

## The Philosophy of Kirtan:

Kirtan (from the Sanskrit word meaning "to sing") is a folk form that arose from the Bhakti movement of 15<sup>th</sup> century India, originally played and sung by musicians with very little in the way of formal training. The Bhaktis wrote ecstatic love poems to the divine, and went around singing all the time. Their message was simple: Cultivate joy. See the divine in one another. In the eyes of Love, we are all the same. In a caste-bound society, this was, and still is, a radical message. They taught Sanskrit mantras to common people using simple melodies, accompanied by handclaps and finger cymbals and drums. Crowds gathered, and in a pre-amplification age, other instruments and more voices were added to strengthen the sound. Kirtan is still hugely popular in modern India. At big festivals, there can be many thousands of divine-intoxicated people singing and dancing.

The seeds of yoga were planted in the Americas in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Upanishads had been recently translated into English, and were read by the American Transcendentalist writers, who examined their own spiritual assumptions against these scriptures. The Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, among others, believed that at the level of the human soul, all people had access to divine inspiration, and that all people sought and loved freedom and knowledge and truth. Thus, it's possible to look at their writings as the first outpouring of an American Bhakti movement. The ideas of the Transcendentalists became deeply embedded in the consciousness of American culture and spirituality, and the leaves of modern American yoga have been nourished by these roots.

The primary musical feature of kirtan is the use of call and response, a figure that also deeply informs bluegrass, field holler, gospel music and jazz. Yoga points toward awareness of the essential oneness of things. So to align the individual-dissolving Eastern tradition of kirtan with the individual-expressing Western traditions of gospel and jazz and rock music is no contradiction, as they both arise from the same impulse toward expressing what is ecstatic and liberating and transcendent. The Bhaktis had no use for orthodoxy. They saw the expression and form of the divine in every direction they looked. They spoke and created music in the vernacular of the people they addressed. Thus, even music that cannot be characterized as traditional kirtan can still be expressive of the Bhakti movement's original vision.

The intention of kirtan is consciousness-transformative, directing the singers to vanish into the song as drops merge into the ocean. The musicians and the crowd coalesce in a cloud of intelligence, turning together like a flock of birds, until the song itself vanishes into the blue skies of silence. From a linguistic perspective, Sanskrit is the mother tongue of many modern languages, and a kind of periodic table of elemental sound-meaning. The mantras are primarily recitations of names given to the divine. But perhaps the true understanding of the mantras can be found in the sense of unity, well-being and timelessness that they elicit. The mantras quiet the mind, and the music frees the heart. Ecstasy is both the process and the product.

The word mantra literally means mind-protection, in the sense of guarding the mind against the injuries of desire and projection and attachment. Mantras are intended as a tool with which the spirit can release itself from the prison that the mind has created. It's not unfair to say that the chanting of mantras is intended to be a completely mindless activity. Yoga doesn't ask us to believe in anything. It asks us to practice, and examine our experience until we can witness the truth in the book of our own heart. No one else can read it for you, or tell you what it means. Whether you experience these mantras as ancient wisdom or psychological metaphor or complete nonsense is up to you.

Inquiring into the origin and nature of the universe, both the Western discipline of science and the Eastern discipline of yoga arrive at the obstacle of the mind. But how can the mind come to see beyond itself? How can we transcend the limits of our consciousness? Is it all just a matter of chemistry? Even if it is, doesn't that deepen the mystery in unexpected new directions? There is no end to the questions that can be asked. But isn't it amazing that you can now look at an MRI of someone's brain, and see how chanting changes it? Singing, we move ourselves into a field out beyond questions and answers. Encountering bliss, the mind is still.

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