

Pranava

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Pranava means the sacred Word, *Aum* or *Om*. H.P. Blavatsky gives the compact definition: *Pranava* is “a sacred word, equivalent to *Aum*.” Professor Iyer develops this definition through the relation of sacred sound to meditation. *Pranava* is not merely a chant, religious formula, or audible sound. It is the Soundless Sound, the symbol of the Supreme Spirit, the bow of meditation, and the sacred vibration through which the mind may be drawn toward *Brahman*.

The *Mundaka Upanishad* gives the governing image: “The *pranava* (*Aum*) is the bow; the arrow is the self; *Brahman* is said to be the mark.” This means that *Pranava* is an instrument of spiritual direction. The self must be sharpened by meditation, steadied by heedfulness, and released toward the deathless center. The sacred Word is not used for personal advantage; it is used to align consciousness with the Supreme Self.

The image also distinguishes the instrument, the act of attention and its aim. The bow cannot choose the target for the archer. A sacred syllable can be repeated while thought remains occupied with rivalry or reward. Heedfulness asks that the whole intention be brought into relation with what is contemplated. The arrow's entry into the mark suggests the overcoming of separation in knowing, rather than the acquisition of an object to be kept. The language directs aspiration while resisting the wish to make spiritual attainment a possession.

Pranava is a name of *Om*, and these essays approach the same sacred syllable through different emphases. Here the emphasis falls on its use as a sustained subject of recollection. The relation to *Nada Brahman* gives that use its depth: the audible syllable points toward a resonance that exceeds ordinary hearing. The sound and the silence are contemplated together. Neither the loudness of the utterance nor the number of repetitions, taken alone, establishes the quality of the attention brought to it.

Professor Iyer teaches that celebration of *Om* is the central thread of the spiritual path. *Om* is the highest one can conceive, and the unbroken current of meditation on the true Self is the supreme resource behind manifestation and THAT which is beyond manifestation. *Om* is *Nada Brahman*, divine resonance, the vibrant vesture of the unmanifested *Logos*.

At its highest level, *Aum* is the Soundless Sound. It is the medium of transmission for the Ineffable Light, the origin of sound in manifestation, the leader of prayers and chants, and the most important subject of meditation. The sound is sacred, but it points beyond itself. The silence before, within, and after it is the hidden womb of sound.

As *Om*, it is the single homogeneous sound, the symbol of the Supreme Spirit, *Ishvara*. As *Aum*, it is the triune Word: A, U, M, together with the crucial silent stoppage. These letters signify the three *Vedas* and *Vedanta*, the three primary states of consciousness — waking, dreaming, and deep sleep — and the fourth state, *turiya*, supreme spiritual wakefulness. The silence after the sound is therefore essential; it points beyond the three states into the fourth.

Aum also signifies the three divisions of the universe invoked in the *Gayatri*: *bhur*, the visible realm; *bhuvah*, the invisible indwelling counterpart; and *svah*, the celestial and transcendental realm. *Pranava* is therefore both microcosmic and macrocosmic. It maps human consciousness and cosmic manifestation at once.

In its highest meaning, *Aum* embraces the entire cosmos as emanated and controlled by the Supreme Spirit, *Paramatman*, a primeval radiation from *Parabrahman*. It is both the One and the Three-in-One, the source of all vibrations involved on all planes of life.

The *Maitrayana Brahmana Upanishad* calls *Om* the *Udgitha*, the *Pranava*, “the leader, the bright, the sleepless, free from old age and death,” placed in the cave of the heart. This brings the cosmic teaching inward. *Pranava* is not merely pronounced by the tongue. It must be discovered in the consecrated temple of the human form.

This makes the term practical. Most people live among scattered sounds: outward noise, inward commentary, emotional turbulence, fear, repetition, and desire. *Pranava* gives a deeper tone. Before speech, one may recollect *Om* and ask whether the word is aligned with truth. Before reaction, one may remember the silence after *Aum*. Before beginning work, one may inwardly return to the sound that links duty with the deathless Self.

