

The Heart of the Mantra

Nowadays the word mantra has assumed a wider connotation. With the quest of the modern man to find easy and sure ways for success in his pursuit of wealth and pleasure, such terms as 'business mantra' or 'music mantra' have come to the use. The secrets of sure and quick achievement, the means for any dramatic success, whether sacred or profane, have come to be regarded as the mantra in their respective fields. A mantra has come to be regarded as a magic formula. But nothing is more distanced from its original meaning than this. Though it is true that a mantra can work as a magic, it is far more than a mere act of conjuring. It is, in its true essence, a means for discovery of the secrets of life and its experiences, the path of finding the hidden truths of the things, a means of enlightenment and self-discovery.

A mantra is understood to be a syllable or a group of syllables endowed with unlimited spiritual potency which can bestow on the sadhaka all sorts of glories both enjoyment and emancipation. It can save, fulfill and glorify the life of a sincere practitioner, and can enrich his life with new meaning and purposefulness. From a general point of view, every word, even every syllable, is a mantra, when enlivened with a special spiritual potency; the esotery is only to be understood and one must sincerely pursue its contemplation. Though the efficacy of the repetition of the sacred names was widely known in different religious traditions, it was in India that the secret of this practice was diligently studied and understood.

The literal meaning of the word "mantra" is that which protects when contemplated mananat trayate. Any word held to be sacred like the names of the God or the names of the avatars (great incarnations) like Siva, Visnu, Rama, Krsna, Buddha, Allah, Jesus or any name as such can be recited as mantra. Illumined prayers recited in praise of them are also mantras which work wonder when recited with devotion. These names are held to be sacred to the human heart and sublimate one's feelings and purify the mind with the association of certain ideas inseparably connected with them notwithstanding their historicity or their mythical character. In view of this, it is not required that they be historical in the strict sense. What is required, it is the sense of devotion and admiration, the capacity to give rise to a feeling of repose in and merger with an unbound spiritual reality, which always is the same, despite different names and forms employed in different contexts. These names and forms are meaningful in their respective connotations and work in the deeper levels of the human psyche. This is what is understood by mantra in general sense.

But the word mantra has a deeper significance. According to the Agamas or Tantric schools of spiritual knowledge, a mantra is more than a spiritual word or a mere name even of the God. It is conceptually more or less like the neo-platonic logos, but the significance and suggestion which are associated with this word are unique, though it has a universal truth and application. Our ordinary language employs words which have fixed ideas as their meaning, though sometimes they may suggest a sense which is remotely associated with them. The first one is known as the direct meaning or abhidha and the second is known as suggested or implied meaning or vyanjana so much obvious in poetry, as they are differentiated by the Indian philosophers. But the language of mantra is remarkably different from both of them. It can be characteristically said to be a mantric language which is multi-dimensional and trans-conceptual in contrast to the ordinary language that we employ in our ordinary or even in intellectual transactions. The dynamics of this spiritual language is that which forms the essence of Tantric esotery, which, in its truth and application, is a Science of its own.

The Tantric schools of India, among which are most prominent the Kashmir Saivism and the Srividya school, have made an intense study of this mantric language. They have discovered from a higher vision that language is the manifestation of a spiritual urge though from an ordinary point of view it is a natural development of man to express his ideas and feelings. The ancient seers have discovered this truth that language is the way through which we perceive the world, enjoy it, understand it and finally transcend it. In the deeper levels, words are nothing but consciousness and the latter is not only the foundation of our perception and understanding, it is, in its cosmic nature, the foundation of the entire world. Phonons, sounds, letters, words, sentences and language itself with all its complications, though developed from arbitrarily articulated sounds, later on being invested with meaning, are basically the outcome of a cosmic urge to manifest itself as well as the world of the objects. In depth of contemplation, the entire world with its manifold realities and meanings seems to flow, as it is, from the way it is perceived, the way it is described or not even described through language. It is immaterial what language we actually employ in our regional context.

