

# The Vedic Conception of Sound in Four Features

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In the Vedantic traditions, sound is considered one of the most important principles of existence, as it is both the source of matter and the key to become free from it. One who can thoroughly understand the four stages of sound as explained in the Vedic texts can utilize this science to become free from the bondage of matter.

When trying to understand the four levels of sound, we must first understand what is "sound" as defined in the scriptures. In the Srimad Bhagavatam (3.26.33) we find an interesting definition for sound ([shabda](#)) as follows:

*arthashrayatvam shabdasya  
drashtur lingatvam eva ca  
tan-matratvam ca nabhaso  
lakshanam kavayo viduh*

"Persons who are learned and who have true knowledge define sound as that which conveys the

idea of an object, indicates the presence of a speaker and constitutes the subtle form of ether."

This may not be an absolute definition of sound, as there are various levels of sound to define, but it provides us with a solid foundation to begin our study of this topic. This definition, as given in Srimad Bhagavatam, is very interesting in that it differs completely from western and modern views of defining sound.

First, those who are learned and who have true knowledge define sound as that which conveys the idea of an object. Sound is not just the vibration created by the meeting of two objects. Sound is that which conveys the idea of an object. The exact word used in this connection is "[artha-ashraya](#)" or "the shelter of the meaning". In the Vedic conception the aksharas (letters) are bijas, or seeds of existence. The audible sound is categorized into 50 alphabets of Sanskrit starting from "a" and ending with "ksha". Hence the alphabet is called "[akshara](#)", which literally means "infallible" or "supreme". Akshara is also a synonym for [pranava](#) (Om), the sum of all syllables and source of all vedic hymns. The Bhagavad Gita confirms this as follows:

*karma brahmodbhavam viddhi  
brahmakshara-samudbhavam  
tasmāt sarva-gatam brahma  
nityam yajne pratisthitam*

"Regulated activities are prescribed in the Vedas, and the Vedas are directly manifested from akshara, the sacred syllable Om. Consequently the all-pervading Transcendence (pranava or the syllable 'Om') is eternally situated in acts of sacrifice."

Karma, or duty, is manifested from the Vedas. This manifestation is not exactly direct, for one is spiritual and the other is material. This is indicated by the word udbhavam. On the other hand, the manifestation of the vedas from the pranava (Om) is direct, and thus the word used to describe it is sam-udbhavam, and not just udbhavam.

In the [tantras](#) the aksharas are traced back to their material source level which is a particular deity of Shakti. Each of her stages of manifestation are phases in the evolution of the universe. Thus the aksharas are potent sound, constitutionally connected to objects as sound (shabda) and its meaning (artha).

This is interesting in that it draws a distinction between sound and noise. Noise, as distinct from sound, is not the artha-ashraya, or the shelter of meaning.

Sri Baladeva Vidyabhushana in his commentary to Vedanta Sutra 1.3.28 says that the creation of all living entities proceeds from the remembrance of their form and characteristics by Lord Brahma reciting the corresponding words. From this we can begin to understand to potency of sound and its meaning.

The second aspect of Srimad Bhagavatam's definition of sound that is unique from modern thought is that sound is defined as "that which indicates the presence of a speaker". Thus sound must be a product of consciousness. In this senses, sound is sometimes referred to as [vak](#), or speech, throughout the Vedic texts.

In the tantra system the purva mimamsaka's theory of the eternality of shabda (sound) and artha (meaning) is accepted. They go a little further to assert that shabda and artha are the embodiment of Shiva and Shakti as the universe itself. They name their original source as shabdartha-brahman instead of a mere shabda-brahman. For, that is the source of both the objects and their descriptions. Words and their meanings - what they denote in the objective world - are the variety of manifestations of shakti.

As sound is of the nature of the [varnas](#) (syllables) composing it, the tantra affirms that the creative force of the universe resides in all the letters of the alphabet. The different letters symbolize the different functions of that creative force, and their totality is designated as matrika or the "mother in essence".

