

OM vs. AUM – Which is Correct?

Raghava S. Boddupalli

Institute of Sanskrit and Vedic Studies (ISVS), Sri Siddhi Vinayaka Temple, Sastry Memorial Hall, Sanjayanagar, Bangalore 560094 India

raghava7boddupalli@gmail.com

The sacred syllable **Om** in Sanskrit, ओम् ॐ, (Romanized: *Om̐*) is a mantra and an invocation and prime symbol of Sanatana Dharma. The verse asserts that this syllable word *Om* is used often and for diverse purposes, to remind and celebrate that Brahman. It lists the diverse uses of *Om* in ancient India, at invocations, at *Agnidhra* (one of the sixteen priests in *Yajña*, who recites Samaveda), in songs of the *Samans*, in prayers, in *Śāstras*, during *Yajñas* (sacrifices), during rituals, during meditation, and during recitation of the Vedas.

Taittirīya Āraṇyaka

It is variously said to be the essence of the supreme Absolute, Consciousness, Ātman, Brahman, or the cosmic world. *Om* is the *bījākṣara* of the embodiment of Parabrahman as described in the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*.

ओम् इत्येकाक्षरं ब्रह्म ।

अग्निर्देवता ब्रह्म इत्यार्षम् ।

गायत्रं छन्दं परमात्मं सरूपम् । सायुज्यं विनियोगम् ॥ – *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* – 10-33

omityekākṣraṃ brahma ।

agnirdevatā brahma ityārṣam ।

gāyatraṃ chandaṃ paramātmam sarūpam ।

sāyujyam viniyogam ॥ – Taittirīya Āraṇyaka –

10-33

The meaning of the verse is – ‘The unique word *Om* is of *Parabrahman* form, *Agni* is main *Devata*, *Brahma* is related to *Ṛṣi*, *Gayatri* is related to *Chandas*, *Pramatva* is all-pervasive and the terminal point of *Moksha* (liberation)’.

Upaniṣads

The *Aitareya Brahmaṇa* of the *Ṛgveda*, in section 5-32, suggests that the three phonetic components of **Om** (a + u + m) correspond to the three stages of cosmic creation, and when it is read or said, it celebrates the creative powers of the universe.

Om emerged in the Vedic corpus and is said to be an encapsulated form of Samavedic chants. *The syllable Om is used to indicate compliance.* The contemplation of *Om* is revealed and described in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* as *Praṇavopāsanam*:

ओमिति ब्रह्म । ओमितीदम् सर्वम् ।

ओमित्येतदनुकृति ह स्म वा अप्यो

श्रावयेत्याश्रावयन्ति । ओमिति सामानि गायन्ति

। ओम् शोमिति शस्त्राणि शग्मसन्ति ।

ओमित्यध्वर्युः प्रतिगुरं प्रतिगृणाति । ओमिति

ब्रह्मा प्रसौति । ओमित्यग्निहोत्रमनुजानाति ।

ओमिति ब्राह्मणः प्रवक्ष्यन्नाह ब्रह्मोपाप्रवानीति ।

ब्रह्मैवोपाप्रोति । – *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* – 1-8.

Omiti brahma | Omitīdagum sarvam | omityetadanukṛtirha sma vā apyo śrāvayetyāśrāvayanti | omiti sāmāni gāyanti | om̐ śomiti śastrāṇi śaṃsanti | omityadhvaryuḥ pratigaram̐ pratigr̥ṇāti | omiti brahmā prasauti | omityagnihotramanujānāti | omiti brāhmaṇaḥ pravakṣyannāha brahmopāpnavānīti | brahmaivopāpnoti ॥ – Taittirīya Upaniṣad – 1-8.

The meaning of the above verses is – when they are told: ‘*Om, recite*’, they recite. Uttering **Om**, they sing the Sama chants. With ‘*Om, Som,*’ they recite the prayers. Uttering **Om**, the *adhvaryu priest* (the main priest for *Yajña*) gives the response. Uttering *Om*, the *Brahma* gives assent. Uttering *Om*, gives permission to offer oblations in the Agnihotra sacrifice. When a Vedic teacher wishes to obtain Brahman he utters *Om*; thus desiring *Brahman*, he verily obtains *Brahman*. The idea is that *Om* is everything as Brahman is everything – *Om iti idam sarvam* as the mantra says; *Om is Brahman* itself – *Om iti brahma* as the mantra puts it **Om is Parabrahman** (*Brahman* without attributes – *nirguṇa*) and *Apara Brahman* (*Brahman* with attributes – *saguṇa*).

