

Authored by late Dr. Georg Feuerstein, this essay on pranava is posted here with the gracious permission of Traditional Yoga Studies.
Its study may be completed with the reading on this website of Lectures 1.17 – 1.20.

The Sacred Syllable OM

The Meaning of Om

There is no question that *om* is the oldest *mantra*, or sound of numinous power, known to the sages of India. Its origin, however, is somewhat obscure. A century ago, the German scholar Max Müller, editor and translator of the *Rig-Veda*, had the idea that *om* might be a contraction of the word *avam*, “a prehistoric pronominal stem, pointing to distant objects, while *ayam* pointed to nearer objects.” He continued, “*Avam* may have become the affirmative particle *om*, just as the French *oui* arose from *hoc illud*.” This obscure comment refers to the fact that *om*, in addition to its sacred significance, came to be used in the prosaic sense of “Yes, I agree.” Müller’s interesting philological speculation remains unsubstantiated, however.

More recently, a different approach was taken by Swami Sankarananda, who proposed that *om* derives from the Vedic word *soma*. Through the influence of the Persians, who did not pronounce the letter *s*, the word *soma* was changed to *homa* and subsequently was shortened to *om*. Like Müller’s derivation, this is pure conjecture, but is nonetheless intriguing, as it brings out the traditionally accepted relationship between *soma* and *om*.

Soma is the sacred substance used in the principal Vedic sacrifice. It has been characterized as an intoxicant, and various scholars have, in my opinion, wrongly identified it as a concoction prepared from the fly agaric mushroom. In the Vedic literature, *soma* is always described as a creeper, which cannot be said to apply to a mushroom. Be that as it may, the real *soma* was not a plant or plant extract but a spiritual “elixir,” or illuminating experience, as is evident from certain hymns of the *Rig-Veda* (e.g. 10.85.3). In this sense, we also encounter it in later Tantra, where *soma* stands for an inner process or esoteric phenomenon: the nectar of immortality said to ooze from the “Moon” at the *tâlu-cakra* (“palate wheel”) in the head, dripping into the “Sun” stationed at the *nâbhi-cakra* (“navel wheel”). On the physical level, it corresponds to the saliva, which is known to have antiseptic, healing properties.

Swami Sankarananda believed that, like *soma*, the sacred syllable *om* represents the Sun. This seems to be confirmed by the *Aitareya-Brâhmana* (5.32): *om ity asau yo’sau [sûryah] tapati*, “That which glows [i.e., the Sun] is *om*.” The Sun was indeed central to the Vedic spirituality, and the Vedic sages looked upon the Sun not merely as a star that supplies our planet with the necessary light and warmth but as a multidimensional entity of which the visible stellar body is merely its outermost material shell.

The esteemed Swami’s conjecture is worthy of deeper consideration. However, most spiritual authorities regard *om* as the vocalization of an actual “sound,” or

vibration, which pervades the entire universe and is audible to *yogins* in higher states of consciousness. In the Western hermetic tradition, this is known as “the music of the spheres.” The Indian sages also speak of it as the *shabda-brahman* or “sonic Absolute,” which, in the words of the *Chândogya-Upanishad* (2.23.3), is “all this (*idam sarvam*).” What this means is that *om* is the universe as a totality, not a conglomerate of individual parts, as we experience it in our ordinary state of consciousness. Thus *om* is the primordial sound that reveals itself to the inner ear of that the adept who has controlled the mind and the senses.

Vihari-Lala Mitra, in the introduction to his translation of the *Yoga-Vâsishtha*, equated the Greek word *on* (“being”) with *om*. While this is linguistically unsustainable, philosophically the connection is valid, as *om* is the symbol of That Which Is, or *brahman*. He also made the link between *om* and *Amen* to which the same strictures apply.

