



Kirtan!

Chanting as a Spiritual Path

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“Once you see it, you can’t unsee it.” Dave Stringer quotes those words from author Arundhati

Roy to sum up the moment his life changed in an Indian ashram in 1990. Pre-India, Dave was a film editor living in Los Angeles. Post-India, he is a passionate kirtan wallah and world-traveling troubadour, singing Sanskrit love songs of and to the Divine.

He arrived in India not as a seeker, but as a hired hand. He went to the Siddha Yoga ashram in Ganeshpuri not for devotion, but to work on an editing project. In the process, he encountered kirtan for the first time. In kirtan “you’re not just listening to the music, you *are* the music,” he told me. The experience was so powerful he left his former life behind. “While I was at the ashram, my priorities began to change. I lost my reasons to do what I was doing in L.A.”

“I was hired to go to India as a film editor. This was a job. I went there and encountered kirtan, and had a number of experiences that were sufficiently ecstatic and transformational that all those things I had going on in my life ceased to be important any more. This was the most riveting thing that I’d ever encountered. The fact that I encountered it without seeking it and without believing in it and it still affected me and changed my life is significant.

“In a scientific culture, we examine things; we don’t take things on faith. My approach to yoga has not been to take it on faith. But every time I chant I always feel better. And my experience keeps validating this.”

After several months in India, Dave returned to L.A., but not to business as usual. Instead, he embarked on the spiritual path of kirtan, which became his career. His goal is nothing short of bringing this ecstatic, soulful experience to everyone on the globe.

To this end, Dave tours the world incessantly, singing kirtan in small towns and large cities, in yoga centers and smoky rural bars. It’s all part of his philosophy that the sacred is in everyone, in every place. Therefore, he believes his role is to make kirtan as accessible as possible, both literally—by traveling a full third of the year to as many locations as humanly feasible, and artistically—by expanding the presentation of the practice beyond the form as we know it in the West. In that sense, he is a kirtan maverick, constantly pushing the envelope with the goal of inviting an ever-widening audience to experience the divine vibration. This audience includes even prison inmates, whom he has taught meditation and chanting.

Time, *Billboard*, *In Style*, and *Yoga Journal* have all recognized Dave Stringer as a top player in American kirtan. He has collaborated with numerous other artists including Rasa, Donna DeLory, Toni Childs and Girish, and has performed with Krishna Das and Jai Uttal. You can also hear his voice on the soundtracks of the blockbuster movie *Matrix Revolutions* and the video game *Myst*.

You spend a lot of time on the road.

Swami Muktananda (a guru in the Siddha Yoga tradition, where Dave first encountered kirtan) walked the length and breadth of India looking for his guru. Along the way he met lots of sages and saints. Each one taught him something. After years of this, he finally found his way to the home of the person who did initiate him, where he realized the truth of his own being.

That’s a very Indian way of getting at it. I am a Westerner and I live in America. Here we have an interstate highway system, a very sophisticated network of airports, Internet, cell phones. And I’m not looking for a guru. But it has been an article of both faith and experience for me that every person I speak to can point me toward the truth. And so, what I’m seeking doesn’t exist out there, but exists in here. It’s within myself. And I’m encountering all these people as an extension of myself.

I try to look at each one in their own way as saints and sadhus (holy men). Most of them are not

pretending to be a holy person. But in meeting all of these people, I keep seeing the One, again and again. And it enlarges my sense of how we're connected and my awareness of myself, my compassion for other people, my sense of joy and ecstasy in connecting with other people.

I'm seeking an experience of my own inner Self that in effect is available anywhere. And each one is pointing me in a direction that I'm already going. We're at the very beginning of something new, which is the experience of communities of like-minded people coming together to sing with an awareness that's beyond a particular spiritual path.

If kirtan is going to continue to be framed in terms of guru and disciple, or even in terms of yoga, there are people who are not going to come. And those are often people who actually don't know they want this experience, but they do. They just don't recognize it when it's framed as yoga or devotion. I'm finding that by freeing it, by looking at kirtan from the perspective of art and the perspective of science, I'm able to penetrate more deeply into American culture. It casts another light on it.

