

Kirtan
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Right now, all around you, the universe is buzzing, vibrating, singing. You are surrounded by sound, even if you can't hear it.

The Bible tells us, "In the beginning there was the Word," while the Vedas recount that creation started from sounding, "Om." The Sanskrit words *nada brahma* inform us that, "The world is sound."

Physics proves that from the tiniest atom to the mightiest galaxy, everything is in a state of vibration, including humans. But before modern science explained it, the ancient mystics knew this truth. 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. Therefore, in many spiritual traditions, becoming one with the universe and returning to the source can be as simple as diving into the ocean of sound and riding the sonic wave back to the primordial vibration.

I euphorically rode the crest of a sacred sound tsunami for the first time a few years ago when I participated in a *kirtan*, which is essentially a call-and-response sing-along, Hindu style.

Kirtan in Sanskrit means "to sing" and it is thus the practice of singing a mantra over and over again. Typically, the leader calls out one of the hundreds of simple devotional phrases to the Divine, and the participants mirror it back. A single chant often lasts 20 or even 40 minutes. The music and the repetition lull the busy mind, simultaneously guiding one deeper into meditation and higher into bliss.

I felt buzzed for days after my kirtan debut. I had no idea why I experienced what I did; I only knew I wanted to feel that way again...and again and again.

Gurushabd is a Sikh whose very name—"one who uplifts Self through the sound current"—embodies the purpose of sacred sound practices such as kirtan. Co-founder of Golden Bridge kundalini yoga studio in Los Angeles, Calif. with his wife, internationally renowned yoga instructor, Gurmukh, Gurushabd offers one explanation of my experience.

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Kirtan—Add One—M.K. Jacobus

“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 explained.

The repetition of kirtan creates a vibrational groove. And that creates what physics calls resonance and entrainment.

Entrainment is a scientific process by which things or people align their movement and energy together to match in rhythm and phase. In his book, Loving Hands Are Healing Hands, Bruce Berger writes, “Sympathetic resonance describes the tendency of two wave forms with the same degree of arc to vibrate sympathetically together, energizing and communicating universally with each other. Thus wave forms of the same length and frequency will entrain and influence each other throughout all creation. This is the key to understanding one of the dynamics that holds all creation together, and to understanding the theory of the body as the energy of sacred sound.” It’s also the key to understanding, in part, the magic of kirtan and its ability to draw you into the universal ocean of vibration.

Through the laws of resonance and frequency, “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.

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. Kirtan is also an integral aspect of *Nada* yoga, the yoga of sound.

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 in the U.S. is sung in Sanskrit and is known as kirtan. But chanting in English, Latin, Gurbani, Hebrew and others can also be found.

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.

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Kirtan—Add Two—M.K. Jacobus

“There’s sacredness in everyone’s voice. It’s like hearing your own soul, hearing your own Self,” shared chant guru Ragani, of Milwaukee, Wis., who learned her practice from more than two decades of study with her guru, Swami Rama, founder of the Himalayan Institute in Honesdale, PA. “Kirtan is people’s music. Everyone creates the music.”

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, who tours the globe sharing his kirtan practice. “One of the intoxicating things about kirtan is that it’s participatory. Your very presence shifts what happens. The crowd is as important an instrument as any of the others.”

It’s tempting to call kirtan a performance or a concert, but while it has 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.

“The yoga of divine vibration is another path to take you to enlightenment,” stated Shri Yogi Hari, a renowned nada yoga practitioner of 30 years who has written books about yoga and produced videos and CDs of chants, kirtan and nada yoga instruction. He also has an ashram in South Florida. “Music has this quality to charm the mind...Kirtan is really glorifying God. It’s a way to keep your mind in that positive state and to keep your mind in God-consciousness. You can say it’s a form of meditation,” he added.

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 sound current. 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.” K.D., as he’s known to friends and fans, is arguably the West’s most well-known kirtan leader. Based in New York, K.D. travels the world singing kirtan, which he describes as “yoga for the mind.”

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Picking Up Good Vibrations

A sound wave is infinite. Once begun, it never stops. So when you sing out a specific mantra, you're joining in on a wave that was started millennia ago. Jai Uttal, veteran kirtan practitioner based in Northern Calif. points out that, for instance, when we sing the Sanskrit words, *Om Nama Shivaya*, "We're adding our hearts and energy to this ancient prayer for peace, our voices are going out into universe...and at the same time our hearts are being nourished by the energy of the people who have sung this before," he said.

"The sound current spans many religions, although some are more powerful than others," Gurushabd said. "What you're drawn to depends in part on you—what is your vibration, your frequency?" He explains that people like different kinds of music based on their personal frequency. "The individual gravitates toward a music which is pleasing to their vibration. Angry people love heavy metal music," he cited for example.

Western-style 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 Los Angeles, Calif.-based kirtan wallah of more than 30 years who brings kirtan to people around the world. "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 and soul are hearing the mantra and the power of the mantra is what makes kirtan more than just another musical genre.

Sheer Bliss

For as steeped in spiritual practice as it is, kirtan, at its heart, is about joy. 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. The important things for the newcomer to know are to be comfortable (kirtan is often done sitting on the floor, so bring a pillow) and to slow down the breath to enhance the meditative effect and opening. Yogi Hari encourages participants to, "Just go and chant with all your heart and experience the divine bliss."

At the end of the chant, sit in silence. "Kirtan is a subtle path," Ragani said. "It has the outer aspect of singing, but in the vibration, in that space between the sounds when you stop, you'll feel something. And that something is you. It's not anything that someone is doing to you. It's that energy that is always within you that you're feeling."

So catch a sound wave and flow back to the ocean of vibration, into the universal oneness.

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Kirtan—Add Four—M.K. Jacobus

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