



The Philosophy of Omkāra and the Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa; A Journey

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Abstract

This work seeks to explore the profound and often overlooked connection between two monumental pillars of Hindu spiritual thought. On one hand stands Omkāra, the sacred monosyllable, a cornerstone of vedic and upanisadic philosophy, particularly as expounded in the māṇḍūkya upaniṣad. Om represents not merely a sound, but the entirety of existence, consciousness, and the ultimate reality, brahman. On the other hand is the teaching of Sri Ramakrishna paramahansa 19th century mystic and saint whose life embodied the practical synthesis of diverse spiritual paths. The journey undertaken here is a cultural and philosophical one, aiming to trace how ancient, abstract truths find resonance and a new life in the modern era through the lived experiences and simple, yet profound, teachings of the spiritual master. In a time when Indian philosophies were being overshadowed by western thought, as noted in the introduction, figures like Sri Ramakrishna paramahansa and his disciple Swāmi Vivekanānda played a crucial role in revitalizing these traditions. This paper argues that Sri Ramakrishna's teachings serve as a practical commentary on the highly symbolic and metaphysical concepts of the upaniṣad.

Keywords: upanisad, Sri Ramakrishnaparamahansa, omkara, Sanskrit

Introduction

With the advent of British rule, Western philosophies began to permeate India, overshadowing Indian philosophies to some extent. However, it is phenomenal that sages like Paramahansa succeeded in bringing these Indian philosophies back into prominence. Swami Vivekananda urged people to spread the principles of the Upaniṣads among the masses to end their conflicts about the nature of God and religion. He believed that recognizing the same divine light within each of us would eliminate religious disputes and conflicts.

On February 17, 1836, Gadadhar was born to Kshudhi Ram and Chandramani Devi in the village of Kamarpukur in the Hoogly district of Bengal. Gadadhar would later be known as Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Despite not completing even primary education, he became the guru of great figures like

Swami Vivekananda. It is truly remarkable that his words make the principles of the Upaniṣads easy to understand.

When the world searches for God, the moment one realizes that God is within oneself or within us, they begin to let go of desires, anger, delusion, and greed. At that point, they start to perceive Brahma, the eternal. The Upaniṣads make us understand that the simplest way to worship Brahma is through the devotional practice of the sacred intonation Omkāra (Prajñava Upāsana).

“The Philosophy of Omkāra and the Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa; A Journey”

This world is a confluence of ideas and mental states. The language and words we use for this exchange of ideas are all based on sounds. For the air generated from the navel to take the form of sound or become a



letter, it must touch various places from the throat to the lips. That touch is what the sound of this world becomes today. Here the Praṇava, the sacred intonation of Omkāra, is being described. The Upaniṣads help us understand and realize Omkāra. The sound that starts in the throat, the place of 'A', travels through all the places and ends at the lips, the place of 'M', forming the great sound of Omkāra. This means that Omkāra, which starts with 'A', the root of all letters, is considered by the Upaniṣads to be the fundamental essence of all letters and, indeed, of language itself.

"माण्डूक्यमेकमेवमलं मुमुक्षूणां विमुक्तये"

(Muktika Upaniṣad)

The ten Upaniṣads that Śaṅkarācārya wrote commentaries on are considered the most important today. Among them, the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad is the shortest and most significant. It is said that one who truly understands the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad does not need to study any other Upaniṣad. The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad describes Omkāra. In essence, it conveys that for the seeker inquiring into the mystery of the universe, the secret of the universe can be encapsulated in the single word Omkāra. The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad is associated with the Atharva Veda. The Māṇḍūkyas are the lineage of maṇḍūkā Ṛṣis, and this Upaniṣad is connected to their branch (Dashopaniṣad śrutipriya Bhāṣyabhāṣyam, page 36, vol 1). The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, which consists of only 12 mantras, observes the realms of human experience in the three states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, and reveals them in the fourth state, Turiya. The great saying *"अयं आत्मा ब्रह्म"* belongs to the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad. When reflecting on the cosmic mystery of Pranava or Omkāra, the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad is the first that comes to mind. Similarly, all Upaniṣads begin with Omkāra. The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad describes Omkāra, which is the foundation of all Upaniṣads.

