



YOGA

what is om? – what is the meaning of ‘om

by Dearbhla Kelly / January 23, 2015 /

I recently took a yoga class with an inspirational teacher here in Los Angeles. He began by addressing a question a student had asked him in the hallway before the start of class – what is the meaning of ‘Om’. His answer may be surprising to those of a more orthodox bent: there is no meaning; *Om* is the primordial sound, the *bija* (seed) mantra from which all other sounds emanate.

He elaborated thus: the sound of *Om* is so loud that we can’t even hear it, kind of like how in the dead of night in the desert, it’s so quiet that it’s loud. We are on a planet rotating on its own axis, hurtling through space at about 16,000 miles per hour. The sound of the universal hum is deafening. So deafening that we can’t hear it.

I love this interpretation, the abstract poetry of it. When we chant *Om* we give form to the formless ground of being, we make the potential actual. *Vedanta* (non-dual yoga philosophy) teaches that *Brahman* (the Divine) is the underlying potentiality of all things. Without beginning or end, beyond all concepts, any attempt to capture the essence of *Brahman* using language necessarily distorts since *Brahman* must be experienced to be understood: *Brahmavit, Brahmaiva, Bhavati*.

Just as we cannot capture the essence of the Divine using labels, words are inadequate to elucidate our true nature. Any label that we give ourselves can at best point to some aspect of our identity. But who we are outruns any labels, even those of our own choosing. Who we are is unbounded.

The essence of *Om* is beyond linguistic attributes. How could the sound of *Brahman’s* breath be reduced to words? To understand we must feel the reverberation when we chant *Om*. The way it unifies a room, the way it changes the energy from dissipated to integrated; the way it calms the nervous system and soothes the heart and mind. The way it pulses, the sound elongating, expanding, cresting and decaying before dissolving into a spacious silence that vibrates with presence and infinite potential.

Om is the sonic invitation to bring us into deeper union with ourselves, each other and the cosmos. A call to the present moment, to connection and awareness; a doorway to touch the infinite, however momentarily. It’s as close as your breath.

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