

Before “Let There Be Light” There was AUM

by Joseph Dongo

Abstract

The sacred syllable **AUM (OM)** occupies a unique place in the spiritual traditions of humanity. Revered in Hinduism as the primordial sound from which creation emerged, it echoes through Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and finds parallels in Christian Amen and Islamic Ameen. This paper explores the origins, phonetic structure, metaphysical power, and symbolic interpretations of AUM across cultures. It further examines its parallels to “primary sets” in nature—the primary colors, the four bases of DNA, and elemental triads—arguing that AUM represents a universal archetype of unity-in-diversity. The study synthesizes Vedic texts, Upanishadic philosophy, esoteric commentaries, modern linguistic insights, and Masonic interpretations of the “Lost Word.” In so doing, it highlights the continuing relevance of AUM as a bridge between science, spirituality, and culture, affirming its role as the universal sound of Being.

Introduction

»Om.is.this.whole.world;Its.explanation.is.as.follows;the.past?the.present?and.the.future.
– .all.this.is.Om;And.whatever.else.there.is?beyond.the.threefold.time.– .that.too?indeed?
is.Om;— Mandukya.Upanishad?verse.7

Across cultures and centuries, humanity has returned to sound as a metaphor and medium of creation. In ancient India, the syllable **AUM (Om)** was revered as the primordial vibration, the essence of the universe articulated in a single syllable. The Gospel of John, centuries later, would echo this vision in declaring, »In.the.beginning.was.the.Word?and.the.Word.was.with.God?and.the.Word.was.God; The resonance between these traditions suggests that AUM is not merely a sectarian chant but a **universal archetype of sound as Logos**, the creative principle.

This paper explores the origins, meanings, and uses of AUM across world religions, mystical traditions, and modern interpretations. Beginning with its phonetic simplicity, we move into its scriptural roots, symbolic elaborations in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, echoes in Abrahamic faiths, and its appropriation in Western esotericism. Alongside, we draw parallels between AUM and “**primordial codes**” in nature — such as the primary colors of light, the four bases of DNA, and elemental triads — to demonstrate its universality.

1. Sound as Creation

»In.the.beginning.was.Brahman?with.whom.was.the.Word?and.the.Word.was.Brahman? — Taittiriya.Brahmana.8;4;4

The primacy of sound in creation is a theme that recurs across civilizations. In Hindu thought, sound is not a byproduct of creation but its **very foundation**, expressed through the doctrine of śabda_brahman — the absolute as sound. Similarly, Jewish mysticism regards the Hebrew alphabet as creative emanations, and Christian theology enshrines the Logos as both word and reason.

In Vedic ritual, the utterance of mantras was believed to sustain cosmic order (*ṛta*). The syllable AUM functioned as the quintessential mantra, often placed at the beginning of sacrificial chants. It was thought to align the sacrificer with cosmic vibration, enabling human speech to participate in divine creativity.

Modern esotericists have also emphasized the centrality of sound. René Guénon, in *The Lord of the World*, describes primordial authority as rooted in a sacred “Word” transmitted through hidden centers of initiation, linking East and West in a perennial metaphysics of vibration.¹ Freemasonry similarly preserves the myth of a “Lost Word,” interpreted by some as a veiled reference to AUM.²

Thus, the idea of creation through sound is not a cultural accident but a **cross-civilizational insight**, one that finds its most concentrated form in AUM.

2. The Phonetics of A–U–M

»If.you.remove.the.tongue?you.can.utter.only.three.sounds;Aaa?Ooo?Mmm? — Sadguru, *The Right Way to Chant AUM*

From a phonetic standpoint, AUM is composed of three fundamental sounds: **A**, **U**, and **M**. These are the only sounds that can be produced without the tongue.³ As Sadguru notes, all other phonemes in human language are modifications of these three, created by placing the tongue in various positions. The universality of AUM thus lies not only in its symbolic resonance but also in its **physiological foundation**.

