



PRANAVA MAGAZINE

the art and culture of tantra in the west

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Honoring the Divine Child

DAVE STRINGER

ROCKS THE RADIANCE SUTRAS

MATRIKA SHAKTI
NADA YOGA
THE GOOD SON
THE DIVINE CHILD

THE GOLDEN EMBRYO:
THE MYSTICAL BIRTH OF THE
DIVINE CHILD

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Dave Stringer

"There's a space in the heart where everything meets. Come here, if you want to find me!" . -- Sutra 26



Rocks the Radiance Sutras

Pranava: Thanks for offering your time, right before your kirtan here in Corvallis! Let's discuss where you're at right now in this moment of your singing career, and how things are unfolding for you.

Dave: Kirtan has always been a movement of bringing mantras out of the temples and into the streets. In a lot of ways, the message of Kirtan is "quit trying to sort the universe into pure and impure, sacred or not sacred". People get all tripped up about purity and tradition, but my experience is that the tradition is not interested in purity. (Laughter)

There are a lot of philosophies that you can study, there are a lot of paths that you can pursue. This practice says "come together as a community and sing!" All the doors open from that initial act. Instead of signing up for a belief system, or reading a series of books, or practicing a dogma, the perspective of Kirtan is that everything is already present in your heart. You are the writer, the book, and the one who is reading it all at once. So look into your own experience, see what happens for you, and start there.

What we're trying to do is provide an experience for people in which they can feel transformed by the act of singing in community. People often come in loaded with all kinds of images or preconceptions about what kirtan is or is not. All that drops away in the face of the experience of what it feels like to sing, and then to be immersed in the buzzing contentment that arises from it. Once people have had that experience, then the conversation can open in another direction.

When people hear me playing Kirtan with a full on rock band, they sometimes say, "this is not traditional!". And I respond, "You don't understand the tradition!". Kirtan has always been kind of confrontational, marching down the street saying, effectively, "I Am God". Now that's a pretty radical thing to do! Just to say that truth and love is something that's discoverable inside of you; this alone upends social and religious structures, and political systems. It's pretty revolutionary. What yoga is talking about is universal. It doesn't belong to anybody, yet it is essential to everyone.

Pranava: Do you see yourself as a form breaker??

Dave: No! It's funny because people see me as a form breaker but I'm actually very traditional! This is the tradition! (More laughter)! If you feel a little bit upset by this, then that's the tradition!! Is it provoking you to re-examine your conceptions? If so, then that's also the tradition!! It's worth noting, however, that I'm from a Shaivite lineage. From this perspective, all forms are temporary, and the end of one form prepares the ground for new creation.

I might be using a sound palette that adds other textures and instruments to what you would hear in India, but the way I develop a Kirtan remains straight out of the Siddha Yoga gharana. The progression begins slowly and spaciouly, causing participants to slow their breathing, relax, and become absorbed in the chant. Then the rhythm begins to speed up, eliciting a feeling of anticipation, with every round increasing the sense of elation.

When the chant reaches maximum speed and density, we cut the rhythm to half time, and suddenly there is a feeling of being unbounded and weightless. At the end, everyone falls naturally into a place of stillness, connection and intense awareness. The experience and the effect are the point. You can use any number of musical instruments to achieve it.

We now have all these Kirtan festivals in the West. There are all these different experiments with sound and style as people from different traditions connect with one another. In India, normally you just follow one teacher, and are never exposed to what's going on in another ashram. Every one of them has its own style. In the Western Kirtan movement, we now often have people from Vaishnava tradition playing with people from Shaivite tradition. On an ethno-musicological level, people are sharing techniques and methodologies of stimulating people to experience ecstatic states.

Pranava: And they're meeting on the common ground where its truly universal!

Dave: Right, right! So in this way the kirtan tradition is going through a profound renaissance.

Pranava: These ancient chants are now being applied within modern music: rock n' roll, blues, hip hop, different styles emerging that are signatred as 'American'. The mantras and sacred chants are enduring no matter what! They will always penetrate every era because they are the ancient stream of where all language of consciousness and sound emerges from. I love that you're speaking to this.

Matura: You're dialed into the substance over the formality.

Dave: Yes, and the quest is for me is to ask what is the substance? Is there any substance? Because the profound mystery that I can't get over is how something arises from nothing. Why should there be a world at all? And now that it's here, how does it develop this mechanism in which it turns back and looks at itself, and then asks why it is here!?! (Lots of laughter)! The whole thing is absurd!

Matura: Consciousness experiencing itself!