The Early History of the Sacred Syllable

Significantly, the syllable *om* is not mentioned in the ancient *Rig-Veda*, which has recently been dated back to the third millennium B.C.E. and earlier still. However, a veiled reference to it may be present in one of the hymns (1.164.39), which speaks of the syllable (*akshara*) that exists in the supreme space in which all the deities reside. “What,” asks the composer of this hymn, “can one who does not know this do with the chant?” He adds, “Only those who know it sit together here.” That is, only initiates gather to delight in the mystery of the sacred syllable and the company of the deities.

The word *akshara* means literally “immutable” or “imperishable.” This designation is most appropriate, since grammatically syllables are stable parts that make up words. In the case of the mantric *om*, this monosyllable came to represent the ultimate One, which is eternally unchanging (*akshara, acala*). The term *akshara* is used as a synonym for *om* in many scriptures, including the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* (10.25), which has Krishna say, “Of utterances I am the single syllable.”

In light of the early prominence given to *om* as the primordial seed sound, there is no good reason for assuming that the sagely composers of the Vedic hymns were ignorant of the sacred syllable *om*. Indeed, they were great masters of *mantra-yoga*, and the Vedic hymnodies are the astounding creation of their mantric competence. Possibly *om* was considered so sacred that it could not be mentioned outside the actual context of the Vedic sacrifices. In that case, it would have been passed on from teacher to student by word of mouth in strictest confidence. There would therefore have been no need to mention *om* in the sacred hymns. All initiates would have known it and also understood its sublime meaning. In any case, for countless generations, any recitation of the Vedic hymns has begun with the syllable *om*. The *Atharva-Veda* (10.8.10) seems to hint at this with the following riddle:

What is joined to the front and to the back and is joined all around and everywhere, and by which the sacrifice proceeds? That praise (*ric*) I ask of you.

The syllable *om* is often appended to longer mantric utterances, both introducing and concluding them, and this practice is very old indeed.

As time went by, the ban on uttering the sacred syllable or even writing it down outside the sacrificial rituals was relaxed. Thus the sacred syllable is first mentioned by name in the opening hymn of the *Shukla-Yajur-Veda* (1.1), the "white" recension of the Vedic hymnody dealing strictly with the performance of the sacrifices (*yajus*). This could be a later addition, however. For the *Taittirîya-Samhitâ* (5.2.8), which is appended to the *Yajur-Veda*, still cryptically speaks of the "divine sign" (*deva-lakshana*) that is written threefold (*try-alikhita*). Some scholars have seen this as a reference to the three constituent parts of the syllable *om*, as written in Sanskrit: *a + u + m*. The three constituents of *om* are referred to, for instance, in the *Prashna-Upanishad* (5.5). The symbolic elaboration of this is found in the *Mândûkya-Upanishad*, as we will see later.

That the sacred syllable was written down early on is clear from the fact that it had to be traced in sand or water during certain of the ancient rituals. This is also a significant piece of evidence in favor of writing at least in the late Vedic era, which is generally denied by historians. However, today we appreciate that ancient Indian history needs to be completely rewritten. The long-held belief that the Vedic people invaded India between 1200 and 1500 B.C. has been shown to be unfounded. In fact, all the evidence points to the identity between the Vedic people and the builders of the great cities along the banks of the Indus river. Since inscribed artifacts have been found in the Indus cities, the question of whether or not the Vedic people knew writing can be conclusively answered in the affirmative.

It is true, though, that the Vedic hymnodies were in all probability never written down until comparatively recently. Yet, the *brahmins* had devised an ingenious system of memorization to guarantee that the *Vedas* were preserved with utmost fidelity. It appears that they have been successful in this, thanks to the prodigious memories of the Vedic specialists. Other cultures, which held their sacred tradition in a similar high regard, sought to preserve it by memorization rather than writing it down on impermanent materials that, moreover, might fall into the wrong hands. However, nowhere has the art of memorization reached the sophistication that it did in India.

