

Om

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Om is the sacred syllable of invocation and consecration, also expressed as the trilateral *Aum*. In Theosophical teaching it points toward the Soundless Sound, the keynote of Nature and the relation of spiritual consciousness to manifestation. Its audible utterance is one expression of a meaning that exceeds ordinary hearing. Professor Iyer approaches it through the cosmic ground of sound and through the intention with which a human being begins an action. These two approaches belong together: recollection of the Whole is to become effective in the conduct of a life.

In “Wisdom in Action,” the discussion begins with *Om Tat Sat*, the threefold designation of the Supreme Being given in the *Bhagavad Gita*. *Om* precedes acts of sacrifice, generosity and spiritual discipline. *Tat* directs attention toward That which cannot be possessed, while *Sat* concerns truth and the steadiness of a worthy undertaking. *Om* gathers the intention at the beginning. The act is placed in relation to a universal purpose before the personality begins calculating what it will receive.

Professor Iyer connects this consecration with Karma Yoga, action freed from attachment to its fruits. A person still needs to consider consequences and carry out the work competently. Freedom from attachment concerns the personal claim upon the outcome. The more disinterested the purpose, the more clearly one may attend to the wider field of people and circumstances involved. An inward recollection that leaves the action careless would defeat the purpose of consecration.

The same essay describes *Om* as present in every atom and throughout the vestures of a human being. It is contemplated as the great keynote of Nature, rather than as something imported into life from outside. To consecrate oneself to it as *Atman* is, in Professor Iyer's image, to become a sphere of light filled with an oceanic pulsation. The image asks that the personality become receptive to a universal rhythm. It gives no basis for magnifying a private claim to spiritual importance.

Aum unfolds this unity through three letters and the silence in which their sounding resolves. Theosophical interpretations relate the triad to creative, preserving and regenerative functions, and to the states through which consciousness passes. Such correspondences are aids to contemplation. They should be held in the context of the teaching that develops them, without assuming that one scheme exhausts every meaning of the syllable. The silence is essential

because the expression points beyond the differentiated sounds through which it becomes audible.

H.P. Blavatsky's glossary relates *Om* or *Aum* to invocation, benediction and affirmation, and associates its letters with Vedic and sacred fire symbolism. Professor Iyer extends the contemplation through the Great Breath, the rhythm of manifestation and withdrawal. Physical breathing gives a familiar analogy for that rhythm. The Great Breath itself belongs to a metaphysical account of cosmic life; it cannot be reduced to the respiration of an immense organism. The analogy directs attention toward periodicity and the living ground of change.

Om also joins the symbolism of sound with spiritual light. In "The Scope of Self-Consciousness," Professor Iyer relates Akashic sound and the primordial light of the Central Spiritual Sun to *Aum* and to the worlds invoked in the *Gayatri*. *Daiviprakriti*, the Light of the *Logos*, gives this comparison its spiritual setting. The student contemplates different approaches to one formative mystery, rather than treating ordinary sound and visible light as interchangeable physical things.

These distinctions matter because a sacred syllable can easily become a possession of the personality. One may enjoy the atmosphere of a practice while overlooking the motives it was intended to purify. The relevant question is what becomes of attention afterward. Is a neglected duty remembered? Can another person's explanation be heard more patiently? Does the desire for recognition interfere less with the work? Such questions keep the contemplation connected with the purpose articulated in the sources.

Consider a volunteer opening a room for a meeting. There are chairs to arrange, a doorway to keep accessible and newcomers who may need help finding their place. A moment of inward recollection can gather these apparently small tasks into one intention: to make the room useful and welcoming. The value of that recollection appears in the attention given to the work. Consecration enters the placement of a chair and the patience of a greeting, where the intention is actually tested.

The example also shows why beginning well requires listening. The volunteer may have assumed what others need and then learn that the arrangement makes participation difficult for someone. Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception means allowing this new information to reshape the work. Recollection of the Whole should make the worker more responsive to particular people. A universal purpose remains incomplete while an avoidable exclusion is ignored.