Professor Iyer suggests meditating on *Aum* at dawn, midday, sunset, and before sleep. These four moments become opportunities to reaffirm the dateless and deathless, the indestructible and immortal Self, and THAT which transcends the cosmos. The day itself becomes a rhythm of recollection.

Pranava is also ethical. Sacred sound cannot be separated from sacred conduct. A careless word disturbs the subtle atmosphere; a truthful word can heal; a compassionate silence may be more faithful to *Pranava* than many uttered syllables. Meditation on *Om* asks speech, thought, breath, motive, and action to become more transparent to *Buddhi*.

The four moments suggested by Professor Iyer can be understood as invitations to continuity. At the beginning of the day, one considers the duties ahead; at midday, one recollects the intention already tested by events. Sunset gives an occasion to review the quality of action, and the approach to sleep allows unfinished reactions to be viewed more calmly. A person whose

work follows another schedule can still understand the principle of deliberate return. The value lies in the attention renewed, not in making an outward timetable an object of anxiety.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception keeps that attention from narrowing into concern with one's own progress. A student may finish a period of recollection and then discover an unexpected duty. The question is whether the remembered purpose can enter that duty. Perhaps someone needs an explanation repeated patiently, or a neglected commitment needs to be fulfilled. The interruption then reveals what meditation has prepared. A more reliable response gives the sacred word a place in the day that repetition alone could not supply.

In this way, *Pranava* helps *Manas* turn toward *Buddhi*. The lower mind scatters itself through opinions, images, fears, and self-reference. *Pranava* gathers the mind into one sound, one center, one hidden light. Yet because *Aum* embraces the cosmos and dwells in the heart, it widens as it concentrates. It draws the larger circle by reminding the student that the inmost Self is also the inmost Self of all.

This is where Human Solidarity and Universal Brotherhood naturally enter. If *Om* is the symbol of the Supreme Spirit, and if the sacred Word embraces the cosmos, then no human being is spiritually isolated. The cave of the heart is not private property. The soundless source within oneself is not different in essence from the soundless source within all beings.

Heedfulness includes recognizing distraction without surrendering the aim. If attention has wandered, it can be recalled; if conduct has contradicted the intention, an appropriate correction can be made. The image of the bow encourages steadiness through such renewal. It gives a direction for effort without making every interruption a verdict upon the whole path.

The living image is the sacred bow of *Aum*. The self is the arrow; *Brahman* is the mark; meditation is the drawing; heedfulness is the release. The sound arises, expands, resolves, and becomes silence. In that silence the heart remembers the dateless and deathless Self, the One Sound behind all sounds.

Glossary

Archetype — An ideal pattern or prototype contemplated as prior to its particular expressions; archetypal means pertaining to such patterns.

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

Brahma — The creative deity or *Logos* when masculine; in the quoted designation *Brahma* (neuter), the term refers to *Brahman*, the unconditioned spiritual ground.

Brahman — The supreme spiritual reality; distinguish the neuter *Brahman* from *Brahma*, the creative deity or *Logos*.

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

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

Gayatri — A sacred Vedic invocation of spiritual illumination.

Hermetic — Pertaining to the wisdom tradition associated with Hermes; used by Professor Iyer in discussing spiritual knowledge and meditation.

Hierophantic — Pertaining to a revealer or interpreter of sacred mysteries; hierophant names such a teacher.

Homogeneous / heterogeneous — Homogeneous means of a uniform nature; heterogeneous means differentiated or diverse. The quotations also use homogenous and heterogenous.

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

Ideation — The activity of thought or the expression of ideal patterns; Divine Ideation concerns cosmic intelligence in the cited teaching.

Ineffable — Beyond adequate expression in words.

Ishvara — The Lord or manifested divine principle; also written *Ishwara*, *Isvara* or *Eswara* in the sources.

Jivatman — The embodied spiritual Self or individual centre, described here as mirroring the Supreme Self, *Paramatman*.

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

Mahatma — Great Soul; in the specific Theosophical usage, an Adept of high spiritual and moral attainment. *Mahatmas* is the plural.