Over many generations, *om* was not uttered outside the sacred context of ritual worship. It was a secret sound communicated by word of mouth from teacher to disciple, that is, originally from father to son. Even the early *Upanishads* (which have recently been dated back to the second millennium B.C.) often still refer to it only indirectly as the *udgîtha* ("up sound") and the *pranava* ("pronouncing"). The former word hints at the nasalized way in which

om is sounded out, with the sound vibrating at the psychoenergetic center located between and behind the eyebrows (i.e., the *âjñâ-cakra*).

The term *pranava* is derived from the prefix *pra* (etymologically related to the Latin "pro") and the stem *nava* (derived from the verbal root *nu* meaning "to call out" and "to exult"). It is used, for instance, in the *Yoga-Sûtra* (1.27), where it is called the symbol (*vâcaka*) of the Lord (*îshvara*). Patanjali further states (in 1.28) that in order to realize the mystery of the Lord, the *om* sound should be recited *and* contemplated.

Another, later term for *om* is *târa*, which is derived from the verbal root *trî*, meaning "to cross, traverse." This is a reference to the liberating function of the *om* sound, which safely transports the *yogin* across the ocean of existence (*bhava-sâra*) to the "other shore." Through recitation, which is mindful repetition of the *om* sound, the *yogin* can transcend the mind itself and thus is freed from the illusion of being an insular being separate from everything else.

The *om* sound is truly liberating because it expands the reciter beyond the physical boundary of the skin and beyond the metaphorical boundary of preconceptions, thus restoring the recognition of the universal Self as his or her true identity.

In the earliest *Upanishads*, such as the *Brihad-Âranyaka*, *Chândogya*, and *Taittirîya*, the sacred syllable *om* is mentioned many times by name, both as *om* (or *aum*) and *om-kâra* ("om making," meaning the "letter om"). However, *udgîtha* is more common. It is the *Chândogya* that first clearly spells out the equation between the words *udgîtha* and *pranava* (a term not found in the *Brihad-Âranyaka*). Perhaps these two terms came in vogue because for unknown reasons *om* had, by that time, spread beyond the sacred domain and begun to be used in the sense of "Yes, I agree."

The first record of this usage is in the *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad* (3.9.1) itself, where *om* is employed seven times in this manner. Indeed, the *Chândogya-Upanishad* (1.1.8) clearly states: "That syllable is a syllable of assent, for whenever we assent to anything we say *aum* [= *om*]." Max Müller commented on this as follows:

If, then, *om* meant originally *that* and *yes*, we can understand that, like *Amen*, it may have assumed a more general meaning, something like *tat sat*, and that it may have been used as representing all that human language can express.

The *Chândogya-Upanishad* (1.1.9) also has this relevant passage:
By this the threefold knowledge proceeds. To honor this syllable, *aum* is recited, *aum* is exclaimed, *aum* is chanted, with its greatness and essence.

Interestingly, in his commentary on this *Upanishad*, Shankara takes this passage to refer to the *soma* sacrifice, which again affirms the connection between *om* and *soma* mentioned above. He states that the *soma* ritual is performed to celebrate, or honor, the sacred syllable, which is the symbol of

the Divine. This sacrifice, he further explains, maintains the Sun from which proceeds all life and nourishment by means of warmth and rain.

The *Chândogya-Upanishad* (1.9.4) also quotes Atidhanvan Shaunaka, the teacher of Udara Shândilya, as saying, "So long as your descendants will know this *udgîtha*, their life in this world will be the highest and best." This expresses the idea that the sacred syllable is a blessing for those who utter it. For this reason it is worthy of being held in the highest esteem, as this and other scriptures emphasize.

According to the concluding verses of the *Brihat-Samnyâsa-Upanishad*—a text of the medieval period—12,000 recitations of *om* remove all sins, while 12,000 recitations daily for a period of one year bring realization of the Absolute (*brahman*). What greater blessing can there be than this?

