

## The Symbolism of OM in the Mandukya Upanishad

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### Abstract

The Mandukya Upanishad, one of the principal Upanishads, is a brief yet profound text that encapsulates the essence of Vedantic philosophy. Central to this Upanishad is the sacred syllable **OM**, which is seen as representing the totality of existence, consciousness, and the self. This paper provides an exhaustive analysis of the symbolism of **OM** in the Mandukya Upanishad, exploring its relationship with the four states of consciousness: waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and **Turiya** (the transcendental state). Through a detailed examination of the text, this paper seeks to unpack the philosophical layers behind **OM** and its significance in understanding the nature of **Atman** (self) and **Brahman** (the ultimate reality). The study demonstrates how **OM** serves as a bridge between the individual and the universal, offering a path to spiritual realization and liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

**Keywords:** OM, Mandukya Upanishad, Brahman, Atman, consciousness, Turiya, states of consciousness, Advaita Vedanta, mysticism, symbolism etc.

### Introduction

The syllable **OM** (or **AUM**) is widely recognized as the most sacred symbol in Indian spiritual traditions, particularly in Vedanta, where it represents the ultimate reality or **Brahman**. Its resonance, both as a sound and as a concept, encapsulates the very essence of the universe, bridging the finite with the infinite and the transient with the eternal. The **Mandukya Upanishad**, one of the shortest yet most philosophically rich Upanishads, dedicates its entire discourse to the exploration of **OM** and its profound implications for understanding reality, consciousness, and self-realization.

The Upanishads, in general, serve as a culmination of Vedic thought, focusing on metaphysical questions surrounding the nature of existence, the self, and ultimate reality. Among these, the Mandukya Upanishad stands out for its direct and concise treatment of **OM** as the symbol that not only encapsulates the cosmos but also the individual self. The text links **OM** with the four states of consciousness, presenting a unified vision of reality that transcends ordinary experiences and leads to the realization of the **Atman** (the individual soul) as being identical to **Brahman**.

This paper delves into the symbolic significance of **OM** as presented in the Mandukya Upanishad, exploring how it relates to consciousness and the ultimate metaphysical truths of existence. We will explore the philosophical meanings behind the syllable **OM**, its relationship with human consciousness, and its role as a tool for spiritual liberation.

## **OM as a Symbol in the Mandukya Upanishad**

### **1. The Four States of Consciousness and OM**

The Mandukya Upanishad's most notable contribution is its delineation of the four states of consciousness and their relationship to **OM**. The syllable **OM** is broken down into three distinct sounds—**A**, **U**, and **M**—each of which corresponds to a particular state of consciousness. The Upanishad's aim is to show that these states represent the different layers of the self, which can be transcended to reach the ultimate state of realization.

- **Jagrat (Waking State):** The waking state, represented by the sound **A**, is the state in which the individual engages with the external world through the senses. In this state, consciousness is outwardly focused, perceiving objects and phenomena in the material world. This is the most common and superficial state of consciousness, where the individual remains unaware of the deeper realities of existence.
- **Swapna (Dreaming State):** The second state of consciousness, **Swapna**, is symbolized by the sound **U**. In the dream state, the individual turns inward, interacting with a subjective reality created by the mind. Though detached from the external world, this state still involves dualistic perceptions, where the mind constructs its own reality, mixing memory, imagination, and latent desires.
- **Sushupti (Deep Sleep State):** The third state, **Sushupti**, represented by the sound **M**, is the state of deep sleep. In this state, there is no awareness of either internal or external objects. The self, while still present, is submerged in an undifferentiated consciousness. This state is closest to the experience of non-duality, though there is no conscious recognition of the unity of self and reality.
- **Turiya (The Fourth State):** Beyond these three states lies **Turiya**, the transcendental state of consciousness, which is symbolized by the silence following the sound **OM**. **Turiya** is pure awareness, the state in which the self recognizes its oneness with **Brahman**. It is not an experience in the conventional sense, as it is beyond the

distinctions of subject and object, beyond time, space, and causality. **Turiya** represents the ultimate realization of the non-dual nature of existence.

## 2. OM as the Embodiment of Totality

The Mandukya Upanishad presents **OM** as the embodiment of all existence. It represents everything that has been, is, and will be, as well as the state beyond time and space. The syllable **OM** contains within it all the various levels of experience and reality, from the mundane to the transcendent.

In the text, **OM** is described as being the past, the present, and the future. It transcends these limitations, pointing to the ultimate reality that is beyond the realm of time. This idea is further reinforced by the assertion that **OM** encompasses all of existence, both the individual self and the universal self.