According to the seers of the Agamas, language has manifested in four phases, para, pasyanti, madhyama and vaikhari. The first, para vak, is one with the Supreme Divine Consciousness where there is no difference between the word and the object. It is the condition where diversity does not exist. Since the world with its various strata of space, time and the objects is not at all existent, the question of difference does not arise here. The second stage is pasyanti which literally means seeing, seeing in a very minute and indistinct form, the would-be world of difference. Here, the world of diversity sprouts though it is never perceived as a reality. It is the stage of the highly awakened yogi or the suprabuddha who feels unfailingly his identity with

the Supreme Reality. In the third stage madhyama, which literally means the middle, the world of difference is distinctly perceived though the vision of the undivided reality is never lost. It is the condition of a siddha or an awakened yogi who is ever in touch with the undivided Supreme Consciousness at the same time perceiving the world of diversity. In this state the word and the object are not totally divorced from each other. But in the stage of vaikhari, the lowest level, in the form of articulated language, the objects are seen as totally divorced from word as well as knowledge. This is the degraded stage, the grossest form of language with which ordinarily man is associated, expressing it in different forms of languages spoken in the world. Words as well as their meanings are thus tainted with ignorance, misleading the individual souls along the path of samsara bereft of true recognition of his divine nature. However, in a recessive process, the same words can be helpful in the discovery of his divine nature through ascending the previous stages of madhyama and pasyanti. The mantric approach is a process of re-discovering and re-vitalizing the lost glory of language as well as a process of re-assertion of the divine glory of the soul through its contemplation.

In the evolution of language, the three stages, the letters consisting the fundamental sounds, the words signifying some ideas and the sentences expressing the multiple interrelationships of the ideas are well known. Though the words and sentences are thought to be endowed with meaning, the letters are accepted as simple sounds bereft of any meaning as such. Thus, the letters, though having phonic significance, are said to be destitute of any conceptual or ideographic meaning, and the words and sentences consisting of them are invested with arbitrary meaning with no significant relation with their phonic character. Thus the word 'cow' is used in English to express the same object for which the word 'gau' in Sanskrit is used (Remarkable is the linguistic similarity since both of them belong to the same Indo-European language family which may interest the philologists).

It is conspicuous that the ideas are signified by words formed with arbitrary sounds developed through regional usage without any necessary connection with their phonic character. This is what is generally said to be the evolution of language as a vehicle of expressing human feelings and ideas, though it has been explained differently by different schools. But why at all such a range of multiple sounds, such horrifying volume of words belonging to so many complicated categories and so many complicated rules of grammar are devised to express human ideas and experiences is difficult to explain. However, it is conspicuous that without the language of poetry it would have been impossible to understand the beauty of the world; without mathematical language no progress in scientific understanding would have been possible. Likewise, other types of verbal uses are obvious by their utter necessity. But it is only one side of the story. The real truth of life seems to escape through the invisible chasm of our languages.

The mantric language as we have noted is not one of many languages spoken or written. It is not confined to the method of signification of words either expressing the direct meaning or implying the suggestive meaning. Though it may use both these meanings of the words to a certain extent, it actually transcends the limits of such methods of signification. The whole process of forming the words and investing them with their meaning in the empirical level is done in the stage of vaikhari. But the mantric language only operates beyond it. Though the letters known as the vaikhari varnamala are used in the mantra, it is never confined to them. However, as the vehicle to carry one to the real mantric language, the ordinary letters are to be properly understood with their esoteric significance. Nowhere in the world was this phenomenon studied as deeply as it was done in India, and except the Agamas (Tantra), nowhere can we get illuminating revelations of the mystery of the words.

The letters consisting different sounds are arranged in a very scientific and logical order in the Sanskrit language (Seeing which MacDonnell lamented the illogical arrangement of the letters in English inherited from the Greeks in his 'History of Sanskrit Literature'). These letters are known as the vaikhari varnamala so much important to the Tantra works. Abhinavagupta in his Tantraloka, the greatest encyclopedic work of the Kashmir Saivism, discusses in detail the esoterism of the words. There is no work in Tantra which does not discuss the mystery of words since these are the ground of all mantras used in them. (Of course there are so many works in Sanskrit which go by the name 'Tantra'. Some works containing bizarre ideas and practices were written by inferior minds and were added to the bulk of the Tantric literature which very often misleads the beginners). To grasp the entire mystery, one has to deeply study those texts from a well-versed master with all the technicalities, in addition to some sort of sadhana (spiritual practice) of his own. However, the outlines can be broadly stated for benefit of the beginners.

