On the Meaning of Om

This is a brief essay on the meaning of the sacred syllable om, culled from original sources.

Om as One and All Three Diamonds

The most basic meaning of om is to signify the three diamonds: enlightened body, speech, and mind. By itself it sometimes signifies only the first, which is also its function in the combination om, ah, huung.

The first reference here is a very typical one on the signification of om, and comes from notes on the two stages of the practice of the Angel of Diamond (at \$6412) composed by Master Ngulchu Dharma Bhadra (1772-1851):

The three crucial places on the holy bodies of the root and lineage lamas are marked by syllables representing the three diamonds.

At the center tip of each of their heads is a white om syllable which is, in its very essence, the diamond of their enlightened actions.

At their throats is a red ah syllable which in essence is the diamond of their enlightened words.

And at their hearts is a blue huung syllable, consisting of the diamond of their enlightened thoughts.

The following reference shows how Chone Lama, Drakpa Shedrup (1675-1748) explains om in combination, in his work on the stage of creation in the practice of

the Secret Collection (at S0261), explains how the sound of om contains all three diamonds:

। अँ वार्ष्यात्र प्राप्त प्र प्राप्त प्र प्राप्त प्र प्राप्त प्र प्रा

The syllable om includes three parts: the ah, the u, and the ma. When you combine the ah with an u, it becomes o. When you add the little circle that means ma, then you come out with one syllable, om. The sounds that make up om individually represent enlightened action, speech, and thought; when they become one then in om, it represents the indivisible combination of all three.

The exact correspondences of the sounds to the three diamonds are clarified in a commentary by Je Tsongkapa on the secret teaching of the Keeper of the Diamond (Vajradhara), found at \$5308:

Now the meaning of the mantra is as follows. When you split the syllable om out into its component parts, there are three: the sounds ah, u, and ma. These represent, respectively, the diamonds of enlightened words, enlightened thoughts, and enlightened actions. When you put these same syllables together they become om, representing the indivisible nature of the three diamonds: enlightened actions, words, and thoughts.

Chone Lama Drakpa Shedrup (1675-1748) briefly gives this and other significances of om in a commentary to the stage of creation for the secret practice of the Union of the Spheres (Chakra Samvara) in the tradition of Luipa at S0255:

पहिमानालयात्। बुटाट्रेट्रालालीयाय्येत्राय्येशाय्येशाय्येत्राय्येत्राय्येत्र्येत्रायेत्रायेत्र

There are different mantras to be repeated in this practice; here I will give you the meaning of the "essential" mantra for the man. Om functions to lead off the mantra; the sounds ah, u, and ma that make it up represent enlightened actions, words, and thoughts.

As mentioned above, om has other kinds of significance, such as the idea of auspiciousness.

The same explanation of om is given by the great Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419) in a text (at \$5334) on how to clean from oneself the karma that would take one to the lower realms. Je Tsongkapa uses the word sna-'dren instead of the more modern mgo-'dren, for "leading off."

अँते नग् विशविर सूगशशी सूचित्र या

The word om in the mantra here has a meaning of auspiciousness, and also acts to start off the mantra.

The great master Ngulchu Dharma Bhadra (1772-1851) repeats this general function of om in an explanation of the popular mantra om mani padme huung, within a commentary on how to do spiritual fasting (at \$6313):

र्ह्नेट्र्य्यकाम्बर्गा क्टा ट्यास्त्राम्यर्थेया क्रमकालटकामा इट्डिट्य्र्व्याक्रम्थ्रेयामस्यक्षेत्रामस्यस्य ट्यास्त्रामर्थ्यम्यर्थेयस्य यालकास्र्यस्य प्रिम्यस्य प्रकास्य या ट्या ह्येयास्य स्थाप्तामस्य स्थापत्तामस्य स्य स्थापत्तामस्य स्थापत्तामस्य स्थापत्तामस्य स्थापत्तामस्य स्थापत्य स्थापत्तामस्य स्य

Around a white hri syllable visualize a string of secret sounds: the six-syllable mantra, om mani padme huung, with the parts circling around in a clockwise

direction. Then repeat this mani mantra a hundred, a thousand, or some other number of times, being careful to avoid the eight mistakes in mantras: (1-2) reciting them sometimes too fast and sometimes too slow; (3-4) too loud or too soft; (5) saying something else in the middle of some mantras; (6) letting your mind wander off as you repeat the mantra; and (7-8) mixing up the long and short vowels of the Sanskrit.