Thus Tantra sees the mantras as not just a mere combination of whimsical sounds but as the subtle form of the presiding deity; and the real purpose of one's meditation through the [mantra](#) is to communicate with the deity of that particular mantra.

Just as a sankalpa - a pure thought - has to pass through several stages before it actually manifests as concrete creative force, the sound of a particular mantra also has to pass through several stages before it is fully experienced by the listener in perfection. These stages are termed as [para](#), [pashyanti](#), [madhyama](#) and [vaikhari](#).

Each level of sound corresponds to a level of existence, and one's experience of sound depends upon the refinement of one's consciousness.

It takes a realized consciousness to experience the full range of sound, the full range of existence. The seers who can comprehend the four stages of sound are known as Manishis.

The higher three forms of shabda are described in the Rig Veda as hidden in "guha", or within the self, whereas the fourth is the external manifested speech, known as laukika bhasha.

These four levels of sound correspond to four states of consciousness. Para represents the transcendental consciousness. Pashyanti represents the intellectual consciousness. Madhyama represents the mental consciousness. And Vaikhari represents the physical consciousness. These states of consciousness correspond with the four states known technically as [jagrat](#), [svapna](#), [sushupti](#), and [turiya](#) - or the wakeful state, the dreaming state, the dreamless state, and the transcendental state.

Shabda-brahman in its absolute nature is called para. In manifestation the subtle is always the source of the gross, and thus from para-vak manifests the other three forms of sound.

Though the manifestation of sound takes place from para-vak down to vaikhari-vak (or fine to gross), in explaining these stages we will begin from the external vaikhari-vak, as that is the sound we all have most experience of.

Vaikhari-vak is the grossest level of speech, and it is heard through the external senses. When

sound comes out through the mouth as spoken syllables it is called as vaikhari.

Madhyama-vak is the intermediate unexpressed state of sound, whose seat is in the heart. The word Madhyama means "in between" or "the middle". The middle sound is that sound which exists between the states of sushupti and jagrat. Madhyama-vak refers to mental speech, as opposed to external audible speech. It is on this level that we normally experience thought. Some hold that wakeful thought is still on the level of vaikhari.

In the manifestation process, after sound has attained the form of pashyanti-vak, it goes further up to the heart and becomes coupled with the assertive intelligence, being charged with the syllables a, ka, cha, tha, ta, etc. At this point it manifests itself in the form of vibratory nada rupa madhyama-vak. Only those who are endowed with discriminative intelligence can feel this.

On the levels of madhyama and vaikhari, there is a distinction between the sound and the object. The object is perceived as something different from the sound, and sound is connected to an object mostly by convention.

Pashyanti-vak is the second level of sound, and is less subtle than para-vak. Pashyanti in Sanskrit means "that which can be seen or visualised".

In the pashyanti stage sound possesses qualities such as color and form. Yogis who have inner vision can perceive these qualities in sound. On this stage the differences between language do not exist, as this sound is intuitive and situated beyond rigidly defined concepts. On the stage of pashyanti-vak, speech is intuitively connected to the object. There is near oneness between the word and the experience described.

Pashyanti-vak is the finest impulse of speech. The seat of pashyanti is in the navel or the Manipura Chakra. When sound goes up to the navel with the bodily air in vibratory form without any particular syllable (varna), yet connected with the mind, it is known as pashyanti-vak.

Para-vak is the transcendent sound. Para means highest or farthest, and in this connection it indicates that sound which is beyond the perception of the senses.

Para-vak is also known as "rava-shabda" - an unvibratory condition of sound beyond the reach of mind and intelligence ([avyakta](#)), only to be realized by great souls, parama-jnanis.

On the stage of para-vak there is no distinction between the object and the sound. The sound contains within it all the qualities of the object.

In terms of the universal cosmology, vaikhari, madhyama and pashyanti correspond respectively to [bhuh](#), [bhuvah](#), and [svah](#). The para-shabda ultimately corresponds to the Lord's tri-pada-vibhuti.

