



Om

Volumes could be written about the word/syllable “Om” as it has great symbolic significance in many traditions. The sound itself creates a vibration in the skull and sinuses that is said to be very healing on many levels. It is related to the words Amen and Omni and when it is chanted it is very centering and helps focus the attention.

There are two transliterations of this Sanskrit syllable: “Om” and “Aum,” both represent the same sound. The symbol that is used to represent the sound, ॐ, is a stylized symbol rather than an actual letter in the Devanagari (Sanskrit) alphabet.

By describing a few of the vowels in the Devanagari alphabet, the two different transliterations can be explained.

The Devanagari alphabet has three “pure” vowel sounds:

अ, transliterated as “a” pronounced “uh” – as the 2nd syllable in “yoga”
generated in the back of the throat,

इ, transliterated as “i” pronounced “ee” – as the 1st syllable in “become”
generated in the middle of the mouth, and

उ, transliterated as “u” pronounced “oo” – as in “you”
generated at the lips.

This alphabet also includes several other vowel sounds, called diphthongs, that are created by moving quickly but smoothly from one pure vowel sound to another.

One of these combination-vowels is created by gliding from अ (transliterated as “a” and pronounced “uh”) to उ (transliterated as “u” and pronounced “oo”).

Try it: → “uh” + “oo” → “uh oo” → “uh-oo” → “uh-oh” → “oh”

When we combine these two pure vowels—one generated at the back of the throat and the other at the lips—the resulting sound is the diphthong, औ, (transliterated as “o” and pronounced “oh” as in “go”).

So you can see that the transliteration “om” is really describing the same sound as “aum,” since the vowel sound represented by the letter “o” is actually formed by combining the vowel sounds which are represented by “a” and “u.”

The particular significance of this sound combination becomes clear when we realize that by combining the sound made at the back of the throat with the sound made at the lips, we are, in a sense, encompassing *all of the sounds* that can be produced within the human mouth.

The “m” represents the closing of the mouth, allowing the vibration to resonate up through the sinus passages and into the bones of the skull. If you place your hand on the top of your head while chanting ॐ, you will feel the great increase in vibration as the mouth is closed.

So in a very *physical* way, chanting ॐ creates a sense of wholeness—with “a” and “u” uniting all the sounds we humans use to communicate with one another, and then closing the mouth with “m” which sends that unifying vibration deep into the bones. And when we focus the attention on this vibration, we gain a powerful aid in stilling the chatter of the mind during meditation or contemplation.

By teaching us to tune our awareness into vibration itself, the practice of chanting ॐ can even lead us beyond that holistic feeling within the individual body to a deeper experience of oneness with the physical universe. When we keep in mind that the fundamental “stuff” of the universe is energy in the form of vibration—from the vibration of the DNA that makes up our bodies to the the universal background radiation left over from the big bang—we can begin to visualize *everything* in its most subtle form and feel the unity of that vibration.

ॐ has great significance in both Hinduism and Buddhism, but because the sound of ॐ is so intimately connected to the human body, our experience of ॐ completely transcends any cultural or religious association.

Strictly speaking, ॐ is said to consist of four parts: a + u + m + silence. The chanting of ॐ is only fully experienced when we intentionally and attentively enter that silence which has been energized by the vibration of the sound that preceded it.

In addition to the experience of physical unification created by chanting ॐ (or perhaps more rightly, because of it), ॐ is also rich in spiritual symbolism. There are many variations of the symbolic meaning of the four parts of ॐ, depending on the school of thought.

One representation is:

a = manifestation/evolution

u = preservation

m = dissolution

silence = the void

Alternatively, the first three aspects can represent past, present, and future, with the silence representing eternity or timelessness. It is also said that the three sounds are symbolic of the three bodies and the three states of existence of both the microcosm and the macrocosm with “a” representing the physical body and the waking state, “u” representing the subtle body and the dream state, “m” representing the causal body and deep dreamless sleep, and the silence being the Witness of the three states, the Absolute Consciousness.

While there are many such symbolic meanings that can apply—all are metaphors with the power to help us utilize the experience of physical unity that we gain through chanting ॐ to point us in the direction of realizing that Consciousness—like vibration—is, in its essence, All One.