

By SISSI



SEX, DRUGS AND KIRTAN

molecules and mantras
by dave stringer & dearbhla kelly

SEX, DRUGS & KIRTAN

Over the previous issues of Sage Magazine, we have investigated kirtan and mantras, looking into areas like Mantras and Children; the Love of Bhakti and the Rise of Conscious Music; so we were thrilled to discuss a story idea with popular kirtan artist Dave Stringer who, along with his partner Dearbhla Kelly, delve into the world of science and music during their workshops around the world.

The concept of Molecules and Mantras interested us as we hear so many stories of people's lives that are transformed through the power of positive affirmation. What if the same power resides in the music we listen to. What if the sounds we feed our ears, not only touch our souls, but can also transform us on a molecular level.

Launching his new album with Donna DeLory this month, based on the Radiance Sutras, Dave has first hand knowledge of music's transformative power. His partner Dearbhla is an expert in Yoga studies of Ashtanga, Forrest Yoga, Yin Yoga, Vinyasa flow, Yoga Nidra and Bhakti Yoga. Together they have developed a full study into the symbiotic relationship between mantras and molecules.

sex drugs & kirtan

Kirtan, the call and response practice of chanting Sanskrit mantras, is usually associated with the devotional path of Bhakti Yoga. Experience, however, shows that it's not necessary to know anything about the mantras or Yoga philosophy to have a deeply transformative experience at a Kirtan. Ecstatic bliss is frequently a byproduct of singing, but most people don't think about sex and drugs - typical ways that humans pursue an ecstatic state - in the same category as chanting mantras for spiritual purposes.

We are not most people.

Dearbhla often begins yoga workshops sharing her youthful experience of taking Ecstasy (MDMA) in nightclubs in Dublin and London. She draws parallels between the ecstatic transcendence she experienced under the influence of E and the feeling of blissful union she discovered chanting kirtan.

Dave was once invited to leave an ashram after making the statement that Kirtan was really all about sex, drugs and rock & roll. Given the context in which he made his remarks, his word choice may have been ill-advised, but upon deeper reflection his statement is less outlandish than it may at first seem.

Let's break this down.

Sex is fundamentally about the search for ecstatic union, and so is Kirtan. Interestingly, the neurological pathways that are stimulated in orgasm are also active when we experience a sense of union with the Divine. Singing together is a way we often experience this connection on a mass level; it frequently diminishes our feelings of separation from others, and enhances group cohesion and bonding.

We are always on Drugs, because our emotional lives (including our feelings of bliss and transcendence) are the surface layer of a complex dance of biochemicals that the body generates and is constantly modifying. Viewed through this lens, singing is a practice of self-medication. Regulation of the breath and rhythmic entrainment naturally increase the production of certain chemicals, and depress the production of others. The result is a shift in both mood and awareness.

Rock & Roll and the Bhakti movement can be equally iconoclastic and joyful; both urge people to rethink the relationship of the individual to the world. Neither Bhakti nor Rock & Roll have any use for orthodoxy. The individual-dissolving Eastern tradition of Kirtan and the individual-expressing Western traditions of Rock & Roll and Jazz both



Photo © Michael Longstaff

”...SEX IS FUNDAMENTALLY ABOUT THE SEARCH FOR ECSTATIC UNION, AND SO IS KIRTAN...”



Dave Stringer playing dulcimer
Photo © Michael Longstaff

arise from the same impulse toward expressing what is ecstatic and liberating and transcendent.

better living through chemistry

Singing is a powerful and very effective form of pranayama (a yoga practice of conscious and regulated breathing). When we breathe deeply and regularly we stimulate the periaqueductal gray (PAG), a part of the mid-brain that releases endogenous (made in the body) drugs into the cerebrospinal fluid. From there, they diffuse to other areas of the body via an intricate system of chemical communication in the endocrine (hormone) and nervous systems.

The PAG is directly influenced by rhythmic breathing, so when we sing, we cause molecules of bliss in the form of chemicals like serotonin and dopamine and oxytocin to diffuse throughout our bodies, spreading their gospel of joy and delight. Singing Sanskrit mantras can bring about a chemical high as intoxicating as dancing to house music under the influence of 'E'. Trippy indeed!

Enhanced physiological states like orgasm and drug highs arise from interactions of the brain,

the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) and the endocrine system. The ANS regulates essential functions such as heartrate, blood pressure, body temperature and digestion, and also has a role in modulating emotions. It has two parts, the arousal and quiescent systems, known respectively as the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) and the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS).

The arousal mechanism (SNS), also known as 'fight or flight', is the body's response to stress, anticipation and excitement. It's characterized by accelerated heart rate; increased levels of adrenalin; shallow, erratic breathing; increased perspiration and a heightened sense of awareness. This aroused state can be amplified and given more meaning by the intention of the participant and the context in which it is experienced.

