microcosm in which you seem to exist as an individual has a counterpart in the macrocosm of the entire universe. In other words, whatever you are as an individual has a correspondence in the universe.

In the waking state, identified with your individual physical body, the *jiva* or soul is called *vishwa*. Identified with the entire universe at the physical plane, the soul is called *virat* or *vishwanara*. God is *vishwanara* and you as an individual are *vishwa*.

While meditating on the A aspect, you are trying to dissolve your “*vishwa*-hood” and become part of *vishwanara*. You are transcending your concept of yourself as an individual to merge with the totality of all physical bodies, to experience the physical universe as one organic whole.

Reflecting on the U Aspect

At this stage of reflection, shift your attention from the physical body to the mind and clarify your understanding that you are more mind than physical body. Your physical awareness does not have any independent reality without the mind. The moment you are chloroformed you are not aware of the body at all. Awareness of the body depends on the mind.

Reflection on the U aspect of Om helps you to begin to identify more with the astral or subtle body or *sukshma sharira*—that part of your personality where the physical body is transcended. Your physical body is just a tool of your deeper personality. Your deeper personality is subtle. It is composed of vital forces, mind, senses, and intellect. Indeed, the whole world is essentially subtle. Physicality is a kind of illusion that is created by your mind.

To understand this more clearly, consider what happens in your own dreams. The dream experience is entirely subtle, abstract. Dream is not an experience in the physical plane. Yet in your dream, when you are experiencing your body, people around you, diverse situations and circumstances, all things seem so concrete, separate, real—yet they are nothing but a magical show created by the mind.

At this point it must be understood that when Vedanta directs your attention to dream, we are actually pointing to the subtle experience of the astral plane in lower *samadhi* (superconsciousness). In your practical life, nature leads you every day to experience the astral plane or your subtle body in an unconscious way through dream. However, it is only through deep meditation that you become separated from the physical body and experience the expansiveness of the subtle plane in a conscious way through lower *samadhi*, the positive counterpart of dream.

When you are identified with the mind or astral body in dream, you are called *Taijasa*, which means “effulgent.” The universal astral body or cosmic counterpart of *Taijasa* is *Hiranyagarbha*, the Cosmic Mind. Through your reflection you understand that your subtle body is not an individualized entity. It is a wave in the cosmic subtle body that is *Hiranyagarbha*. Your thoughts do not originate in the ego-self; they proceed from the cosmic mind.

Thus, try to understand the possibility of uniting your mind with the Cosmic Mind. Try to understand that the Divine mind permeates your mind; the Divine subtle body permeates your individual subtle body. Allow your mind to relax and commune with the Cosmic Mind. Become a channel for cosmic thoughts. Feel you have no ego or will of your own—just God’s Will.

This form of reflection and devout meditation along with mental repetition of *Om* comprises the “U” aspect of meditation on *Om*.

Reflecting on the M Aspect

Next, focus your attention on the “M” aspect of *Om* and discover your identity with the causal body. The causal body is a highly advanced center within you, a center that is beyond mind and intellect. It is the vast realm of the unconscious.

When you are identified with the causal body, you are called *prajna*. Just as your individual physical and astral bodies (*Vishwa* and *Taijasa*) are related to their cosmic physical and astral counterparts (*Virat* and *Hiranyagarbha*), so too, your individual causal body (*Prajna*) is related to the cosmic causal body, which in Sanskrit is called *Ishwara* or God. God is the cosmic source of all. An individual causal body is linked to God just as a wave is linked to the ocean. At the deeper core of your existence you are one with God.

The only way most people experience the causal plane in their practical life is in deep sleep. In deep sleep, you have moved away from your physical body and your astral body, and you have come closest to the causal body. But in that experience there is always a veil that separates you from God. The veil is called *avidya*, ignorance.

All that you experience in deep sleep is the temporary silencing of the ego, of the triad of seer, seen and sight, of the awareness of time and space, of the burden of multiplicity. This temporary absence of all problems is not God-realization. If you went on sleeping all the time you would not be enlightened.

However, if you could lead your mind to a state of consciousness in which the ego is thoroughly transformed, you would enjoy the positive counterpart of sleep—perpetual *samadhi*. When you enjoy this higher *samadhi*, the ego is filled with blissful spiritual awareness and no longer wears the same robes of illusion. The unconscious becomes flooded with Divine impressions and your entire life is lit up with the glory of the transcendental Self.

You come to the plane of *turiya* associated with the fourth aspect of *Om*—which will be studied in the next issue of *International Yoga Guide*.

