

The OM Mala

Meanings of the Mystic Sound



Nityānanda Mīśra

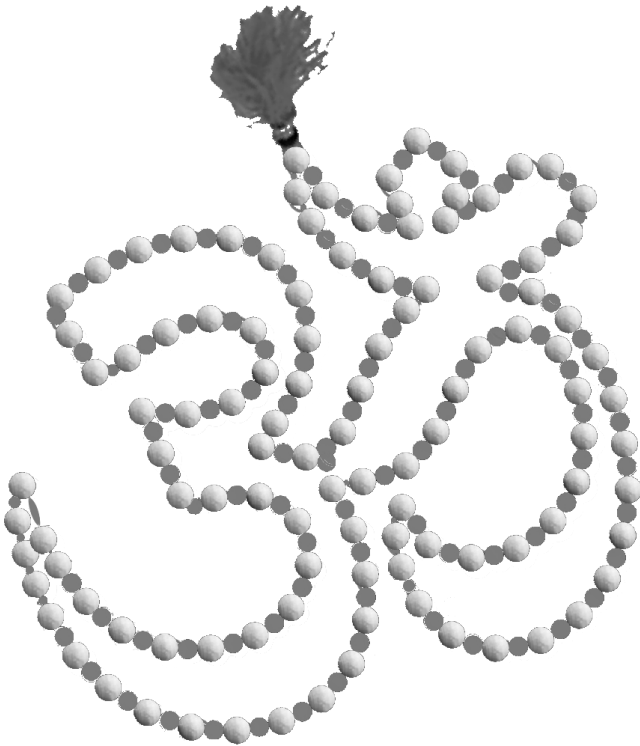


THE OM MALA
MEANINGS OF THE MYSTIC SOUND



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To my mother

“I wish I never get *moksha*
but am born again and again,
each time as your beloved child
your godly love may I attain.”



Note to the reader

As I expect this book to be read by laypersons as well as scholars, I follow some practices for better readability—

1) A simple Roman transliteration scheme without diacritics is used. Exceptions are the second line of the section headings, the etymologies, and the full derivation of the word OM in the last section where IAST diacritics are used for clarity.

2) Devanagari is used in section headings and at some places in the explanations to distinguish between words with the same Roman transliterations.

3) The book has no footnotes or endnotes. Instead, the notes are separately published as a PDF under my Academia page at <http://independent.academia.edu/MisraNityanand>.

4) Each section in the book is typeset completely on a single page or on a spread (facing verso and recto pages).

5) The *Bhagavad Gita* is referred to as simply *Gita*.

6) The *Srimadbhagavata Purana* is referred to as *Bhagavata Purana*, while the *Devi Bhagavata Purana* is referred to as *Devi Bhagavata*.

7) The *Brihad Yogi Yajnavalkya Smriti* is referred to as simply *Yogi Yajnavalkya Smriti*.

8) ‘Veda-s’ and ‘Vedic texts’ refer to the *Samhita-s*, the *Brahmana-s*, the *Aranyaka-s*, and the *Upanishad-s*.



Preface

This is a special book, for it is written to explain just one word—OM. And yet, this book is not even the tip of the iceberg. I have spent hardly a few months on this book, whereas even a lifetime is not sufficient to understand OM. The *Madhyandina Samhita* of the Shukla Yajur Veda ends by proclaiming that OM is the Brahman, the sky. The metaphor is apt, for there is no limit to the infinite sky and likewise there is no limit to the meanings of OM. OM is the topic of deliberation in many Upanishad-s, the crest-jewels of Indian philosophy. OM is described vividly in the Smriti-s, which follow the meaning of the Veda-s—as Kalidasa states in the *Raghuvamsha*. OM is praised in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the two unparalleled epics of India. OM is described in many ways in the Purana-s, the bedrock of Hinduism and Indian culture. OM is extolled in the philosophy of Yoga, the gift of India to mankind. OM is celebrated in Tantra, the esoteric and mystical spiritual path. OM is the object of devotion in Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism—traditions enlivened by *bhakti*. OM is a part of chants in Jainism and Buddhism and is also prominent as the one word, or *Ik Onkar*, in Sikhism. OM commands the reverence of all major sects of Hinduism and all major religions of India. No book, therefore, can even remotely present a complete picture of this mystic sound which yogi-s “always meditate upon”, as a popular verse says.

