

# THE ART OF CHANTING

*In a kirtan, a group chants a Sanskrit phrase over and over, building on the group's energy and emotion*

**T**he first time I participated in the Indian style sing along known as kirtan, I felt buzzed for days afterwards. It was an exhilarating high, a tangible sensation of vibrating at another frequency.

I became fascinated with the concept of singing oneself into spiritual ecstasy. I bought several CDs and began chanting morning, noon and night. I chanted in the shower, I chanted in the car. I chanted with my kids, I chanted at the cat. I chanted while cooking, I chanted while cleaning. Hundreds of times I chanted "hare Krishna" and "sita Ram" while dancing feverishly around my kitchen, playing air drums.

Meditation doesn't come easily to me. It's hard for me to sit still, to quiet my brain. So kirtan, which is singing a Sanskrit mantra over and over again, often faster and faster, is the perfect way for me to close out the chatter of my mind and just focus on the rhythmic repetition, as the energy gets raised higher and higher. Although singing alone, repeating a phrase again and again and again, is mood-altering and consciousness-raising, there is nothing quite so magical as chanting, breathing and vibrating with dozens of others to live music.

"Your vibration changes to the vibration of the music," said Laura Svolos, a Chicago chanter who has experienced kirtan with some of the genre's biggest names, including Bhagawan Das, WAH!, Dave Stringer and a week-long yoga retreat with Krishna Das. "It's not the words. I was loving it before I knew the meaning of the words. The music, the sound, is what strikes a chord with me," she shared in a telephone interview.

Kirtan comes from the Sanskrit word "to sing." It's a style that originated in East India centuries ago that is a call and response format. The leader sings out the mantra, one of hundreds of different simple Sanskrit phrases of devotion to the Divine, and the participants sing it back. It's not only a simple way to teach a song, but invites interaction and eventually erases the distinction between the performer and audience. Throughout the duration of the chant, the mantra speeds up, gaining intensity and momentum, which is further heightened by participants' clapping of hands. The experience is one of increasing and expanding energy that continuously climbs, entraining to a progressively higher vibration.

But perhaps the most powerful moment is when the song ends and the room sits in silence.

Spiritual activity, including the songs to the Divine, was originally exclusive to kings and other higher classes. But the Bhakti movement in the 15th century challenged that mindset, believing that all are equal and each individual could speak to the Divine. Common people were taught simple songs, the aim of which was to achieve a state of ecstatic union within oneself and within the company of fellow seekers. "In part because it upended the caste system, this movement caught fire. Some of the world's first 'rock stars' developed: ecstatic singers who could move a crowd. It turned into a genuine mass movement," explained Dave Stringer, a Los Angeles-based musician and singer who performs kirtan around the world with his band. We caught up via telephone while he was in Chicago on one of his myriad engagements in 2002.

Traditionally, the main instrument is a harmonium, which is an accordion-looking reed apparatus brought from Europe to India hundreds of years ago by Christian missionaries. Usually played by the lead singer, it sits on the floor in front of the musician and is keyed with one hand, while the other compresses and releases the bellows. Other traditional instruments that may be part of the ensemble include the tabla (drums), finger cymbals, tambourines and tambura (a stringed instrument). Most kirtan bands in the U.S. have fused East and West and incorporate other non-traditional instruments such as guitar, bass guitar, flute, violin, trumpet, pedal steel and more. But the most important instrument in kirtan is the voice.

"In our culture most of the entertainment is passive; the individual doesn't change it, doesn't have an impact on it. Their presence doesn't matter," said Stringer. "One of the intoxicating things about kirtan is that it's participatory entertainment. Your very presence shifts what happens." In fact, Stringer finds that the more participatory the crowd, the higher the experience.

To be single-focused, to move beyond the minutia of the mind, is liberating. Prayer, meditation, certain sports activities and the asanas of yoga are some of the best known ways to get you there. Chanting is one more activity to add to the list. All of these are essentially meditation, the positive effects of which Western Science has studied extensively. Meditation also has a physical effect on the brain that can be mapped and measured. Professor N. Lyubimov, one of the world's leading neuroscientists, found that the meditative state creates a unique pattern of coherent activity in the brain's frontal cortex that indicated left and right hemisphere synchronization. This enhanced activity during meditation correlates with greater creativity and produces a state of restful alertness and improved mental performance.

The words themselves don't appear to matter as much as the vibrations and feelings and energy they create. "In my experience, the basic sounds of the Sanskrit mantras include sounds that acoustically lie at the base of every language; meaningful sounds that even a baby would make," Stringer said. He cites examples of non-word sounds that are easily understood, including, "mmmm" as an expression of satisfaction, "o" or "ah" as a means to relate awe or wonder and "shhh" to express quiet.

"When I'm singing I'm not concerned with the meaning at all. I'm really throwing myself into the feeling of the sound," Stringer shared. "It's not that it's free of content. A stream of images can move across my field of awareness...As the conscious mind shuts down, there stops being a subject, it comes closer and closer to a pure feeling of 'I am' and that's one of the liberating things about it."

That being said, people do seem to want to know the words, especially newcomers. To make the mantras more accessible, American kirtan has taken a page out of modern opera performances and often provides "super titles" up on a screen for the group to follow.

Fans and artists alike are optimistic and see the genre taking off. Riding the wave of the world music trend may help. And then there's the fact that kirtan is simply a blast. "We can talk about all the layers of metaphysics and theology involved here," Stringer mused, "but when you do it, the experience you have is, 'This is fun!'"

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