Understanding that the navel is the crucial centre of the body allows us to comprehend where and how speech originates. The navel is the life source of the fetus, providing nourishment through it. The first sound of Omkāra, the syllable 'A', also originates

from the navel. Hence, 'A' is considered the foundational root of all letters and sounds.

"ओमित्येतदक्षरमिदं"

The syllable "Om" is used as the most auspicious sound in the world. The Upaniṣads state that Omkāra represents both the manifested universe (Brahmāṇḍa) and the transcendent nature beyond it. The sound of Om and the syllable 'A' are regarded as the primary sounds. The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad begins with an explanation of the importance of Omkāra. Omkāra transcends the three times—past, present, and future. When uttering Om, the sound that starts at the throat (the place of 'A') travels through various places and ends at the lips (the place of 'M'). Therefore, Om is considered a fundamental symbol of letters and language. However, the Katha Upaniṣad advises that Omkāra is an accessible means for attaining Brahma.

एतद्व्येवक्षरं ब्रह्म

एतद्व्येवक्षरं परं

एतद्व्येवक्षरं ज्ञात्वा

यो यदिच्छति तस्य तत्

(kadopanishad2-16)page 55

"एतदालम्बनं श्रेष्ठ

मेतादलम्बनं परं

एतदालम्बनं ज्ञात्वा

ब्रह्मलोके महीयते

(kadopanishad second valli 17)"

Brahma is worshipped both with attributes (Saguṇa) and without attributes (Nirguṇa). Saguṇa Brahma is referred to as 'Aparam' (lesser), while Nirguṇa Brahma is called 'Param' (supreme). Omkāra symbolizes both. Those who worship Saguṇa Brahma attain the realization of Īśvara (God), while those who worship Nirguṇa Brahma gain Brahma Jñāna (knowledge of Brahma).

"From the same Om arise 'Om Shiva', 'Om Kali', and 'Om Krishna'."

"(Sri Ramakrishna Vacanamritam, vol. 1, page 474)"



This clearly indicates that the most effective means to attain Brahmaloaka (the realm of Brahma) is the worship of Omkāra. Similarly, the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, in the śikṣa Valli, Eighth Anuvaka, also highlights the importance of Omkāra:

*ओमिति ब्रह्म/ ओमितीदं सर्वं/ओमित्येतदनुक्रितिह स्म
वा अप्यो श्रवयेत्यश्रवयन्ति?*

"(Taittirīya Upaniṣad, Shiksha Valli, Anuvaka 8)"

This suggests that Om is the essence of Brahma and everything. It emphasizes that Omkāra is central to understanding and realizing Brahma.

The provided texts highlight the significance of Omkāra (the sacred syllable 'Om') in Vedantic tradition. It symbolizes both the personal (Saguṇa) and the impersonal (Nirguṇa) aspects of Brahma. Worshipping Omkāra is a means to attain both the realization of God and the ultimate knowledge of Brahma. The Upaniṣads and the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna underscore that Omkāra is foundational to spiritual practices and understanding, as it encompasses the essence of all deities and ultimate reality.

One must worship Om as Brahma, for everything perceived is Brahma. It is described as the explosive force of sound energy that illuminates the sensory world. "(Taittirīya Upaniṣad, page 31)"

In this imperishable explosion of sound, Īśvara created the universe. The only term that can be used to denote this explosion is Om. Om is the mother of all names and forms, and among the pure sounds, it is the most sacred. The combination of the three syllables—A, U, and M—represents the creation of the entire universe. Om is the most universal symbol among all sounds that we can utter. Of all sounds, the distinctive characteristic is the sound of 'A'. All phonations begin with the touch of the tongue against the roof of the mouth and end at the lips. The sound that originates from the root, 'A', represents the beginning.

When the Bible says "In the beginning was the Word," it does not refer to a mere word but to a musical sound, which is Om. Spandanam means sound, and this is the essence of Om. "(Paramadharma Darśanam, Osho, page 16)"

The text emphasizes that Om, regarded as the essence of Brahma, is fundamental to understanding the universe. It describes Om as the primordial sound or vibration from which everything emerges. The Taittirīya Upaniṣad suggests that Om represents the dynamic energy behind creation. The text also highlights that Om is both the symbol of the divine and the foundational sound from which all other sounds and phonations originate. In spiritual and philosophical contexts, Om is considered the purest form of sound, embodying the essence of divine creation and universal consciousness.

