

Mantra Meditation

Kirtan: The Divine Sound

By divine utterance the universe came into being.



If you've ever taken part in a lively kirtan, it was likely a transformative experience. Kirtan is singing devotional songs or the divine holy names, and it gives one a deep sense of spiritual happiness and a feeling of unity with others—as if you're singing with one heart and one voice. When singing in unison —something often referred to as chanting — no one is a spectator; everyone is a participant. Historian A. L. Basham (1914-1986) wrote about his experience of Hare Krishna kirtan: "I joined in the chanting and was really carried away. That is an evening I will never forget —the intense exhilaration and relief, the feeling of security and safety and inner happiness which came from it. And it was so clear that all the people were feeling it."

Kirtan is call-and-response chanting, with melodies in various tempos usually accompanied by mridanga (a two-headed Indian drum), kartalas (small hand cymbals), and harmonium (a hand-

pumped organ), as well as by nontraditional instruments like guitar, violin, and saxophone. Kirtan is also called sankirtan. The prefix san comes from the Sanskrit samyak, "complete" or "coming together." Kirtan is complete because it's a glorification of the Divine Supreme Source, the complete whole, and because the group experience tends to feel more absorbing and moving than one's private chanting. When people chant the holy names together, the atmosphere becomes surcharged with spiritual energy, and one develops an ever-increasing taste for the Supreme. An ancient Vedic text states, "By divine utterance the universe came into being." The Bible says that the whole of material existence was generated through sound: "In the beginning was the Word." Vedic texts tell us that sound is the basis of cosmic creation and plays a significant role in humankind's ultimate achievement as well: "Liberation through sound," declares the Vedanta-sutra. Kirtan is called "complete" for another reason: all the senses are involved. Your voice and the voices of others generate a sound that fills your ears. Your nose delights in the fragrances of incense or fresh flowers that often find their way into kirtan environments. If the kirtan is being held at a temple, your eyes behold the beautiful deity forms; in other venues the faces of the other chanters uplift you. When you play the musical instruments, clap your hands, or dance to the rhythm of the kirtan, you spiritually engage your sense of touch. Chanting is so easy that even children can chant. Yet sankirtan has deep theological underpinnings. In this relative world an object and its name are not the same. The holy names, however, are beyond this duality. The Vedic literature tells us that the Divine Source has innumerable names, and it lists thousands of them. The greatest authority on bhakti and kirtan, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, urges us to chant the maha-mantra, or "the great chant for deliverance" (see below) as our primary focus during kirtan.

**HARE KRISHNA HARE KRISHNA KRISHNA KRISHNA HARE HARE
HARE RAMA HARE RAMA RAMA RAMA HARE HARE**

**JAPA:
THE PERSONAL MEDITATION**

Mantras are ancient Sanskrit syllables that purify our consciousness.



Mantras, ancient Sanskrit syllables purify the consciousness. While kirtan involves communing with the Divine Source through song and dance, japa is like a private conversation with that Divine Source. The word japa means the “soft” or “murmured” chanting of a mantra – a warm and personal act that lends itself to contemplation and introspection. So japa is private meditation. It's one of the main practices of bhakti yoga and serious bhakti yogi's meditate in japa every day.

Japa is usually chanted on beads. All the world's major religions encourage private prayer, and many encourage the use of prayer beads.

Praying or chanting mantra's with beads engages the sense of touch and allows for easy counting. Chanting the holy names a certain number of times around a string of beads each day helps one draw closer to the Divine Source.

Like silent meditation, mantra meditation trains us to control the mind, but instead of simply trying to clear the mind from material consciousness, mantra meditation clears and replaces thoughts with cleansing sacred mantras.

Focusing on the sound of your own chanting while fingering the beads tames the mind naturally. And if you control your mind, you'll be able to master your senses. When your mind and senses are quieter and your heart cleansed by divine sound, the pure self can shine through.

You may want to chant japa indoors, but you can chant just as comfortable walking on the beach or hiking in forests or mountains. Just bring your beads along with you. If you chant sitting down, assume a comfortable position, but not one that will make you sleepy. You can chant as loudly or softly as you like, but it's important to pronounce the mantra clearly and loudly enough so you can hear yourself.

You can chant japa at any time of the day, but the Vedic literature notes that the stillness in quiet of early morning is excellent for contemplative chanting. Many people find it especially helpful to set aside a certain amount of time at the same time each day for chanting.

For japa we chant the Maha-mantra (see photo) on a string of 108 beads. One time around is called one round. Start with one or two round a day and then gradually increase that number as you feel japa's good effects.

Srila Prabhupada once explained the nature of chanting the Hare Krishna mantra, speaking on the Happening album in 1966: "By practical experience we can perceive that by chanting the Hare Krishna maha-mantra, "the great chant for deliverance," one can at once feel transcendental ecstasy from the spiritual stratum. When one is factually on the plane of spiritual understanding, surpassing the stages of sense, mind, and intelligence, one is situated on the transcendental plane. This chanting is directly enacted from the spiritual platform, surpassing all lower states of consciousness. There is no need of understanding the language of the mantra. It springs automatically from the spiritual platform and as such, anyone can take part in this transcendental sound vibration."

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