

Essay

The Secret Meaning of AUM

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Abstract

There is a deeper meaning for many common words and phrases, than their dictionary definition would imply, and even more so for those used in meditation or prayer. Words can be used to set the tone, open channels of communication or psychic and spiritual awakening, or express feelings and ideas for which there are no ready definitions. But there are primal utterances as well, which need no definition. One of the oldest words used for chanting during meditation is a combination of three primal utterances, which express three moods or modes of being. The word is AUM.

Keywords: Utterances, primal sounds, chanting, meditation, AUM.

1. Introduction

There are words and there is sound. Many natural processes and a diverse range of creatures make a sound. Sounds do not need to have verbal content to have meaning in a particular context. An auto horn and a thunderclap both convey a warning that something is incoming or impending. And there are primal utterances that express pain or pleasure, joy or sadness, relaxation, satisfaction, and so on. However, words are meant to convey more complex ideas and a far greater range of possible meanings than simple sounds. Music also introduces subtleties and variations which enrich the palette of possibilities, and it can be combined with words to create an amazing range of content. In addition, there are sounds or chants that are intoned to create an altered or uplifted state of consciousness. Unsurprisingly, there are musical chants as well, so the possibilities are endless, but for this article I have a specific focus.

Of all the words used for chanting around the world, AUM is one of the best known, and most powerful, as well as one of the oldest. And it is well-known that AUM is comprised of three sounds, but less well understood that these are primal sounds, utterances of relaxation or happiness, serenity or appreciation, and satisfaction or respect. In addition, AUM also reflects the existence of a universal creative hierarchy and the natural division of labor into ‘author, director, actor,’ as Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, (or Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos) and so on. There is a lot of hidden meaning packed into just three letters/sounds in AUM. So here I share my perspective with the reader in the hope of fostering deeper understanding.

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2. The Word, the Sound, and the Meaning

I was first introduced to the idea of primal sounds in a Music improvisation workshop by Cellist and New Age composer David Darling, but the fact certain sounds are primal goes back to the dawn of human existence and the roots of communication. The tone ‘ah’ is the sound of relaxation, of being able to let go of concerns and to just be in the moment. Accordingly, it is the sound we make when our airways are the most open and our breathing is completely unrestricted. It is a natural utterance that is primal and universal among humans and various other living creatures. When people intone the word AUM, this wonderful ‘ah’ sound is the first tone we make, and it sends a message to the brain “relax” and “be happy.”

The next tone we utter, when sounding AUM, is ‘oo’ and this too is a primal utterance, the sound of taking it all in and appreciating the grandeur or splendor of it all – while being a part of it – or appreciating natural or artistic beauty when or where we see it. The emotion of ‘oo’ is serenity, so people intone the sound ‘oo’ when they feel serene – or pleasantly surprised and amazed – and the sound of ‘oo’ sends a message of serenity to the brain. It is no wonder that when people attend fireworks displays there are many oohs and ahs from the crowd. People are relaxed and at ease at such gatherings, and they make these joyful noises of celebration because they are free to have a good time and express their appreciation out loud without suppressing their primal responses to observe social etiquette.

The last part of AUM is ‘mm.’ The sound ‘mm’ is often uttered by people when enjoying a good meal. That sound expresses their satisfaction or a different kind of appreciation due to an appetite being quenched. It is an expression of contentment. When one is satisfied, ‘mm’ comes naturally. It is therefore also a sound uttered during lovemaking, when sitting with a loved one by a warm fire, cuddling to share bodily warmth, or sipping a warm drink, and so on. ‘Mm’ reflects a sense of being at peace, having what you need, and enjoying what you have and who you are with, as well. And this in turn leads to a sense of respect. So, the combined 3-part sound of AUM inspires a mood that is at once relaxed, serene, and respectful.

3. Three Personalities in One Word

The idea of dividing the responsibilities of a task among people or personalities is a pervasive theme. Three key figures in putting on a play or making a dramatic film or video are the author and/or screenwriter, the director, and the actor(s). The author’s job is to create a story or script for the production, the director’s job is to shape the production process so it will best support the process and help the actors tell the story, and the actors’ jobs involve being the face of the production, the ones who create the action onstage or in the movie. Each job is an essential part of bringing the story to the audience, and it would be harder to make real if the entire production process was the responsibility of one person.