At the end, the sound 'M' originates from the lips. The syllable 'U' starts from the root of the tongue and ends at the lips, demonstrating the effort of sound production. When Omkāra, which encompasses the primal, middle, and final sounds, is pronounced correctly, it encompasses all forms of sound articulation. No other word can achieve this. Therefore, Om is the most fitting term for an explosion of sound. Since this explosion is the most subtle aspect of the visible world, it is the closest to Īśvara and is, in fact, the first manifestation of pure consciousness. Thus, Omkāra is the true symbol of Īśvara. "(Swami Vivekananda, Bhakti Yoga, Chapter 7)"

In the view of Brahma, the incredibly vast and eternal essence, Omkāra, though a sound, becomes the means for attaining both. Omkāra is considered by various Upaniṣads as both a support and symbol for Para Brahma (the Supreme Absolute) and Aparā Brahma (the manifest aspect). The sound associated with Īśvara is known as Praṇava, as clarified in the Yoga Sūtras: "तस्य वाचकः प्रणवः" (Yoga Sūtra 1-27).

The single syllable Om is Brahma itself. The self that shines in all living beings is also Brahma. This self has four aspects: Visva (the waking state), Taijasa (the dreaming state), Prājña (the deep sleep state), and Turīya (the transcendental state).

"सर्वं ह्येतद्ब्रह्म अयमात्मा ब्रह्म,

सोऽयमात्मा चतष्पात्. "(Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad 2)"

When the self is described in the syllables, it is Omkāra. Omkāra is composed of the sounds 'A', 'U',



and 'M'. These three sounds are also considered as the three feet of Omkāra. This means that the aspects of the self and the sounds of Omkāra are differentiated accordingly. The first sound, 'A', represents the waking state (Vaiśvanara) and the first sound of Omkāra. Among the three sounds, 'A' is the first to be uttered, as opposed to 'U' and 'M'.

When considering the states of Taijasa and Prajñā, the waking state (Vaiśvanara) is the primary one. This is the first similarity. The entire universe is pervaded by Vaiśvanara, the universal form. Among the letters, 'A' is pervasive in all words. As stated in the Shruti, " अकारो वै सर्व वाक् " Vai (Everything is pervaded by 'A'), and the Bhagavad Gita confirms, "अक्षराणां ओम्करोऽस्मि" श्रीमद् गीतयुगे १२.३०. "Aksarāṇam Omkāra" (Among letters, Omkāra is the Supreme).

All letters in language are pronounced with the mouth open. The first sound uttered with an open mouth is 'A'. No other letter can be pronounced without the assistance of 'A'. Similarly, our initial experience of the universe happens in the waking state. Without the waking state, it is impossible to comprehend these states. Without waking, there is no authority for understanding the universe. Thus, 'A' and Vaiśvanara are inseparable. Worshipping Vaiśvanara, who is the form of 'A', fulfils all worldly desires and elevates one to be among the great beings. The first step in the elevation of great beings, who communicate through words, is also represented by 'A'.

In the fifth question of the Praśna Upaniṣad, Satyakama, the son of Sibi, approached the sage Pippalada and asked, if a person meditates on Omkāra throughout their life, what realm will they attain upon death? The answer from the guru was that Omkāra represents both Para (Supreme) and Apra (Manifest) Brahma. By meditating on Omkāra with understanding, one attains either the Supreme or the Manifest Brahma. It is also stated that one who meditates on Omkāra with perfect devotion will gain enlightenment and be reborn on Earth. There, they will experience all forms of prosperity through austerity, celibacy, and concentration.

This passage from the Praśna Upaniṣad emphasizes the significance of meditating on Omkāra (the sacred syllable 'Om') throughout one's life. Omkāra is seen as encompassing both the Supreme (Para) and Manifest (Apra) aspects of Brahma. Through sincere meditation on Omkāra, a person can attain either the Supreme or Manifest Brahma. Moreover, the text suggests that those who practice this meditation with true devotion will gain enlightenment and be reborn on Earth, where they will experience all forms of prosperity and success due to their disciplined spiritual practice.