Preface

So what is this book about then? OM is known by countless names in Sanskrit texts, and most of these names can be interpreted in several ways. This book presents eighty-four names of OM and their meanings in accordance with multiple Sanskrit texts including not only Hindu scriptures but also secular texts like dictionaries, poems, plays, and treatises on music, grammar, and Ayurveda. While the names in this book are solely from Sanskrit texts and their meanings are also in accordance with Sanskrit grammar, I give examples from texts of other languages wherever appropriate. Apart from the Upanishad-s and the Purana-s, whose treatment of OM is the focus of many books, this book also draws from Sanskrit commentaries as well as Yoga and Tantra works which have explained OM and its names in many unique ways.

This book has 109 sections, each section presents one or more specific meanings for a single name or multiple related names of OM. Apart from the meanings, each of the 109 sections offers a short explanation, a list of corresponding traditions, and translations of relevant quotations from Sanskrit texts. Most sections also provide the etymology of the name(s) explained in the section. A *mala* used for chanting a mantra typically has 109 beads, of which 108 beads are used for chanting and the head bead (*sumeru*) is used to keep track of rounds of chanting. After every complete round of chanting, the direction of moving the beads is reversed. One round of chanting covers 108 beads, beginning with the bead on one side of the *sumeru* and ending with the bead on the other side of the *sumeru*. The first 108 sections in this book are like the 108 chanting beads of a *mala*, and the last section is like the *sumeru* bead. As OM is essentially

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a Sanskrit word, best illuminated by Sanskrit grammar, this last section aptly explains nineteen meanings of the word OM as per the Sanskrit grammar tradition.

This book has many translations and explanations of Sanskrit words, phrases, sentences, and verses. I am a Vaishnava initiated in the tradition of Ramananda and have an unshakeable belief in the *Vishishtadvaita* philosophy. For me, as for millions of Ramanandi-s, Rama alone is the Supreme Brahman. Therefore, I have adhered to dualistic Vaishnava interpretations in my translations and explanations wherever there is a difference of opinion among interpreters. Most of the translations I offer are not literal (*shabda-anuvada*) but present the essence of the original text (*bhava-anuvada*). For additional clarity, I supply ellipsis wherever needed and also abridge the translations.

I hope the readers of this book will benefit from it. I have tried my best to keep the draft free from errors, but some errors may have still escaped the multiple rounds of proofreading. I request readers who come across any error in this edition to bring it to my notice or the publisher's notice so that it can be corrected in the next edition. For this, the reader may contact me on Twitter (@MisraNityanand) or write to the publisher.

Just like the meanings of OM are infinite, the list of those who have contributed to this book is endless. I cannot thank every one of them, but can only mention the most prominent ones. My Gurudeva, Jagadguru Ramanandacharya Swami Ramabhadracharya, comes first to my mind. The astounding beginning of his Sanskrit commentary on the *Isha Upanishad* is the inspiration behind this book. OM and my *ishta* Rama are the next to be mentioned, they are one and the same (pp. 38, 40, 42)

Preface

and it is their grace which enabled me to complete this book in what has been the most challenging phase of my personal life. It is said that the child is the father of the man. I have experienced this firsthand, thanks to my father, who has taught me so many things in the past, and to my children Nilayaa and Niramay, who teach me something new every day. Another source of learning something new every day is the *Bharatiya-vidvat-parishat* mailing list, members of which have helped me on countless occasions while writing this book. I have relied on the works of many great commentators of the past and the present for my understanding of Sanskrit texts, I bow my head to all of them in reverence. The ever-helpful and resourceful Ami Ganatra has proofread the draft of this edition and offered many valuable comments, for which I cannot thank her enough. Another round of proofreading has been done by Arun Ayyar, whose dedication towards Krishna Yajur Veda chanting is an inspiration for everybody. Heartfelt gratitude goes to my friend Maulik Mavani who has contributed a sketch to this book. Pranav Niranjani and Sudhir Kuduchkar of Three Dot Designs have ably designed the book cover, I am heavily indebted to them. Thanks also due to Bibhu Datta Rout, Devendra Jaiswal, and the StoryMirror team for publishing the book. Finally, I thank the mysterious flower that has been the object of my meditation when I was writing this book.