Within the pashyanti-vak exists the nature's [iccha-shakti](#), or the power of will. Within the madhyama-vak exists the nature's [jnana-shakti](#), or the power of knowledge. And within the vaikhari-vak exists the nature's [kriya-shakti](#), or power of action.

The pranava, or the syllable "om", is the complete representation of the four stages of sound and their existential counterparts. The existential realities are the physical ([sthula](#)) which is connected to the vaikhari-shabda, the subtle ([sukshma](#)) which is connected to the madhyama-shabda, the causal ([karana](#)) which is connected with the pashyanti-shabda, and the transcendental (para) which is related to the para-shabda. These four existential realities further correspond to the four states of consciousness.

The sthula [sarira](#), or physical body, operates in the state of jagrat (wakeful state). It is in this realm of consciousness, and through this body, that the vaikhari-vak is manifested.

The [sukshma-sarira](#), subtle or psychic body, operates in the state of svapna. It is in this realm of consciousness, and through this body, that the madhyama-vak is manifested.

The [karana-sarira](#), or causal body, operates in the state of sushupti, or deep sleep. It is in this realm of consciousness, and through this body, that the pashyanti-vak is manifested.

The para-vak is manifested through the fourth state of consciousness, known as turiya.

The sacred syllable "om" is composed of three matras, namely "a", "u", and "m". These three matras correspond respectively to bhuh, bhuvah and svah; jagrat, svapna and sushupti; sukshma, sthula and karana; and vaikhari, madhyama and pashyanti. Besides these three matras, the pranava ("a-u-m") is also composed of a fourth constituent, namely the a-matra or anahata-dhvani - the non-syllable or unstruck sound. For our practical understanding, this a-matra corresponds to the humming sound after one recites the "om" syllable. The a-matra represents the transcendence, the turiya, the para-vak.

Thus the syllable om contains all elements of existence. It is the reservoir of all energies of the Supreme Lord, and for this reason Lord Krishna states in the Gita:

*om ity ekaksharam brahma*

"The single syllable Om is the supreme combination of letters."

Elsewhere the Lord states:

*yad aksharam veda-vido vadanti*

"Those knowers of the Vedas recite Om (akshara)."

Why do they do this? Because the syllable om is the Supreme Lord and the potency of all Vedic mantras:

*pranava sarva vedeshu*

"Within all the Vedas, I am the symbol Om."

Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu established the pranava as the [maha-vakya](#) (the greatest statement) of the vedas, for within it exist all Vedic hymns (and shabda). The world itself is a manifestation of this syllable. It is the sound representation of the Absolute Truth.

The vak is not a manifestation of the material nature, for the Vedanta sutra 2.4.4 states as follows:

*tat-purvakatvad vacah*

This indicates that the vak existed before the [pradhana](#). Pradhana is the root of the material manifestation - the three qualities non-differentiated in absolute equilibrium. Yet prior to this is the vak. Thus the vak is non-material.

For this reason we find in the Vedanta Sutras the following statement:

*anavriti shabdat*

"Liberation by sound."

Since sound is the non-material source of the material manifestation, it is the key by which we can become free from bondage. It is the thread-like link between the material and spiritual realms.

In describing the four phases of sound, sometimes the descriptions of one will overlap another, or sometimes an aspect of one will seem to be attributed to another. For example sometimes pashyanti is described as "mental sound", whereas madhyama will be described as "intellectual sound". This will require a deeper explanation of the intricacies of these stages of sound and their relationships. Such an explanation is not possible here at this time.

To study these concepts in greater depth one may refer to the Nada-bindu Upanishad, Bhartrihari's Vakyapadadiya, Prashna Upanishad, Mundaka Upanishad, Mandukya Upanishad, Maitri Upanishad and Katha Upanishad, as well as the concepts of shabda, vak, matrikas, hiranyagarbha, four states of consciousness, etc., as found in the tantras and throughout the upanishads. One should remember that in Vedic study one will not generally find a book on a particular topic (such as "vaikhari", etc.) One must study from numerous sources and assimilate a number of apparently diverse concepts. These concepts must then be harmonized internally. This constitutes the meditation and sacrifice of svadhyaya [yajna](#).

