



The Role of Sound in Meditation

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From sound to silence

Why do we use sound in meditation? Why not use one of the other senses or faculties, since touch, sight, taste, and smell must also possess increasingly subtler forms until they reach the point of their emerging? It is true that these four faculties do have subtle forms, but only sound reaches to the ultimate point of emergence.

The five senses correspond to the five elements of which all things consist. Those elements are ether, air, fire, water, and earth. That is, their grossest forms are those of sound, sight, touch, taste, and smell as perceived by the bodily senses. Because of this we use these terms to refer to them. But the water element is not just the liquid we call “water.” It is much, much more, having roots into the astral and causal planes. The same is true of the other elements.

When relative existence, individual or cosmic, begins, there is a chain of manifestation. First there is the out-turning of the consciousness itself. This modification on the cosmic level is the emerging of the Mahat Tattwa, the Great Element, that is the Personal or Saguna Brahman, spoken of in Christianity as “the Only-begotten of the Father” or “Son” of God. In the individual this is the sense of *asmitya*: I-am-ness. Then the Pradhana [Prakriti] modifies itself into the five elements, beginning with the ether, and each succeeding element contains within itself some of the preceding elements. That is, air is not “pure” but is air mixed with some ether. Fire possesses some of the ether and air element. Water has some fire, air, and ether. Earth has some water, fire, air, and ether. So only ether is unmixed, and only ether is “touching” the principle of individualized consciousness. In other words, only ether is in direct contact with the spirit. Yet ether [akasha] pervades all the other elements as their prime constituent—actually as their source and core element. Sound is the quality (or faculty) of ether;¹ touch is the quality of air; sight is the quality of fire; taste is the quality of water; and smell is the quality of earth. Sound, then, is the only thing that reaches back to the principle of consciousness. The other elements stop somewhere along the way.

The five elements also correspond to the five levels or bodies known as koshas: the anandamaya, jnanamaya, manomaya, pranamaya, and annamaya bodies. These are the intelligence, intellectual, mental (sensory), biomagnetic, and physical bodies. The highest (most subtle) body is the etheric body (anandamaya kosha) which is the seat of sound or speech.

Sound, then, is the direct means to return our awareness to the inmost level of our being and put us into touch with consciousness itself. In fact, consciousness is innate in sound. At the same time, sound rules all the levels of our being and has the ability to infuse all those levels with the highest spiritual consciousness. Sound has the power to “spiritualize” every bit of us. And the essence, the root, of all sound is Om, that is both sound and silence, both energy and consciousness.² Therefore, listening to our inner intonations of Om during japa and meditation right away centers our awareness in the etheric level of our being. Even more,

¹ “Sound arises in akasha [ether], the inner sky” (Paramhansa Nityananda in Nitya Sutra 37). This is the unanimous teaching of all schools of Indian philosophy.

² In Indian cosmology the dance of creation is the activity of Shiva Nataraja—the King of the Dance. He produces the cosmic rhythms through a damaru, a two-headed drum that is held in the right hand and sounded by a striker-ball that is attached to it. By flicking the wrist the sound is produced. This is a symbol of Om that consists of two letters and has two poles: sound and silence or energy and consciousness.

it not only serves to return our awareness to its source, it gathers up and centers every other aspect of our being in spiritual consciousness.

Even more, the etheric body contains all the etheric patterns that manifest as our other bodies—the archetypal ideas that are the matrix around which all those bodies are formed. Through japa and meditation the Divine Sound, Om, pervades all our bodies, corrects, directs, and empowers all the etheric patterns, and thus enables them to perfectly and fully manifest all their potentials—which is the root purpose of our relative existence. For Vyasa, commenting on Yoga Sutra 2:19, speaking of the pure consciousness as the root of the bodies, says: “Supported in it, these [bodies] fulfill their development to the limit.³ And in the reverse process, they are supported in that which is pure being, and go back to [are resolved or merged into] that pradhana, the formless.”⁴ Through Om Yoga practice all the aspects of our being are brought into perfect fruition and then enabled to merge back into their Source in the state of absolute liberation. Om Yoga, then, embraces all the aspects of our existence—not only the highest part—and is supremely practical. Om, through Its japa and meditation, perfects our entire being.

