

‘Om’ – three states and one reality

(An interpretation of the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad)

1. What is the mantra ‘om’?

om ity etad akṣharam idam sarvam tasy’ opavyākhyānam
bhūtam bhavad bhaviṣhyad iti sarvam on-kāra eva, yac c’ ānyat
tri-kāl’-ātītam tad apy on-kāra eva

This changeless ‘om’ is everything.

Explaining it a little more:

all that has been, is now, or will
in future be, is only ‘om’.

And what’s beyond this threefold time,
that too is nothing else but ‘om’.

In Sanskrit, the word ‘akṣhara’ means ‘changeless’. And it is also used to mean a ‘letter of the alphabet’ or a ‘syllable or word of spoken sound’.

As a person speaks, letters, syllables and words are heard as passing sounds that keep on changing all the time. But, as such sounds of language pass, each represents a changeless something: which can later reappear, as a repetition of the same thing. We imply such a changeless something every time we recognize some sound as a letter or a syllable or a word that we have heard before. It is then the *same* letter or the *same* syllable or the *same* word that has already been heard – though spoken differently – on previous occasions. Thus, behind the passing sounds of speech, we somehow recognize particular letters, syllables and words that stay the same. This ‘sameness’ is essentially implied, whenever the word ‘akṣhara’ is used.

One syllable, in particular, is described as ‘akṣhara’. It is *the* akṣhara: the one, unchanging syllable that signifies all speech, all expression and creation, all experience. That syllable is ‘om’. It represents whatever may be found, in past or present or in future time. And it also stands for what is to be found beyond all changing time.

When 'om' is chanted, it means everything, with nothing left to be described. That's what the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad says, in its first stanza.

2. How can one sound mean everything?

sarvam hy etad brahma, ayam ātmā brahma, so 'yam ātmā
catuṣ-pāt

For everything is all reality.

This self is all reality.

And this same self falls out
four ways (as we experience it).

In the one sound 'om', we are meant to understand a complete reality, called 'brahman'. Literally, 'brahman' means expanded'. It implies an expanded comprehension of reality.

As we see objects in the world, we think of them as different realities. Each object then is thought to have its own particular reality, different from other objects. So when one object is seen and thought about, other objects are left out.

And yet, even when attention is turned to one particular object, we somehow manage to take other things into account. All co-ordination and continuity of knowledge depends on this. How do we manage it? We do so on the basis of understanding.

At the surface of our minds, attention is restricted to a particular focus. There, narrow objects are perceived. But, beneath these limited perceptions, a great deal more is understood, at the background of experience.

For example, suppose that a shopper wants to buy a chair, and sees one on display for sale. This is a particular perception; but it draws upon a broader basis of experience. It draws upon the shopper's understanding of chairs in general, of the store that is selling this chair, of who has manufactured it, of the home or office where it will be used, of the people who will use it, of how it will be used and looked after, and so on.

Thus each perception draws on roots that go down into a background of understanding. As the roots go further down, they draw on more and more experience that we understand implicitly. Beneath the narrow surface of our changing minds, there is a depth of understanding that broadens indefinitely. It is there that we understand things in general, beneath their particular differences.

‘Brahman’ is reality in general. It is the reality of everything. In English, the word ‘humanity’ is used to describe what different human beings share in common. Similarly, in the Upaniṣhads, the word ‘brahman’ is used to describe what all physical and mental objects share in common, no matter where or when they appear. It is their common reality, which they all show.

But is there any such reality, shown by all things? How could it be known? These questions are answered in stanza 2 of the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad, when it says: ‘ayam ātmā brahma’. That means: ‘This self is all reality.’ We are told here that the true reality of everything is one’s own self. For every one of us, this self is not a limited object, seen in the physical or mental world. Instead, it is one’s inmost self (ātman), found at the depth of one’s own experience.

To know reality, one has to find just what one truly is, in one’s own experience. That requires a thorough examination of how we experience things and who or what experiences them. To help us make such an examination, we are told that the self is ‘catuṣ-pāt’ or ‘fallen out in four’. This sounds a bit mysterious, but the following stanzas go on to explain what it means.

3. What do we know, on waking up from sleep?

jāgarita-sthāno bahiṣh-prajnyah sapt’-āṅga ekonavimshati-
mukhah sthūla-bhug vaishvānarah prathamah pādah

The outward-knowing waking state
has seven limbs and nineteen mouths:
experiencing gross things.

