

“The benefit that one attained in the Satya Age by meditation, in the Treta Age by sacrifice, and in the Dvapara Age by temple worship, can be had in the Kali Age merely by reciting the names of Krishna.”

— *Bhagavata Purana* 12.3.52

## A Sound Form of Meditation has Ancient Roots and Modern Popularity

*Among the many existing forms of spiritual practice, calling upon the name of God is central. If bhakti, or devotional mysticism, is the essence of the spiritual path, which it is, then the practice of the Name is the essence of the essence. That being so, I would like to outline the basic philosophy, culture, and implications of such chanting – where it comes from and where it seems to be going.*

To begin, the world's earliest spiritual tradition – embodied in the Vedas – was steeped in mantras and verbal intonations of sacred sound. Brahmin priests performed sacrifices with the help of mantras, the proper pronunciation of which was crucial for maximum effect.<sup>1</sup>

Portions of the Vedic literature read almost like textbooks on chanting, informing devotees about an ancient art in which sound was used as a spiritual tool. The same concept reverberated in lands as diverse as Egypt and Ireland, which tell of a time when mystical vibrations were harnessed by spiritual adepts for the benefit of mankind.<sup>2</sup> Like the Bible, which states “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1.1), the Vedic scriptures affirm that the entire cosmic creation began with sound: “By His utterance the universe came into being” (Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad 1.2.4). Vaishnava texts add that ultimate liberation comes from sound as well, in the form of chanting.<sup>3</sup>

The Vedic texts developed chanting into a science. Mantras, or sacred sounds, were used to pierce

through sensual, mental, and intellectual levels of existence – all lower strata of consciousness – for the purpose of purification and spiritual enlightenment. The sounds of different letters, particularly Sanskrit letters, have been shown to affect the mind, intellect, and auditory nerves of those who chant and hear them. The seven energy centers (chakras) of the spinal column, it is said, all respond to especially composed mantras, bringing practitioners to elevated levels of awareness.

Most of these mantras are prayers, of sorts. There are literally millions of them, usually traceable to the Vedas themselves, either in seed form or in full phrases, as they are chanted today. The “seed-form” mantras would be incomprehensible to most people; unless one is a Sanskritist, it is difficult to know what an ancient monosyllabic utterance represented in bygone eras. Otherwise, the full prayers, though in Vedic language, are easily translated into English. A famous one runs as follows: “Lead me from nonbeing into being, from darkness to light, from death to immortality.”

### THE POWER OF GOD'S NAMES

The spiritual sounds most lauded in Vedic texts are the names of God. These sounds are said to have powers that surpass those of any other uttered word. Vaishnava texts state that in much the same way that one can awaken a person who is sleeping by making a sound or calling out his name, man can awaken from his conditioned, materialistic slumber by calling out the name of God. In fact, the world's major religious traditions concur in regard to the importance of God's name.

For example, in the Bible, King David preached: “From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised” (Psalms 113.3); Saint Paul said, “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10.13); Mohammed, in the Koran (87.2), counseled, “Glorify the name of your Lord, the most high”; Buddha declared, “All who sincerely call upon my name will come to me after death, and I will take them to paradise” (Vows of Amida Buddha, 18); and the Vaishnava scriptures repeatedly assert: “Chant the holy name, chant the holy name, chant the holy name of the Lord. In this age of quarrel there is no other way, no other way, no other way to attain spiritual enlightenment” (Brihad-Naradiya Purana 3.8.126).

### All The Names

Praise of God's holy name is found throughout the literature of the Vaishnavas, particularly in the *Bhagavata Purana*. Here are some examples:

*Oh, how glorious are they whose tongues are chanting Your holy name! Even if originally lowborn dog-eaters, they are to be considered worthy of worship. To have reached the point of chanting the Lord's name, they must have executed various austerities and Vedic sacrifices and achieved all the good qualities of true Aryans. If they are chanting Your holy name, they must have bathed in all holy rivers, studied the Vedas and fulfilled all prescribed duties [if not in this life, then in previous ones].*

(*Bhagavata Purana* 3.33.7)

*My dear king, although Kali-yuga is full of faults, there is still one good quality about this age: simply by chanting the holy name*