From Om to Aum

At least two millennia after the sacred syllable *om* was discovered by the Vedic seers (*rishis*), the anonymous sage who composed the brief *Mândûkya-Upanishad* utilized this age-old *mantra* to expound the metaphysics of Advaita Vedânta. Thus he explained the three constituent parts (*mâtrâ*) of the syllable—namely *a* + *u* + *m*—as symbolizing past, present, and future, as well as waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. He also spoke of a fourth part that transcends the other three and concluded his esoteric observations with the statement that *om* is the Self (*âtman*), saying, "He who knows this enters the Self with the self—indeed, he who knows this!"

The importance of the *Mândûkya-Upanishad* can be gauged from the fact that the venerable sage Gaudapâda wrote his celebrated commentary entitled *Mândûkya-Kârikâ* on it, which was subsequently commented on at length by Shankara, the great preceptor of the school of nondualism (*advaita*). Gaudapâda was the teacher of Govindapâda, Shankara's *guru*.

Another scripture, given exclusively to explaining the sacred syllable *om* is the *Atharva-Shikhâ-Upanishad*. This scripture begins with the question: What should one meditate on? The answer is: the syllable *om*, which symbolizes the supreme Absolute (*brahman*). The text speaks of four constituent parts of this *mantra*, each having its own symbolic correlations as follows:

1. the sound *a* — earth - *ric* (hymn of praise) — *Rig-Veda* — Brahman — Vasus (a class of eight deities) — *gâyatrî* meter — *gârhapatya* fire — red — dedicated to Brahman;
2. the sound *u* — atmosphere — *yajus* (sacrificial formula) — *Yajur-Veda* — Vishnu — Rudras (deities governing the region between earth and heaven) — *trishtubh* meter — *dakshina* fire — bright — dedicated to Rudra;

3. the sound *m* — heaven — *sâman* (sacred chants) — *Sâma-Veda* — Vishnu — Âdityas (deities connected with the Goddess Aditi, symbolizing primordial infinity) — *jagatî* meter — *âhavanîya* fire — black — dedicated to Vishnu;

4. “half-part” (*ardha-mâtra*) — Atharvan songs — *Atharva-Veda* — fire of universal destruction — Maruts (deities of the mid-region who are especially associated with the wind) — Virât — lightning-like and multicolored — dedicated to Purusha.

The most important part is the nasalized “half-part” sound *m*, which brings its own illumination and causes the life force (*prâna*) in the body to rush upward into the head. This *Upanishad* further states that the *om* sound is called *om-kâra* because it sends the currents of the life force upward (*ûrdhvam utkrâmayati*) and that it is called *pranava* because it makes all the life currents bow down (*pranâmayati*) before it. The text concludes by stating that the *om* sound is Shiva.

Interestingly, in Tantra-Yoga, the serpent power (*kundalinî-shakti*) resting in the psychoenergetic center at the base of the spine, is said to be coiled up three and a half times. Very likely, this captures the same idea as in the notion of the three and a half units of the *om* sound. The *Tantras* would presumably modify the *Upanishad*’s final claim to replace Shiva with Shakti, which in the form of the *kundalinî* rises upward and while doing so assimilates the life currents. In fact, the ascent of the serpent power is accompanied by manifestations of ever more subtle sound.

According to the *Amrita-Bindu-Upanishad* (4), only the silent part of the sound *m* leads to the soundless, invisible Abode, the ultimate Reality. This scripture explains breath control (*prânâyâma*), a very important aspect of yogic discipline, as the recitation of the *gâyatrî-mantra*: *tat savitur varenyam bhargo devasya dhîmahî dhiyo yo nah pracodayât*). This *mantra* is to be recited together with the *pranava* and the *vyâhritis* (“formulaic utterances,” notably the words *bhûh bhuvah svah*, standing for “earth,” “mid-region,” and “heaven” respectively). This sacred *mantra* should be recited three times in a single breath.

The *Amrita-Nâda-Upanishad* (2ff.) recommends that one should mount the “chariot of the *om* sound,” make Vishnu one’s charioteer, and steer steadily toward the ultimate Reality. As one approaches the supreme Self, one should abandon the chariot and enter the splendor of the Self by means of the unsounded letter *m*. This is the silent, subtle part of *om*.