Part of what this touring has been about is a community-building exercise. The more I'm out there traveling, the more the millions of cross-connections occur. I see people again and again in different cities. It's like I'm creating—to use a brain metaphor—a bunch of neural hook-ups. My presence and the presence of other kirtan singers traveling around the country is creating community. I'm thrilled to be able to be present in all these places almost simultaneously. I've enlarged my sense of neighborhood to all of North America and parts of Europe and coming this fall (2006), Asia. I'm going to Tokyo, Kyoto, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Sydney.

You studied jazz music very seriously, as well as visual art. How do they affect your approach to kirtan?

What I've started to do now, artistically, is move my kirtans out of yoga studios to art spaces. My own experiences with kirtan began with encountering it as a musical form. I was attracted to it because of something I felt when participating in it. I'm trying to make it available as widely as possible, because it has been my experience that when you participate in a kirtan, something happens to you way beyond what you might have thought or believed. There's something really intoxicating and entrancing. I just need to get people in the door for them to have that experience.

If I stage a kirtan at the local art museum, it takes on an entirely different feeling. The questions people ask and the perspective from which people look at it are quite different. People are used to experiencing the spiritual through art. That's something art has mediated for a long time. At the same time, modern art in general is pointing us toward the shock of the new. I'm able to invite people to come and experience this as music and as a participatory work of art. The spiritual experience follows from that. We don't have to put the frame of spirituality around it.

Once I was invited by a yoga studio in Jackson, Mississippi—I was surprised there was a yoga studio there—to come and chant. When I got there, I was astonished to discover the kirtan had been booked not in a yoga studio, but in a bar. I was a little shocked, but trying to maintain my sense of decorum, I said, "Well that's a really interesting choice! Can you tell me what made you choose this place?" And she said, "Well down here most people don't know about chanting mantras. We figured they wouldn't go to a yoga studio. But you know they're used to going to a bar for music, so we thought we'd have it in the bar." And you know, her logic was right on. Take it to the people!

I frankly never thought I'd be chanting in a bar. And so I had to change my sensibilities right away and go, "Dave, is there anyplace where the Divine is not?" We chanted mantras with people drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. And you know, we had a great time. The place to look for the Divine is in the people coming together and singing together. And that happened at a bar in Mississippi.

Ashrams are nice, but it's a rarified environment where you get to retreat from the world and be spiritual

without the distractions of the world. The hard work is to go and live your life. Drop your kids off at soccer practice, go to the grocery store, do your job, return your phone calls, deal with your mother-in-law—and see the energy of the divine.

Here's the thing: people have all kinds of ideas about what constitutes a sacred place. To me it has absolutely everything to do with your intention. The way I read the yoga scriptures is that there is no place that the energy of the divine is not present. No place. Your very intention to make a place sacred makes it sacred. It doesn't matter whether those people are stoned or not, whether they're checking kirtan out as art, whether they believe in it or not. What's sacred isn't dependent on whether people want to approach it as sacred or not. The energy of the Divine is still there.

Your attitude is pretty unconventional. Ironically, the very act of being unconventional follows the conventions of the bhakti (devotional) movement.

In India spiritual activity, including the songs to the Divine, was originally exclusive to kings and other higher classes. But the bhakti movement in the fifteenth century challenged that mindset, believing that all are equal and each individual could speak to the Divine. Common people were taught simple songs, the aim of which was to achieve a state of ecstatic union within oneself and within the company of fellow seekers. In part because it upended the caste system, this movement caught fire. Some of the world's first "rock stars" developed, ecstatic singers who could move a crowd. It turned into a genuine mass movement.

As long as you challenge traditional mindsets, you're staying true to the bhakti roots. But I know you're also interested in the intersection of science and spirituality.

One of the things that interests me about kirtan is this phenomenology of what happens to our state of consciousness, what happens in our brains. When we do kirtan, if you participate fully in it, even without knowing anything about it, you end up not only with a feeling of ecstasy but also a feeling of stillness when it's over. These changes occur in the activity in people's brains. Science has been able to look at that and say, "Wow. This isn't something that people are imagining. This is real." You can see their consciousness is in fact shifting.