Dave: I'd like to shift this conversation a little bit into that realm of pure philosophy. Now we live in the age of neuroscience, and that gives us new tools to examine at what Kirtan is. I've recently been looking at kirtan as a very old form of investigation into the nature of consciousness, and as a practice of shifting on how we experience it.

Pranava: As I've written in my article on Mantra, I say that the utilization of mantra was probably one of the first tools used in psychotherapy.

Dave: Yes. I've always seen Kirtan as a modern art form, but I frequently see posters advertising the ancient aspect of chanting mantras. While I can understand the appeal of connecting with something timeless, I don't think we should be trying to elevate the ancient world as somehow being better or more authoritative than the present era. In the ancient world, your teeth were rotting out of your head by age 35! People often lived short, brutal lives. In the modern era, we have much more time and liberty to contemplate what our lives mean, and how we should live them.

My deal is to try to keep the door open and talk about Kirtan in language that people can easily grasp. People come to kirtan all the time without knowing a thing about it. I know there

are guys wandering in with a yogini girlfriend. She may have told him she would go to the ball game if the guy would come to the Kirtan. My job is to speak to that guy and ease his sense of confusion or discomfort and find a way that I can reach him. I figure if I can get him with me, then the rest of the crowd will come right along. All it takes is a few people to get excited and it becomes contagious.

This plays into the question of 'what is consciousness and how does it work?' The whole Kirtan is a model of consciousness. It turns out that we can assist each other in making these shifts. One person making the move helps to bring everyone else along. Consciousness may in fact not be something that any of us possess individually - we feel like we have it, but no one can say exactly where it is - so maybe we have been looking in the wrong place. The kirtan is a model that points to how consciousness may be that which connects us together.

Matura: So you're giving people the experience, rather than philosophy, helping them step into a tangible experience of transcendence.

Dave: Yes! The experience and the philosophy are one, just as the singer and the song become one. We must have the direct experience, otherwise it's just an abstraction that doesn't mean anything.

Pranava: Lets talk about your alignment with the Call & Response Foundation. (Call & Response Foundation is a charitable organization that organizes and sponsors Kirtan and meditation in correctional and psychiatric institutions)

Dave: Before I became a professional kirtan singer, I did a long period of *seva* teaching meditation, bringing kirtan and hatha yoga into prisons. At the high point of it, around 1995-96, we were operating in about 12 different correctional institutions in California. This was a pivotal experience for me, because it taught me to speak a different spiritual language. I once led a kirtan at Folsom Prison, from the same stage where Johnny Cash made his famous album, backed by a three piece inmate rock band. It was amazing!

The thing was to enter that space putting aside my concept of what's sacred and not sacred, who was a seeker and who was not. The question for me was what compelled these guys to pay attention to this? One of the few rights that prisoners enjoy is the ability to practice their religion. So they do have the right to come chant and meditate. But I had to change up my language about it in order to connect. Prisoners have limited patience for spiritual bullshit. They'll just get up and walk out if you begin spouting New Age jargon! So either you're speaking from experience and in language that connects, or you're just wasting your time.

I met a lot of people locked up for drug violations, people serving long sentences. People who use drugs are often seeking bliss, or trying to anesthetize some spiritual pain. In prison, these people had all the time in the world to meditate and practice, like living in a monastery. I found that some of these guys were really serious about it. If you're looking at a twenty year minimum sentence, you have to find a way to equanimity and peacefulness, to move through what is often a dangerous and violent world. I remember thinking, wow, these guys have the opportunity to practice yoga at a level that I don't!

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From the *The Radiance Sutras*

"All this talk of purity and impurity – these are just opinions. Beyond them are the astonishing energies of creation." -- Sutra 100

"Raise your glass, close your eyes, toast the universe." ." -- Sutra 49

"Immerse yourself in the rapture of music. You know what you love: go there." ." -- Sutra 18

"Passion and compassion, holding and letting go. This ache in your heart is holy." ." -- Sutra 98

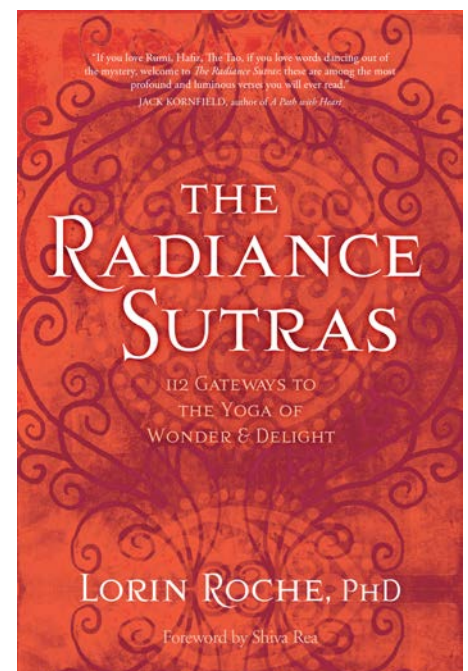
Pranava: You have a new album, *Elixir*, that was recently released by Sounds True. It's not a Kirtan album, but it's based on translations of the *Vijñana Bhairava*, a classic text in the Tantra tradition. How did that come about?