This is the first aspect:
of universality.

Stanza 3 identifies a first aspect (prathamah pādah) in the fourfold falling out of self. This first aspect is the waking state, of bodily awareness. It is described as outward-knowing (bahiṣh-prajnya), gross (sthūla) and universal (vaishvānara).

When our bodies wake from sleep, they see a world outside. This is their waking state. But there is something missing here. Our bodies never wake up fully, to a full awareness of what they see. In their waking state, we live in a large universe; but our perceptions of it are partial and inadequate. Through our senses, we only see a small few of the many things that the universe contains. Even when we look at one particular object, our senses do not see it properly. They only see an outward appearance, from one of many different points of view.

The world outside is seen by looking through our bodies. But their senses are both narrow and gross. They tell us only a small part of the story. And even that small part they tell very roughly and crudely: leaving many things unclear, and missing out on many important details.

So, in what we call the 'waking state', our bodies are not properly awake. They are awake only to small and superficial appearances. That leaves us with many gaps, and many frustrations, in our experience of the waking world. It is to fill these gaps, and to resolve these frustrations, that we need to dream and sleep.

4. What is the use of dreaming?

svapna-sthāno 'ntah-prajnyah sapt'-ānga ekonavimshati-
mukhah pravivikta-bhuk taijaso dvitīyah pādah

The inward-knowing state of dream
has seven limbs and nineteen mouths:
experiencing subtlety.

This is the second aspect:
of burning energy.

Stanza 4 identifies a second aspect of our self-experience. This is the state of dreaming mind. It is described as inward-knowing (antah-prajnya), subtle (pravivikta) and burning (taijasa). In this state, per-

ception is turned back in. Attention does not go out through the body's five senses, to a world of objects outside. Instead, perceptions are imagined, thought and felt within a person's mind.

The dream state occurs most obviously at night: when the body is asleep, and its senses have been physically shut down. But we also dream while our bodies are awake. When we indulge in wishful fantasies, or when we are entertained by imagined fictions, those are kinds of dream. And further, we enter into a kind of dream state whenever we use our imaginations: as we describe and interpret what has been perceived in the past, or as we look into the future and make plans for it. All of these are states of dream: in the sense that we are then imagining and thinking and feeling in our minds, instead of looking out through our physical senses at objects outside.

In this way, the dream state may be associated with our mental faculties – of imagination, thought and feeling. We use these mental faculties to compare and to co-ordinate our physical perceptions. By putting different perceptions together, we make finer distinctions and build fuller pictures of the world.

Thus, where the gross perceptions of our senses fail, we fill the gaps with subtler faculties of conception in our minds. These mental faculties have a pervasive influence. As they fill in the gaps between perceptions, we make assumptions and build conceptual pictures of the world. This affects our understanding and our attitudes; and so it has a subtle and pervading effect upon the way we see things and interpret them.

In the process of experience, our pictures of the world keep getting built, destroyed and built again. This gives us different and changing ways of looking at things and thinking about them. As we learn from experience, old conceptions get burned up. In that burning, new experiences become illuminated and new conceptions are formed. That's why the dream state and its mental transformations are called 'taijasa' or 'burning'.

What is this changing process for? Where does it lead? In answer to these questions, the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad goes on to describe deep sleep: as a third aspect of each person's experience.

5. What is reached, as world and dreams dissolve in sleep?

yatra supto na kan cana kāman kāmayate na kan cana svapnam
pashyati tat suṣhuptam, suṣhupta-sthāna ekī-bhūtaḥ prajnyāna-
ghana ev' ānanda-mayo hy ānanda-bhuk ceto-mukhaḥ prājnyas
ṭṭitīyah pādah

Where one who sleeps does not perceive
the slightest dream, nor feels desire
of any kind, that is deep sleep.

This deep sleep state has come to oneness:
filled with consciousness alone.
It's made of happiness itself,
experiencing that happiness.

Its gateway is the mouth of mind.

This is the third aspect:
of knowing in itself.

In the experience of deep sleep, no desires are felt, no objects are conceived, no mental or physical appearances are seen. Viewed through our minds and bodies, the depth of sleep seems blank and dark and empty.

But the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad doesn't see it like that. In stanza 5, it describes the deep sleep state as having come to unity (ekī-bhūta), as filled with consciousness (prajnyāna-ghana), as made of happiness (ānanda-maya), and as knowing in itself (prājnya). Here, deep sleep is seen from its own point of view, as a positive experience in its own right.