My mother is motherhood personified. To her, this book is dedicated.

Nityananda Misra

Mumbai, June 2017

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(1)

om, tridaivat [y] a

(ओम्, त्रिदैवत/त्रिदैवत्य = *om, tridaivat[y]a*)

MEANING

“ [having] three gods—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. ”

EXPLANATION

This is probably the most popular meaning of OM. The single syllable OM is composed of three sounds—*a* (as in *alone*), *u* (as in *full*), and *m* (as in *mind*). As per Sanskrit *sandhi* rules, when the sounds *a* and *u* come together, the resulting sound is *o* (as in the German word *Ober*). Thus, *a + u + m* results in OM.

The three component sounds of OM represent Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma, respectively. In addition to the *Yogi Yajnavalkya Smriti* and Purana-s which offer this explanation, the meanings of the three component sounds are also attested in secular sources like lexicons. As per the *Ekakshara Kosha*, the word *a* means Vishnu and the word *u* means Shiva. The lexicon gives three meanings of the word *ma* (Shiva, the moon, and Brahma) from which Brahma is taken as the meaning of the sound *m* in OM.

As per Smriti and Tantra texts, OM is also known as *tri-daivata* and *tri-daivatya*. The words *daivata* and *daivatya* are derived from the root $\sqrt{\text{div}}$, which is also the root of the word *deva* (“god”). The Sanskrit word *deva* is believed to be cognate with the Greek word *theos* and Latin word *deus*, with which the English word *divine* is related. Although the root $\sqrt{\text{div}}$ has ten meanings in Sanskrit, in this context it means “to shine”. Therefore, the names *tri-daivata* and *tri-daivatya* mean “having three shining gods (Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva)”.

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As Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the destroyer) represent three aspects of the same Supreme Brahman in Hinduism, the purport is that OM is the Supreme Brahman. This will appear as a consistent theme across many meanings presented in this book.

TRADITION

Smriti, Purana, Tantra, commentaries.

ETYMOLOGY

a + u + m → om; tri + daivata → tridaivata;

tri + daivatya → tridaivatya.

a ▶ Vishnu; **u** ▶ Shiva; **m** ▶ Brahma. **tri** ▶ three; **daivata** ▶ deity. **daivatya** ▶ deity.

QUOTES

“OM is known as *tridaivata*. OM is also called *tridaivatya*; as it is Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.”

—*Yogi Yajnavalkya Smriti*

“The sound *a* is said to be Vishnu, the sound *u* to be Shiva, and the sound *m* denotes Brahma. All three are meant by OM.”

—Purana-s

“OM is Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva.”

—*Markandeya Purana*

“There is a threefold form in the sound OM; ‘threefold’ means consisting of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.”

—*Linga Purana*, its commentary

“The sound OM is called *tridaivata*.”

—*Bija Varna Abhidhana*

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om

(ओम् = om)

MEANING

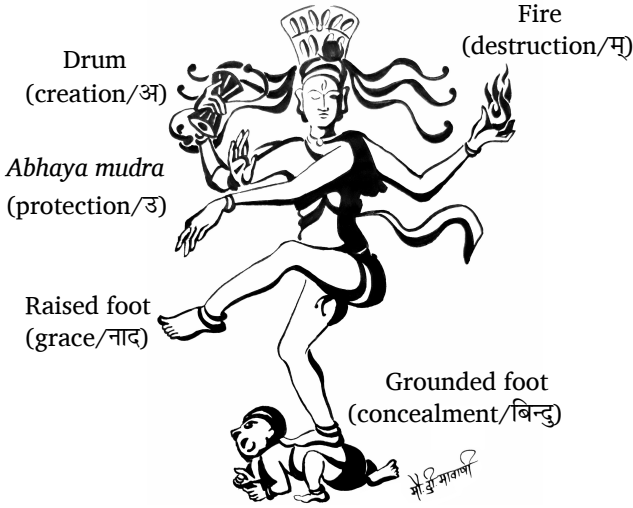
“Brahma, Vishnu, Hara, Maheshvara, Sadashiva,
and supreme Shiva.”

