

Rebelle Society

creatively maladjusted

Kirtan in the Jungle: A Conversation with Dave Stringer.



{Dave Stringer}

<http://www.rebelle.com/2013/06/12/kirtan-in-the-jungle-a-conversation-with-dave-stringer/>

Recently I had the opportunity to interview musician, artist, and kirtankar, [Dave Stringer](#) at [The Sanctuary at Two Rivers in Costa Rica](#), during one of the retreats we hold there annually. We spoke about Kirtan, his art par excellence, and the importance of getting away and reconnecting with our inner wilderness.

Naga: What was your experience like in the jungle at The Sanctuary at Two Rivers?

Dave: Simultaneously, it was incredibly peaceful, and incredibly noisy. People often say, “Oh, I long for the peace and quiet of the country side,” but they’ve obviously never spent any time in it. There is a whole urban world of insects and frogs and monkeys, and there’s a whole lot of life going on, which is a really beautiful and interesting thing.

But at first, you think, “Wow! We’re so far from anything, and we’re so isolated, and this is so fantastic.” And then when you start to focus on nature, you realize that there is a constant call from every corner of “I am, I am, I am, I want, I want, I want.” And it’s an interesting thing to reflect on. It’s really beautiful, actually. In a funny way, after spending a week in the jungle, I came to the conclusion that everywhere is the jungle.

Naga: *Here in the jungle everything is vibing so much. And they’re pretty much screaming, “I am, I am.” They have their own tribal call, so, in a way, the cacophony is for me, very harmonious. While doing Kirtan, the mantras were adding to the cacophony in a harmonious way. I say this as I compare the many times when I’m here in the jungle and I hear a human voice and it just seems out of place. But then when we are chanting away, it seemed like we just Are. This is our roar. I think the monkeys were roaring back at you at one point, didn’t they?*

Dave: Yeah. It was a really beautiful experience to realize that actually this call-and-response thing is something that is inherent in nature, and every creature in the jungle is doing that, and that, in fact, we can also call and respond that we are part of the natural world, too. It was nice to actually hear how musical the world is.

To sit in the jungle and hear all these sounds, it reminds me that music didn’t come from nowhere. We were probably responding to the sounds around us and imitating them.



{The Sanctuary at Two Rivers, Costa Rica}

Naga: *Why is it important to go on retreat? Why is it important to break away from your daily routine and go somewhere exotic or where you’ve never been?*

Dave: Well, I don't think that you actually have any perspective on what's happening to you until you are able to step away from it. It reminded me of the metaphor of a frog, who is placed in a pot of water and then it slowly comes to a boil. It really has no idea that it's getting warmer and warmer. It happens incrementally, and it's only when suddenly it reaches the critical point, the boiling point, that you understand, "Oh, my God, it's hot."

I think, in some ways, with the stresses of life that we simply just become used to it. The water gets hotter and hotter, but we're not noticing, because it's only a little hotter than yesterday. And then there's a point when all of a sudden we go, "Oh, my God. I'm in trouble here." So unless you step away from your circumstances, you can't really take the measure of the circumstances that you're in.

It's weird, you know, Americans work more than almost anybody else on earth. We actually take less vacation time. And there's reasons why there's even a biblical admonishment to take a day. That rest is really restorative, and it provides a lot of perspective on your life. It's nice to unplug for a little while.

It's not impossible to check in with the world at The Sanctuary at Two Rivers, but yet you feel less of an impulse to check in. And that's a nice thing. It's to be able to look at the stuff that everyday drives you crazy, and respond to it and from the perspective of being in a solar-powered retreat in the middle of the jungle, suddenly those things just don't seem so important any more.

Naga: *I love that you guys came up on the first day and then on the last day, when I took you out, you said this is the first time you left the property. The only thing you did was go deeper, deeper into the jungle.*

Dave: Yeah. That was really great for me too, because so often, I feel just like, "Oh, I should go check this out. I should go do this." But there was something about the cool vibe and setup of the retreat that said, "No. No. No. Stay. Go deeper." It's not that I didn't leave, I hiked up the river to these really spectacular waterfalls. But I felt the impulse to go deeper through the retreat rather than to bail out and about. And that was a nice thing, too, to have that experience.

Naga: *Now, for those people who are not familiar with the science of **Kirtan**, how do you define it or describe it in layman's terms?*

Dave: Well, Kirtan always involves the technique of singing in a call-and-response fashion. A lead group calls out a phrase, and the audience responds. It's a little model of the interaction of self in universe or self and other. And we're singing simple Sanskrit mantras, which are largely names that are given to the divine, beautiful metaphors of our relationship to love in the universe. They're very simple so that you can close your eyes and get lost singing them.

Ultimately, the idea and the experience is that the singer merges into the song, the audience merges into the band, and all enter this space where there really isn't a distinction that can be made between audience and performer, or singer and song.

Naga: There are those of us in the yoga community who have now been exposed to Kirtan for quite some time, and there's a specific yoga behind it called Bhakti yoga. How would you define it?

Dave: Well, there are people that are going to say, "Oh, Bhakti is the yoga of devotion." But, to me that's a really loaded and tricky word. Devotion on one level seems to imply that there's a relationship of being devoted to something so that there's an object. And for me, the experience of singing is one of utterly blurring any distinction between subject and object, between self and the divine.