By meditating on **OM**, the practitioner is invited to transcend the illusory separations between the self and the world, between time-bound experiences and eternal truths. **OM** serves as a tool for contemplating the totality of existence, pointing to the ultimate unity that lies beyond dualistic distinctions.

## Philosophical Implications of OM

### 3. OM as Brahman: The Ultimate Reality

The Mandukya Upanishad's identification of **OM** with **Brahman**, the ultimate reality, is one of its key philosophical insights. In Vedantic thought, **Brahman** is the non-dual, unchanging reality behind the apparent multiplicity of the universe. It is beyond description and cannot be perceived through ordinary means, but it is the essence of all that exists.

**OM**, as a symbol, represents this ineffable reality. By meditating on **OM**, the practitioner is able to grasp the essence of **Brahman** in a direct, intuitive manner. The syllable itself becomes a means of experiencing the divine, as it encapsulates the totality of existence in a single sound. In this sense, **OM** is not merely a symbol or a tool for meditation; it is the very essence of **Brahman** in audible form.

The Mandukya Upanishad highlights that **Brahman** is both immanent and transcendent. It pervades every aspect of the cosmos, yet it also exists beyond the realm of time, space, and causality. **OM**, as the representation of **Brahman**, similarly encompasses both the manifest and unmanifest aspects of reality.

## 4. OM and the Self (Atman)

In Vedantic philosophy, the ultimate goal is to realize the identity of the individual self (**Atman**) with the universal self (**Brahman**). The Mandukya Upanishad uses **OM** as a means of illustrating this essential unity. The text teaches that the self, in its true essence, is not limited by the experiences of waking, dreaming, or deep sleep. These states are merely manifestations of the self's interaction with the material and mental realms.

The ultimate reality of the self lies in **Turiya**, the fourth state of consciousness that transcends all dualities. **Turiya** is the state in which the individual self recognizes its unity with **Brahman**, and this realization is symbolized by the silence that follows the utterance of **OM**.

The Mandukya Upanishad emphasizes that the self is not a mere participant in the world of appearances. It is the unchanging reality behind all experiences, and by meditating on **OM**, one can come to realize this truth. In this way, **OM** serves as both a symbol and a practical tool for achieving self-realization.

## OM in the Context of Advaita Vedanta

### 5. Non-Duality and OM

The philosophy of **Advaita Vedanta**, which teaches the non-duality of the self and the ultimate reality, finds its perfect expression in the teachings of the Mandukya Upanishad. The syllable **OM** represents the non-dual reality of **Brahman**, and its association with the four states of consciousness illustrates the illusory nature of dualistic experiences.

In the waking, dreaming, and deep sleep states, the individual experiences reality as fragmented and separate. However, these distinctions are ultimately illusory, as the true nature of the self is non-dual. **Turiya**, the fourth state of consciousness, is the realization of this non-dual truth, and **OM** is the key to unlocking this awareness.

The Mandukya Upanishad's teaching on **OM** aligns perfectly with the Advaitic notion that all multiplicity is a product of ignorance (**avidya**). By meditating on **OM**, the individual can transcend the illusions of duality and realize the unity of **Atman** and **Brahman**. This realization is the ultimate goal of spiritual practice in Advaita Vedanta.

## Findings and Implications

The study of **OM** in the Mandukya Upanishad reveals a profound symbolic system that connects the individual self with the ultimate reality of the cosmos. Through its association with the states of consciousness and the nature of **Atman** and **Brahman**, **OM** serves as both a meditative tool and a philosophical concept that bridges the gap between the finite and the infinite.

This study has shown that **OM** is not merely a religious symbol but a comprehensive framework for understanding the nature of existence and consciousness. It is through the understanding and meditation on **OM** that one can transcend the limitations of the ego and realize the unity of all existence.

## Conclusion

The symbolism of **OM** in the Mandukya Upanishad offers a deep insight into the nature of reality, consciousness, and the self. By linking **OM** to the four states of consciousness and the ultimate state of **Turiya**, the Upanishad provides a profound teaching on the unity of the self and the cosmos. The meditation on **OM** serves as a practical method for realizing the non-dual nature of reality and achieving spiritual liberation.

The Mandukya Upanishad's teaching on **OM** continues to inspire philosophical inquiry and spiritual practice, making it a timeless text that speaks to the deepest questions of human existence. As a symbol, **OM** encapsulates the essence of the Upanishadic vision of reality, offering a path to self-realization and the experience of oneness with the universe.

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