Dave: I first read the *Vijñana Bhairava* when I was living at the Siddha Yoga ashram in Ganeshpuri, India in the early 1990's. It pointed toward an understanding of self and universe that I resonated very closely with, but the language was very dense and difficult. I encountered the text again in 2007 at a yoga and surfing retreat in Mexico, where yoga teacher Denise Kaufman invited participants to get up and read verses over grooves that I and the other musicians improvised. She was working with Lorin Roche on the translations that would become the *Radiance Sutras*, his ecstatic and poetic interpretation of the 112 meditations that comprise the heart and practice of the *Vijñana Bhairava*. I was struck by how accessible and practical the language was. It flowed so easily into song. The words spoke so eloquently of our ecstasies and agonies, from a point of view so unbounded by them, I was literally leaping with joy.

As it turned out, my wife, Dearbhla Kelly, an Irish yoga teacher and philosopher, also knew Lorin, and I asked her to introduce me. Subsequently, Denise, Lorin, his wife Camille and I

began staging a series of Sutra Jams at yoga studios around the USA. We'd ask audience members to pick out verses they liked, and then read them over grooves we created on the spot. Joni Allen and Donna De Lory (the singers I collaborated with on the album) and I would repeat certain phrases, and sing them as choruses. We'd keep track of the memorable moments, and found that certain motives would recur. Sometimes these choruses would have a mantra quality to them, in English, that merged aspects of kirtan and popular song.

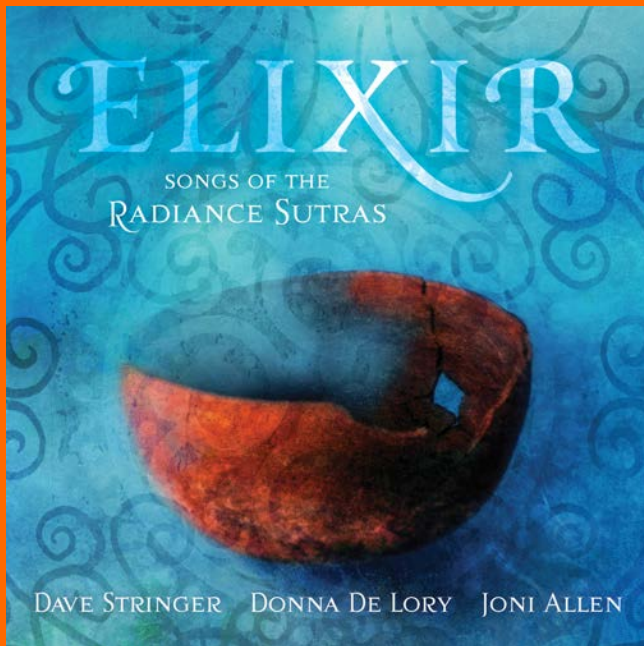
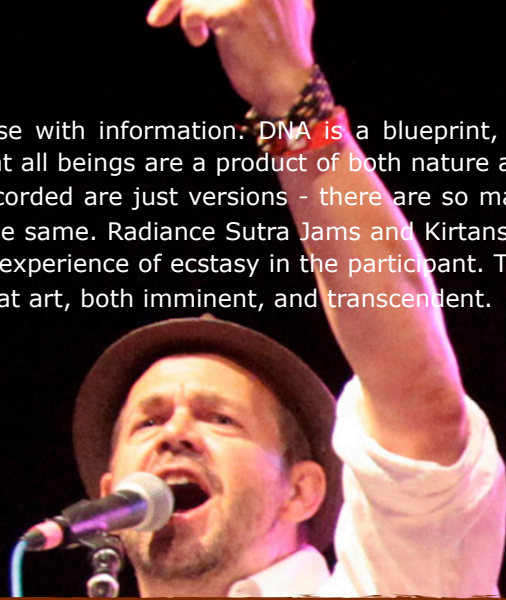
I was astonished at how much art and joy and originality I witnessed in the people who got up and rocked a Sutra at one of the jams, many of them reciting poetry with musicians and a crowd for the first time. This process eventually led to some formal writing sessions with Donna and Joni, where we worked with the Sutras that had the most impact on us as a point of departure. Sometimes we would use the translations verbatim. Other times, we needed more text to flesh out the song, so we would make a further journey with Lorin into the original Sanskrit to extract more shades of meaning. We tried to remain faithful to the meaning of the text, but also felt free to experiment and play with it, so that it could have resonance as it took the form of verses and choruses and bridges.