*of the Lord, one can become free from material bondage and be promoted to the transcendental kingdom.*

(*Bhagavata Purana* 12.3.51)

*Devotional service, beginning with the chanting of the holy name, is the ultimate religious principle for the living entity in human society.*

(*Bhagavata Purana* 6.3.22)

*The holy name of Krishna is the spiritually blissful giver of all benedictions, for it is Krishna Himself, the reservoir of pleasure. Krishna's name is complete in itself and is the essential form of all spiritual relationships. It is not a material name under any condition, and it is no less powerful than Krishna Himself. This name is not tinged by any aspect of material nature, because it is identical with Krishna.*

(*Padma Purana* 3.21)

# Sonic Spirituality

Because chanting the name of God is so much emphasized in Vaishnava texts, practitioners tend to include it in most forms of worship. One finds chanting at Hindu temples, while engaging in deity service, when offering food to God, and in private meditation. It permeates all forms of Hindu practice. Thus, deep meditation and great emotion accompany japa (soft chanting on beads, similar to the Christian rosary), kirtan (loud chanting, often in the form of song and dance), and sankirtan (congregational chanting, usually with an attempt to include others).

Sometimes this chanting is merely a combination of names, eloquently strung together through grammatical devices, appearing in Sanskrit or in regional languages. And sometimes it tells a story, weaving together pastimes of the Lord in any of his many forms. Melody plays an important part in both these kinds of kirtans, but some are accompanied by dancing, whereas a sit-down kirtan is often called a *bhajan* – this is usually more meditative and laid back. When perfected, the chanting, in any of its forms, leads to awareness of God's absolute nature (i.e., that there is no difference between the *namī* “the named one” and the *nama* “the name”).<sup>4</sup>

They are necessarily distinct. However, in the spiritual world, which is the exact opposite of the material world, the reverse must be true – an essential oneness engulfs all. A thing and its name are the same. This is not to say that there is no hierarchy in the spiritual world, with various gradations perceivable by spiritually-realized souls, but rather that a sense of oneness and difference exist simultaneously. Elucidation on the absolute nature of Krishna and his name is the heart of Vaishnava mysticism, leading to love of God.<sup>5</sup>

For now, it need merely be pointed out that if God and his name are nondifferent, association with the name is the same as associating with God himself. This has certain implications. Proximity to God, say Hindu texts, results in purification, edification, and blissful feelings of love. Thus, by chanting, the devotee can expect to advance in spiritual life, developing a taste for the higher pleasures of spiritual attainment. Concomitantly, the practitioners' material fever is expected to diminish – that is to say, one's advancement in spiritual life can be gauged by how much one is forgoing material pleasures in favor of spiritual ones – and the supreme spiritual pleasure is chanting the holy name.

Great systematizers of the tradition, such as Ramanuja and Rupa Goswami, have delineated an elaborate science of the holy name, explaining step-by-step procedures for chanting. By applying these time-tested methods, devotees are able to gradually advance and ultimately attain spiritually developed consciousness. This is nowhere as apparent as in kirtan, where men, women, and children gather together to rejoice in the Lord.

Norvin Hein, Professor Emeritus at Yale University, was deeply touched when he personally witnessed an enthusiastic Vaishnava kirtan session, and in writing

about it, he captures its most emotional components:

“In the singing of verses like these, each line, separately, is incanted by the leader first, and the whole assembly repeats each line after him, one by one. As the verse is gone through again and again, the leader steps up the tempo. When the speed of utterance approaches the utmost possible, the whole group, in unison, begins to shout the lines, at the same time beating out the rhythm with sharply-timed clapping of

This ultimate oneness between God and his name, of course, is something that virtually defines the unseen world, revealing a fundamental difference between matter and spirit: material substances are relative (i.e. in the material world a thing and its name are not one and the same).

hands. The singers begin to sway and let themselves go in ungoverned gestures. Faces flush. From the line of instrumental accompanists the bell-like peal of small brass cymbals swells up with the rising shouting and pierces through it.