Etymology

The grammatical root word (*dhātu*) for **OM** is: *ava + man, oṃ + kāraṃ - praṇavaḥ avati rakṣaṇādikaṃ karōti* – meaning the mantra that protects; the syllable *Om* is also referred to as **Ōmkāra** (*Ōmkāra*) and **Praṇavam** among many other names. The word ओंकारमाचरिंचु in the Śṛṅgāra

naiṣadham̐ (2-69) it is described as अभिलिषिंपंग नोंकार माचरिंचु (abhilaṣiṃpaṃga nōṃkāra mācarim̐cu); **Ōmkāra** means *Praṇavam*, *Aṃgīkāram*, *Āraṃbham*, *Brahma*, *Ōm anunaḥṣaram*; **Ōmkār** means *Mūla daivam̐*, *Ādi daivam̐*; **Ōmkārēśvara** means Lord Siva, *Mukkaṃṭi*, *Maheshwara*.

Importance of OM

OM is a sacred *mantra* and also a spiritual incantation made before and during the recitation of spiritual texts, during puja and private prayers, in ceremonies of rites of passage (*samskara*) such as *Upanayanam*, weddings, and during meditative and spiritual activities such as *Praṇava yoga*. It is part of the iconography found in ancient and medieval era manuscripts, temples, monasteries, and spiritual retreats in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. As a syllable, it is often chanted either independently or before a spiritual recitation and during meditation in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

Derivation of OM

Om represents the Sanskrit letters अ (a) उ (u) and म (m) – अकार उकार मकार इति (*akāra ukāra makāra iti – Narayana Upanishad 44 – 51*). More and more people are spelling **Om** incorrectly as AUM, which is incorrect. ओम् (**Om**) has three letters as per the rules of the Sanskrit grammar. The rules say that *Om* is simply ओ (O) म (M). The Sanskrit language has an unusual feature called *sandhi* (connection) that can cause adjacent letters to merge or combine into a

new letter. For example, when the letter अ (a) is followed by उ (u), they combine to form ओ (o), like when Katha of a scripture, is followed by the word the name Upanishad, they combine to form the word, *Katha Upaniṣad*. All this is due to the grammatical rules of *sandhi* that determine how adjacent letters combine. According to those rules, the letter अ (a) followed by उ (u) must combine to form ओ (o), they can never remain side by side. For this reason, to say that ओम् (om) has three letters, a u m is incorrect. It is interesting to consider how this division of ओम् (om) into three letters came about in the first place. An important Vedantic scripture, the *Mandukya Upaniṣad*, uses om in a symbolic way to describe the three states of experience, (1) waking (जागृति), (2) dream (स्वप्न), and (3) deep sleep (सुषुप्ति). It does this by grammatically deconstructing o into a and u, then it symbolically assigns a to the waking state, u to the dream state, and m to the state of deep sleep. When om is chanted again and again, its repetition represents the daily cycle of waking, dream, and deep sleep. Between each two repetitions of om, there is a brief gap of silence in between them. According to the *Mandukya Upaniṣad*, that gap of silence represents pure consciousness. So, just as om emerges from silence and then fades back into silence, so too, the waking, dream, and sleep states arise from pure consciousness and resolve back into that consciousness. This grammatical deconstruction of the letter o into a and u was done for the sake of symbolism, not for the sake of spelling or pronunciation.

Because the *Mandukya Upaniṣad* is so widely studied, many people know that a, u, and m represent the three states of experience. Without knowing the Sanskrit grammar, some people might incorrectly conclude that those three letters actually spell om. It is simply pronounced as OM. There are some hidden details. Sanskrit vowels are generally short or long. The letters a and i are short; they are considered to be one unit in duration (*mātrākalam*). The letters aa and ii are long, as are e and o. All these letters are two units in duration. But the letter o of om is prolated, which means it is extra-long, it is three units in duration. So, om is properly pronounced with an extra-long o, in om. This prolated o is sometimes indicated in writing. As depicted in the figure 1, the om at the top is the Sanskrit symbol that is used most frequently. The second om is formed from the individual letters o and m. The third om is written in the Tibetan script and is used in the well-known mantra, *Om maṇi padme hum*. The fourth om includes the numeral three in between o and m, to indicate that o is three units long. The last om is written in Telugu, a highly revered language of Southern India. So, one can write om in any of these ways, but never as A U M.

Having described about the OM svarupa to be shown in writing, it can be noted how the mystic syllable om is analytically presented in the *Upaniṣads* which teach *Ganeśa vidya* and *Savitṛ vidya* on one hand and in the other like *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* which postulates and describes *Bhṛgu vidya*. Vidyas are the tools and wisdom ridden knowledge. The repetition of *Om Śanti Śanti Śantih* thrice is to remove the three kinds of obstacles, viz. *Ādhyātmika* (from the self), *Ādhidaivika*

(from the heavens) and *Ādhibhautika* (from living beings).

Hariḥ OM

- *OM Tat Sat* -

Figure 1: Representation of ‘OM’ in few Languages and Scripts