The Sanskrit of the Sutras is like a kind of DNA, coiled and dense with information: DNA is a blueprint, but it's not entirely determinant. It interacts with environmental factors, so that all beings are a product of both nature and nurture. Elixir arose from the Radiant Sutras in the same way. What we recorded are just versions - there are so many ways to do them. Our hope is that these versions will inspire other to do the same. Radiance Sutra Jams and Kirtans seem to fit easily together. They're both interactive practices that produce the experience of ecstasy in the participant. They see the great artist in everyone, and every life form as the expression of that art, both imminent, and transcendent.

Pranava: Thanks so much, this has been a beautiful conversation.

davestringer.com
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ELIXIR

TEN ECLECTIC, MODERN SONGS INSPIRED BY THE RADIANCE SUTRAS, LORIN ROCHE'S POETIC INTERPRETATION OF THE VIJÑANA BHAIRAVA TANTRA, ONE OF THE MOST ECSTATIC AND ICONOCLASTIC TEXTS OF YOGA PHILOSOPHY. ELIXIR UNITES THE TALENTS OF LEADING ECSTATIC CHANT ARTISTS DAVE STRINGER AND DONNA DE LORY WITH CONTEMPORARY SINGER / SONGWRITER JONI ALLEN. FROM STIMULATING BHANGRA GROOVES TO COUNTRY ANTHEMS AND SULTRY BALLADS, THESE ARE SONGS TO BE DANCED WITH AND MEDITATED UPON. "THERE'S A SPACE IN THE HEART WHERE EVERYTHING MEETS. COME HERE, IF YOU WANT TO FIND ME!"

"IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THE RAPTURE OF MUSIC. YOU KNOW WHAT YOU LOVE: GO THERE."

"ALL THIS TALK OF PURITY AND IMPURITY — THESE ARE JUST OPINIONS. BEYOND THEM ARE THE ASTONISHING ENERGIES OF CREATION."

"RAISE YOUR GLASS, CLOSE YOUR EYES AND TOAST THE UNIVERSE".

"PASSION AND COMPASSION, HOLDING AND LETTING GO. THIS ACHE IN YOUR HEART IS HOLY."

THE RADIANCE SUTRAS

"IF YOU LOVE RUMI, HAFIZ, THE TAO, IF YOU LOVE WORDS DANCING OUT OF THE MYSTERY, WELCOME TO THE RADIANCE SUTRAS: THESE ARE AMONG THE MOST PROFOUND, EXQUISITE AND LUMINOUS VERSES YOU WILL EVER READ." – JACK KORNFIELD, AUTHOR OF A PATH WITH HEART

"LORIN ROCHE'S RENDITION OF THE VIJNANA BHAIRAVA IS TRULY RADIANT, FILLED WITH INSIGHT AND POETRY, AND ILLUMINED BY THE POWER OF HIS PRACTICE." – SALLY KEMPTON

"LIKE FEELING AND READING SHAKTI IN PRINT. I READ A LITTLE BIT EACH DAY, THEN CLOSE MY EYES AND DO THE EXERCISE, OR PONDER THE THOUGHT. I LET THE WARM SWEET LOVING WORDS AND IMAGERY WASH AND HEAL MY MANY LAYERS OF SELF." – LILIAS FOLAN

"LORIN ROCHE'S RADIANT SUTRAS PRESENT THE MOST INSPIRING TRANSLATION OF THE VIJNANA BHAIRAVA SUTRAS I HAVE EVER ENCOUNTERED. IT IS JUICY, HIP, INTELLIGENT, INSPIRING AND THE BEST COMPANION FOR YOUR DAILY LIFE. WE ALL NEED DAILY REMINDERS TO "CELEBRATE THE BOUNDARY WHERE BODY MEETS INFINITY." THIS BOOK IS A MUST READ!
 – MARGOT ANAND, AUTHOR OF THE ART OF EVERYDAY ECSTASY AND THE ART OF SEXUAL ECSTASY.