I want to take the sum from the output from everybody's head and get an average waveform. Then I can project that onto a screen and as the collective consciousness changes, we can witness a real-time analog version. It becomes an act of mass biofeedback. You can visually establish the initial state of consciousness of the crowd, and watch it change over time.

Would that be different if the crowd was watching? What is the impact of people observing themselves? Kirtan is an interactive thing. It may be that watching what our brains do may actually deepen the effect.

It's been my experience that there are profound changes. When you come to chant, you're an artist, too. I want everybody in the room to fully be a co-creator of that art. This extends even to watching our state of consciousness. Where this all goes is a matter of experimentation and experience.

You're an intellectual, constantly crossing back and forth between the mystical and the scientific.

I guess there is a part of me that seeks to validate this in terms of other areas of inquiry, partly because I think it makes it more accessible to larger numbers of people. By looking at this from the standpoint of science—and there is a lot science in this—I think I reach an audience that would never get near the guru and yoga thing. I bring more people into this conversation and this experience.

How did you develop this experimental outlook?

I was about seven-years-old when it first occurred to me that I was a musician. When I was nine I had a reel-to-reel tape recorder. I recorded a copy of the Beatle's "Within You Without You," and then cut up the tape and put it back together in a different order. The technical term for this is *musique concrète*, but I was just a nine-year-old kid playing around. I've always been attracted to music with a transcendental quality, and felt that at some level I had to interact with it. Hence my cutting it up and putting it back together."

Given your penchant for upending the traditional order of things, I notice you like to break the rules, such as the one which says no harmonies are allowed in Indian music.

I would hear a harmony and sing it, so I was constantly getting in trouble for it at the Ganeshpuri ashram. They'd say it was my ego, but in a lot of ways it was my bliss. Somehow I needed to encounter this Eastern discipline and still retain my own essential nature with it. I had to be able to come at it from a place that made sense in light of my own journey and experiences. The experiences I brought to it were singing in a choir and playing the acoustic guitar around the campfire. To me, things like harmony are cues to Westerners to sing along.

What was great about the ashram in India was that they taught me to surrender to the music itself. And to give up this idea that it was about my individual expression and instead view music as an expression of something deeper, beyond the individual. But as a Westerner I had instincts related to sacred tradition that I couldn't get rid of. So eventually they showed me the door. They kicked me out! But when God closes a window, he opens a door. And suddenly there was a yoga studio in Santa Monica inviting me to do kirtan.

It seems you need to hold true to your Western roots, your scientific perspective, your vision of kirtan as an art form, and your unique approach to your own music because that's who you are.

It's about "What ground can one authentically hold?" I'm not a *brahmana* (upper caste Hindu), I'm not a priest, I'm not a swami. And I'm not a very good devotee either.

I have been practicing yoga for a long time now, and am certainly formed by the ideas of Eastern philosophy. But what I can most authentically be is an artist. And I would say, as an artist, I am exploring my spiritual awareness and experiences. I'm standing on different ground. I'm trying to make excellent, quality music with an audience of amateurs. I don't see that as being paradoxical. The idea here is that everybody is musical. That singing and music are something so fundamental to being human that, without it, we can scarcely be said to be human.

What if life was all a musical and you had to sing everything you said? What would that be like? Singing is deeper than language. Singing is deeper than conscious thought. It opens a doorway to something really fundamental in our feeling and spiritual being. And even if you're not a musician, the fact is you resonate with it. Everybody feels music. It means something to us, even if we can't say what it means. It's an imprecise language that somehow speaks very clearly.

My gig is to give people a direct experience of what it's like to be a musician. I just get you to sing and then you know what it's like. By enlisting a crowd of people as the "choir," together with a group of professional musicians, gives the participants a sense of being a musician.

There's something magical about the musical looseness of a live kirtan.

