

The Aum: what are the meanings of this symbol of the Hindu religion?



Background knowledge for the teacher

- Many Hindus use the *Aum* (*Om*) symbol. It has many meanings, but the simplest way to introduce it to pupils might be to say it is a badge for Hindu people, with lots of different meanings.
- The symbol can be seen on Hindu temples and in the shrines that many Hindus keep in their homes. It marks and identifies the place of worship or the home as one where 'Sanatan Dharma', the 'eternal way' of the Hindus, is followed.
- There are also many more popular uses of the *Aum* symbol, for example on cakes, mobile phone covers, T-shirts, rings, Rangoli patterns, necklaces, bracelets and car bumper stickers. Sometimes Hindu pupils choose to write an *Aum* at the top of their exam answer papers.
- This symbol comes from one of the Hindu creation stories. It was the first sound of the universe, according to many Hindus.

For this age group, the activities suggested are designed to enable children to notice and understand simply how the religious symbol is drawn, how it is used and some of its deeper meanings. They will think for themselves about simple connections between the symbol and Hindu ideas, ways of living, worship and meditation. They will be able to connect the learning to their own experiences.

Note that we are not here teaching the children to 'join in' with Hindu worship in any way, but we are learning about it. Do tell the children this, and remind them that Hindu worship is for Hindus, but learning is for everyone.



Essential knowledge for the pupil

Pupils will know:

- The Hindu symbol *Aum* is important to Hindus and has symbolic meaning.
- Many Hindus worship at a shrine in the home or mandir, and the symbol *Aum* is a word used to calm the mind for meditation and worship.
- Hindus also teach that *Aum* was the first sound that began the creation of our universe.



Assessment for 4–7s

The statements below suggest 'emerging' (based on the Early Learning Goals), 'expected' and 'exceeding' outcomes from this unit for 5-year-olds. Adapt them for the age of pupils you are teaching. If necessary, adapt the 'e' words to the assessment language of your school.

Emerging

- Talk about different families, communities and traditions, giving some Hindu examples.
- Notice and talk about the *Aum* symbol in the Hindu community.
- Talk about the importance of people's beliefs being valued, using Hindu beliefs as an example.

Expected

- Talk simply about the *Aum* symbol and its meaning to Hindu people.
- Name and describe simply different ways in which the symbol is used.
- Think, talk and ask questions about why badges, signs and symbols are important.

Exceeding

- Raise and discuss questions themselves about the Hindu symbol.

This unit helps pupils in Scotland to achieve RME 0-04a.



eResources



Go to www.natre.org.uk/inspiring-re/ to access the resources below.

- An animated Hindu story is featured in RE Today's *Share a Story With ...* digi-book for 4-7s. The package includes stories from six religions and can be purchased through the NATRE website.
- A Google Image or Flickr photo search for '*Aum*' produces numerous and amazing visual results.
- The Wonder Project made a short video of a Hindu creation story, which shows the *Aum* sound as the origin of the universe.
- Pronunciation of the word *Aum* can be heard using the RE-Definitions app. It is sounded out slowly with the emphasis on the 'm'.

Members can also access:

- A selection of Hindu images and symbols to stimulate and enhance learning.
- The questions from the activity for older pupils as a fill-in sheet.

Activity
1

Candle Aum: what does the Hindu symbol say? What does it mean?

Before the children come into class, lay out some tea-light candles in the shape of the *Aum* symbol on a small, low table. Cover it with a cloth, and darken the room with curtains if you can. You will need about 20 tea-lights. Alternatively, battery tea-lights can be used.

Ask the children to sit round the table – not too close – and light the candles. Have a moment of calm to look into the flames.

- Can the children feel the calmness?
- Who feels peaceful?
- Who feels a mystery?
- Who feels a question coming into their mind?

Reveal the *Aum* symbol. Tell the children that the *Aum* symbol is a sign or badge for Hindu people all over the world. Their religion began in India but there are more than half a million Hindus in the UK today. Tell the children that the symbol is a word made up of three sounds, and a silence. The sounds are: *AAAA-UUUU-MMMM* (see eResources for a pronunciation guide). The first sound is made down in our tummies, the second in our chest, the third between our lips.

- Can the children make the three separate sounds?
- Can they put the three sounds together, breathing out one long breath as they do so?

This is how many Hindus often begin their prayers or meditation, because they find it calms the mind.

- Did the children find it a calming thing to do?
- What else can we do to calm the mind?

Make a list of ten or more things that make us feel calm in our minds – refer to the five senses. What about music, walking, sitting or closing our eyes? We all need to calm down sometimes.

Blow out the candles and let them cool down. Activity 2 can follow on straight away or be done in a teacher-led learning session another day.