In the waking and dream states, body and mind see differing and changing things. But in deep sleep, body and mind have disappeared. There are no different objects, no conflicting activities. In order to experience anything, body and mind need difference and action. So, from a physical or mental point of view, there is nothing in deep sleep. It seems to be a blank, without experience.

And yet, in actual fact, we do experience deep sleep. It is just that state where our experience is neither physical nor mental. We experi-

ence it where all differences and conflicts are dissolved in peace. In its own experience, it is just peace: with no difference or conflict to disturb its unity.

In the peace of sleep, there are no appearances that partly cover knowledge, leaving gaps of ignorance. There is just pure experience: in which no cover up, nor any gaps are known. In that pure consciousness, no desires are frustrated, no dissatisfactions are found. Its essence is unclouded happiness: which all beings seek, through their actions in the world.

For that happiness, all acts are done.

6. How does deep sleep affect our living in the world?

eṣha sarv'-eshvara eṣha sarva-jnya eṣho 'ntar-yāmy eṣha yonih
sarvasya prabhav'-āpyayau hi bhūtānām

This is the Lord of all.

This is the knower, of everything.

It is what guides and
keeps control, from within.

It is the source of all:
at once the basic origin
and the dissolution
of created things.

In waking life and dreams, as we interpret what we see, our perceptions get absorbed into understanding, at the background of experience. There, at the depth of understanding, consciousness continues quietly: undistracted by the changing appearances that come and go at the surface of attention. At that underlying ground, consciousness is independent of body and mind, beneath the limitations of their physical and mental acts.

That is the same consciousness which deep sleep shows. It is the knowing ground from which all mental and physical experiences arise. As they appear, they all express it and depend on it. As they disappear, they are absorbed back into it.

In stanza 6, that inner ground is called the Lord of all (sarv'-eshvara), the knower of all (sarva-jnya), the inner controller (antar-yāmi), the source of all (yonih sarvasya), the origin and dissolution of created things (prabhav'-āpyayau hi bhūtānām).

In the course of our lives, we learn through a repeated cycle of expression and reflection. As we engage in any act, a current state of understanding is expressed, from the ground of consciousness within each one of us. Then, as this expression is experienced, there is a reflection back. We perceive what happens and interpret it, thus absorbing experience back into the ground of consciousness. A new state of understanding results, now having learned from what has taken place. As we act further in the world, the new understanding is expressed. So the cycle keeps repeating: reflecting back and forth between the changing world of action and the changeless ground of consciousness which is expressed.

This expression and reflection takes place at every moment of experience. Each moment is a passing experience, which is replaced by the next. At each moment, some perception, thought or feeling passes by. As it appears, it expresses consciousness and is immediately absorbed back into consciousness again. Then, just after that absorption, consciousness is all alone: with no appearance overlaid on top of it. This happens momentarily, before the next experience occurs. But while it happens, there is a state with no appearances in it, just the same as in deep sleep.

Thus, in between each moment and the next, there occurs a state without appearances. From a waking or dreaming point of view, this state is momentary. But in the state itself, no time appears. From its own point of view, there is no time. In its own right, that state is identical with deep sleep.

Seen in this way, the deep sleep state is quite essential to our waking and dreaming lives. To make up for our physical and mental limitations, we keep returning every moment to deep sleep. It's there that we refresh our actions with new energy, with living meaning and with undistracting light.

7. Where is one truly awake?

n' āntah-prajnyam na bahiṣh-prajnyam n' obhayatah-prajnyam
 na prajnyāna-ghanam na prajnyam n' āprajnyam, adṛiṣṭam
 avyavahāryam agrāhyam alakṣhaṇam acintyam avyapadeshyam
 ek'-ātma-pratyaya-sāram prapañc' opashamam shāntam shivam
 advaitam caturtham manyante sa ātmā sa vijnyeyah

Not knowing inward, nor outside,
 nor knowing both; it is not something
 filled with consciousness; not something
 that may know or may not know.

Unseen by any faculties,
 it cannot be transacted, grasped,
 nor pointed out, conceived by thought.
 It cannot be determined thus.

It is the one self-evident
 reality, where all the world's
 appearances are laid to rest.

It is just peace and happiness,
 where no duality is found.

That is conceived as the 'fourth'.

It is the real self.
 Just that needs to be known.