The whole process approaches a crashing, breath-taking crescendo. The point of explosion is reached: eyes flash, mouths drop open, a tremor runs through the entire assembly. The Power, the Presence, has been felt!”<sup>6</sup>

#### CHANTING TODAY

His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977) brought the chanting to the Western world. His mission still thrives, and, in the present context, has given the world popular kirtan performers whose CDs sell in significant numbers and whose concerts fill huge auditoriums. But it is not only Prabhupada's disciples who enliven crowds with tones from heaven: no one movement has the monopoly on

kirtan, which is God's gift to humankind.

Along these lines, an interesting development has occurred over the last decade or so: Chanting that clearly originated in an Indian context is now permeating the Western mainstream, affecting a revival in India as well. This has been a long time in coming. The 1960s saw an awakening of the mystic East on Western shores. Vegetarianism, nonviolent ethics, yoga, and meditation – all have enjoyed spates of Occidental popularity in the last 40 years, often influenced by Prabhupada directly, if not indirectly.

The latest in this Vaishnava penetration of the modern world, as stated, is chanting. Kirtan is gaining momentum all across the United States, and in Europe as well. Yoga studios, once confined to silent meditation, now broadcast melodious mantras through their loudspeakers, and have special sales on CDs; health food stores and restaurants now popularize the latest kirtan to people through soft music and New Age magazines. Parts of upstate New York formerly known as the “Borsht Belt” for its catering to Jewish comedians in the 1940s, the 1950s, and the 1960s, is now being redesignated the “Bhajan Belt”.

Less than 10 years ago, few were aware of the virtues of kirtan, even in the yoga community. Today, kirtan events attract yogis and non-yogis alike. Business people relieve stress by listening to kirtan CDs and Grammy-winning artists sample kirtan performances on their disks. Krishna Das, whom Yoga Journal recently dubbed “The Pavarotti of Kirtan”, and Jai Uttal, an extremely gifted kirtan leader, are arguably the most popular of the genre. They are disciples of a well-known Hindu ecstatic and have no connection to Prabhupada or his lineage, though, interestingly, both admit that the Vaishnava tradition influenced and inspired their initial attachment to sacred chant.<sup>7</sup>

Popular books now contemporize Vaishnava mantras by explaining them in modern language. In *Chanting: Discovering Spirit in Sound*, for example, author Robert Gass says that kirtan is “singing our prayers, vocal meditation, the breath made audible in tone, and discovering

armies, tribes and nations, political marches and sports teams have all recognized and made use of the power of chant to touch our collective minds and hearts – for better and for worse. Something happens when we chant together, when we choose to give our voices, our energy and our hearts to a common song and to each other.”<sup>8</sup> His words merely echo the ancient Sanskrit texts of India's past. It echoes the truths found as a practical reality in the Hare Krishna movement.

Kirtan is gaining momentum all across the United States, and in Europe as well. Yoga studios, once confined to silent meditation, now broadcast melodious mantras through their loudspeakers.

## Chaitanya Mahaprabhu: The Father of Sonic Spirituality

*Though the phenomenon of chanting is fundamental to spiritual life, and numerous personalities could be assigned prominent roles in establishing and developing the science of mantras, there is one luminous individual who stands out among the rest. This is Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1533), the doyen of chanting as a yogic practice.*

*He inspired hundreds of thousands in his own lifetime, and many millions more after that. Though Sri Chaitanya trained theologians, whom he instructed to open temples and write massive treatises on the science of devotion, which they did, he left the world only eight Sanskrit verses of his own, four of which are specifically about chanting:*

*(1) Glory to the Sri-Krishna-Sankirtan, which cleanses the heart of all the dust accumulated for years and extinguishes the fire of conditional life, of repeated birth and death. This Sankirtan movement is the prime benediction for humanity at large because it spreads the rays of the benediction moon. It is the life of all transcendental knowledge. It increases the ocean of transcendental bliss, and it enables us to fully taste the nectar for which we are always anxious*

*(2) O my Lord, Your holy name alone can render all benediction to living beings, and thus You have hundreds and millions of names, like Krishna and Govinda. In these transcendental names, You have invested all Your transcendental energies. There are not even hard and fast rules for chanting these names. O my Lord, out of kindness You enable us to easily approach You by Your holy names, but I am so unfortunate that I have no attraction for them.*

