

Devotional Chanting



an excerpt from the

Self-Realization Fellowship
Center and Meditation Group Manual

CHANTING

Paramahansaji once said: “Chanting is half the battle.” Chanting awakens a devotional zeal necessary for deep meditation. Chanting aids in focusing the mind and feelings; and, when done with ever-deepening concentration on the thought behind the words, brings the Divine Response. A good way to begin chanting is to listen to the chants Gurujī recorded, and then as you are able, to accompany him as he sings them.

Many of you have Gurujī’s recordings. You will therefore be especially interested in the soul-touching incident that took place one evening in 1949 when the Master was recording some of those chants. The recordings were made in a little cottage at the Mother Center. When Gurujī finished chanting, he was in an exalted state of joy from singing to the Lord. He stood on the lawn outside the cottage listening to the tape, “What lightning flash glimmers in Thy face, Mother! Seeing Thee I am thrilled through and through.” Seeing that he was deeply absorbed within, the devotees continued playing the tape. Paramahansaji began swaying to and fro ecstatically, almost dancing; his arms remained outstretched sideways, and moved joyously in rhythm with the music. He became blissfully and totally engrossed in God, who he was perceiving as wondrous light spreading to Infinity. The disciples with him on this occasion felt deeply the overwhelming spiritual vibration of love and joy he was emanating. As he left for the Main building, he said “I see all of you as images of light. And everything – the trees, the bushes – all are made of His light. You have no idea how beautiful everything is!” When we chant, let us become so engrossed in the joy of singing to the Lord that we, too, may be blessed to see His light just behind the dancing atoms of physical creation.

CHANTING AS A FORM OF MEDITATION

Excerpt from a talk given by Sri Daya Mata during satsanga at Self-Realization Fellowship International Headquarters

Let me say a few words to you about the purpose of devotional chanting, as taught by our guru, Paramahansa Yogananda. In *Cosmic Chants* he tells us: “Sound or vibration is the most powerful force in the universe. Music is a divine art, to be used not only for pleasure but as a path to God-realization. ...One who sings these spiritualized songs, Cosmic Chants, with true devotion will find God-communion and ecstatic joy, and through them the healing of body, mind, and soul.”

To learn the chants, take one at a time. In the beginning, of course, you will have to concentrate upon the notes and the correct rendering of them on the harmonium. But when you have learned the chant well, your attention should be on the words you are singing. With increasing depth of concentration, repeat the chant over and over and over again, until your consciousness becomes wholly absorbed in the meaning behind the words. By this practice, you will arrive at that state wherein you are one with the chant. No distracting thoughts will penetrate your consciousness; nothing else will exist for you but the concept of God you are invoking.

For instance, consider the chant we have just sung, “Blue Lotus Feet.” “Engrossed is the bee of my mind on the blue lotus feet of my Divine Mother. Divine Mother, my Divine Mother! Divine mother, my Divine Mother!” The repetition of the name “Divine Mother” begins to draw Her loving presence. The key is to not stop chanting until you feel that blissful awareness. Then you know you have drunk the nectar from the flower of that chant. Such chanting becomes a form of meditation. We were often blessed to sit around Gurudeva while he composed a new chant, or rendered a

traditional Indian chant into English. Then we would join in with him as he sang that song over and over again, sometimes far into the night, until we went even beyond the words and the music and were glorying in devotion to God and the wonderful feeling of His nearness. This experience is the goal of chanting.

I can't stress too much the importance of a devotional spirit in chanting. When we chanted with Master, he would often remind us: "Sing with all your heart. Forget that I am playing the harmonium; forget me. Just become absorbed in the thought behind the words. Think of the One to whom you are singing." Sometimes, as he sang to Divine Mother, my consciousness would become absolutely intoxicated with love for Her. The very thought of Her seemed like an ocean within me, swelling with Her infinite, loving presence.

When one goes deeper and ever deeper into the realm of a single spiritual thought or realization, everything else fades into the background. I remember one occasion in Encinitas while we were meditating with Gurudeva and Rajarsi. The blessed Master was singing to Divine Mother, pouring out his heart to Her. His love for the Mother, and his joy, lifted us into a rapturous state. My mind became so engrossed in longing for Divine Mother and Her love that I entered a very deep ecstatic state. The Master stopped chanting; he touched me on the forehead, and then turned to Rajarsi and said: "See, she has stolen my ecstasy."

I never forgot that experience. From it I learned that when we chant or meditate we have to forget everything else. God's presence is felt only when we divorce ourselves completely from all other thoughts. So whenever you take the name of the Divine Mother, don't let it be just words to you. Lose yourself completely in the thought of Her. By your concentration and devotion, make Her a living reality in your consciousness. She is real to those who think her real; but far away – only a name or a vague mental concept – to those whose call to Her is mechanical.

In one of the chants is this thought: "Will that day come to me, Ma, when saying, 'Mother dear,' my eyes will flow tears?" I shall never forget the thrill that went through my being when first I heard Master sing that chant. That same thrill returns whenever I dwell on those words. So should it be with all of you. Every day you should repeat to yourself that thought, and feel the divine longing of those words welling up from within your soul.

