

## CHAPTER 14

### SYMBOLS<sup>62</sup>

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**OM:** The deepest spiritual truth in the Vedas is the omnipresence of divine consciousness. Absolutely nothing in the universe exists separate from the divine. This supreme truth is beyond form and has no name; and is represented in the Vedas by the Sanskrit symbol *OM*. *OM* is a most sacred symbol: it is recited before all Vedic mantras; written at the start of any document; and even used as a greeting.

The sound *OM* is composed of three sounds that span the whole vocal apparatus: ‘a’ from the base; ‘u’ from the middle; and ‘m’ from the tip at the lips; combining to form *AUM*. The fourth element in *OM* is the silence between successive *OMs*: the silence from which all sounds emerge and into which they all subside.<sup>63</sup>

The Upanishads explain how *OM* represents the sum totality of all human experience. Its four elements represent the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the universe and the Pure Existence in which they all happen; they represent the three states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep that span our entire lives and the Pure Awareness through which we experience all these states; they represent earth, space and heaven and the Pure Bliss which transcends all these fields of experience.

By reminding us of the omnipresence of the Divine, the chanting of *OM* can bring our minds to a profound meditative state. And the vibratory quality of the sound *Om* itself has a profound impact on our inner energies, preparing us for meditation.



**LOTUS:** The *Lotus flower* is cited widely in Hindu spiritual texts: Gods and Goddesses are frequently depicted holding a lotus or sitting on one; the centers of energy in the human body, known as *chakras* are symbolized by lotuses at each energy center; the Creator, Brahma, is said to have been born from the lotus that sprang up at the navel center of Narayana, who symbolizes Pure Consciousness.

Why do Hindus accord such importance to the lotus? The ancient Sages who were close observers of nature saw a lot to learn from the lotus flower:

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<sup>62</sup> Previously published by InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington [www.ifcmw.org]

<sup>63</sup> Mandukya Upanishad 1 and 12.

- The lotus grows in ponds that are frequently murky, yet retains its freshness and beauty. Although in water, the leaves of the lotus do not themselves become wet. That is a lesson for all of us to maintain our purity and nobility even when we are mired in the ugliness and chaos that often surrounds us.<sup>64</sup>
- The petals of the lotus open in the morning when touched by the rays of the sun and close again for the night. True knowledge is like light, and when we recognize our oneness with the eternal, universal consciousness, our Spirit blossoms forth in all its beauty.
- Bees hover over the lotus attracted by its perfume and the careless bee is trapped in the petals of the lotus when they close for the night. That warns us that being overly immersed in seeking sensory satisfaction in the world can lead to our ruin.<sup>65</sup>
- Drops of water tremble on the surface of lotus leaves and are blown off by a passing breeze. This is a reminder to us of the fragility of our lives which may end at any moment.<sup>66</sup>



**SWASTIKA:** The word *swastika* in Sanskrit means “that which brings good luck and well-being”: “su” means “good” and “asti” means “is”. It appears in one of the most frequently used mantras of the Rg Veda [1.89.6], the oldest scripture known to man.

The swastika is considered extremely sacred and holy by Hindus, Buddhists and Jains and remains very widely used from ancient times to the present day. The symbol is engraved on sacred objects of worship as well as on doorways of temples and homes. It forms part of religious ceremonies to celebrate weddings, consecrations of new homes, embarking on new ventures or any such auspicious undertaking. It is used to decorate books, vehicles, cash registers in stores and myriad other objects in daily use in many Asian countries, especially India.

Because the swastika has been so widely used for so long, it has been interpreted in a variety of ways:

- A solar symbol, spreading light in all directions;

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<sup>64</sup> Bhagavad Gita 5.10

<sup>65</sup> Vivekachudamani by Shankaracharya: verse 76

<sup>66</sup> Bhaja Govindam by Shankaracharya: verse 4

- The four goals of human Endeavour: the line from bottom left to top right represents the pursuit of Artha [material security] and Kama [sensual pleasure]. The line from bottom right to top left represents the flow from Dharma [right action] to Moksha [liberation]. Note that the first line levels off, signifying the limitations of material pleasure, while the second is open-ended, signifying the infinite nature of spiritual bliss.
- The swastika symbol is often used as a means of invoking Lord Ganesha, the Remover of obstacles, the Repository of wisdom, at the start of a religious ceremony.



**LORD GANESHA:** Symbols are especially important when conveying concepts that are subtle and abstract. The Upanishads exhort Hindus to see the presence of Pure Consciousness in all things.<sup>67</sup> That is hard to do unless the mind is exceptionally pure, calm and undistracted. As a means of developing these qualities of mind, our scriptures guide spiritual aspirants to worship God represented by a specific form and provide a variety of forms to choose from.<sup>68</sup> Intense devotion to one form of God is a precursor to seeing the presence of God in all forms in the universe. Defining a form invites a physical representation of that form (called a *murti*) as a visual aid to contemplation on the worshipful qualities of God. A special ritual is undertaken to inhale in this *murti* the energy of the transcendent Pure Consciousness before engaging in worship; and in some cases, the image may even be ritually disposed of at the end of the worship ceremony. This worship of a sculpted image or painting as a representation of God, who as Pure Consciousness is everywhere, is emphatically not the “idol worship” that is condemned in the Abrahamic traditions. The devotee uses the image as an aid to form an intense personal relationship with God and does not worship any image as an independent source of power or divinity. Thus the purpose of worshipping an image is to focus the mind and imbue it with love and devotion to the transcendent Divine Consciousness.

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<sup>67</sup> Isha Upanishad 1

<sup>68</sup> Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 2.3.1