ल्यायार्ट्यत्री ल्युन्यस्ति। याद्वा याद्वा याद्वा याद्वा स्वायार्ट्यत्या विकार्य्यत्या क्षेत्रः स्वायां स्वाया स्वायार्ट्यत्या व्यायार्थः स्वायाय्य्यत् । याद्वायां स्वयायाद्वायः स्वयायायः स्वयायायाद्वायः स्वयायायायः स्वयायायायः स्वयायायः स्वयायायः स्वयायः स्वयायायः स्वयायायः स्वयायायः स्वयायायः स्वयायायः स्वयायायः स्वयायायः स्वयायायः स्वयायः स्वयः स्वयायः स्वयः स

Here next is the meaning of the mantra. Om serves to start the mantra off. Mani padme means "Wonder! The jewel, with a lotus!" The point is that you are calling to the Angel by mentioning their accourrements: a string of jewel crystal beads, and a lotus of pure gold. Huung is the root syllable of the enlightened state of mind (tuk), and here represents calling on their high compassion (tuk-je).

The use of om at the beginning of a mantra is so prevalent that mantras have been classified according to its presence. The following description of this classification is found in a famed commentary by Je Tsongkapa on a "realization" practice in the secret teachings of Highest Bliss (at \$5320).

भ्रत्ता महिन्याल्तास्य स्वास्त्रास्य स्वास्त्र स्वस्त्र स्वास्त्र स्वास्त्र स्वास्त्र स्वास्त्र स्वास्त्र स्वास्त्र

Mantras for recitation may be grouped into four different types. The secret teachings on the Diamond Topknot (Vajra Ushnashi) and the String of Diamonds (Vajravali) state:

Mantras with the syllable om at the head, but without the syllables so ha at the tail, are called "tailless." The reverse are called "headless." Those with both are known as "snakes," and those with neither we say are "truncated"...

Om as an Angel

There are places in scripture where the word om serves to represent the presence of an enlightened Angel. The following brief reference is found in a work on a special kind of torma (at \$6356), again by the master Ngulchu Dharma Bhadra.

र्राया स्ट्रिया स्ट्

Now the meaning of the mantra is as follows. The first syllable, the om, represents the Warrior of Diamond (Vajrasattva) the indivisible combination of the three diamonds of enlightened actions, words, and thoughts.

The word also represents another Angel, as we see in the massive commentary on the practice of the Secret Collection (Guhya Samaja) by Je Tsongkapa (at \$5282):

मुन्नश्याक्ष्याक्ष्याक्षेत्राक्षेत्राक्षेत्राक्ष्यात्वाची यात्रश्याद्वी स्थापर स्थूट सहित्र स्वाप्त सङ्ग्री स् सुन्नश्याक्ष्याक्षेत्राक्षेत्राक्षेत्राक्षेत्राक्षेत्राक्षेत्राक्षेत्राक्षेत्राच्या

The highest form of the Diamond King of Ritual is intense meditation on the Diamond Angel of Appearances (Vairochana), situated within the eye of the Holder of the Diamond (Vajradhara). As the text says, "You should meditate intensely on the om of the three bodies."

The phrase "Om of the three bodies" refers to the Diamond Angel of Appearances. For the phrase "meditate intensely" read "do a meditation, going through it in the proper steps"; that is, first meditate on the om, and then meditate upon the Angel of Appearances.

Om and Emptiness

The word om is often seen in the function of symbolizing emptiness. A typical instance is where it represents the emptiness of the "three spheres," meaning for example the emptiness of the giver of a thing, the person to whom it is given, and the thing given (or action of giving itself); or else the pair of the subject and object of an action. We see this usage here first in the Cow that Produces Every Wish, Je Tsongkapa's commentary on the practice of HIghest Bliss (Sambara) at \$5320:

विश्वास्त्री वर्शन्त्रस्य ग्रीक्षणा विश्वास्त्र व्यास्त्र विश्वास्त्र विष्य विश्वास्त्र विश्वास्त्र विश्वास्त्र विश्वास्त्र विश्वास्त्र व

Here is the second point [in our discussion of why one must meditate upon emptiness]. Once one has gathered together a mass of merit, on must then bring together a mass of wisdom. For this we are advised that:

The word om represents the fact that the being to whom an offering is being made, and the one making the offering, and the thing being offered itself are nothing more than the imagination.

The point is that the fact that the three sounds in the word om take on these three meanings only because you have, mentally, labelled them that way.

रवात्मक्ष्यानुरावानुरावानुरावानुरावान्यान्ध्यायदेश्याम्ययान्यत्ते । व्यानुस्य वितानुस्य वितानुस्य वितानुस्य वि

The phrase sarwa dharma, in this particular context, refers to all objects included into the object side of things. And then comes the phrase swabhawa shuddha, which means "free of any nature," signifying that the object side of things is devoid of any nature of its own.

अर्द्धन पर्दा। इ.महिश्रपदी। The word ahang means "me," referring to the subject side of things which is, just like the object side of things, completely free or devoid of any nature of its own. And it is to indicate this fact that the second swabhawa shuddha is mentioned.