For those who have assimilated these topics, they will find all this information contained in detail within nine technical verses of Srimad Bhagavatam beginning from 11.2.35 and ending at 11.2.43. For example, if one sees verses 38 through 40 one will find a complete explanation of sound in four levels and the process of manifestation. One must be trained to see the inner meaning of words, for these topics are discussed in esoteric and confidential manners:

*paroksha-vada rishayah  
paroksham mama ca priyam*

"The Vedic seers speak about these topics indirectly in esoteric terms, and I am pleased by such confidential descriptions."

When we see such words as pranah, manasa, sparsha-rupinah and chandah-mayah as occurring in verses 38 and 39, we should immediately understand the indirect and esoteric nature of the discussion, and thereby conclude the direct meaning being inferred by these words. We must learn the transcendental code of the Vedas. In reality everything is explained in the Srimad Bhagavatam in full, but because we generally lack the proper vision to understand the indirect and esoteric discussions, we therefore need to study and refer to other more direct scriptures. Thus the commentaries of the Acharyas will help us to understand these topics.

The science of sound, shabda-vijnana, as explained in the above mentioned verses of Srimad Bhagavatam, is also summarily explained in the [pancharatrik](#) text known as Lakshmi-tantra as follows:

*mulam adharam arabhya dvistkantam upeyusi  
udita aneka sahasra surya vahnindu sannibha  
cakravat punar adharat santa pasyatha madhyama  
vaikhari sthanam asadhya tatrasta sthanavartini  
varnanam jananim bhutva bhogya prasnoumi gouriva*

"Seated in the area starting from the [muladhara](#) to the position of dvistkanta with effulgence equal to the rising of millions of suns, fires and moons. Like a wheel from the adhara becoming the sounds known as santa, pashyai, madhyama. Reaching the position of vaikhari, there situated in eight places, viz., the throat etc. Being the mother of all sounds I bestow enjoyments like a cow."

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#### **A simple glossary of Sanskrit words used in this issue:**

[acharya](#) - A spiritual master who teaches by example.

akshara - The alphabet, literally "infallible".

artha - "Meaning"

avyakta - "Unmanifested" or "inconceivable".

bhuh - The earthly planetary system.

bhuvah - The planetary system immediately above the earthly realm.

iccha-shakti - Power of will.

jagrat - The wakeful state of consciousness.

jnana-shakti - The power of knowledge.

karana - "Causal"

karana-sarira - The causal body.

kriya-shakti - The power of action.

madhyama - The third stage of sound, sometime referred to as mental sound.

maha-vakya - The most important statement of the vedas.

muladhara - One of the seven chakras in the body.

[omkara](#) - Another name for the syllable 'Om'.

pancharatrik - A category of scriptures.

para - The first stage of sound, sometimes referred to as transcendental sound.

pashyanti - The second stage of sound, sometimes referred to as intellectual sound.

pradhana - The unmanifested material nature.

pranava - The sacred syllable 'Om'.

sarira - "Body"

shabda - "Sound"

sthula - Gross or physical.

[sthula-sarira](#) - The gross body.

sukshma - "Subtle"

sukshma-sarira - The subtle body.

sushupti - The state of deep dreamless sleep.

[svadhyaya-yajna](#) - The sacrifice of self-study.

svah - The heavenly planetary system.

svapna - The conscious state of sleep.

tantras - a category of scriptures revealed by Lord Shiva

turiya - The fourth state of consciousness, situated beyond the wakeful state, dream state and dreamless state. The state of spiritual consciousness.

vaikhari - The fourth stage of sound. External sound.

vak - "speech"

varnas - "Syllables"