In the Agamas, the empirical letters are known as mayiya varnas or illusory letters. These are said to bind the ignorant with the bondage of false knowledge. However, when their true nature is understood, they lead one to Self-realization and emancipation. In the Tantric lore, these letters (as arranged in Sanskrit) are known as matrka or the mother, since all language and knowledge are derived from them. This matrka (taken combined in the feminine singular), is said to be the matrix of all knowledge, and inwardly, in recessive journey of Self-revelation, turns to be the same as para vak, the Cosmic Consciousness in its aspect of manifestation. Among these letters, the vowels are said to be the aspect of Siva (the Cosmic Consciousness in the masculine form), and the consonants are said to be the aspect of Sakti (the Cosmic Consciousness in the feminine), there being nothing in the world which is not based on this divine paradigm. In a special jumbled manner, matrka, the mother, is also known as malini, literally meaning the garlanded one, garlanded by the letters.

Various other meanings as that 'which illuminates' or 'fulfills' etc, are assigned to it. In this form, she (in the feminine) is particularly said to be highly prolific.

Among these letters, the 'a' (as it is articulated as the first letter in Sanskrit) and 'h' (as it is articulated as the last letter in Sanskrit) are said to be the beginning and the end of all verbal phenomena, standing as such for Siva and Sakti respectively. In fact, 'a' is also known as anuttara, which means beyond which there is nothing superior; it is, in the deeper level, the un-manifest primeval sound phenomenon, which comes to the fore-front only with the will of revealing itself. In contrast to it, 'h' is said to be the expressed form of the primeval power of manifestation, which gives rise to all other sound phenomena, the consonants, requiring more pranic energy for articulation. In a more subtle form, when it is articulated as a half 'h' or ardha 'ha'kara, it is known as visarga, written as double dots ':' in Sanskrit, which literally means 'that which creates the varieties' It stands for the primeval power, supreme Sakti, variously known as prana (different from breath which is also meant by this word), kundalini, saparardha kala and yoni (the source of creation) etc. When these letters combine with the 'bindu' at the end, they express 'aham' or 'I', the Ego, the Supreme Self-Awareness, the Cosmic Consciousness as manifesting and subsuming the entire world. In the individual level, this word also stands for the individual ego which, in essence, is not different from the Cosmic. Since all the other letters come within these two, this word, in a symbolic form, also signifies the entire verbal phenomena. The Supreme Ego, parahanta, the Cosmic Divine Consciousness is said to be the 'soul' of the illusory letters, and as such is described as mantra-birya or the strength of the mantras.

A mantra may consist of a sentence, a word or even a single syllable. The truth is that we have to go from the gross to the subtle, from the sound to its meaning, from meaning to that which cannot be meant by language and from the physical level to the level of consciousness. This is what forms the essence of a mantra. In the case of a mantra consisting of words and sentences, the conceptualistic meaning holds good, but in the bija-mantra, consisting mainly of a single syllable, having one or more consonants, no such fixed meaning is there. To an unaccustomed mind it seems to be a conglomeration of meaningless sounds, but, in fact, it has a multilayered significance. Of course, it may contextually be invested with multiple meanings, but it actually has a trans-conceptual significance in so far as it intends to transcend the level of duality caused by words and meanings. In fact, the syllabic form of mantra, in its trans-conceptual character, is said to be more true to its nature, thus more important for the comprehension of mantric language.