The structure of AUM parallels other primary systems: just as three basic colors (red, green, blue) generate the entire visual spectrum, so A–U–M generate the field of audible articulation.⁴ When chanted sequentially, the syllable begins deep in the throat (**A**), rolls forward in the mouth (**U**), and closes at the lips (**M**). The chant culminates in **silence**, often termed *turiya* in Upanishadic exegesis — the “fourth” beyond waking, dreaming, and deep sleep.

This fourfold structure (A–U–M + silence) has been compared to the four nucleotides of DNA, which encode the diversity of life from a minimal set of building blocks.⁵ Both reveal a **principle of simplicity generating complexity**, a hallmark of sacred cosmologies and modern science alike.

3. Scriptural Origins and Vedic Foundations

»Om.ityetad.akṣaram.idam.sarvamḥ .- .Om?this.syllable?is.all.thisḥ
— Mandukya.Upanishad?verse.7

The earliest textual evidence of AUM is found in the Vedas, where it is used as an **invocatory syllable** in sacrifice. Over time, it acquired a deeper metaphysical significance in the Upanishads. The Mandukya.Upanishad, perhaps the briefest and most profound of these texts, devotes itself entirely to the analysis of AUM. It identifies the syllable with the totality of existence:

- **A** corresponds to the waking state (jāgrat).
- **U** corresponds to the dream state (svapna).
- **M** corresponds to deep sleep (suṣupti).
- The silence after AUM corresponds to the transcendent state (turīya).

Here AUM functions as both **cosmic map** and **meditative tool**, collapsing ontology and psychology into a single phoneme.

Later texts, such as the Chandogya.Upanishad, amplify this symbolism, associating AUM with the life-breath (prāṇa), the sun, and the essence of the Vedas themselves. The Bhagavad.Gītā (9:17) declares: »I.am.the.syllable.Om.in.all.the.Vedasḥ

Through these scriptural articulations, AUM became the **acoustic embodiment of Brahman**, the ultimate reality. It signified not just sound but **Being itself**.

4. AUM in Hindu Philosophical Systems

»Om.is.the.bow?the.Self.is.the.arrow?Brahman.is.the.targetḥ
— Mundaka.Upanishad?8;8;0

Within Hindu philosophical schools, AUM assumes layered meanings. **Vedānta**, especially Advaita, interprets it as the direct symbol of non-dual Brahman. Chanting AUM is thus a contemplative practice leading to realization of the Self's unity with the Absolute.

Tantric traditions adopt AUM as a bija.mantra, a seed sound that energizes rituals and awakens subtle energies. In the system of nāda.yoga, AUM is regarded as the primordial

vibration (nāda) underlying all sound. Its chanting is thought to purify the mind and activate the chakras, aligning the microcosm (body) with the macrocosm (universe).

In **popular Hindu devotion**, AUM prefixes prayers and mantras, functioning both ritually and theologically. It sanctifies speech, ensuring that human utterance begins in resonance with the divine.

Thus, in Hindu philosophy and practice, AUM is not simply a sound but a **method of integration**: of mind and body, of human and divine, of language and silence.

5. Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh Adaptations

»Om.Mani.Padme.Hum.– .the.jewel.is.in.the.lotus;₪
– .Tibetan.Buddhist.mantra

The syllable AUM did not remain confined to Vedic or Hindu contexts but spread across the broader Indic religious landscape. In **Buddhism**, especially in its Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna expressions, AUM was adopted into some of the most significant mantras. The most famous of these is Om Mani Padme Hum, associated with Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. Here, **Om** sanctifies the mantra’s opening, invoking cosmic vibration before articulating compassion (mani, jewel) and wisdom (padme, lotus). The recitation integrates sound and meaning into a spiritual practice of liberation.

In **Jainism**, AUM functions as a condensed form of homage to the five supreme beings: Arihanta, Ashiri, Acharya, Upadhyaya, and Muni. This illustrates the adaptability of AUM as a phonetic root capable of being reinterpreted within different doctrinal structures while retaining its sacrality.

