

Ode Magazine
Kirtan Feature for October issue
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A friend confided a dark personal secret to me at a party the other night. “I don’t meditate,” he said, furtively glancing around. He stepped closer to tell me more.

He *knows* there’s a gazillion benefits, like reduced stress, increased concentration, a greater sense of calm and well-being, a shot at enlightenment. “Problem is,” he whispered, “I can’t sit still or stay quiet long enough to attain those perks. So I just give up.” He hung his head.

Alas, his is not an isolated case.

I, too, was once among the non-meditating. I spent years trying to engage in a traditional seated practice. While staring quietly at my carpet, I usually received such insights as: the rug is dirty. And then I’d be up and vacuuming, all intentions for spiritual evolution sucked up with the cookie crumbs.

So imagine my glee at discovering *kirtan*, an alternative route to reaching meditative bliss that is neither silent nor still and can lure even the most attention span-challenged among us into an altered state of higher consciousness.

Mantra Jammin’

Kirtan in Sanskrit connotes singing, chanting and praising the divine. It’s essentially a high-spirited call and response sing-along, East Indian style, and is the most fun I’ve ever had on the road to enlightenment.

Typically practiced in a group setting, the kirtan leader sings out a Sanskrit mantra—one of the hundreds of phrases praising the divine—and the participants mirror it back. The mantra gets lobbed back and forth, often faster and faster as the chant progresses. A single chant can last 20, even 40 minutes, engendering a sacred jam band experience. The repetition of the music and the mantra beguile the busy mind, simultaneously guiding us deeper into meditation and higher into bliss. In essence, the chant is meditating us and we get to just sit back and enjoy the ride.

I felt buzzed for days after my first kirtan encounter. *Enchanted*, you might say. I had no idea what the mantras meant or why I experienced what I did; I only knew I wanted to feel that way again...and again and again.

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Kirtan feature—Add One

Gurushabd, co-founder of Golden Bridge yoga studio in Los Angeles, Calif., has studied in-depth the science of sacred sound. His name translates as, “one who uplifts Self through the sound current,” a moniker that not coincidentally reflects the very purpose of sacred sound practices such as kirtan. He offers one explanation for my experience.

“These sounds [mantras] come from enlightened holy men. These are universal sounds. Even if you don’t understand a word of the translation, it doesn’t matter, because your soul understands all languages, the soul understands all universality. You’re sending a sound current into your brain that has to do with your soul and the Infinite and that’s why it makes you feel happy and blissful,” he told me.

Picking Up Good Vibrations

Quantum physics proves that from the tiniest atom to the mightiest galaxy, everything is in a state of vibration, including humans. When we come into contact with others, a phenomenon called resonance and entrainment happens wherein our individual vibrations are altered and we start blending together in rhythm and phase. One oft-cited example of this is the fact that women living in a dormitory together eventually sync up menstrual cycles.

In addition to other people, we also entrain to things like the moon...and music...and mantras. “When you hear kirtan, then literally the molecules in your being start to vibrate with this sound that is the underpinning of everything in the universe,” Gurushabd said.

Originating in East India centuries ago, kirtan is an integral practice in both the *bhakti*--or devotional--limb of yoga, and *nada* yoga, the science of sound. In the West, a typical kirtan gathering a just decade ago would most likely have been in an ashram and attracted a small group of yoga devotees. But in the past five years kirtan has exploded as a grassroots musical meditation phenomenon, with these group sing-alongs springing up all over the Americas and Europe. Now yogis and non-yogis alike can be found in crowds of 300—sometimes even 1000 or more—all having a great time slipping through the backdoor to meditation.

Traditionally, the main instrument is the harmonium, an accordion-looking reed apparatus. Other classical instruments include the tabla (drums) and tamboura (a stringed instrument). The distinctive East Indian flavor is often spiced up with Western instruments such as guitar, bass guitar, flute, violin, trumpet, hand drums, lap steel and more, resulting in one tasty experience.

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Kirtan feature—Add two

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 Wisconsin, USA-based chantress Ragani, leader of the largest ongoing monthly kirtan event in North America. “Kirtan is people’s music. Everyone creates the music.”

And that is one of the unique—and frankly, most fun—aspects of kirtan: the audience is inextricably intertwined with the experience. Kirtan simply cannot happen if the audience doesn’t sing. “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 Dave Stringer, a kirtan leader who tours the globe. “One of the intoxicating things about kirtan is that it’s participatory. Your very presence shifts what happens.”

Meditation Magic

And what happens, in my experience, is nothing short of magical. The synchronization of the individual breath, sound and vibration of dozens—or even hundreds—of people fuels exponential buzz. As the chant intensifies, the lines blur between audience, band and leader and we melt together, lifting each other up, collectively soaring higher and higher on the sound current.

“It’s really a trip. Everyone’s experience is different—and should be, because everyone’s concept of God is different,” said Jai Uttal, a San Francisco-based 30-year kirtan veteran known for his fusion musical style. “Yet 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 greater energy as a whole. It’s very powerful.”

As euphoric as the groovin’ is, the most profound moment comes when we stop. While we’ve been having a great time singing our hearts out, the chant has been casting its spell and charming our minds into that very place that eludes most of us: silence and stillness.

I bask in the chant afterglow, relishing this exquisite moment. I’m here, sitting in quiet stillness...and have no thoughts of needing to vacuum.

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Maggie Jacobus is a freelance writer and co-author of a forthcoming book on kirtan. By the time you read this, she will have moved to Nosara, Costa Rica where she’s blissfully singing kirtan to the monkeys and dolphins. She can be reached for comment at mjacobus@execpc.com