This *Upanishad* prescribes breath control, especially retention of the breath, as a means of controlling the senses and focusing the mind upon the inner world. It defines Yoga as the state of restraint over a period of twelve units or measures (*mâtrâ*), that is, twelve recitations of *om*. It promises the dawning of wisdom within three months of diligent and continuous practice, an inner vision of the deities within four months, and final liberation within a mere six months.

Of course, one must be able to sustain unwavering concentration for that span of time in order to succeed. For most people, this is an impossibility. For, as one Vedic seer-bard (*rishi*) complained in the *Rig-Veda* (10.33.2), “My mind flutters here and there like a bird.”

According to the *Dhyâna-Bindu-Upanishad* (15), the *pranava* is the bow, oneself is the arrow, and the Absolute is the target. This metaphor is first found in the *Mundaka-Upanishad* (2.2.3-4). It also calls the *pranava* imperishable and states that its “fine end” cannot be expressed. Another favorite metaphor, also recapitulated in the *Dhyâna-Bindu-Upanishad* (22), is that of oneself as the lower churning stick (*arani*) and the *om* sound as the upper churning stick. By practicing it, one can restrain one’s breath and dissolve the subtle sound (*nâda*).

Through constant cultivation of the subtle inner sound, declares the *Nâda-Bindu-Upanishad* (49), the karmic imprints (*vâsanâ*) left by our past volitional activity are eradicated. This leads to the merging of mind and life force. When the mind and the life force are motionless, the person abides as the subtle sound known as *brahma-târa-antara-nâda*, which can be translated as the “innermost sound that is the brahmic liberator (*târa*).”

A fascinating account of the sacred syllable is given in the *Nârada-Parivrâjaka-Upanishad* (8.1ff.), a medieval scripture. Here *om* is said to be threefold: the destructive *om*, the creative *om*, and the internal-and-external *om* (comprising the two former types). Another threefold division is: the brahmic *om*, the internal *om*, and the practical *om*. Then the text mentions two more sets: the external *om*, the *om* of the seers (*rishi*), and the *virât om* (consisting of the former two), as well as the destructive *om*, the Brahma *om*, and the *om* of the half-measure (*ardha-mâtrâ*).

This *Upanishad* goes on to explain these various forms of *om* as follows: The internal *om* is the single syllable *om*, which has eight parts—*a*, *u*, *m*, *ardha-mâtrâ*, *nâda*, *bindu*, *kalâ*, and *shakti*. The phoneme *a* is said to consist of 10,000 parts, the phoneme *u* of 1,000 parts, the phoneme *m* of 100 parts, and the *ardha-mâtrâ* of an infinite number of parts. The creative *om* is described as having qualities and the destructive *om* as having none. The *virât om* is said to consist of sixteen units (morae). In addition to the above-mentioned eight parts (which are explained below), the sacred syllable also has *kalâ-atîta*, *shânti*, *shânti-atîta* (written *shântyatîta*), *unmanî*, *mana-unmanî* (written *manomanî*), *purî*, *madhyamâ*, *pashyantî*, and *parâ*. This text also refers to 64 and 128 parts of the sacred syllable, but it makes the point that ultimately its designated object—the Absolute—is singular.

The Sacred Syllable Om in the Tantras

The above Upanishadic ideas lead to the speculations about *om* in the Tantric literature where concepts like *nâda*, *bindu*, *kalâ*, *shakti*, etc. abound. The

Shâradâ-Tilaka-Tantra (1.108) describes the cosmogonic process in terms of the production of sound as follows: From the supreme Shakti—pure Consciousness combined with the factor of lucidity (*sattva*)—comes the most subtle sound (*dhvani*), which is marked by a preeminence of the factors of lucidity and dynamism (*rajas*). Out of the *dhvani* develops the subtle sound (*nâda*), characterized by a mixture of the factors of lucidity, dynamism, and inertia (*tamas*). This subtle sound, in turn, gives rise to the energy of restriction (*nirodhikâ*), which has an excess of the factor of inertia. This ontic principle emanates the “half-moon” (*ardha-indu*, written *ardhendû*), which at this lower level again shows a predominance of the factor of lucidity. Out of it comes the vibratory source point (*bindu*), the immediate source of all letters and words. These form *mantras*, which are thus manifestations or vehicles of Shakti.