Human Solidarity gives this discipline a reach beyond any one form of worship. Theosophy invokes a common spiritual ground while acknowledging the many languages, symbols and

convictions through which people approach life. Remembering *Om* does not require asking everyone else to adopt the syllable. Its ethical meaning can appear in the respect shown to another's conscience and in the willingness to cooperate in a useful task. A common good can be served without making uniformity a condition of fellowship.

Speech belongs to the same field of responsibility. A hurried assurance, an exaggerated account or an unnecessary harshness can undo the care with which an action began. The contemplation of sacred sound asks for attention to the words that follow it. Truthfulness includes accuracy and proportion; kindness includes considering whether a listener can understand what is meant. Silence has value when it allows such judgment to mature, and speech has value when it gives needed understanding a clear form.

The relation of *Om* to *Manas* and *Buddhi* can be approached through this purification of attention. *Manas*, the thinking principle, is capable of scattering itself among images and anticipations. A sustained spiritual subject gives it a direction beyond immediate preference. *Buddhi* represents the deeper discernment toward which that attention is turned. A quieter mental state can assist the work, but quiet alone is not its completion. Understanding must enter motive and action if the instruments are to become more useful to the soul.

Professor Iyer describes *Om* as encompassing beginnings, middles and endings. Recollection can therefore continue after an undertaking has begun and after its visible work is finished. One can review an error without making it a permanent identity, and appreciate a success without treating it as private spiritual credit. The intention is renewed as circumstances change. This continuity joins study, work and the spaces of silence within a day.

The practice also permits a simple return when attention wanders. Discovering distraction is already an opportunity to remember the intention. The student need not turn each lapse into a judgment of spiritual worth. A quiet renewal, followed by the next necessary action, preserves the continuity that the contemplation is meant to establish.

Om gathers the mind before the offering and recalls it to the life in which the offering is made. The syllable is sounded, its vibration passes and the silence remains available for attention. What follows gives the contemplation its human expression: a promise kept, a correction received, a duty completed with care. The sacred keynote is approached through the steady education of the person who would listen to it.

Glossary

Agni — Fire; the Vedic divine figure associated with sacred fire and creative spiritual energy.

Akshara — The imperishable; in the quotation, the enduring spiritual ground of sacred sound.

Atman — The universal spiritual Self; *Atma* is another form, and Atmic means pertaining to this principle.

Bhagavad Gita — The Hindu sacred dialogue between *Krishna* and Arjuna, concerned with spiritual knowledge, devotion and action.

Bhur, bhuvah and svah — The three worlds invoked in the *Gayatri*; Professor Iyer relates them to visible, inward invisible and celestial degrees of manifestation.

Buddhi — The spiritual soul or faculty of intuitive discernment; Buddhic means pertaining to it.

Correspondence — A meaningful relation between different orders or levels; an instrument of analogy that requires attention to context.

Daiviprakriti — Divine Nature or the Light of the *Logos*; a primordial spiritual radiance in the cited metaphysical account.

Dharma — Sustaining law, duty, or right relation; the precise meaning depends upon the context.

Discernment — The capacity to distinguish what is true, fitting and spiritually significant; Buddhic discernment transcends personal preference.

Divine Darkness — The unmanifest spiritual ground or boundless potential, distinguished from ignorance, evil and ordinary absence of visible light.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening understanding to include more relationships, consequences and the needs of others.

Esoteric — Pertaining to an inward or occult interpretation of a teaching, distinguished from its outward formulation.

Father-Mother — A symbolic expression for complementary spiritual and substantial powers held together in a primordial unity; also written Mother-Father.

Gayatri — A sacred Vedic invocation of spiritual illumination.

Great Breath — A symbol of the cyclic manifestation and withdrawal of universes.

Hiranyagarbha — The golden womb or cosmic egg; a symbol of the potentiality of manifestation.

Human Solidarity — The shared dignity and interdependence of human beings, expressed through responsibility for one another's welfare.

Interstices — Spaces between parts or forms.

Karma — The continuity of action, cause and consequence; karmic law gives moral responsibility a wider field of relations.

Karma Yoga — The discipline of action performed as duty or offering, without attachment to personal reward.