A special sound

We say that we use sound in Om Yoga—in meditation especially. But it is not just any form of sound. Rather, it is sound that is produced (generated) in the mind—not sound that is passively heard either through the ears or through the memory of auditory sound. This generation of sound is the process known as thinking. So yoga is accomplished by the generation and observation of a thought in the mind. This is why Shankara, commenting on Yoga Sutra 2:20, says that the activity of pure consciousness in the individual is “observation of thoughts in the mind.⁵...Purusha, looking on at thought in the mind alone, sees only that, and never fails to see thought which is his object....To witness is natural to him, in the sense that his essence is awareness of the mind’s ideas.” Now this is extremely profound. *The only thing we ever do in our real nature as pure consciousness is to observe thoughts in the intellect (buddhi)*. Sense impressions are perceived a step away from that in the lower mind (manas). Perceiving thought is the sole activity of the spirit-consciousness. Perception of thought is also a perpetual—truly an inescapable—activity of the purusha. It is only reasonable then to conclude that to discover the true self or to cause the self to become established in its real nature we must employ the faculty of thought. Yet it is thought that is tangling us up all the time in false identities. So it is not just thought in general that we need, but a special kind of thought—one that turns the awareness back upon itself and eventually dissolves itself into the pure consciousness that is spirit. That unique thought is Om. “Its japa and bhavanam is the way.” Our eternal nature⁶ ensures our success.

The “history” of sound

The cosmos and the individual person are manifested by the same process: ever-expanding sound. First there comes the most subtle expansion-movement or vibration on the causal

³ Commenting on the commentary, Shankara says: “Supported in that which is their cause, they fulfill their development.”

⁴ “The scale of subtlety [of the elements] ends in pradhana,” says Shankara.

⁵ “Mind is by definition the object of purusha.” (Vyasa)

⁶ “Liberation is absence of bondage.” (Vyasa) “Nor is liberation something that has to be brought about apart from the absence of bondage, and this is why it is always accepted that liberation is eternal.” (Shankara)

level where rather than an objective sound it is a *bhava*, the slightest differentiation of primal consciousness. This is known as *dhvani*. Dhvani then expands and mutates into *nada*, which is sound, but in such a subtle form that it is more an *idea* of sound rather than actual sound. Nada develops into *nirodhika*, a kind of focussing of the energy so it becomes potential sound. This expands and becomes *ardha-indu* (*ardhendu*), the “half-moon” which is the crescent shape seen on the Om symbol and on the head of Shiva. This is both thought and sound, but sound that can only be heard as the faintest of inner or mental sounds. Ardhendu then expands and becomes *bindu*,⁷ the vibratory source-point that is depicted in the Om symbol as point or dot. This bindu is fully sound, but on the interior level only. It cannot be spoken aloud. It cannot be spoken at all, but only perceived and entered into as the first step back to the source consciousness that is Spirit. Yet, from bindu comes all the permutations that are the various sounds which are combined to form words–mantras. As we enter into relative consciousness through the expansion of sound, just so can we enter back into transcendent Consciousness through the intentional contraction of sound that occurs in meditation.

The seventy-first hymn of the tenth section (khanda) of the Rig Veda speaks of Vak, the creative Sound from which all things came. This Sound both manifested all things and revealed them—that is, produced the consciousness capable of perceiving them. The sages, the hymn tells us, traced Vak (Om) back to the source and discovered It was within themselves as both Power and Consciousness. Meditation is the process of tracing discovered by the sages.