This scripture (1.8) further explains that the *bindu* is itself composed of three parts, viz. *nâda*, *bindu*, and *bîja* (“seed”). The first part has a predominance of Consciousness (i.e., Shiva), the second a preponderance of Energy (i.e., Shakti), and the third an equal presence of Consciousness and Energy. Such esoteric accounts of the evolution of sound remain relatively unintelligible outside of Tantric practice; however, they become increasingly meaningful as the practitioner makes progress on the path of *mantra-vidyâ* or “mantric science.”

The primordial sound is uncaused. In the language of Kashmiri Tantrism, it is pure vibration (*spanda*). According to the *Kirana-Tantra* (copied in 924 A.D.), *om* resides in the throat of Shiva and is the Divine itself. This scripture also describes it as the root of all *mantras*, stating that upon articulation it becomes *vâc* (“speech”), corresponding to the Greek concept of *logos*.

As we get higher up the ladder of ontic unfoldment, we encounter ever more subtle energies. Thus the *mâtrikâs* are the subtle alphabetic counterpart to their corresponding audible sounds; the *bindu* is subtler than the *mâtrikâs*, and the *nâda* is still more subtle.

As the *Yoga-Shikhâ-Upanishad* (2.21) states, “There is no *mantra* higher than the *nâda*.” In old graphic representations of the *om-kâra*, the *nâda* symbol is drawn or painted as an inverted crescent *above* the *bindu*, which suggests that the *nâda* is prior to the *bindu*. Later the crescent placed *below* the *bindu* emphasized that the *nâda* contains the *bindu*. Both graphic representations make the same point, however.

The *nâda* itself has various levels of subtle manifestation. According to the *Hamsa-Upanishad* (16) it manifests in ten different ways.

First there is the sound *cini*, then *cini-cini*. The third sounds like a bell, the fourth like the blast of a conch, whereas the fifth has the quality of a harp sound. The sixth through the ninth respectively resemble the sounds of cymbals, flute, kettle drum, and tabor. Only the tenth type, which is like a

thunder clap, should be cultivated. Various physiological symptoms are said to accompany these sounds.

Thus when the fourth sound is heard (in the right ear), one's head begins to shake, while the fifth sound causes the subtle center at the root of the palate to stream with the lunar ambrosia, and so on. The final sound alone is accompanied by identification with the supreme Absolute (*para-brahman*).

Some *Tantras* differentiate between *mahâ-nâda* (also called *nâda-anta*) and *nîrodhinî*, which is transmuted into *bindu*. This is also called *tri-bindu* because it is subdivided into *nâda*, *bindu*, and *bîja*. In this case, the *nâda* is correlated with *shiva*, the *bindu* with *shakti*, and the *bîja* with both Shiva and Shakti. The ultimate Reality itself can be viewed as a point origin, and as such is sometimes referred to as *para-bindu* or transcendental germinal point.

Om is the ultimate *bîja-mantra*. The idea of *om* being the root of other *mantras* may actually have given rise to whole idea of *bîja-mantras*, which are root sounds associated with particular deities.

They are special high-potency sounds or vibrations giving direct access to the spiritual realities for which they stand. The *Mantra-Yoga-Samhitâ* (71) calls *om* the "best of all *mantras*," adding that all other *mantras* receive their power from it. Thus *om* is prefixed or suffixed to numerous *mantras*:

Om namah shivâya. "Om. Obeisance to Shiva."