According to the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad, no passing state can amount to a true awakening. Not the waking state, which gives way to dreaming. Nor the dream state, which dissolves in depth of sleep. Nor even the deep sleep state, whose latent potency gives rise to waking and dream experiences.

To be truly awake, all states must be taken into account. That is only possible from a changeless reality, which stays present in all states. That reality is called 'turīya' or the 'fourth'. It's called the 'fourth' because it is beyond the three states of waking, dream and sleep. In stanza 7, it is described in two ways: negative and positive.

Negatively, it is contrasted with the three states. It is not the outward knowing of the waking state; nor the inward knowing of the dream state. Nor is it even the background knowing of deep sleep, whose quiet witnessing knows both our outward and our inward experiences.

Outside and inside do not apply to it. Nor does any distinction of knowledge and ignorance. It is not knowing as opposed to ignorant. It is not seen or transacted as an object that can be grasped or pointed out or thought or determined in the physical and mental world.

More positively, it is described as the one self-evident principle (ek'-ātma-pratyaya-sāra). In other words, it is the self-illuminating principle of consciousness that is shared in common by all experience. In that consciousness, knowing is not an act which may or may not be done. Instead, consciousness illuminates itself by its essential nature: just by being what it always is. That is not a state of knowing which may alternate with ignorance. There, knowing is not a passing state; but the ground reality of consciousness, which does not change.

Where that reality is reached, all appearances turn out to be its expressions. Throughout the world, all things perceived just manifest that one reality. It's what they truly show, each one of them. It's that in which all of the world's appearances get laid to rest (prapanc'-opashama), dissolved into its changeless unity.

When conflicts end, we come to it as peace (shānta). When desire is satisfied, we come to it as happiness (shiva): where we are no longer at odds with the experience that we know.

In it, subject and object are the same. The 'consciousness' that knows and the 'reality' that's known are found identical. They are two words for one same thing. That is its non-duality (advaita).

It is each person's real self (ātman), where each of us lives truly. It's only there that anyone is properly awake. That, we are told, is what we need to know.

8. How is 'om' interpreted?

so 'yam ātmā 'dhy-akṣharam on-kāro 'dhi-mātram pādā mātrā
mātrāsh ca pādā a-kāra u-kāra ma-kāra iti

Seen there, as that which does not change,
the chanted 'om' is that same self.

Seen element by element,
the elements (of changing sound)
are aspects (of unchanging self).
And in their turn, the aspects are
these elements: the letter 'a',
the letter 'u', the letter 'ma'.

The sound 'om' is a mantra, meant to be chanted and heard. It has a special shape of sound, with a special effect on those who chant and hear it. The meaning of the mantra 'om' is based directly on its shape of chanted sound.

In order to pronounce the sound correctly, and to help interpret its meaning, it is analysed phonetically. Three elements, of passing sound, are thus identified.

- First is the vowel 'a', pronounced as '-er' in 'father' (without any 'r' sound). This sound is voiced from the bottom of the throat, with the mouth open.
- Second is the vowel 'u', pronounced as 'u' in 'put'. This sound is voiced in the mouth, through narrowed lips.
- Third is a resonant hum 'mmm...', which gradually trails back into silence. This sound is meant to resonate everywhere, throughout the chanter's and the listener's experience. But in that resonance it dissolves itself, with the mouth and lips closed.

At first, when learning how to chant 'om', its three elements may be pronounced separately, one after the other. Then, by running them gradually together, they may be coalesced into a single sound. The 'a' and 'u' thus coalesce into an 'o', which continues seamlessly into the resonating 'mmm...'. There results a single continuity of sound, rising up from silence and dissolving there again. That continuity extends into the silence as well.

Thus, as 'om' is chanted, the whole experience is meant to show a continuity that carries on through changing sounds, and through silence as well. In stanza 8, that continuity is identified as the unchang-

ing truth of self. And 'om' is analysed into three elements, which show three aspects of the self.

9. How is 'a' the waking state?

jāgarita-sthāno vaishvānaro 'kārah prathamā mātrā 'pter
ādimattvād vā 'pnoti ha vai sarvān kāmān ādish ca bhavati ya
evam veda

The waking state, together with
its common universe, is the
first element: the letter 'a'.

From 'āpti' (or 'attainment');
or from 'ādimattva' ('being first').

One who thus knows in truth attains
to all desires; and is established
as the one, first principle
that's here before all other things.