EXPLANATION

The *Kailasa Samhita* in the *Shiva Purana* offers another fivefold interpretation of OM where the components *a*, *u*, *m*, *bindu*, and *nada* are said to be Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Maheshvara, and Sadashiva respectively. The five deities are associated with the five cosmic activities called *panchakritya*-s in the *Shaiva Siddhanta* tradition of Tamil Nadu. The five activities are *srishthi* (creation), *palana* (sustenance), *samhara* (destruction), *tirobhava* (concealment), and *anugraha* (grace). The first three constitute the cosmic cycle in several Indian philosophies. *Tirobhava* is the concealment of the nature of the atman, the world, and Shiva. *Anugraha* is the grace of Shiva which grants knowledge and liberation to the atman. As per the Tamil work *Tirumantiram*, the five activities are represented by the dance of Nataraja, a form of Shiva immortalized in art by the Chola dynasty sculptures. This is illustrated on the facing page.

The five cosmic activities of Shiva are recognized in Kashmir Shaivism also, where works like *Svacchanda Tantra* formally define the activities. The first verse of *Pratyabhijna Hridaya* describes Shiva as one who is constantly engaged in the five activities. As per the *Lakshmi Tantra*, the five activities are the functions of Shri, the independent power of Narayana.

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TRADITION

Purana, *Shaiva Siddhanta*, Kashmir Shaivism, Dramatics.

ETYMOLOGY

a + u + m + bindu + nāda → **om**.

a ▶ Brahma; **u** ▶ Vishnu; **m** ▶ Rudra; **bindu** ▶ Maheshvara; **nāda** ▶ Sadashiva.

QUOTES

“The sound *a* is the creator Brahma, *u* is the protector Vishnu, and *m* is the destroyer Hara (Rudra). The *bindu* is the deity Maheshvara, proclaimed to be concealment. The *nada* is said to be Sadashiva, bestowing grace on everybody. After meditating above the *nada*, the most supreme Shiva [is seen].”

—*Shiva Purana*

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udgitha

(उद्गीथ = *udgītha*)

MEANING

“that which is sung aloud.”

EXPLANATION

In the Sama Veda, each verse (*saman*) in a *stotra* has five parts of which the third is called *udgitha*. The chanting of *udgitha* begins with OM. Sama Veda's *Chandogya Upanishad*, which mentions *udgitha* more than 60 times, says that this is why the word *udgitha* denotes OM.

Grammatically, the word *udgitha* is derived from the root √*gai* (“to sing”). The words *gana* and *gita*, both meaning “a song”, are from the same root √*gai*. The prefix *ut*, which changes to *ud* (p. 78), in *udgitha* means “high” or “aloud”. Thus, *udgitha* literally means “that which is sung aloud”. In the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, Brahman is described as *udgita* (उद्गीत), which has the same meaning as *udgitha* (उद्गीथ). A cognate word is *udgata* (उद्गाता) which means a singer of the Sama Veda. In the *Gita*, Krishna says that among the Veda-s, he is the Sama Veda. The *Chandogya Upanishad* proclaims *udgitha* to be the essence (*rasa*) of Sama Veda. OM is thus the essence of the foremost Veda—it is described in the Upanishad as the essence of all essences (p. 148). In the *Durga Saptashati*, Indra and the gods praise Shakti as the resting place of the Veda-s, the recitation of whose words is made mellifluous by *udgitha* (p. 45).

While the name *udgitha* is rarely mentioned in the Purana-s and *Itihasa*-s, there is description of OM being sung or chanted

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aloud at several places. In the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma narrates Vishnu's display of his universal form to Narada. Narada sees Vishnu, who has hundreds of heads, "singing aloud" OM with one of his mouths. The *Kurma Purana* similarly has a description of Shiva's cosmic form, akin to thousands of suns, in which he is described as "singing aloud" *pranava* (OM).