Om namo bhagavate. "Om. Obeisance to the Lord [Krishna or Vishnu]."

Om namo ganeshâya. "Om. Obeisance to [the elephant-headed] Ganesha."

Om namo nârâyânâya. "Om. Obeisance to Nârâyana [Vishnu]."

Om shânte prashânte sarva-krodha-upashamani svâhâ. "Om. At peace! Pacifying! All anger be subdued! Hail!" (Note pronunciation: *sarva-krodhopashamani*)

Om sac-cid-ekam brahma. "Om. The singular Being-Consciousness, the Absolute."

The *Mahânirvâna-Tantra* (3.13) calls the last-mentioned *brahma-mantra* the most excellent of all *mantras*, which promptly bestows not only liberation but also virtue, wealth, and pleasure.

The *para-bindu* mentioned above is said to have a masculine and a feminine side, which are respectively called *ham* and *sa*, thus yielding the sound or word *hamsa*, meaning "swan," but signifying the sound of the breath and indeed the breath itself as it enters and leaves the body. This natural motion of breathing, which is calculated to occur 21,600 times every day, is called spontaneous recitation (*sahaja-japa*) or unrecited recitation (*ajapa-japa*).

The *hamsa* also stands for the psyche (*jīva*), which lives through the breath. This spontaneous *mantra* is understood as *so'ham* or "I am he," that is, "I am Shiva, the ultimate Reality." But ignorance prevents us from realizing this; hence the need for spiritual practice.

The *Yoga-Bīja* (156), a comparatively late Hatha-Yoga text, states that when the *prāna* enters the central channel, the natural *mantra* reverses itself from *hamsa* to *so'ham*. Experientially, however, this is not different from the primordial *om*, the root *mantra* that reverberates through the entire cosmos.

The *Mantra-Yoga- Samhitā* (73) has this stanza:

When people hear the *pranava* they hear the Absolute itself.
 When they utter the *pranava* they go to the abode of the Absolute.
 He who perceives the *pranava* sees the state of the Absolute.
 He who always has the *pranava* in his mind has the form of the Absolute.

Conclusion

This brief discourse on the history and nature of the sacred syllable *om* is meant to give the reader a better appreciation of the metaphysical complexities surrounding this age-old *mantra* and of some of the profound spiritual practices associated with it. It would be possible to write several volumes on this subject, just as it would be possible to provide an overview of India's spiritual traditions based solely on the theory and practice of the *om* sound. What has been presented here is but a minute fraction of the teachings about *om* developed over a span of five millennia.

The Yoga tradition is very rich and immensely sophisticated; yet its various schools and their respective paths are at core very simple, and in their simplicity they have many features in common. Above all, they lead to the same goal, which is the transcendence of the ego-personality, however this may be conceived and expressed in words. As the *Rig-Veda* (1.164.46) declared five millennia or more ago, "There is a single Truth but the wise call it by different names."

AUM TAT SAT

Notes

- 1 M. Müller, *Three Lectures on the Vedānta Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1894), p. 116.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 See Swami Sankarananda, *The Rigvedic Culture of the Pre-Historic Indus* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1942), p. 75.
- 4 See V.-L. Mitra, *The Yoga-Vasishtha-Maharamayana* (Calcutta: Bonnerjee and Co., 1891), vol. 1., p. 39. Apparently, Mitra got this idea from Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of Brahma Samaj.

5 Ibid., p. 46. In linking om with Amen, Mitra took his cue from the great Sanskrit scholar Rajendra Lala Mitra.

6 See, e.g., G. Feuerstein, S. Kak, and D. Frawley, *In Search of the Cradle of Civilization: New Light on Ancient India* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1996).

7 M. Müller, op. cit., p. 116.

Original © 1999 by Georg Feuerstein.

Copyright ©2006 by Georg Feuerstein. All rights reserved.

Reproduction in any form requires prior permission from Traditional Yoga Studies. <http://www.traditionalyogastudies.com/>