

Article for the July/August 2004 issue of LA Yoga Magazine

Getting the Kirtan Buzz
God not only speaks, God sings

By Maggie Jacobus

From the Kabbalists, to the Sufis, to Tibetan monks, and from the Aborigines, to shamans, to the Vedic holy men, the belief has always existed that the cosmos is a sea of vibration and that sound is the vessel that transports us to bathe in that ocean. The ancient Sanskrit words nada brahma translate as, “The world is sound” or also as, “Sound is God.” Kirtan is one way we experience sound as God.

The first time I participated in this 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 bought several CDs and began chanting morning, noon and night. I chanted in the shower, in the car, with my kids, at the cat. Thousands of times I chanted “hare Krishna” and “sita Ram.” I had no idea what I was saying and it didn’t matter. I had found pure joy and never wanted to be separated from it again.

Kirtan, which is singing a mantra over and over again, is the perfect practice to lure my busy mind into meditation. The chants of many traditions routinely go on for 20 minutes—some 40 minutes or longer—simultaneously guiding one deeper into meditation and higher into bliss.

“When you do a long kirtan, you get to travel on this train journey into your mind and soul and heart. You make the passage from excitement into deep self-discovery,” shared Jai Uttal, a kirtan veteran of three decades.

I’m not the only one who’s caught the kirtan buzz. Kirtan is gaining momentum in cities large and small all across the United States. Less than 10 years ago, it was rarely shared with more than just a handful of people. Today, some kirtan events—such as the one led by Ragani in Milwaukee, Wis.—each month attract hundreds of yogis and non-yogis alike. Krishna Das, the West’s most widely recognized kirtan master, recently gathered a crowd of 1,000 at Westwood United Methodist Church in Los Angeles.

It’s tempting to call it a performance or a concert, but while these events have elements of mainstream music, there’s one big difference: kirtan is a spiritual practice. It’s not meant to be a show at which the audience is entertained. In fact, the leader is simply doing his or her practice and the audience is invited to join in.

One of the unique—and frankly, most fun—aspects of kirtan is how integral the audience is to the experience. “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 accomplished kirtan leader Dave Stringer. “One of the intoxicating things about kirtan is that it’s participatory entertainment. Your very presence shifts what happens. The crowd is as important an instrument as any of the others.”

Songs From the Heart

Originating in East India centuries ago as part of the Bhakti--or devotional--limb of yoga, this “yoga for the heart” is all about opening and healing that energy center. It also incorporates *Nada* yoga, the yoga of sound.

In Sanskrit kirtan means “to sing.” Typically, the leader calls out a mantra, one of the hundreds of simple devotional phrases to the Divine, and the participants sing it back. Although chanting is part of nearly every spiritual tradition, the American kirtan phenomenon was born of the Woodstock generation, which was heavily influenced by the gurus of India. Therefore most chanting here is sung in Sanskrit and is known as kirtan. But chanting in English, Latin, Gurbani, Hebrew and others can also be found.

Live kirtan is at once both a very personal practice and a dynamic group experience. Individual breath, sound and vibration synchronize, creating exponential energy. Eventually the audience, band and leader melt into one, soaring together on the sonic wave. As the meditative state deepens, one may flow into a personal bliss, responding no longer to the leader, but instead to what feels like the very call of God. Or perchance it is the Divine answering us. Or, yet again, perhaps we are one in the same.

“It’s much more profound than you or I know or can understand,” said Krishna Das, who’s been chanting since the early ‘70’s. “From the yogic point of view, we are not actually doing this—God is singing His or Her own name within us. We think we’re doing it, our egos think we’re doing it, but in fact, it’s a deeper part of us that’s doing it.”

“It’s really a trip. Everyone’s experience is different—and should be, because everyone’s conception of God is different,” said Jai Uttal. “...when we’re in a group, we’re all helping each other, we’re all sharing our *shakti* and strength with each other. It allows each person to go deeper into their own space, while at the same time creating great energy as a whole. It’s very powerful.”

Traditionally, the main instrument is the harmonium, an accordion-looking reed apparatus. Other classical instruments include the tabla (drums) and tanpura (a stringed instrument). Most kirtan bands in the U.S. have fused East and West and incorporate instruments such as guitar, bass guitar, flute, violin, trumpet, pedal steel and more. But the most important instrument in kirtan is the voice.

“There’s sacredness in everyone’s voice. It’s like hearing your own soul, hearing your own Self,” shared chant guru Ragani. “Kirtan is people’s music. Everyone creates the music.”

Picking Up Good Vibrations

“The sound current is what will take you to God, to your oneness,” stated Gurushabd, co-founder of Golden Bridge yoga studio. “The sound current spans many religions, although some are more powerful than others. What you’re drawn to depends in part on you—what is your vibration, your frequency?”

Gurushabd explains that people like different kinds of music based on their frequency. “The individual gravitates toward a music which is pleasing to their vibration. Angry people love heavy metal music,” he cited for example.

American kirtan is rapidly morphing, with mantras set to many different styles of music—from classical Indian, to rock, reggae, Gospel and beyond--so you have numerous options to match your vibe. “We have to offer all these multitudes of diversity because there are so many kinds of people out there,” said WAH!, a kirtan master of more than 30 years. “We do that with gurus, too—they all have different personalities....you’ll be attracted to the guru—and the chanting—that suits you.”

Regardless of what style it’s dressed in, however, the heart is hearing the mantra and the power of the mantra is what makes kirtan more than just another musical genre. “The sound vibration [of singing mantra] is not mundane. It’s not like singing G-L-O-R-I-A!,” quipped Sura, leader of The Temple Bhajan Band. “It’s a transcendental sound vibration. It comes from the spiritual world and carries you back to the spiritual world.”

As the kirtan trend continues to grow and evolve, new applications arise. Saul David Rae of Sacred Movement yoga studio incorporates live kirtan right into many of his *asana* classes, often with musician Dave Stringer. “Incorporating chanting into the class is a way to bring the *bhakti* into hatha yoga classes to create a shift,” he shared.

Sheer Bliss

For as steeped in spiritual practice as it is, kirtan, at its heart, is about having fun. No musical ability or yoga experience is required, no specific spiritual beliefs are necessary and most leaders provide song sheets or slides, so no knowledge of Sanskrit is needed either.

Steve Ross of Maha Yoga leads free monthly kirtan events at his studio. He sums up the kirtan experience succinctly: “It gets you so high and ecstatic. It opens your heart. It does things that other practices don’t,” he enthused. “Some people consider it a practice, but I consider it just an expression of the joy that’s bubbling up inside.”

[Maggie Jacobus is a freelance writer who’s still chanting morning, noon and night. Direct comments or questions to her at mjacobus@execpc.com]