
The Mystic Word "OM"

SWAMI PRABHAVANANDA

FROM VEDIC TIMES until the present day the word "OM" has been taken as a symbol and as an aid to meditation by spiritual aspirants. It is accepted both as one with Brahman and as the medium, the Logos, connecting man and God. It is God, and by its aid man may realize God. The entire history of the syllable is in the revelations of the Vedas and the Upanishads, and this history in the hands of the later philosophers developed into what became known as Sphota-vada, or philosophy of the Word. Later also than the Vedas and the Upanishads we discover the doctrine of the Logos among Greek metaphysicians, and this in turn influenced the writer of the Fourth Gospel.

The Sphota-vada, however, is not precisely the philosophy of the Logos of the Greek philosophers. The Greeks first conceived of the Logos as a bridge over the gulf that separates man and God, the known and the unknown. The earliest Greek conception of the Logos was a crude one. It was identified with one or another of the physical elements, according as the source of the universe was thought to have been one or another of these. Heraclitus, who lived in the sixth century B.C., was the first to break away from a purely physical conception of creation, substituting for the material first cause of his predecessors a principle which he called intelligence. This principle of intelligence was the Logos. The advance Heraclitus made, however, was rendered somewhat equivocal by his identification of the Logos with the physical element fire.

With Plato the theory of the Logos underwent a complete transformation. He regarded the Logos, or Word, as the supersensual image, the "idea" or "thought" in God, word and thought being inseparable. And the visible universe, he

thought, is the imperfect shadow of the idea, the Logos.

The Stoics denied the validity of Plato's supersensual archetypes, accepting rather the essential theory of Heraclitus and freeing it from the illogicality to which attention has been drawn. Like Heraclitus, the Stoics perceived the principle of reason immanent and active in the universe. This eternal reason, "made concrete in the endless variety of the physical world," became the Logos of the Stoics, and this Logos in reality resided in the soul of man, who might rise above all limitations by realizing its presence within him.

Somewhat later came Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher and contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth, who attempted to harmonize Stoic reason with the transcendentalism of Plato. Philo declared that the Logos was not only immanent in the universe but was transcendent as well, one with God.

According to the Stoics, the Eternal Reason was the ultimate principle, and the necessity of its transcendental existence they did not admit. Stoicism may in fact be regarded as an attempt to escape from an admission of the existence of a transcendental God. Philo, on the contrary, insisted on the existence of a supreme self-existent Deity, and on the Stoic Logos, or Reason, as related subordinately to Him, this relation being, however, of the nature of identity. Philo called this Logos the "Son of God," and "the only begotten Son of God," as being God's first manifestation. Later the Logos assumed concrete form as the universe.

The author of the Fourth Gospel accepted this conception of the Alexandrian Philo but gave it new expression to serve the theological needs of Christianity.¹ The Logos, that is, which is identical with God, and through which the universe was created, was "made flesh" in Jesus Christ. Thus Jesus, one with the Logos, became the "only begotten son of God," and in Jesus, therefore, there was identity of being with God the Father. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This verse is almost identical with a verse in the Vedas: "*Prajapatir vai idam agre asit*—In the beginning was Prajapati (Brahman); *Tasya vag*

¹ Cf. J. Reville. *La Doctrine du Logos dans la quatrième Evangile et dans les Oeuvres de Philon.*

dvitīya asit—With whom was the Word; *Vag vai Paramam Brahma*—And the Word was verily the Supreme Brahman.”

The Philonic and Johannean conceptions of the Logos may conceivably owe no debt to Indian thought, for the truth is no monopoly of any race or nation, and with spiritual growth the same truth is often realized by different peoples independently of one another. Yet it is also possible that both Greek philosophers and Christian theologians were in some degree under obligations to India for their initial ideas, since it is a well-known fact that Hindu philosophy exercised a strong influence upon the minds of early Western thinkers.

Not only, however, are there general points of similarity between the Eastern conception of the Logos and that which took root in the West, but there are also differences between the Greek and Christian Logos and the Hindu Sphota-vada that are quite as great. To the Hindu mind, the expressed sensible universe is the form behind which stands the eternal inexpressible, the Sphota, the manifest as Logos, or Word. This Eternal Sphota, the essential material of all ideas or names, is the power through which God creates the universe.¹ Iswara, Brahman conditioned by Maya, first manifests Himself as the Sphota, the inexpressible Word, out of which He evolves as the concrete, sensible world. The Christian Logos is not, however, regarded as the material cause of the Universe, for God according to Christianity is only an efficient cause.

The Christian Logos, as we read in the Fourth Gospel, “was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we behold his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth.” There is here a second interesting difference between the Christian and the Hindu Logos. The Christian Logos was incarnate once, in the person of Jesus, whereas the Sphota of the Hindus was and is and will be incarnate in all persons—and not in persons only but in all

¹ Patanjali, the author of Yoga philosophy, did not admit this last statement, for the universe was to him a product of Prakriti. Vedanta accepts the Samkhya-Patanjali view, and then reduces the dualism of Samkhya-Patanjali to non-dualism by regarding Prakriti as Maya, or the power of God—the power to create, preserve, and dissolve the universe.

beings, throughout the universe, each of whom may directly realize God through His power, the power of Sphota. "This Sphota," says Swami Vivekananda, "has one word as its only possible symbol, and this is OM. And as by no possible means of analysis can we separate the word from the idea, this OM and the eternal Sphota are inseparable; and therefore it is out of this holiest of all holy words, the mother of all names and forms, the eternal OM, that the whole universe may be supposed to have been created. But it may be said that, although thought and word are inseparable, yet as there may be various word-symbols for the same thought, it is not necessary that this particular word OM should be the word representative of the thought out of which the universe has become manifested. To this objection we reply, that this OM is the only possible symbol which covers the whole ground, and there is none other like it. The Sphota is the material of all words, yet it is not any definite word in its fully formed state. That is to say, if all the particularities which distinguish one word from another be removed, then what remains will be the Sphota; therefore this Sphota is called the Nada-Brahman, the Sound-Brahman. Now, as every word-symbol intended to express the inexpressible Sphota will so particularize it that it will no longer be the Sphota, that symbol which particularizes it the least and at the same time most approximately expresses its nature, will be the truest symbol thereof; and this is the OM, and the OM only; because these three letters A, U, M, pronounced in combination as OM, may well be the generalized symbol of all possible sounds. The letter A is the least differentiated of all sounds. Again, all articulate sounds are produced in the space within the mouth beginning with the root of the tongue and ending in the lips—the throat sound is A, and M is the last lip sound; and the U exactly represents the rolling forward of the impulse which begins at the root of the tongue, continuing till it ends in the lips. If properly pronounced, this OM will represent the whole phenomenon of sound production, and no other word can do this; and this, therefore, is the fittest symbol of the Sphota, which is the real meaning of the OM. And as the symbol can never be separated from the thing signified, the OM and the Sphota are one. And as the Sphota,

being the finer side of the manifested universe, is nearer to God, and is indeed the first manifestation of Divine Wisdom, this OM is truly symbolic of God."

More than this, the Yogis claim that through meditation one may hear this word OM vibrating through the universe. In Patanjali's words, the worship of God and meditation upon Him can be effected by repeating OM and meditating upon its meaning.