So I guess I prefer to think of devotion as a sort of feeling that the divine is something that's streaming through you, the energy before there was a universe or before there was time. And maybe it's really a sense of awareness of how intimately connected to the source of all things that you are. It's simultaneously holding a sense of both your insignificance and feeling to be at the center of things.

Devotion, in this sense, would mean a kind of a yoga of being at home in the world. It is a yoga of a feeling imbued with the sense of wonder and mystery and imagination.

I don't know how that exactly fits in a more religious definition of this. I guess my tendency is to resist any religious definitions of it, because it's possible to step into this music or into yoga, any of the limbs of yoga, without being particularly religious. There's nothing about yoga or Kirtan that's insisting that one believe this or believe that. In fact, belief could potentially be seen as an impediment to the process and practice of yoga.

Really, one is being asked to immerse one's self, and fully jump into experience. So from that perspective, devotion is just complete immersion into what is. The Bhakti tradition is certainly useful in the sense that it causes us to focus on how we're connected to each other, how we're connected to the universe around us, and ultimately it propels us to the kinds of questions of "why am I here?" and "how shall I act, now that I am here?"

Naga: Speaking of wonder, I want to get back to the nuts and bolts of Kirtan and it being composed of signing mantras. For those who do not know what a mantra is or what the purpose of it is, how would you describe or define Mantra?

Dave: Mantra, in Sanskrit, means mind tool, and it's a tool for exploring and becoming aware of your mind and how it works and ultimately a tool to shift your relationship to it. It seems obvious to me now, although, it was not always so, that it's possible to watch my mind and think "who is thinking?", to be having the thought and simultaneously be asking this question of "who is having that thought?" or "where is that thought arising from?"

It's possible to think about thinking, or to become aware of one's self and that one is having thoughts, as opposed to being simply lost and immersed in those thoughts. Mantras are very useful for this. Also to sing a mantra is in a sense to give your mind something to do, it's like giving a child a toy to play with. So once the child is busy and occupied, it's no longer making the same demands on you, and that allows you to get involved in potentially other more interesting things.

Freed from the constant chattering of your mind, which is something that can happen when you deeply immerse yourself in something like singing, or [asana](#), or dancing, allows you to have the experience of what it is to not be involved in your mind and its thinking all the time. And for most people that's really refreshing.

Naga: *It's a wonderful concept—Mantra as mind tool. It really can excavate the wonders of the world. I'm fully with you on it. I hope more people test and explore the science experiment of using mantra for transformation. It is very effective and efficient.*

Naga: *How do you, as an artist, define art and creativity?*

Dave: I don't define art or creativity. Art is, I suppose, both the process and the product. Perhaps it's a way of expressing my questions, or mediating my experience, or making my experience available to others in a way that allows us to see how our experiences are shared. It can also, in some ways, be a kind of contagious thing. In that, it's easy through the medium of art to make certain insights available to others in ways they can grasp it. Once you see something in a certain way, it makes it possible for others to see it in that way, so there's a certain service that comes through art.

I actually really prefer having this conversation on the terms of *art* as opposed to *religion*. Religion is often inflexible and dogmatic. Certainly the art world has been full of dogmas and inflexibilities as well, but its stars are set in a different place.

Art is invested in questions, whereas the dogmas of religion are mostly invested in answers.

Naga: *Hallelujah. Om out my friend!*



***Dave Stringer** has been widely profiled in publications all over the world as one of the most innovative artists of the new Kirtan movement. Stringer's sound marries the transcendent mysticism of traditional Indian instruments with the exuberant, groove-oriented sensibility of American gospel. Initially trained as a visual artist, filmmaker and jazz musician, Stringer's work underwent a significant shift when video editing work brought him to an ashram in Ganeshpuri, India in 1990. It has also been informed by a subsequent period of service teaching meditation to prison inmates, and expanded by his interest and research in neuroscience.*

*Stringer often collaborates with internationally celebrated yoga teachers, creating music for workshops led by Shiva Rea, Bryan Kest, Gurmukh, Saul David Raye, John Friend, and many others. He has released six CDs under his own name, and his music is played in yoga studios worldwide. His voice also appears on numerous soundtracks, including the blockbuster film *Matrix Revolutions* and the video game *Myst*. For more about Dave Stringer, check out his [artist page](#) and [his albums](#).*



Naganath

Labels are for boxes and nothing else since once you label someone or something he/she/it becomes stuck within the limitations of that box. So best to just throw Naga into that odd box labeled "Miscellaneous" and hopefully in there will be a backgammon board, a bottle of good red wine, and some dark chocolate to keep him company. In sum, for almost a decade Naganath has been living 100% off-the-grid in the jungles of Costa Rica. There he has been enveloped in refining and fine-tuning his body-mind-spirit complex while developing [The Sanctuary at Two Rivers](#), a 40 acre Eco-conscious, 100% off-the-grid solar powered, tropical-modern Yoga & Meditation Retreat and Teacher Training Center. Naganath is an initiate of the International Nath Order. More about this non-dogmatic spiritual paradigm focusing on the expansion and refinement of consciousness can be found [here](#). Naga serves as the "Chakra Raja" or Circle Leader of [Nagaloka Dhuni](#). Other musings can be found on [Facebook](#).