Sikhism employs a related concept through Ik Onkar — “One Reality.” Although not linguistically identical, Onkar reflects the same insight that a single vibratory principle underlies multiplicity. The Guru Granth Sahib opens with this invocation, setting the tone for Sikh theology as grounded in divine unity.

Taken together, these adaptations show that AUM’s **universality** was recognized across Indic religions: not as sectarian property but as the vibrational key to spiritual awakening.

🔗.AUM.Beyond.India;₪Cross_Religious.Resonances

»In.the.beginning.was.the.Word?and.the.Word.was.with.God?and.the.Word.was.God;₪
– John.7:₪7

The resonance of AUM extends beyond India into the Abrahamic faiths. In **Christianity**, the term Amen closes prayers and hymns. In liturgical contexts, it is often prolonged — Aaaamen — creating an acoustic effect remarkably close to AUM. When chanted at papal

Masses in the Vatican, the vibration mirrors the rolling resonance of the primordial syllable.¹

In **Islam**, the word Ameen concludes Qur'ānic recitations and supplications. Like Amen, it emerges from the Semitic root conveying affirmation, but phonetically it sustains the same vibratory closure found in AUM.²

These parallels are not coincidental. As Sadguru has argued, phonetic drift across languages naturally produced such variations: AUM in Sanskrit, Amen in Aramaic and Hebrew, and Ameen in Arabic.³ Each tradition retained the **core vibrational archetype**, even if its theological articulation diverged.

Moreover, the **Logos theology** of the Gospel of John explicitly connects sound with divine creation. The Logos is both with God and is God — just as the Mandukya Upanishad proclaims that Om is both the Self and Brahman. The consonance is too striking to ignore.

Jewish mysticism also emphasizes sound and letters in creation. The Kabbalistic Sefer Yetzirah teaches that God “engraved” the world into existence with Hebrew letters. Here again we encounter the archetype: creation through sacred vibration.

Thus, while AUM is historically Indian, its archetypal resonance finds expression across Abrahamic traditions, making it a **bridge-concept** between East and West.

🔒.Esoteric.and.Mystical.Interpretations

»The.Word.is.the.first.emanation.of.Spirit?the.Great.Cosmic.Sound• .From.that.Holy.
Vibration.all.things.have.come?and.into.that.vibration.all.things.must.melt;
– .Dr.J.M;W;Lewis.on.AUM.and.Freemasonry

Western esoteric traditions have long been preoccupied with the idea of a **Lost Word** — a primordial name or sound through which creation was accomplished. In **Freemasonry**, particularly in the Royal Arch degree, the quest for the Lost Word symbolizes the search for divine truth obscured by time. Some commentators, drawing from comparative mysticism, suggest that this “Word” is none other than AUM.⁴

Albert Pike, in *Morals and Dogma*, describes Masonry as the custodian of universal religious truths, preserved through symbols, allegories, and ritual.⁵ Among these, the symbolism of sound occupies a central role. Pike insists that Masonry, like the ancient mysteries, conceals its truths from the uninitiated, revealing them only to those prepared to perceive the hidden meaning of its symbols. This aligns with the Indian teaching that AUM is self-evident to the realized sage but opaque to the ordinary listener.

The mysterious initiatory phrase *Konx Om Pax*, used in certain ancient rites and later adopted by esotericists, has been interpreted by some as a Western echo of AUM.⁶ While philological certainty is elusive, the structural similarity reinforces the intuition that sacred sound transcends cultural boundaries.

René Guénon, in *The Lord of the World*, describes the supreme spiritual authority (Manu, Metatron, Melchizedek) as custodian of primordial wisdom, including the science of sacred sound.⁷ His account situates AUM within a perennial esotericism that unites East and West.