Kriya — Action or activity; in Professor Iyer's quoted discussion, a creative act dedicated to the universal good.

Kumaras — Spiritual progenitors associated with the awakening of self-conscious mind; *Kumara* means youth, and *Kumaric* means pertaining to these beings.

Logos — The Word or principle of divine expression; *Logoi* is the plural and *Logoic* means pertaining to it. Classifications distinguish several stages of manifestation.

Manas — The self-conscious thinking principle; in its higher sense, the reincarnating individuality. *Manasic* means pertaining to this principle.

Manifestation — The expression of differentiated existence from a subtler or unmanifest condition.

Maruts — The Vedic storm-gods associated with *Indra*; Blavatsky gives several occult interpretations, including passions and powers of Nature.

Narayana — A divine name associated with the spiritual source brooding over the primordial waters; related to *Ishwara* in the quoted interpretation.

Oeaothoo — A sacred name associated with the Father-Mother and the septenary root of manifestation.

Om / Aum — The sacred syllable of invocation and consecration; *Om* emphasizes its unity and *Aum* its triliteral expression in the cited interpretations.

Personality — The temporary identity, habits and instruments associated with a particular life, distinguished from enduring spiritual individuality.

Pre-cosmic — Prior to the emergence of a manifested cosmos, within the metaphysical account.

Sat — Being or Reality; in the cited passage, the eternal and changeless.

Self-consciousness — The capacity to reflect upon one's own experience, intention and action; the sources distinguish personal and more universal degrees.

Septenary — Sevenfold; used of the human constitution and of cosmic principles or hierarchies.

Shabda Brahman — *Brahman* as sacred sound or Word; *Shabdabrahman* is the joined form in the cited passages.

Spiritual Sun — The inward source of spiritual illumination contemplated beyond the visible solar orb in Theosophical symbolism.

Tat — That; a designation directing attention beyond limiting descriptions and personal claims.

Triad — A group of three related principles or powers.

Varuna — A Vedic divine figure associated with the cosmic waters; the *Om* quotation relates the name to water symbolism.

Vedas — Ancient Indian sacred texts associated with spiritual knowledge and revelation; Vedic means pertaining to them.

Vesture — A sheath, vehicle or instrument through which consciousness is expressed; vestures is the plural.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — “Wisdom in Action”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 392.

“This is the ancient and sacred mode of consecration of karma or action. The more disinterested one's practice of Karma Yoga, the more that action is itself a disinterested flow of benevolence, the more one begins to gain clues into the magical connections of the workings of karma in the large. Freed from a concern with one's own karma, one may begin to discern the karma of nations, continents, races and human beings whom one wishes to serve and help.”

Meditation thought: Consider an action whose benefit extends beyond its performer. What personal claim can be released while responsibility for the work remains?

2. R.N. Iyer — “Wisdom in Action”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, pp. 392–393.

“OM is the Soundless Sound in boundless space – space beyond all subjects and objects, beyond all qualities, space which is no-thing and the fullness of the void. But OM is also in every atom, stirring within the minutest centres imaginable and in all the interstices of empty space. It is also a reverberation of one's own being, omnipresent in all the vestures, the great keynote of Nature.”

Meditation thought: Hold the cosmic and the minute together in contemplation. What changes when no scale is treated as outside the sacred field?

3. R.N. Iyer — “Wisdom in Action”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 393.

“To be able to bring it before consciousness and to consecrate oneself to it as the *Atman* or eternal spirit is to reduce oneself to a zero, a sphere of light filled with the oceanic pulsation of the OM at the cosmic level.”

Meditation thought: Let the sphere of light suggest receptivity. How might a quieter claim to importance improve the service already before you?

4. R.N. Iyer — “Wisdom in Action”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 393.

“It encompasses all beginnings, middles and endings. It includes all creative, supportive and regenerative action. Most human action is not creative, but mechanical and routinized, half-hearted and preoccupied, based upon indirect calculations of consequences in the future or guilt over the past.”

Meditation thought: Review the beginning, course and completion of one task. At which stage did attention give way to habit or anxious calculation?