Next, the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad compares the second aspect of the self, Taijasa, with the second syllable of Omkāra, which is 'U'. The common attributes of 'U' and Taijasa are excellence and duality. Since 'U' follows 'A', it is said to have a higher status, as per the customary principle that subsequent elements have a superior quality compared to their predecessors. In the same way, Taijasa, which follows Vaiśvanara, is considered superior. This reasoning is based on the notion that Taijasa, which is subtle and experienced in dreams, is superior to the gross and wide Vaiśvanara experienced in waking life. This indicates a closer approach to the truth.

Furthermore, duality means integration on both sides. Just as 'U' sits between 'A' and 'M' in Omkāra, Taijasa integrates with both Viśva (the waking state) and Prājñā (the deep sleep state). By understanding and meditating on this, a person's knowledge and wisdom will increase. This leads to the individual having no animosity towards enemies and being treated with equal respect by everyone, similar to how friends are treated. The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad makes it clear that such a person will foster interest and success in spiritual matters among all in their lineage.

The passage highlights the comparative attributes of the syllable 'U' in Omkāra and the Taijasa state of consciousness. It explains that 'U', being the second part of Omkāra, and Taijasa, being the second state of consciousness, share attributes of excellence and duality. The text implies that Taijasa, as a more subtle state than Vaiśvanara, holds a higher



status, mirroring the hierarchical principle where subsequent elements are considered superior.

Duality in this context means that Taijasa, like the syllable 'U' that bridges 'A' and 'M', integrates aspects of both the waking state (Viśva) and the deep sleep state (Prajña). Meditation on these aspects leads to increased wisdom and knowledge, resulting in a harmonious and respected presence among all, including enemies. This understanding promotes spiritual success and interest among one's followers and lineage, as clarified by the Māndūkya Upaniṣad.

The Praśna Upaniṣad describes that the second syllable of Omkāra symbolizes the subtle universe seen in the dream state and the mind that supports it. This means that the dream state and the associated glory are represented by this syllable. It is meditated upon in the form of the Yajurveda. Therefore, one who meditates on this second syllable is taken to the lunar realm, which is the abode of the mind-deity, according to the Yajus. There, after experiencing the results of worship in the form of prosperity, the person returns to this world and is reborn as a human. They are then given the opportunity to achieve the success of rebirth through further philosophical inquiry.

Although the mind may have been diverted from external objects and internalized, one who meditates on the second syllable is still considered to be a person whose mental impressions and tendencies have not been completely destroyed. This is because the person exists solely in the light of the subtle Prajña, illuminating and experiencing subtle matters of the mind. Thus, the Māndūkya Upaniṣad describes Taijasa as the second aspect of the self, which involves experiencing subtle matters of the mind in the dream state with the light of Prajña. This is detailed in the fourth mantra of the Māndūkya Upaniṣad.

Those who have vision of God in dreams are called dream-siddhas (Sri Ramakrishna Vachanāmritam, vol. 2, page 171).

According to Vedānta, the world is an illusion and as false as a dream. The Supreme Self is the witness to all states: waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. Just as a dream is false to some extent, so is

the waking world. Only one eternal reality exists, and that is the Atman, as stated by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

The Māndūkya Upaniṣad clarifies that the third syllable of Omkāra corresponds to Prajña, which is associated with the state of deep sleep. The common attributes of this state are measuring and becoming one. Thus, one who understands this measures the entire world, attaining unity with the world. Like a snake shedding its skin, such a person becomes liberated from all sins. The utterance of Om combines the three syllables A, U, and M into a unified, indivisible sound, which is referred to as the 'Akhaṇḍa' sound (Māndūkya Upaniṣad, 12). This is equated with the state of Turiya, where the three aspects merge completely, representing the state of pure consciousness.

One who meditates on the sacred sound Om with full understanding is considered to know the entire world and is also able to perceive the Saṁgha Īśvara, the cause of the world, as the Māndūkya Upaniṣad explains.

The Bhagavad Gita states:

"One who chants the single syllable Om, remembering the Supreme Lord, and leaves the body, attains the highest state of liberation"

ओमित्येकाक्षरं ब्रह्म

व्यायहरत्ममनुस्मरन्

यः प्रयाति त्यजन् देहं

स यति परमं गतिं (geetha VIII13)(Gita VIII.13).

The Māndūkya Upaniṣad "अमात्रचतुर्थोऽव्यवहार्यः

प्रपञ्चोपशमः" (māndūkyam 12) explains that when chanting Om, the three syllables A, U, and M combine and merge into the indivisible sound, known as "Amitra." This sound has no individual syllables and is associated with the Turiya state, which is the pure consciousness where the three aspects merge into one.