Meditation is the procedure by which the yogi enters into the inner levels of Om, tracing it to its very source which is consciousness. As he does so, he experiences within the depths of his awareness the subtle states of consciousness (*bhava*) inherent in Om. Meditation leads us right into the heart of Om. As could be expected, meditation of the Pranava is the heart of Om Yoga though, as indicated by Patanjali and Shankara, japa of the Pranava is employed to lead the yogi into the state of meditation (*bhavanam*). Then in meditation we trace the “thread” of Its sound back through Its many permutations to Its original *bhava* or impulse of consciousness that expanded outward (and upward), to manifest as Its outermost form of the spoken Om.

This procedure is spoken of in the Katha Upanishad: “The Self, though hidden in all beings, does not shine forth but can be seen by those subtle seers, through their sharp and subtle intelligence. The wise man should restrain speech into the mind; the latter he should restrain into the understanding self. The understanding self he should restrain into the great self. That he should restrain into the tranquil self.”⁸ By “mind” is meant the *manas*, the sensory mind; by “understanding self” is meant the *buddhi*, the intellect; by “the great self” is meant the will; and by “tranquil self” is meant the subtlest level, the *chidakasha*, the witness-link between our pure consciousness and our perceptions. These levels also correspond to the *manomaya*, *jnanamaya*, and *anandamaya koshas* (mind, intellect, and will bodies) as well as that which is so subtle it is both *kosha* (body) and witness-consciousness of the *atman*. In

⁷ The bindu is composed of three parts or aspects: *nada*, *bindu*, and *bija* (seed). *Nada* is predominantly consciousness, and corresponds to Shiva or God the Father. *Bindu* is predominantly energy, and corresponds to Parvati or God the Holy Spirit, the Mother. *Bija* is both consciousness and energy, and corresponds to Ganesha, or God the Son. According to the yoga scriptures there are three basic forms of sound or speech: 1) *pashyanti*, that which can only be intuited or felt rather than heard—even within; 2) *madhyama*, that which can be “heard” in the mind as thought; and 3) *vaikhari*, that which is physically spoken and heard outwardly through the vibration of the air. But beyond even these is the transcendental sound, *para-vac* or “supreme speech” which is soundless sound, consciousness itself.

⁸ Katha Upanishad 1.3.12,13

Viveka Chudamani (verse 369) Shankara expresses it this way: “Restrain speech in the manas, and restrain manas in the buddhi; this again restrain in the witness of the buddhi [anandamayi kosha], and merging that also in the Infinite Absolute Self, attain to Supreme Peace.” This is accomplished through meditation on the sound of Om.

I.K. Taimni on japa and meditation

In *The Science of Yoga* I.K. Taimni says this regarding japa and meditation:

“Japa begins in a mechanical repetition but it should pass by stages into a form of meditation and unfoldment of the deeper layers of consciousness.

“The efficacy of japa is based upon the fact that every jivatma is a microcosm thus having within himself the potentialities of developing all states of consciousness and all powers which are present in the active form in the macrocosm. All the forces which can help this Divine spark within each human heart to become a roaring fire are to be applied. And the unfoldment of consciousness takes place as a result of the combined action of all these forces....A mantra is a sound combination and thus represents a physical vibration which is perceptible to the physical ear. But this physical vibration is its outermost expression, and hidden behind the physical vibration and connected with it are subtler vibrations much in the same way as the dense physical body of man is his outermost expression and is connected with his subtler vehicles. These different aspects of *Vak* or ‘speech’ are called *Vaikhari Madhyama, Pashyanti* and *Para*. *Vaikhari* is the audible sound which can lead through the intermediate stages to the subtlest form of *Para Vak*. It is really through the agency of these subtler forms of ‘sound’ that the unfoldment of consciousness takes place and the hidden potentialities become active powers. This release of powers takes a definite course according to the specific nature of the mantra just as a seed grows into a tree, but into a particular kind of tree according to the nature of the seed.”

And the Pranava being the seed of the Totality of Consciousness, of Brahman Itself, the Pranava yogi grows into Perfect Divinity by means of Its japa and meditation.

The identity of Om (Pranava) with the breath

“Speech and breath are joined together in the Syllable Om” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.1.6).