We have earlier noted that there are four stages in language. The grossest form is vaikhari, the articulated language, comprising the illusory letters, words formed with

them and the sentences derived from the words, both being impregnated with some conceptualistic significance. There are so many theories, both in the West and the East as to how the words actually express the ideas associated with them. Most of these theories, like so many other human endeavors, are utterly useless though interesting from the intellectual point of view. We are not here concerned with the formation of theories, but with a way by which we can understand the basis of all verbal transactions, thereby comprehending the ultimate mechanism of knowledge as a function and as a reality. Thus, the next two higher stages in language, going inward from the grosser to the subtler, the madhyama (middle) and the pasyanti (seeing) are very much important from the point of view of comprehending the dynamics operating in the mantric level. These two stages are not really the activity in the level of thinking preceding the verbal expression, as it is wrongly interpreted by some. These are actually the finer stages where the dualities of the world are not as real as they are seen in the grossest form. When the letters shed their illusory nature and become more and more unified with their ground, the Cosmic Consciousness, they are known as suddha paramarsa or pure knowledge (pure reference), conducive, as they are, to the understanding of the ultimate nature of the things.

Though this point is difficult to understand unless one becomes aware of the subtler and finer perceptions of the mind, its intention is easily comprehensible. A bija-mantra (literally bija means seed, thus, a mantra in syllabic form) works more in this trans-conceptual and meaning-neutral dimension. So its application is universal, non-religious, esoteric and in the long run non-ideational. In understanding a mantra, we have to move gradually from the rigid, fixed, conceptualistic language to a more flexible language of multi-dimensional meaning, from an ideational language to an idea-neutral language, from words and sentences invested with conceptualistic meanings to the sounds bereft of ideational meaning, from sounds to the subtler vibrations, and from subtle vibrations to finer and finer awareness, thus, ultimately reaching Supreme Awareness, which is the Supreme Reality itself. The effect of different types of sounds on the human psyche is quite conspicuous. It is noticeable in the case of musical notes affecting the mind in many different ways. The basic sound vibration known as nada is the root of all the sounds both ideated and non-ideational. The syllabic mantras work both in the ideational level and in the pure sound level transcending both of them at the end.

Among these bija-mantras we may take into consideration the case of 'OM' articulated as 'AUM' with a lengthening of the nasal sound, which is accepted as the most sacred of all the mantras in the Indian traditions, both in Hinduism and other cognate religions. It is noteworthy that, in its actual significance, it has nothing to do with any particular religion. It has a multi-dimensional meaning as well an idea-neutral significance which reveal almost automatically when recited and

contemplated in the right manner. The ringing effect of the vibration of 'OM' pervades the entire body even though one is not conversant with its real significance. Contemplation in silence with awareness of the meaning of its components gives rise to a rare uplift in consciousness apart from serenity and peace of mind. The japa of a mantra means its recitation and contemplation. Recitation is more fruitful in a low voice or in a voiceless manner. Contemplation requires understanding of the various components of the mantra and their significance. The techniques and procedures of japa when adhered to and pursued sincerely bring forth the immense benefits of this practice. After a long practice, japa continues in the sub-conscious level even without any effort. In the advanced sadhakas, it even goes on uninterrupted during sleep.

Coming to the understanding of 'OM', we notice that this syllable consists of three letters, A, U and M. Apart from this; there is a ringing nasal effect of the sound. The first three letters stand for three cosmic dimensions of different strata and contemplated as such. They stand respectively for the three states of consciousness, namely, waking, dream and deep sleep; the three regions, the Earth, atmosphere and heaven; the three cosmic activities, creation, existence and dissolution; the three aspects of God known as Brahma, Visnu and Rudra responsible for the creation, existence and dissolution of the entire universe; the three Vedas, the Rk, Yajus and Sama; and the three round folds of Kundalini, the sleeping spiritual energy perceived by the yogins in the base-plexus of the spinal cord. The fourth half letter known as ardha matra with the ringing sound superscripted in Sanskrit as a dot or bindu is the most mysterious one. It stands for the fourth state of consciousness, the turiya, which is the same as the unbound Supreme Consciousness, the Godhead, which is the ultimate reality of the individuals and the world of duality, transcending all the threefold strata represented earlier by the three letters. This ardha matra also represents the other half fold of Kundalini, beyond the three folds, thus, representing her awaking. Contemplation on 'OM' means taking hold the entire strata of the universe in their manifold dimensions in mind, which gives rise to an inner expansion that rebuilds the personality in the image of a vaster reality.