But as human beings, we all need to take on each of these three roles at various times in our lives, just to deal with everyday situations and problems. So in some ways, we all must assume the personality of the three individuals Hindus refer to as the godhead, Brahma the creator, Vishnu the sustainer, and Shiva the destroyer. The author of the story like Brahma sets the template for creation, the director like Vishnu oversees its evolution, and the actor like Shiva knows things must turn out exactly one way and so slays all other possibilities. Until the curtain rises or filming is done, the director and actors can experiment with multiple possible interpretations or even alter the script. At some point, however, there must be a cut where a precise determination is made, and at that point multiple possibilities are reduced to a single reality.

When people chant AUM, they are celebrating these three aspects of the creative process and of the divinity within ourselves. There is a universality to these qualities and their appearance in personalities across disciplines, and also with the component sounds in the word AUM. We talk about inventors having an ‘aha!’ moment at the point of inspiration or discovery, for instance, and this reveals that the mood for inspiration is expressed by the sound ‘ah.’ And so it is for ‘oo’ and ‘mm,’ as reflections of stages in the creative process. A recurring theme in the works of Paul Twitchell is that attitude, attention, and awareness, are attributes we can cultivate to help us create the lives we want. Here again we find three aspects or stages of the creative process that find expression across a wide range of disciplines. So if we ask what attitude, attention, and awareness we should aim for; I suggest that being relaxed is the right attitude for authors and inventors, serenity affords the proper attention for a director or manager, and mindfulness or respect is the correct awareness for an actor or worker.

Of course, one must note that sometimes it will be an engineer overseeing things rather than a manager or director, or a technician instead of a worker or actor, and so on. In the military, there must be generals or admirals, field officers to translate strategy into tactics, and soldiers, sailors, or airmen to carry out their orders. In a symphonic orchestra, there is no music without a composer, but the conductor directs and oversees the ensemble, and each player must learn and then play their part – for a symphony to be performed. In the word AUM, all these personalities are heard or voiced in their ideal or archetypal form. The three moods of ‘ah,’ ‘oo,’ and ‘mm,’ are harmoniously blended to form one word that embodies creation. This may be why AUM is widely used across so many cultures as a word to promote enlightenment. It is popular because it is so potent and efficacious, as a tool for upliftment.

4. The Reasons for Chanting AUM

Various words and phrases are used by meditators to clear the mind, open up the consciousness to inspiration, and so on. In the first phase of meditation practice, one is mainly trying to break bad habits that keep the mind fixated on our problems, and so the main reason for needing a word to chant is to have a point of focus or a way to distract our mind from its preoccupation

with our bodily or material circumstances. But later on, it becomes more and more helpful to find meaning in any word or phrase we are repeating, so we can feel that the process is working, and is worthwhile or meaningful. Still further along, one finds that meditation is its own reward, and one derives value from feeling thankful or grateful for opportunities to be meditating. So the process of learning to meditate also has the same stages, where first we learn to relax, then attain a measure of serenity, and finally we reach a stage where meditating is satisfying of itself, or for its own sake. The chanting of AUM offers help in all these phases of the learning process.

It is an easy word to remember and to intone, it has a deeper meaning for experienced meditators to unlock and focus upon, and it embodies the qualities of the primal sounds for relaxation, serenity, and satisfaction, enhancing enjoyment, or respectfulness. Ergo, it tends to support the process of learning how to meditate through all the early phases, and for more advanced meditators it provides the chance to discover the Divine for and in oneself. One of my spiritual teachers explained that while many approach the search for God as an attempt to find something outside themselves, it is better and quicker to recognize that the Divine is all pervasive and therefore is already a part of you, so the challenge then becomes learning to identify with the part of you that already is the Divine Self. And the chanting of AUM has helped many to discover and identify with the Divine in themselves.