Sri Ramakrishna says:



"The chanting of Om can lead to spiritual enlightenment, similar to the way the sound of the Gāyatri mantra merges in meditation. If chanting Om leads to samādhi, then spiritual life becomes perfected" (Sri Ramakrishna Vacanamritam, vol. 2, page 359).

Just as a wheel with three spokes rotates and merges into a single entity, the three syllables of Om merge into a complete letter, which is described as Amitra. When both word and meaning dissolve, it ceases to be an object of transactional speech. Without the ignorance-based seed state, the illusion of the universe is pacified. Therefore, it is non-dual, blissful, and pure.

One who understands the non-difference between Omkāra and the Atman, and practices meditation on Omkāra, transcends the notion of the individual self and attains the state of the supreme self. Just as someone who distinguishes between light and a snake does not mistake the snake for something harmful again, a person who realizes the supreme self with knowledge will not return to the illusion of the universe. If ignorance persists, such a person will return to the dualistic world.

"While the awareness of 'I' and 'you' persists, names and forms will continue to be seen" (Sri Ramakrishna Vacanamritam, vol. 2, page 520).

ऋग्भिरेतं यजुर्भिरन्तरीक्षं

सामभिर्यत् तत् कवयोः वेदयन्ते

तमोङ्गकारेणैवायतनेनन्वेति विद्वान्

यत्तच्छान्तमजरममृतमभयं परं चेति

(Preshna upaishad V -7)

The Praśna Upaniṣad (V.7) states: "The letters A, U, and M in Omkāra correspond to the three worlds, the three Vedas, and the three states of consciousness. A represents the waking state, the earth, and the R̥gveda; U represents the dreaming state, the atmosphere, and the Yajurveda; and M represents the deep sleep state, Brahma, and the Sāmaveda. Meditating separately on these three syllables leads one to the divine realms of Virat Puruṣa, Hiranya-garbhā, and Īśvara."

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa adds: "By transcending the illusory, transient state of existence and reaching the eternal, one attains Samādhi. Omkāra, when practiced properly, transcends the sound and leads to Samādh." Inside the world-renowned Śāntigiri Ashram's shrine, the deity is represented as the radiant Omkāra sitting on a lotus. When asked about this representation, the response from the monk there was: "The lotus symbolizes the earth, and Omkāra represents the Param Brahma." The shrine features images of deities and prophets, signifying that after transcending all forms of worship and understanding them, one arrives at Omkāra, as suggested by the Upaniṣads.

Similarly, in the book "Ramana Maharṣi: The Spiritual Teacher of Nocchi Venkataraman," the chapter "Atma Prakasa" mentions that the cave where Maharṣi Ramana resided was in the shape of Omkāra. This cave, known as Virūpakṣa Cave, was suitable for winter stay, but it became uncomfortable during the summer due to the drying up of nearby water sources and lack of airflow. The book clarifies that while one can enter the state of Omkāra in a balanced state of sattva, rajas, and tamas, for others, Omkāra can become unbearable.

Text like Māṇḍūkya upaniṣad are in a Sanskrit, a language with a limited number of speakers are in the modern world. This creates a barrier for people to access and understand their cultural heritage directly. Sri Ramakrishna used a simple Bengali to make these complex philosophical ideas accessible to the common person.

Deep spiritual and philosophical ideas can sometimes be misinterpreted, leading to superstition or dogmatic beliefs. Symbols like Omkāra may be used without understanding their profound metaphysical meaning.

Conclusion

The union of A, U, and M sounds of Omkāra represents the paths or steps to reach Brahma. When the components of Omkāra are related to the soul's states, if the goal is to reach Brahma, then the practice of Omkāra is the way. Whether one worships the Saṅga (with attributes) or Nirṅga (without



attributes) aspects of Brahma, the ultimate aim is to realize that Brahma is within us. The Upaniṣads illustrate this concept. In the states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, the human being moves through the experiences of the syllables A, U, and M, and ultimately seeks the non-dual Omkāra. This Omkāra is beyond transactional experiences and is pure, non-dual consciousness. When one realizes the Atman (soul) as Brahma, the distinctions of "I" and "you" dissolve, along with conflicts and disturbances.

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