In addition to being the name of the central part of a Sama Vedic *stotra* and the sound OM, *udgitha* also refers to the act of singing. In this context, *udgitha* refers to the singing of the Sama Veda in general and its second chapter in particular.

TRADITION

Upanishad, Smriti, Purana, *Mahabharata*.

ETYMOLOGY

ut + √**gai** + **thak** → **udgītha**.

ut + √**gai** ► to sing or chant aloud; **thak** ► suffix indicating object of the action.

QUOTES

"Then, verily, what is *udgitha* is *pranava* (OM). What is *pranava* (OM) is *udgitha*."

—*Chandogya Upanishad*

"OM is known as *udgitha*."

—*Yogi Yajnavalkya Smriti*

"Vishnu was singing aloud OM with [one] mouth."

—Bhishma's description, *Mahabharata*

"Shiva was singing aloud the great OM with his mouth."

—*Kurma Purana*

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vedarambha

(वेदारम्भ = *vedārambha*)

MEANING

“the beginning of the Veda-s.”

EXPLANATION

The *Amara Kosha* states that the words *omkara* (p. 56) and *pranava* (p. 58) are synonymous. Its *Rasala* commentary explains the words and adds that they are synonyms of *vedarambha*, which translates as “the beginning of the Veda-s”. OM is called *vedarambha* as it is recited at the beginning of Vedic mantra-s (p. 130) and Vedic study (p. 17).

Or, OM is called *vedarambha* as the three Veda-s began as OM. A verse in the ninth canto of the *Bhagavata Purana* states that in the *Satya Yuga*, there was only one Veda—OM, and the threefold Veda was revealed to King Pururavas when the *Treta Yuga* started. Shuka narrates the events leading to this as follows. The *apsara* Urvashi came to earth on hearing about the virtues of King Pururavas. The king asked her to stay with him. Urvashi put forward three conditions to which the king agreed. The *apsara* and the king spent many years together. When one of Urvashi’s conditions was violated, she left. Pururavas searched for her and found her, now pregnant, on the banks of the river Sarasvati. Pururavas requested her to stay with him, but Urvashi said that the king would be able to stay with her for only one night every year. The king came back a year later when she was with their son. When Pururavas returned to his palace again, he kept thinking about Urvashi the entire night. It was then that

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the *Satya Yuga* ended and the *Treta Yuga* began, and the three Veda-s revealed themselves in the heart of Pururavas. Following this, the Jatavedas fire arose when the king kindled fire using two *arani*-s (sticks). The king used the knowledge of the three Veda-s to make the Jatavedas fire also threefold—*garahapatya*, *ahavaniya*, and *dakshinagni* (p. 6)—and accepted Jatavedas as his son. Shuka then tells Parikshit that in the *Satya Yuga* there was one Veda—OM, one god—Narayana, one worldly fire, and one *varna* called *hamsa*. The threefold Veda started only in the *Treta Yuga*. Commentaries explain that in the *Satya Yuga* most people were dominated by the quality of *sattva*, while in the *Treta Yuga* they were dominated by *rajas* and so the threefold path of karma appeared. The immense and passionate desire of Pururavas to be with Urvashi reflects the onset of *rajas* as explained in various commentaries on the *Bhagavata Purana*.

Vedarambha is the name of the eleventh of the sixteen *samskara*-s mentioned in the *Vyasa Smriti*. This *samskara* is performed when the study of the Veda-s is started.

TRADITION

Commentaries.

ETYMOLOGY

veda + ārambha → vedārambha.

veda ▶ Veda-s; *ārambha* ▶ beginning, commencement.

QUOTES

“*Omkara ... pranava ... two [synonyms] of vedarambha.*”

—Commentary on *Amara Kosha*

“In the beginning, there was only one Veda—OM.”

—*Bhagavata Purana*



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The mystic sound OM is one of the shortest Sanskrit words, and yet it is the most discussed and explained word in the Upanishad-s, Smriti-s, Purana-s, and Itihasa-s. OM is extolled in the schools of Yoga, Tantra, Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, and even Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. This book explains 84 names of OM as mentioned in epic, classical, medieval, and modern Sanskrit texts. The book is organized in 109 sections or beads. It is a book and it is also a chanting mala: The OM Mala.



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