As 'om' begins to be pronounced, the mouth is opened and sound is voiced from deep within, expressed towards the world outside. The letter 'a' is pronounced like this. It thus stands for the arising of manifestation. What's manifested is the common universe, which we perceive outside us in the waking state.

Stanza 9 points out two ways of experiencing this waking universe. It may be experienced either from what has been attained, or from what one is in the first place. And we are told that knowing rightly brings a final attainment: where all desires are satisfied, in coming back to one first origin.

10. How is 'u' the dream state?

svapna-sthānas taijasa u-kāro dvitīyā mātr' otkarṣhād
ubhayatvād v' otkarṣhati ha vai jnyāna-santatim samānash ca
bhavati n' āsy' ābrahma-vit kule bhavati ya evam veda

The state of dream, together with
its burning energy, is the
second element: the letter ‘u’.

From ‘utkarṣha’ (‘excellence’);
or from ‘ubhayatva’ (‘being both’).

One who thus knows in truth excels
at passing knowledge on alive,
and comes to its equality
(where it is shared and handed down).

In the resulting lineage,
no one falls ignorant of truth.

As ‘om’ continues from its starting sound, the lips are narrowed and the sound takes on a more subtle shape inside the mouth. The letter ‘u’ is pronounced like this. It thus stands for the transforming energy of the dream state, manifested in the subtleties of mind. Here, the gross forms of outward perception are processed and transformed, as they get interpreted and taken into lasting knowledge.

In stanza 10, two alternatives are again presented, this time for our experience of conception in our minds. To know things better, they may be conceived from a position of cultivated excellence, raised above the crudities of unrefined perception. Or, alternatively, our experience may be interpreted from a non-dual ground: where both outside world and inner mind are accepted as the same reality.

And here we are told that those who know may pass truth on, in traditions of knowledge that keep learning genuinely alive.

11. How is ‘mmm...’ the deep sleep state?

suṣhupta-sthānaḥ prājnyo ma-kāras tṛtīyā mātṛā miter apīter
vā minoti ha vā idam sarvam apītiś ca bhavati ya evam veda

The deep sleep state, together with
its knowing principle, is the
third element: the letter ‘ma’.

From 'miti' (or 'measuring out');
or from 'apīti' ('merging in').

One who thus knows correctly takes
the measure here of everything,
and is completely merged therein.

As 'om' ends, mouth and lips are closed. What started and continued as a vowel sound becomes a resonating hum, which merges into silence. This is the letter 'ma', here pronounced as 'mmm...'. Its closing resonation is designed to fill the chanter's and the listener's experience, as sound is taken into quietness. This special shape of droning and dissolving sound is meant to draw a full attention positively down into the quiet background of experience. There knowing carries on, beneath all changing sounds and silence. It is from there that knowledge is expressed and changing things are known.

In stanza 11, two alternatives are once again presented, now for our experience of integrating knowledge. On the one hand, our differing perceptions are co-ordinated by comparing and contrasting them, thus measuring them out, one against the other. On the other hand, when they have been measured out, they get interpreted and taken into understanding. Thus they are merged into a quiet knowledge that we continue to draw upon, as attention turns to other things.

Here we are told that one who knows takes all things into full account, in a correctly measured way, by getting utterly absorbed in unconditioned truth.

12. What is 'turiya' or the 'fourth'?

amātrash caturtho 'vyavahāryah prapanc'-opashamah shivo
'dvaita evam on-kāra ātm' aiva samvishaty ātman' ātmānam ya
evam veda

The fourth is not an element;
nor has it elements. It cannot
be transacted or made up.
In it, the whole created world
of made-up things is brought to rest.

It is the unconditioned
happiness of non-duality.

‘Om’ is thus self alone.
One who knows that
joins back, through self,
into the truth of self.

As ‘om’ is chanted, sound arises from the background of experience and returns back there again. The shape of sound is specially designed to emphasize that background: as the source which is expressed, and as the goal where all expressions are returned to rest. That is the goal of happiness which all desires really seek, through all their differing objectives.

At that background, knowing self and known reality are quietly at one. Each is what all appearances express. They are inseparable, with nothing to distinguish them. There, self is on its own, identical with the reality of everything experienced.

That non-dual self is indicated as the ‘fourth’: beyond the three states of waking, dream and sleep. They come and go, but it remains unchanged: forever present through all changing states.

From this same self, in everyone, all chanting and expression comes. All sounds and all appearances are its expressions. They are made up of elements, but it is not.

To find it means to come back home, to what one always is.