Maitrayana Brahmana Upanishad — A Hindu sacred text quoted by Professor Iyer in describing *Pranava* as the deathless sacred sound in the heart.

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

Mandukya — The *Mandukya Upanishad*, invoked in the quotation for the Reality beyond thought and expression.

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

Mundaka Upanishad — A Hindu sacred text that supplies the image of *Pranava* as bow, the self as arrow and *Brahman* as the mark.

Nada — Spiritual sound or resonance; in the cited passage, *the Voice of the Silence*.

Nada Brahman — The Divine as Soundless Sound; contemplated by Professor Iyer in unmanifest essence and differentiated expression.

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

Parabrahmam / Parabrahman — The unconditioned Absolute beyond subject and object; *Parabrahm* is another form of the name.

Paramatman — The Supreme or universal Self, contemplated beyond personal identity and mirrored in the embodied Self, *Jivatman*.

Planes — Levels or orders of consciousness and substance within the Theosophical account of manifestation.

Pranava — A name of the sacred word *Om* or *Aum*; developed through its relation to meditation and the Supreme Self.

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

Sat-Chit-Ananda — Truth or being, consciousness or ideation, and bliss; a triadic designation of the Supreme Reality in the quoted interpretation.

Shiva — A divine figure of transformation; also written *Siva*, and associated with *Rudra* and the *Kumaras* in the sources.

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

Tetraktys — The sacred four in Pythagorean and Theosophical symbolism; also written *Tetractys*.

Transcendental — Exceeding the conditions of ordinary sense experience; the particular meaning depends on the context.

Triad — A group of three related principles or powers.

Trimurti — A threefold divine expression; the cited contexts use *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva*, or the triad of *Agni*, *Vayu* and *Surya*.

Turiya — The fourth state, described as supreme spiritual wakefulness beyond ordinary waking, dreaming and deep sleep; *turya* is another spelling.

Udgitha — The sacred chant or sounding; a designation related to *Om* and *Pranava* in the quoted Upanishadic passage.

Universal Brotherhood — The spiritual kinship of beings, expressed ethically through care extending beyond personal or sectarian boundaries.

Upanishads — Hindu sacred philosophical texts concerned with the Self, spiritual reality and liberation; *Upanishad* is the singular.

Vedanta — A family of Indian philosophical teachings grounded in the *Upanishads*; its classifications are compared with Theosophical ones.

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.

Vishnu — The divine preserver in Hindu tradition; *Mahavishnu* or *Maha Vishnu* emphasizes the cosmic scope of that principle.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 263, “Pranava”.

“*Pranava* (Sk.). A sacred word, equivalent to *Aum*.”

Meditation thought: *Pranava* names the sacred word *Aum*. Let that equivalence remain clear as the meditation develops its many implications.

2. *Mundaka Upanishad*, quoted by R.N. Iyer — “Dateless and Deathless”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 102.

“The *pranava* (AUM) is the bow; the arrow is the self; *Brahman* is said to be the mark. With heedfulness It is to be penetrated. Become one with It as the arrow in the mark.”

Meditation thought: Consider the bow, the arrow and the mark together. What does heedfulness contribute that repetition of a syllable alone cannot provide?

3. R.N. Iyer — “Dateless and Deathless”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 104.

“Celebration of the OM is the central thread of the spiritual path and of the quintessential Hermetic current. Celebration of hymns of praise to the OM is the axis around which the entire work of the Great Lodge of *Mahatmas* turns, and it is a celebration on behalf of and among intrepid individuals who are willing to become men and women of meditation, deeply conscious of what the highest level of OM represents.”

Meditation thought: Reflect on celebration as a sustained orientation of life. How could a moment of recollection become continuous with useful action?

4. R.N. Iyer — “Dateless and Deathless”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 104.

“The OM is the highest that one can conceive. The unbroken current of meditation of the true Self is also the supreme resource behind the whole of manifestation and THAT which is beyond manifestation itself. It is *Nada Brahman*, the divine resonance that becomes the vibrant vesture of the divine radiance of the Light of the unmanifested *Logos*.”