This is the multi-dimensional significance of this mystic syllable to be kept in mind at the time of japa, but a still more mystery which comes spontaneously to the sadhaka is yet to come. The Agamas reveal another dimension of the mantra. The discovery of the Agamic seers can revolutionize human perception with a rare scientific vision of spirituality; it only needs a sympathetic and correct understanding.

The bija mantra which consists of one or more consonants with a vowel having either a bindu (nasal 'm' sound) or a visarga (a shortened 'h' sound) at the end is said to have infinite potency. We have seen how the mantra 'OM' contains a multilayered meaning covering different dimensions pervading both the microcosm and the

macrocosm. Apart from this there is a deeper meaning in the syllabic mantras. The conspicuous aspects represent the gross levels of existence that we have already discussed. The subtler aspects consist of the finer and finer levels which remain hidden from the grasp of the ordinary human mind. Only the yogis of the highest order could grasp these finer principles. We may discuss briefly the subtler levels of 'OM' which are more or less the same for all other bija mantras.

The first three letters of pranava (OM) are A, U and M. The fourth is the half nasal consonant, the bindu, superscripted as a dot or as a lunar crescent having a dot above it. However, this dot is not a simple resonant nasal sound. It consists of nine limbs pointing to nine subtle principles extending beyond the triads signified by the three letters of pranava (as discussed in the previous article) in the cosmic dimensions. The nine subtle principles as named in the Tantra are (1) bindu, (2) ardha candra, (3) rodhini, (4) nada, (5) nadanta, (6) sakti, (7) vyapini, (8) samana and (9) unmani. The bindu or the point represents all the aspects of the objectivity, the entire ranges of existence put together in a condensed form (may be termed as 'singularity'). It is a point without any dimension. It not only subsumes all the diversities of the world but also all space and time which provide ground for all the cosmic play. In the individual body, it is contemplated in the 'ajna chakra' at the middle of the eye brows. It is articulated in $\frac{1}{2}$ a matra (mora). A consonant, in Sanskrit, without any vowel is said to be articulated in half a matra, where as a short vowel is articulated in the time of a matra. The bindu being articulated in the time of half a matra is also known as ardha matra. According to ancient Hindu conception, a matra consists of two hundred and fifty six lavas, a lava being the subtlest perceptible time by human mind. So bindu is articulated in 128 lavas. In the finer and finer components of 'OM'kara, the time of articulation is gradually reduced till time is totally transcended at the end.

Thus, ardha candra (literally, half moon) is articulated in $\frac{1}{4}$ of a matra or 64 lavas; rodhini (lit. that which debar an unqualified from entering the highest level of spiritual realization) in $\frac{1}{8}$ of a matra or 32 lavas, nada (lit. the condensed cosmic sound in the subtlest vibration) in $\frac{1}{16}$ of a matra or 16 lavas, nadanta (lit. end of all subtle sound vibrations) in $\frac{1}{32}$ of a matra or 8 lavas, sakti in $\frac{1}{64}$ of a matra or 4 lavas, vyapini in $\frac{1}{128}$ of a matra or 2 lavas, samana in $\frac{1}{256}$ of a matra or 1 lava and unmani is not at all articulated in time: here time comes to an end. Though after nadanta, articulation of the sound is not discernible, it persists as subtle vibration. Sakti (different from the Supreme Sakti or Cosmic Consciousness) is the stage where an overwhelming feeling of a cosmic energy comes to the sadhaka. In the stage of samana, all spatial, temporal limitations and all subtle vibrations are transcended. Samana means 'with the mind'; hence in this state, there is no touch of any objectivity. It is contemplated in the sikha or tuft of hair on the head. Unmani is beyond samana, which literally means 'where mind is transcended'. With the

removal of the trace of the last lava at the end of samana, time comes to the end, thus, removing all the bondages of the individual. With the transcendence of time space is also transcended since both of them form one space-time continuum and are inseparable. There reveals the state of Pure Consciousness, beyond the touch of all duality. Through intense awareness, the mind penetrates the finer and finer realities till it gets dissolved in Supreme Awareness. Time, space and the dualities of experience which bind the individual (jiva) are completely transcended. The individual becomes the Universal. This is the real consummation of the practice of a mantra.