Devotion is something every devotee must work for, so that there is feeling behind the words we address to God. Devotion comes by calming restless thoughts, keeping the body still, interiorizing the mind by yoga techniques and focusing the concentration on just one concept, such as "Divine Mother, Divine Mother, Divine Mother." Pour all the craving and longing of the heart and mind into that one thought. It is said in the Hindu scriptures that just taking the name of God can give one salvation. When I first read this, I didn't understand how it could be possible. But I learned that it is possible, when behind that mental prayer is all the hunger and longing of your soul: "My Lord, I love only You, I want only You, I crave only You. Do with my life as You will." When you have complete dependence on God – by which I mean deep devotion, faith, and surrender – then He does indeed respond.

While the desire is with you, and the body is healthy and the mind strong, make the effort to be with God. Dismiss from your consciousness everything that works contrary to this endeavor – petty grudges; even deep hurts. Leave them all in God's care. If you believe in God, you know that there is a divine justice in this world. It makes no difference what others say about us, or whether or not they do right by us. Divine Mother adjusts all conditions, and protects those children who look to Her with complete love and faith.

We're all going to be hurt at times, and have to bear certain crosses. We shouldn't fear these tests; but face people, conditions, and everything in life with the courage that springs from utter dependence on God. Then we will realize that the Divine Being is supporting us, guiding us, correcting us when we err, strengthening us where we are right, and, above all, loving us.

We don't have to be perfect before God will love us. He loves us now, in spite of all our faults and weaknesses. What we do have to perfect is our love for God, and our loving dependence on Him that springs from complete self-surrender. Then we will know that the Lord is ours and we are His.

So, dear ones, meditate regularly and sincerely. Sing to the Divine One with all the love of your soul those chants that have been spiritualized by Gurudeva. And pray deeply to God in the language of your heart. Pray for devotion: pray that your heart, mind, and soul be afire with such divine hunger, divine fervor, that your life becomes one great longing for God. Then will your feet be truly, firmly, set on the spiritual path.

GUIDELINES FOR KIRTANS

Our Guru, Paramahansa Yogananda, often enjoyed chanting with devotees, for chanting or kirtan helps to arouse devotion and interiorize one's consciousness. Through concentration and repetition one's attention becomes wholly absorbed within upon the devotional thought that is being expressed. It is with this goal in mind that chanting is included as an important part of Self-Realization Fellowship services. However, Guruji emphasized most of all silent meditation as the very foundation of his teachings of Self-Realization -- including practice of the SRF techniques of meditation, prayer, and inwardly talking to God in the language of one's heart. In chanting one's consciousness is still involved to an extent in the outward movements associated with singing and the playing of instruments. To attain a deeper state of God-communion, a state of complete stillness is necessary, which is the goal of silent meditation and practice of the SRF meditation techniques.

Meditation Services

It is fine for a group or center's kirtan group to lead the chanting during regularly scheduled long meditations. As a general rule, meditation services should include approximately 5 to 10 minutes of chanting followed by 45 minutes to an hour of meditation, and then repeated until the end of the service. Naturally the periods of meditation and chanting should be adjusted depending upon the overall feeling of depth for that particular meditation, but the emphasis should always remain upon the periods of silent meditation.

Special Kirtan Services

Meditation groups and centers may have a special kirtan service where more chanting is stressed if the devotees wish, but such a service should not be held more than once or twice a month. Special kirtan services should always begin and end with periods of meditation (10 to 15 minutes) and close with a prayer. If there is more than one period of chanting, it is appropriate to follow each period of chanting with an additional 5-10 minute meditation.

Bhajans

At the regular weekly services held by SRF groups and centers -- the Readings, Inspirational, and Meditation Services -- only Guruji's Cosmic Chants should be played. At long meditations (which may be weekly or less frequently) and special kirtan services (which may be held once or twice monthly), the emphasis should also be upon the Cosmic Chants, but it is all right to occasionally include a traditional Indian bhajan such as those that are on the SRF recording, "I Will Sing Thy Name," and any future SRF kirtan cassette or compact disc recordings. However, no bhajans should be sung at SRF services or gatherings that are primarily identified with another spiritual organization or group.

All chants, including bhajans, should always be sung in unison, as this is the form of chanting that was practiced by our Guru. Chanting can be lead by a harmonium, and accompanied by other instruments such as tablas, bells, and cymbals. Although the traditional style of bhajan chanting is for the leader to sing a refrain and have the congregation follow by repeating the refrain, Gurudeva never chanted this way. He always instructed devotees to chant in unison, for this is more conducive to interiorization of one's consciousness, which is essential for deep communion with God -- the goal of any chanting or meditation.

When chanting the important principle is to avoid an attitude of "music for music's sake" and to use chanting -- whether it be in a meditation or kirtan -- as a means of divine communion. As Sri Daya Mata has counseled, "Whenever you chant to God, feel that you are talking to Him. Forget everyone else around you. Just harbor one thought: 'My beloved God, You are here; let me feel Your love percolating through my being. You created me. You are my Mother. You are my Father, and I am Your child.'"

If you have any questions, please let us know. We are always happy to serve you in any way we can.