Meditation thought: The resonance is described as a vesture of radiance. What does that relationship suggest about expression and its spiritual ground?

5. R.N. Iyer — “Dateless and Deathless”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 104.

“At its highest level, *AUM* is the Soundless Sound which becomes the medium of transmission for the Ineffable Light. The *AUM* is also the origin of sound in the world of manifestation, the most sacred syllable, the hierophantic leader of all prayers and chants, and the most important subject of all meditation.”

Meditation thought: Contemplate sound in relation to the silence it cannot exhaust. What habit of listening must become more patient?

6. R.N. Iyer — “Dateless and Deathless”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 104.

“As a single letter uttered with one articulation, it is the OM, the symbol of the Supreme Spirit. One should imagine this as a constant, omnipresent sounding, capable of being consciously sounded within the consecrated temple of the human form.”

Meditation thought: Imagine the human form as a consecrated instrument. Which motive would help its capacities serve the intention being remembered?

7. R.N. Iyer — “Dateless and Deathless”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 104.

“Considered as the trilateral word *AUM*, consisting of the three letters A, U and M, as well as the crucial silent stoppage, it implies all the archetypal trinities and triplicities inherent in the manifesting *Tetraktys*. It signifies the three *Vedas* and the *Vedanta*. It connotes the three primary states of human consciousness, which are at one simple level waking, sleeping and deep sleep; it also includes *turiya*, the state of supreme spiritual wakefulness.”

Meditation thought: Give attention to the silent stoppage as well as the three letters. How does this alter a purely phonetic understanding of *Aum*?

8. R.N. Iyer — “Dateless and Deathless”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, pp. 104–105.

“It is essentially the *Trimurti*, the three ruling deities *Brahmā*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva*, the mighty agents of creation, preservation and destruction, the three principal attributes of the One Supreme Reality, which is *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, the fusion of Truth, Ideation and Bliss. In this sense, *AUM* embraces the entire cosmos as emanated and controlled by the Supreme Spirit, the *Paramatman* which is a pristine, primeval radiation from the Divine Ground, *Parabrahman*.”

Meditation thought: Hold the triad of cosmic functions within a greater unity. What is gained by considering the whole before assigning its parts?

9. *Maitrayana Brahmana Upanishad*, quoted by R.N. Iyer — “Dateless and Deathless”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 105.

“The *Udgitha*, called *Pranava*, the leader, the bright, the sleepless, free from old age and death, three-footed, consisting of three letters and likewise to be known as fivefold, placed in the cave of the heart.”

Meditation thought: Let the cave of the heart suggest inwardness without enclosure. How can the deathless image support a wider concern for living beings?

10. R.N. Iyer — “Dateless and Deathless”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 105.

“Thus, one could give oneself four significant moments during the day, four precious opportunities to reaffirm the dateless and deathless, the bright, the bodiless, the indestructible, the immortal and invulnerable as one's inmost Self and the inmost Self of all that exists, but also as *THAT* (*TAT*) which transcends the cosmos.”

Meditation thought: Choose a natural interval in the day for recollection. What intention should be renewed there and tested in the action that follows?

11. R.N. Iyer — “Mental Posture”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 317.

“Behind this masquerade there is the Soundless Sound. The *Mandukya Upanishad* says that eventually we truly come to recognize, to revere, and to renounce everything for the sake of the One — OM TAT SAT — That which is beyond all colours and forms, all limitations, all labels, all distinctions, all beginnings, changes and endings.”

Meditation thought: The passage asks thought to reach beyond labels. Which label has become an obstacle to seeing a person or event more clearly?

12. R.N. Iyer — “The Nachiketas Flame”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 375.

“AUM is the sacred bow, the arrow is spiritual resolve, and the fixed target is the indestructible, invisible, formless, supreme Self (*Paramatman*), mirrored in the embodied Self (*Jivatman*), the divine Triad within and beyond one's manifest identity.”

Meditation thought: Spiritual resolve gives the arrow its direction. What would steady that resolve without turning attainment into a possession?