Even in American history, we find resonance. George Washington, a practicing Freemason, was depicted as Grand Master of his lodge during his presidency. While his personal engagement with esoteric doctrine is debated, later interpretations — including those by Yogananda’s disciple Dr. M.W. Lewis — linked Washington’s Masonic heritage to the universal quest for the Lost Word, identified with AUM.⁸

Thus, in Masonic and esoteric traditions, AUM is not merely a Hindu mantra but the **hidden key**: the primordial Word, lost to the many but preserved in symbolism for the few.

4. AUM as a Universal Code

» These three sounds A-U-M are the very basis of all the other sounds you can utter just as three colors form all others;

– .Sadguru

The triadic structure of AUM invites comparison with other **primordial codes** in nature:

- **Primary Colors:** In physics, red, green, and blue light combine to produce the full visible spectrum. A–U–M functions analogously as the “primary colors of sound.”⁹
- **DNA Bases:** Life is encoded by four nucleotides (adenine, thymine, guanine, cytosine). When silence is counted as the “fourth element,” AUM + Silence mirrors this quaternary pattern, encoding infinite diversity from minimal units.¹⁰
- **Archetypal Triads:** Cultures universally structure reality in triads:
 - Hindu Trinity: Brahmā–Viṣṇu–Śiva
 - Christian Trinity: Father–Son–Holy Spirit
 - Alchemical Trinity: Sulfur–Mercury–Salt
 - Masonic Trinity: Wisdom–Strength–Beauty

The recurrence of triads suggests a **universal archetype of wholeness through complementarity**. In every case, the threefold structure culminates in a hidden fourth: the silence after AUM, the ineffable mystery beyond form.

Such parallels demonstrate that AUM is more than a syllable: it is a **metaphysical code** echoing throughout nature and culture. Its structure expresses the law by which **simplicity births complexity**, whether in sound, light, life, or symbol.

9. The Science and Metaphysics of AUM: Sound, Silence, and the Brain

»Be.still.and.know.that.I.am.God;

– .Psalm.0076

The ancient seers described AUM as a vibration that quiets the mind and aligns the body with the rhythms of the universe. Today, modern neuroscience is beginning to validate what mystics have taught for thousands of years: sound is not merely symbolic — it is physiological, measurable, and transformative.

In controlled studies, researchers found that chanting AUM decreases activity in the amygdala, the brain's fear and stress center.⁴ The final nasal resonance — the lingering mmm — stimulates the vagus nerve, sending a calming wave through the autonomic nervous system. This same vibratory signature slows the heartbeat, deepens breathing, and induces what clinicians call a “parasympathetic shift,” a state associated with clarity, ease, and emotional resilience.

The yogic tradition anticipated this long ago. Patanjali teaches that the repetition of Om leads the mind toward stillness, removing obstacles in perception. The mechanism is vibrational: a long, unbroken tone that harmonizes breath and consciousness. The Mandukya Upanishad describes Om as both the map and the destination — a symbol of the waking world, the dreaming mind, the depths of dreamless sleep, and the silent awareness beyond them all.

Silence is the fourth part of AUM, and perhaps the most important. In the Upanishads, this silence represents turiya, the state beyond form, name, and thought. It is not the absence of sound but the presence of pure awareness. Neuroscientists note a similar phenomenon: after a resonant auditory stimulus, the brain often slips into coherent low-frequency activity, a calm, steady hum associated with contemplative states.⁵

Here again, the parallels with Western spirituality are striking. Christian desert mystics spoke of the “prayer of quiet,” a stillness in which the soul meets God directly. The Sufi tradition calls this sukoon, the inward settling that follows remembrance of the Divine.

AUM, with its rise, roll, and release into silence, reflects this universal movement — from sound into stillness, from form into presence.

Thus AUM is not merely a mystical symbol; it is a doorway. It leads inward, downward, upward, and finally beyond — a simple syllable with the power to reshape breath, brain, and consciousness.