Activity
2

A Hindu creation story

Share the Hindu story of the creation (see eResources for a short video showing this). Discuss the story.

- How does this story show why *Aum* is important to many Hindu people?
- How does the story show how all the senses are important to many Hindus?

Take the *Aum* symbol from p. 8 and on one side draw pictures that retell this Hindu story of creation. Save it to use again in Activity 4.

Activity
3

Questions about the symbol

Rearrange your tea-lights into the shape of a question mark.

Sit the children around the low table and light the candles. Remind them what they learned before about the *Aum* symbol, and ask them if they can think up some good questions about the symbol, or about the Hindu religion. Ask them to sit in silence, look at the candlelight and note down all the questions they can think up. Can they get ten? Fifteen? Twenty? If the children find it hard, give them the prompts:

- | | |
|-------------|----------------|
| • Who ... | • When ... |
| • What ... | • How ... |
| • Where ... | • How much ... |
| • Why ... | • What if ... |

For further stimulus, ask them to choose between questions. Which are the best, and why?

- How do you draw an *Aum*?
- How old is the *Aum*?
- Is the *Aum* a holy word?
- What other holy words do we know?
- Why is the *Aum* a Hindu symbol? What other religious symbols do we know?
- How many different meanings does the *Aum* have?



Activity 4

Record what you know about Aum

Ask pupils to use the reverse of the *Aum* symbol from Activity 2 to show what they have learnt about the symbol and its importance to many Hindus. Pupils can draw and write pictures, words and phrases to show what they have learnt. If these are created on card they can be displayed against a window or as mobiles.



Extended provision

Creative and/or construction areas: Ask the children, if they were making an *Aum* symbol, what could they make it from?

Suggest that they make one, with a partner, in the next couple of days. Provide lots of paper templates (various sizes) for them to do this.

- Can the symbol be made of LEGO®? Paper? Card? Playdough? Beads?
- Can it be made outside, as a 'natural world' sculpture of leaves and flowers, chalk on the playground or squirty water on a dry paving stone?

See how many different ways children can make the *Aum*. Take photos.



For older pupils

Knowing lots of different meanings – which do we like best?

Share with the children the information sheet on p. 7, which explains lots of different uses and meanings of the *Aum* symbol. Teach the class that the symbol is used in lots of different ways and means many things. Can they remember what they have learnt during their activities and from the information sheet? There will be a quiz! Choose appropriate questions from the selection below or write your own. This activity will suit pupils aged 7 or over.

1. How many sounds make up the *Aum*?
2. Which sound is made by the lips?
3. When do many Hindus think the sound '*Aum*' was first heard?
4. What does the 'moon dot' at the top of the *Aum* symbol stand for?
5. What is a mantra?
6. At what time of day do many Hindus use the *Aum* to pray?
7. Which Hindu god is the creator?
8. Which curve of the *Aum* stands for dreaming?
9. What comes after the three sounds of *Aum*?
10. Make a list of different places where you might see the *Aum*.



Examples of where the *Aum* symbol might be found: in jewellery, as an incense holder, at a mandir.

The Aum symbol: many meanings

'I am a Hindu and I use the three sounds of the *Aum* symbol to start my prayers in the morning. I chant the sounds several times. It really makes me calm, peaceful and ready to pray.'

'We Hindus have a story of how this universe began. Before anything **existed, the first thing** to happen was this sound: *Aum*! Imagine **that, the first sound** of creation. Then all the universe began.'

'The first sound is "A". It is the sound of your mind, awake. The second sound is "U". It is the sound of your dreams. The third sound is "M", which is for deep sleep. The silence at the end of "*Aum*" is for you to be ready for God.'

'When I draw the *Aum*, I do the "moon dot" at the top last. It stands for quiet peace, total calm and happiness. That's how I feel about being a Hindu.'



'When you write "*Aum*" the lower curve is for being awake, the upper curve is for deep sleep. The "trunk" of the right-hand curve is for dreams and at the top is the crescent and moon dot, which is **for finding God.**'

'We call the "*Aum*" the Mother of All Mantras. A mantra is a prayer, or a way to meditate. Hindus have many different mantras, but the *Aum* is one of our favourites.'

'We have *Aum* symbols at our mandirs or temples, but we also turn them into bumper stickers for the car, icing on cakes, mobile phone covers and necklaces. We use the *Aum* everywhere to remind us of what matters.'

'We remember three of the Hindu gods when we draw the *Aum*. The bottom-left curve is for Brahma, the creator, the top-left curve is for Shiva, the destroyer, and the right-hand curve is for Vishnu, the preserver.'

The Aum symbol

Activity
2

Activity
4

