

How (and Why) to Teach Chanting and Mantra

Mantra and Chanting have long been associated with yoga practice, but should you teach them to your students? Learn the history of these practices and some popular chants to help you get started.

Chanting Glossary: The precise definition of some common terms.

Chant, chanting: Chant is often used interchangeably with the Sanskrit word mantra; chanting is also used loosely to indicate either the repetition of a mantra (*japa*) or the singing of devotional songs (*kirtana*).

Mantra: Literally an "instrument (*tra*) of thought (*man*)," defined variously in English as a prayer, hymn or song of praise, sacred formula, incantation, or charm. A mantra may be meaningful or unintelligible, and may consist of a single letter, a word, or a complete sentence.

Japa: Literally "muttering, whispering," usually in reference to the repetition of mantras.

Kirtana (Often referred to as "*kirtan*;" also called *bhajana*, "worshipping"): Kirtan is one of the practices of devotional yoga (*bhakti-yoga*) and consists of singing songs in praise of the deity, usually accompanied by drums and other musical instruments. Literally translated as "mentioning, repeating, saying," usually translated as "chanting."

Invocation: A mantra-like prayer usually spoken at the beginning of a ritual or formal practice session to solemnize the occasion. One of the most famous invocations is that to Patanjali, which begins (translation by B.K.S. Iyengar): "Let us bow before the noblest of sages, Patanjali . . ."

By Richard Rosen

There's a long tradition in India of saluting the teacher or evoking divine power through a mantra to open a practice. Such a preamble helps the student to steady her resolve and to remind her of the goal of the work, which is always self-liberation. It also serves to signal the student's intent to humbly offer the upcoming practice as a sacrifice to the divine, which is the source of all true wisdom.

Even if you aren't a fully self-realized teacher (*guru*) who can give individual mantras to students, you can still lead them in the recitation of traditional chants and mantras that will help them enter the right state of mind before or after class. Before you start, it's helpful to know something about the tradition you'll be participating in.

The recitation of mantra is known as *japa*, which literally means "muttering, whispering."

According to schools such as Hatha Yoga and Mantra Yoga, the universe is created through the medium of sound, and all sound, whether subtle or audible, issues from a transcendent, "soundless" source called the "supreme sound" or "supreme voice" (*shabda-brahman* or *para-vac*). While all sounds possess some degree of *shabda-brahman*'s creative force, the sounds of mantras are far more forceful than other sounds.

As a practice, japa is thousands of years old. In the beginning, mantras were drawn only from the thousands of verses in the Rig-Veda, Hinduism's oldest and holiest scripture. After some time, mantras were taken from non-Vedic sources as well, such as the numerous texts associated with the schools of Hindu Tantra, or those revealed to seers (*rishis*) in meditation. Mantra Yoga as a formal school is a relatively recent development, though "recent" in yoga years means between twelve and fifteen centuries. Instructional manuals commonly list sixteen "limbs" (*anga*) of practice. Many of them--such as asana, conscious breathing, and meditation--are shared with other yoga schools.

The building blocks of all mantras are the 50 letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. Mantras can consist of a single letter, a syllable or string of syllables, a word, or a whole sentence. Etymologically, the word "mantra" is derived from the verb "man," which means "to think," and the suffix "tra," which denotes instrumentality. A mantra then is literally an "instrument of thought" that concentrates, intensifies, and spiritualizes our consciousness.

Mantra traditionally has two purposes, which can be called worldly and spiritual. We usually think of mantra solely as an instrument of self-transformation. But in ancient times mantra was also used for mundane and not necessarily positive ends, such as communicating with and appeasing ghosts and ancestors, exorcism or warding off evil forces, remedies for illnesses, control of other people's thoughts or actions, and the acquisition of powers (*siddha*) or magical skills. As for its spiritual purpose, mantra is said to quiet the habitual fluctuations of our consciousness and then steer consciousness toward its source in the Self.

Yogis also categorize mantras as either "meaningful" or "meaningless." Mantras in the "meaningful" category have an obvious surface meaning along with the esoteric one. Examples of meaningful mantras are the "great sayings" (*maha-vakya*) drawn from the texts known as the Upanishads, such as "I am the Absolute" (*aham brahma asmi*) and "You are That" (*tat tvam asi*). Meaningful mantras have two functions: to instill within the reciter a particular spiritual doctrine, and to serve as a vehicle for meditation.

It's rather misleading to call the second category of mantras "meaningless." Meaningless mantras are only apparently so to non-initiates, who don't possess the key to their understanding. Those in the know, who have undergone proper initiation, understand the mantra perfectly well. Besides, the purpose of these mantras isn't to impart a particular doctrine but to affect a certain state of consciousness in the reciter.

There are a few important things to remember when teaching japa. You will want to communicate the appropriate speed, rhythm, pronunciation, aim, and esoteric meaning of the mantra to your students. It's claimed that a mantra that's mispronounced and used inappropriately is "asleep" or totally ineffective. It's also recommended that japa be practiced at the same time

every day and place every day, facing either north or east. The most propitious time is called the "hour of Brahma" (*brahma-muhurta*), which is set at different times by different teachers, commonly either at sunrise or an hour before. Of course, depending on the time when you teach, this might not always be possible, so any time and place will do, as long as you encourage your students to practice regularly.

If you're convinced now that chanting will add to your students' experience in class but aren't sure what chant to use or how to pronounce their words, try our Guide to Common Chants, which includes translations, historical information, and audio clips.

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