“One should meditate on the breath in the mouth as the udgitha, for it is continually sounding ‘Om’” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.5.3).

In the ancient Sanskrit texts, Hindu and Buddhist, *prana* means both life and breath. Om is called the Pranava, which means Enlivener and Breather, the idea of the latter expression being that Om is the essential sound-energy form that manifests in living beings as the breath itself. Om is the sound-form of the subtle power of life which originates in the pure consciousness, the spirit, of each one of us and extends upward and outward to manifest as the inhaling and exhaling breaths.

Hence, through the intoning of Om in meditation we can become attuned to the essential Breath of Life and enter into the Consciousness that is Life.

The Pranava as pranayama

We have already somewhat covered the subject of pranayama in the section on meditation, but there is more. In his yoga treatise, Shandilya wrote: “The Pranava alone becomes the pranayama.” Shankara says: “Pranayama is caused by a *mental activity* deriving from a restraining

effort inherent in the self.” That is, the suppression of the vrittis in the chitta by japa and meditation of Om is the highest form of pranayama.

As already cited, the master yogi Shandilya also says: “Pranayama is accomplished through the right realization of the true nature of the sound which is at the extreme end of the pronunciation of the syllable Om, when sushupti [the dreamless sleep state] is rightly cognized [experienced] while conscious” (Shandilya Upanishad). Virtually the same thing is said in the *Yoga Vashistha*: “Pranayama is accomplished by effortlessly breathing and joining to it the repetition of the sacred Om with the experience of Its meaning, when the consciousness reaches the deep sleep state.”⁹

Inner psychic sounds

It may be that sometimes you will hear various inner sounds such as the sound of a gong or bell, a harp, a flute, a bee, a waterfall, a vina, bagpipes, etc. These are often mistaken for genuinely spiritual phenomena when in reality they are only the astral sounds of the bodily functions. For example, the bee sound is the astral sound of cellular division, the flute sound is the astral sound of the lymphatic circulation, the bell sound is the astral sound of the cardio-pulmonary functions, and so forth. They are—in the astral sense—purely physical and have no yogic value whatsoever.

The so-called “Cosmic Om” or “Cosmic Motor” sound heard by some yogis who plug their ears and listen for it is only the basic sound of the physical universe and the physical body. It is actually the astral sound of the cosmic fire element¹⁰ from which the material plane emerges and into which it is dissolved. It has no spiritual character at all, though through it a yogi can merge his mind into the cosmic energy and become what the Yoga Sutras call *Prakritilaya*, absorbed in Prakriti. This temporarily produces astounding experiences of expanding awareness and psychic powers, but according to Patanjali, Vyasa, and Shankara, such yogis become caught in the web of the cosmos and cannot be liberated until the final dissolution at the end of the creation cycle (the mahapralaya). Like milk poured into water they become cosmically diluted—and deluded.

In short, all such astral sounds should be ignored. Stay with your intonations of Om.

An ancient yogic principle newly discovered by the West

American studies in Business Psychology have uncovered a most interesting fact: people can detect falsehood much more easily if they are only listening to a speaker and not seeing him. Controlled studies demonstrated that propagandists, distorters of the truth, and outright liars and were much more rationally considered and their errors and wiles more readily detected if they were being heard on the radio, whereas a far greater percentage of people would accept their fallacious assertions, falsehoods, and distortions if they were being watched on television. This is because of the nature of sound versus sight. Sound stimulates the etheric bodies which reflect the light of the spirit, whereas sight stimulates the “fire element” which is tied in with the senses and emotion rather than reason.

Sound stimulates the wisdom faculty in man. Knowing this many thousands of years ago, the Vedic yogi-seers instructed their students to meditate on sound alone, for from sound

⁹ *Yoga Vashistha* 5:78

¹⁰ That this is so is shown by the following upanishadic statement: “This *fire* which is within a man and digests food that is eaten is Vaisvanara. *Its sound is that which one hears by stopping the ears.*” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 5.9.1)

arises knowledge (jnana), including self-knowledge.



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