These same meanings of the word are found in a commentary by Master Ngulchu Dharma Bhadra on the practice of the stage of creation in the secret teachings of the Frightener (Bhairava) at S6413:

त्त्रेश त्र्रेर्यक्ष्रेर्यक्ष्रे । त्र्रेश्वर्यक्ष । त्र्रेश्वर्यक्षे विद्या त्र्रेश्वर्यक्ष्रे विद्या विद

The second step [in blessing the inner offering] is to purify it. The word om represents the fact that the three spheres relating to the inner offering have no existence as a self-existent thing. Swabhawa means "nature," shuddha means "free of," and sarwa dharma means "every existing thing." Swabhawa shuddha means what we've just mentioned, and ahang means "me." To put it briefly, then, the phrase is refering to the emptiness of things, saying that every one of them whether they relate to the object side of things or to the subject side of things is completely free of any nature of its own.

We return again to the text by Master Ngulchu Dharma Bhadra on fasting, at \$6313, for another description of this concept:

Here is the meaning of the mantra. Om represents the the cosmic play of the fact that the three spheres in an act of giving are totally free. Guru arya

means "my Lama, the Realized Being." Lokeshwara means "Great Lord of the Entire World." Sapariwara means "along with His or Her Retinue." Baling is "torma cake," and partitsa is "partake, each one." So ha means "give all that is good."

We see om again as emptiness, but now something more than emptiness, in the famed *Great Book on the Stages of the Secret Path*, by Je Tsongkapa (S5281):

१र्अं भिवा त्या अन्तर अन्तर स्था विषय । अन्य स्था । १९ इत्रीत हो से विषय अने विषय स्था विषय । अने विषय । अने

The word om has three sounds in it: ah, u, and ma. These three are your own actions, words, and thoughts; and om stands for the combined essence, the single song, of the emptiness and the compassion of these three within you.

On the Benefits of Uttering Om

The tantra just quoted stated the benefits of uttering om and other sacred sounds, saying that "one can reach high goals" even without thinking spiritual thoughts as you do so. Various other benefits as well are given in standard references like that found in the following work on the creation stage of the secret teachings of Highest Bliss (at \$5904), written by the First Panchen Lama (1565-1662).

याश्वर्रात्तेर्यः स्त्रात्त्रेराः स्राह्म । स्वर्णः स्त्रात्त्रेराः स्त्रात्त्रेर्त्रे । स्त्रात्त्रेर्त्ते। स्त्रात्ते।

In striking with the dagger, the rest is easy to understand; here though is the meaning of the mantra with the gha gha and so on. There are three components of the syllable om; these are ah, u, and ma. When the u is applied to the ah, they change to oh; then when you add the ma, the little circle, it becomes om. These three syllables represent enlightened action, speech, and thought. The fact that all three are combined in the syllable om symbolizes that the three diamonds are indivisible.

यर्क्ट्रेन्द्रन्द्रन्द्रन्द्रम् । अर्क्ट्याद्रद्रम् । विक्रायाद्वर्ष्ट्रम् ।

If you utter the syllable om while thinking about what it symbolizes, you accrue seven different benefits, as described in the Tip of Diamond:

I'll tell you here what the om can do, This heart that holds the jewel: It gives you the highest, and wealth as well, And glory, and all prosperity; It grants to you great fortune too, Has meanings of making a declaration, And lastly auspiciousness.

In the Cow that Produces Every Wish (at \$5320), Je Tsongkapa explains these benefits in further detail:

द्री द्रश्चात्रक्ष्यात्रक्षयात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यत्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्ष्यात्रक्षत्यत्रक्षत्यत्रक्षत्रक्षत्रक्षत्रक्षत्रक्षत्रक्षत्रक्षत्रक्षत्रक्षत्रक्षत्रक्षत्रक्षत्रक्षत्रक्षत

Here is the meaning of the mantra. The syllable om is described in the Tip of Diamond as follows:

I'll tell you here what the om can do, This heart that holds the jewel: It gives you the highest, and wealth as well, And glory, and all prosperity; It grants to you great fortune too, Has meanings of making a declaration, And lastly auspiciousness.

The point is that there are seven different benefits you can get from reciting this syllable. First of all, it will bring to you the four attainments of the "highest" goal and the others mentioned. Secondly it grants you great and wonderful fortune, the blessing of virtue.

The syllable furthermore has the function of "making a declaration," which here means that it acts to start off the mantra. Finally, it is something very auspicious to recite the mantra. Thus it is the very heart or essence that can fulfil the wishes of all other beings; it acts the same as if you were holding a wishing jewel.

र्क्र-क्षिर-क्की-चि-व-क्किन वर्त-क्षित्र विकास क्षेत्र क्षेत्

By the way, it is not the case that . . . these wonderful qualities are inherent in the syllable. Sacred syllables must first of all have been composed by an extraordinary person such as an Enlightened Being; someone of great knowledge and power.

And remember that the om is made of ah and u and ma, representing your own actions, words, and thoughts. The explanation is that the om is the emptiness of these three; that it is the embodiment, the one essence, the single song of this emptiness and of the compassion in the heart of the person who is perceiving the emptiness.

If you keep in mind this explanation as you recite the syllable, then the om can do what we just said it would. This same idea applies to all other mantras. . .