Nobody is conducting it. It's just happening. And, you know, somebody out in the audience can change

that. If somebody out there starts clapping at a certain point, the kirtan can explode in a whole different direction. To sit before that intelligence really fascinates me, to see how that works, to make the kind of music that is not based upon a plan, but in a sense finds the statue in the stone. It finds the music that's already in the people who have come.

You know how sympathetic resonance works, right? You strike the tuning fork and the string tuned to that same frequency vibrates. So, we all have this artist self, this musician self, this awakened self, and you're already tuned to that. All it needs is somebody to come along and strike the "tuning fork" and it's like, "Oh! It's not over there, it's in here." What happens, happens inside of you.

I've heard about people who have had big shifts as a result of kirtan. You know everything can change in an instant. In a sense the kirtan is about that instant.

You know from personal experience how much people can change. You've told me before that you used to suffer severe depression.

Once I started chanting and practicing yoga *asanas* (postures) every day, it went away. Yoga and chanting were working with what was in my own head. It moderated my chemistry. I don't want to say it's cured me, but all I can say is I don't have bouts of depression anymore. Maybe I've created a different chemistry in my brain.

In the act of singing I can observe my thoughts. In singing I can detach. Detachment in itself is ecstatic. I mean, kirtan is a kind of mass catharsis. It's better than psychoanalysis in this way.

When we are singing together in kirtan, frequently people have the experience that time slows or alters in some way, or stops completely. This is an art form that in some ways can help us find a new kind of experience, give us a new kind of insight into the way the world is. Similarly when you're lost in song, voices are blending and you're fully in the experience, one can have a sense that even one's own body is illusory, that one is not in a place of separation. Whether one is having this experience or not, kirtan points you toward this awareness. So both the form and the experience of kirtan are pointing us toward understanding time and space in a new way.

In some ways, I'm trying to challenge the spiritual with the model of science. In the other direction, I hope to challenge the scientific world with some of the understandings of modern spirituality. So I guess with all the language of science and art and everything that I've been talking about, this thing of going out to meet all these people and travel is in and of itself a spiritual practice. What I've been doing—touring and performing and scheduling and booking and promoting—is actually a huge act of yoga for myself.

By that I mean being focused on the place that I'm going, and at the same time, removing all attachment to it coming out in a particular way. It means taming the inner demons of my own desires and attachments and moods, and really being compelled again and again to find a tranquil place within myself. To hold a place of inner stillness and compassion within myself even amongst a whirl of activity.

I'm trying to find opportunity in loss, or to see how everything turns out perfectly. There's a lesson in everything. What I'm trying to get out of this is the discrimination to know when to surrender and when to stand firm, when I should take action and when I should refrain from action. So the very doing of this thing has in many ways helped me to embody the very experience that was so attractive about kirtan in the first place: this expansive sense of peace, the incredibly exciting and ecstatic sense of stillness. It's such a paradox.

I once asked you why you don't have a Sanskrit name like many other kirtan wallahs. You admitted you wanted a new name, but were told you already had a Sanskrit name: Dave. It's pronounced almost exactly like deva (pronounced "Dave-uh") which means, among other things, "shining being." You really do shine when you sing.

Kirtan is an inner reset button for me. Why I do this is that it makes me quiet. There's so much noise in

my head most of the time, and when I sing it shuts off. I sit in a place of expansive silence that doesn't want to add anything, doesn't want to take anything away. It's happy just to be. It's both really exciting and really the opposite of exciting at the same time. It's this elevator going up and down at the same time. In that moment I feel weightless. I feel free of anxiety.

I used to have a private practice and now I practice in front of an audience. But almost always I'm able to deliver myself to that place night after night. And it's that which I'm cultivating. It's a place of ease and repose. It's a space that allows what's going to go. It's not defined by concept or expectation. And my feeling is that, if there is "enlightenment," it's somewhere in that space. And it may be holding that space all the time, even as the chaos in the world goes on around me.

I'm more able to be in that space, even in situations that don't involve singing at all. In this way is it a practice? Yes. It's a profound practice for how I live in the world. But sometimes it's just really fun. And that's cool, too.