If one practices mantra simply out of curiosity, he may not get any benefit. Like any other serious pursuits in science and business, the practice of mantra is to be undertaken with earnestness and dedication. The practice of mantra is based on a great spiritual knowledge. It is not simply a religious practice, nor can it be studied and investigated as an objective science in its entirety. Unlike philosophical thinking it is not a speculative activity. It is a more serious and deeper pursuit than any other pursuits that we encounter in life. It is a way of rediscovering the deeper levels of our own being which remain submerged under the waters of maya or delusion. It gives us a new vision of the world by awakening us to a greater reality that forms the ground of the drama of samsara. A mantra gives its result only when it is contemplated and recited in the proper manner as prescribed in the scriptures. Though it is a long and complicated process which should be learnt from an adept, the aim is very simple. The aim of the entire process is to be in communion with a vaster reality known as maha hrada or the Great Ocean of Cosmic Consciousness in the Tantric works which gives rise to the experience of the potency of the mantra or mantra virya. The practice also requires a certain disciplines of both the mind and the body as without them the required stability of mind cannot be achieved.

Another important aspect of the practice of the mantra is diksa or initiation. In the case of some advanced sadhakas who have acquired some progress in their previous lives there may not be any requirement of a guru or spiritual guide, but in most cases the help of an enlightened master is urgently required. Since the sadhaka is not conversant with the dynamics of the finer levels of the inner world, he is likely to commit mistakes which may hinder his progress. At these junctures an accomplished master can lead the practitioner to the goal. He can arouse the latent spiritual power in the disciple if the latter has acquired a certain level of progress. This is technically known as Saktipata or the bestowing of or the transferring of the spiritual energy. But it does not happen all and a sudden unless the disciple has the required attainments. Saktipata can only be performed by an enlightened master and it can only be received by a person who has the capacity to receive it. (Unfortunately this has become a fashion in this new-age spiritualism commercialized by fake gurus and their branded disciples). However, if an enlightened master is not available, it is better to accept

God as the preceptor than falling a prey to the trade of the so-called instant spiritualism of the fake gurus.

Our mind is our only laboratory and the sole equipment in all our spiritual experiments. Unless it is kept fit there is no possibility of making any spiritual progress. The modern age has changed our mindset and afflicted our minds by different maladies of permissiveness and consumerism. Trying to be free in our pursuits of the sense-pleasures, we have really become the prisoners of the senses. We can discover the inner realm only when the external turbulence is pacified. So, a person who desires to reach the ultimate goal has to get rid of the hankering after the senses. But, for the common practitioners, a moderate dose of sense-enjoyment is not harmful. Only an attitudinal change is necessary. To achieve the goal of the practice of mantra one should have sincerity and regular practice.

When one makes some noticeable progress in japa, many spiritual experiences may happen. These are not common to all. They happen to a sadhaka depending on the state of his progress and his peculiar idiosyncrasies. In all these diverse experiences, the only thing that is notable is his progress in the inner world. One needs not be swayed away by these experiences. The ultimate goal is the realization of Brahman by ascending the higher and higher levels of spiritual experience. As we enter the space through a spacecraft with an escape velocity by overcoming the pull of gravity, we enter the space of Supreme Consciousness through the mantra with a certain spiritual potency that helps us overcome the pull of maya. The japa of a powerful mantra is a great experience. Even though we do not know the proper method, have not received initiation from an enlightened master and do not have the firm state of mind, let us start with the preliminaries. In a certain level the mantra will reveal its secrets. Then only we can discover that the mantra is not a simple word but it is a living word.

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