*(3) One should chant the holy name of the Lord in a humble state of mind, thinking oneself lower than the straw in the street; one should be more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige, and should be ready to offer all respect to others. In such a state of mind one can chant the holy name of the Lord constantly.*

*(4) O my Lord, when will my eyes be decorated with tears of love flowing constantly when I chant Your holy name? When will my voice choke up, and when will the hairs of my body stand on end at the recitation of Your name?*

# Chanting the “Hare Krishna” Maha-Mantra

Sri Chaitanya emphasized the chanting of the Hare Krishna maha-mantra (“Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare”), also known as “the great chant for deliverance”.

He uncovered scriptural evidence stating that this was the most powerful of incantations, for it includes the potency of all other mantras. And he showed, in his own life, the blissfully transformative effect bestowed on its chanters. Statements about the mantra's singular potency can be found in the Brahmanda Purana (Uttara-Khanda 6.55), the Kalisantarana Upanishad, and in many other Vedic and post-Vedic texts.

Breaking down this sacred mantra into its component parts, the word “Hare” refers to Lord Hari – a name for Krishna that indicates his ability to remove obstacles from his devotees' path. In a more esoteric sense, the word “Hare” is a vocative form of “Hara”, which refers to Mother Hara, or Sri Radha, the divine feminine energy – Lord Krishna's eternal consort and transcendental counterpart.

“Krishna” means “the all-attractive one”, referring to God in his original form. Etymologically, the word krish indicates the Lord's

attractive feature, and na refers to spiritual pleasure. When the verb krish is added to the affix na, it becomes krishna, which means “the absolute person, who gives spiritual pleasure through his all-attractive qualities”.

“Rama” refers to both Balarama (Krishna's elder brother) and Lord Ramachandra, the incarnation of the Lord discussed at length in the Ramayana. It is also said, however, that “Rama” can refer to Radha Ramana Rama, which is another name for Krishna, meaning “one who brings pleasure to Sri Radha”. Overall, the maha-mantra, composed solely of the Lord's most confidential names, embodies the essence of the divine. As a prayer, the mantra is translated in the following way: “O Lord, O divine energy of the Lord (Radha)! Please engage me in Your service.”

The selflessness of this mantra – imploring God to be engaged solely in his service, rather than asking for individual needs – situates it in a unique category, even among the best of prayers and the most powerful of mantras. But to chant it in its purest form is no simple matter. There is an elaborate science to chanting, and the tradition urges its readers to study this science closely. Otherwise, the fruits of the mantra may not be obtained.

There is another side, however: One can simply chant with a sincere heart, crying out to God with a sense of spontaneity. This, too, say Vaishnava stalwarts, may afford the fruits of Chaitanya's religious process.

### Endnotes

1. This is elaborated upon in Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).

2. For a comprehensive look at sound as a spiritual tool in various world cultures, see Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *Nada Brahma: The World is Sound* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1987).

3. See Rajendra Chakravarti, *The Teaching of Sri Chaitanya* (Delhi, India: Partan Books, 2004), pp. 64–65.

4. For more on this subject, see Norvin Hein, “Chaitanya's Ecstasies and the Theology of the Name,” in Bardwell L. Smith, Ed., *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1976), pp. 16–32.

5. For more on the science of the holy name, see Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Sri Namamrta: The Nectar of the Holy Name* (Los Angeles, CA: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1982).

6. Norvin Hein, *op. cit.*

7. Their debt to Gaudiya Vaishnavism is revealed in personal conversation. See my book *The Yoga of Kirtan: Conversations on the Sacred Art of Chanting* (New York: FOLK Books, 2008).

8. Robert Gass, *Chanting: Discovering Spirit in Sound* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000).

**Steven J. Rosen** is an initiated disciple of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, an academic periodical esteemed by scholars around the world. He is also associate editor of *Back to Godhead*, the magazine of the Hare Krishna movement. His recent books include *Essential Hinduism* (Greenwood, 2006), *Krishna's Song: A New Look at the Bhagavad Gita* (Praeger, 2007), and *The Yoga of Kirtan: Conversations on the Sacred Art of Chanting* (FOLK Books, 2008).