5. R.N. Iyer — “The Scope of Self-Consciousness”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 280.

“Akashic sound and the primordial light of the Central Spiritual Sun are a primordial vibration reflected in the *AUM*, and also mirrored in *bhur*, *bhuvah* and *svah*, the three worlds invoked at the beginning of the *Gayatri*. Ultimately, that light is *Daiviprakriti*, awakened within *Hiranyagarbha* by the first ray of the Divine Darkness in the pre-cosmic dawn.”

Meditation thought: Sound and light here name spiritual correspondences. Contemplate their relation while keeping the metaphor distinct from ordinary sensory measurements.

6. R.N. Iyer — “The Scope of Self-Consciousness”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 280.

“Owing to the gift of self-consciousness through the *Kumaras*, every human being has the potent capacity of sacred speech. Each and every human being may meditate upon the *Gayatri*, and through the creative potency of sound evoke the spiritual light of the Invisible Sun on behalf of all beings.”

Meditation thought: Think of sacred speech as a responsibility available to every person. Which use of words could serve a wider good today?

7. R.N. Iyer — “Manasadharma”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 361.

“The *Logos* is itself the seven-vowelled sign, the Great Breath crystallized into the WORD. It is *OEAHOHO*, the Father-Mother of the gods, the single, triple and septenary root from which all proceeds. To credit man as the living septenary symbol of the *Logos* is to become ready to use the reverberation of *OEAHOHO*, meditating upon it, becoming one with it and understanding its threefold pronunciations.”

Meditation thought: The seven-vowelled sign directs thought toward differentiated unity. What preparation would help a symbol become more than an admired formula?

8. R.N. Iyer — “Space and Self-Consciousness”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 70.

“The phrase ‘Great Breath’ is used because the original Sanskritic etymology of the word ‘breath’ implies the primal vivifying power of expansion at the root of manifestation. Breath is connected with the divine perpetual motion of the *Atman*; even the single letter A conveys the meaning. If divine spirit is in perpetual motion, it involves a perpetual breathing in and breathing out. It cannot be visualized without the Ah and the indrawing into the M. Therefore, a deific potency grounded in the very process of becoming produces the cosmos, and this is linked to the attempt, in meditation, to transcend all forms and all limiting conceptions of motion, space and deity through the *AUM*.”

Meditation thought: Follow the breathing analogy toward rhythm and return. Notice the point at which a bodily image can no longer contain the contemplation.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Dakshinamurti”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 16.

“In Hindu iconography *Narayana* holds the conch shell, symbolizing his ability to rock the earth through sound, the potency of the *Logos* as *Shabdabrahman*, the Soundless Sound of the indestructible *Akshara* behind and beyond and within all the spaces of ‘the *AUM* throughout eternal ages’.”

Meditation thought: Consider the conch as a spiritual summons. What neglected obligation might be heard when attention is recalled from personal noise?

10. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 241, “Om or Aum”.

“*Om* or *Aum* (Sk.). A mystic syllable, the most solemn of all words in India.”

Meditation thought: Begin with the compact definition. What intention would make an utterance an act of recollection rather than a familiar sound alone?

11. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 242, “Om or Aum”.

“It is a compound of three letters a, u, m, which, in the popular belief, are typical of the three *Vedas*, also of three gods — A (*Agni*) V (*Varuna*) and M (*Maruts*) or Fire, Water and Air. In esoteric philosophy these are the three sacred fires, or the ‘triple fire’ in the Universe and Man, besides many other things.”

Meditation thought: Let the triadic symbolism invite careful comparison. Preserve the source's particular correspondences without making them an exhaustive explanation of *Aum*.

12. R.N. Iyer — “Wisdom in Action”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 393.

“Since all beings must act out of internal necessity or dharma, it makes sense to set aside certain actions – *kriya* – as creative contributions to the universal good. Far from being grudging or mechanical, such performance of duty through action flows with a serene and steady rhythm, rooted in an ability to abstract from the outward particulars of acts and a freedom from illusion that is gained through meditation upon the OM.”

Meditation thought: Choose one modest act for the common good. Can its performance become steady and willing, with less inward bargaining for reward?