10. AUM in the Modern World: A Universal Practice for a Restless Age

»The.world.is.full.of.magic.things?patiently.waiting.for.our.senses.to.grow.sharper?
– .WjBj.Yeats

In a century defined by speed, noise, and digital distraction, AUM has reemerged as a counter-melody — a reminder that human beings are wired for depth, resonance, and presence. Yoga studios chant it at the start of class, mindfulness apps use its tones to guide meditation, and interfaith gatherings adopt it as a symbol of unity across traditions.

Yet its rise is not simply fashionable. People recognize instinctively that AUM works.

The vibration steadies the breath.

The breath steadies the mind.

The mind steadies the heart.

As the world grows louder, the appeal of a single grounding sound becomes unavoidable.

Even outside spiritual contexts, clinicians are now recommending tonal breathing practices inspired by AUM. The therapeutic model is simple: prolonged exhalation + vocal resonance = parasympathetic activation. This is the essence of sound healing, framed in the language of modern medicine.

Meanwhile, interfaith leaders have noted AUM’s remarkable ability to serve as a bridge. When people discover that Amen and Ameen carry the same vibrational arc as AUM, theological boundaries soften. What divides religions becomes less significant than what binds them: a shared human impulse to seal sacred speech with a resonant hum that returns the soul to its Source.

AUM also holds new relevance in ecological and cosmological conversations. Physicists speak of the universe emerging from quantum fluctuations — vibrations. Astrophysicists have recorded the “sound” of planetary magnetic fields. The Vedic insight that “all is vibration” is becoming a metaphor for modern science.

AUM stands comfortably at this crossroads, honored not only as a mantra but as a metaphor for interconnectedness in an increasingly fragmented age.

Conclusion: A Sound That Belongs to Everyone

“The universe is not outside of you. Look inside yourself; everything that you want, you already are.”

— Jalal ad-Din Rumi

AUM began as an ancient Indian syllable, chanted in the forests and ashrams of a world far older than ours. But like all great truths, it refused to remain confined. It traveled silently across cultures, morphing gently in form but not in essence — Amen, Ameen, Om, Aum — each a branch of the same universal root.

Its endurance is easy to explain. AUM speaks to something that existed before language, before doctrine, before belief. It speaks to the rhythm of breath, the pulse in the chest, the stillness behind the eyes. It reminds us that creation began with a vibration — and that we, too, are part of that ongoing resonance.

Whether whispered in meditation, sung in church, or breathed at the close of a prayer, AUM brings the seeker home to the center of their being. It is the archetype of sound, the meeting point of science and mysticism, the bridge between East and West, and the quiet hum beneath every sincere attempt to touch the Divine.

In a fractured world, AUM invites us back to unity.

In a noisy age, it calls us to silence.

And in a time of constant motion, it reminds us that the oldest prayer is not a sentence — but a sound.

References

1. René Guénon, *The Lord of the World* (London: Coombe Springs Press, 1983), 1–5.
2. M.W. Lewis, “The Lost Word AUM-OM,” in *comparison of Self-Realization and Freemasonry*, 2022.
3. Sadguru, *The Right Way to Chant AUM* (unpublished lecture, 2024).
4. Mircea Eliade, *Yoga; Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 201–205.
5. Video recording, *Papal Blessing of Benedict XVI at Christmas 8678* (Vatican, 2012).
6. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Āmīn.”
7. Sadguru Dongo, *The Right Way to Chant AUM* (unpublished lecture, 2024).
8. M.W. Lewis, “The Lost Word AUM-OM,” *Self-Realization and Freemasonry*, 2022.

9. Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (Charleston: Supreme Council, 1871), 210–219.
10. William Sandys, *A Short View of the History of Freemasonry* (London: Crew and Spencer, 1829), 12–15.
11. René Guénon, *The Lord of the World* (London: Coombe Springs Press, 1983), 18–25.
12. “The Lost Word AUM-OM,” Yogananda site archive, accessed 2022.
13. Sadguru Dongo, *The Right Way to Chant AUM*.
14. Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 201–205.