Quiescence (PNS) is the relaxation response – how we feel at the end of a chant or when we're fully absorbed in something. It's associated with both deep rest and the process of digestion. Heart rate slows and blood pressure drops; breathing becomes slower and more even; brain waves shift from the beta-rhythm of alertness, to the alpha-rhythm of repose. Calming and stabilizing, we also

often experience this as post orgasmic bliss, or the feeling of being deeply rested after yoga practice.

The hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis (HPA axis) is a complicated set of interactions between the hypothalamus (part of the limbic / emotional brain), the pituitary (master) gland and the adrenal glands. These communications take the form of a two-way feedback loop that links the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems with the endocrine (hormonal) system. The HPA axis ensures that the right chemicals (drugs) get to the right areas of the body (the immune, digestive and respiratory systems) via the orchestrations of the SNS and PNS. How we feel when either the arousal or quiescent system is dominant is a direct result of these chemicals.

how kirtan works

You may have never previously thought about what chanting Om Namah Shivaya has to do with the body's endocrine and nervous systems, but both the SNS and PNS are affected by the repetitions and rhythmic progression of Kirtan. This is why the kirtan experience is so irreducibly visceral. Because we regulate our breathing and elicit shifts in our internal homeostasis when we sing, we effectively shift our inner environment.

Consider the arc of a typical 20-30 minute kirtan progression. At the beginning of a chant, participants must inhale deeply in order to sustain the long notes of a musical phrase at a slow tempo. This measured breathing stimulates the Parasympathetic Nervous System, and the chanters begin to feel relaxed, entering into an expansive, calm state of awareness.

Eventually, as the singers continue to repeat the melody (usually consisting of two or three primary phrases or motives), the rhythm begins to accelerate. As the speed continues to build, a certain tension is introduced. The Sympathetic Nervous System kicks in, and participants begin to feel a sense of anticipation and excitement as the chant progresses toward a fast, pulsing peak.

The brain and body are constantly trying to maintain equilibrium. Excitement gives way to tranquility, and when things become too slow,

then brain and body want stimulation. Under normal circumstances, the Sympathetic and Parasympathetic Nervous Systems alternate dominance, but under certain conditions they can be triggered to operate simultaneously.

In a kirtan, as the singers continue to breathe together in a deep and measured way, the relaxing actions of the PNS continue to be sustained, even as the SNS is stimulated by the accelerating rhythms. Instead of oscillating between calm and excitement, the chanter experiences a union of both, as the PNS and SNS are concurrently firing. The effect is a kind of spiritual speedball, simultaneously tranquilizing and exhilarating.

At the moment of orgasm, we also experience maximum arousal concurrent with maximum relaxation. Given the necessity of orgasm for the species to continue, this has adaptive utility. The quest for connection and orgasm leads to the formation of relationships, the basic building blocks of society.

Nature is very practical, seldom building two systems when one will do. Marvelously, we use exactly the same physiological systems when we engage in spiritual rituals as we do when we make love. Making love helps to create bonds on an individual level, and spiritual ritual helps us to create bonds on a collective level.

good sex, good kirtan

Indeed, a typical kirtan progression mirrors a typical lovemaking session. It often begins with an alap, an exploration of melodic theme without a clearly defined rhythm, which establishes a relaxing mood, and constitutes a kind of foreplay. At this point there's little, if any, synchronicity between people's breathing in the room, and the dance towards union is just beginning.

Typically the drummer then begins to establish a slow, spacious and seductive groove. As people sing along, their breathing starts to deepen and synchronize. The leader calls out the mantra and the melody, and the group responds; a dynamic process alternating between singing and listening. During this period of entrainment the group begins



Dearbhla Kelly
Photo © Hanumani

to cohere and the feeling in the room becomes noticeably relaxed.

Eventually the pulse begins to accelerate and anticipation builds. Because the group is singing as one, people's breathing starts to synch up. This creates a feeling of unity, and as the pace increases, and people witness each other's growing excitement, an electrifying feeling of connection ripples through the room. You start to get high on each other's high, just as during lovemaking, each partner's state of arousal stimulates that of the other.

As the chant gets faster and faster, pressure and excitement build, becoming almost unbearable. When holding this rhythm becomes unsustainable, the drummer cuts the rhythm exactly in half, opening the groove into feeling of great spaciousness and expansiveness. It's at this point that some people shout or scream, and others feel catapulted into a feeling of timelessness and unity that is both thrilling and relaxing.

From this point of simultaneous maximal excitement and calm, the kirtan begins to wind down, slowly returning to a space of deep absorption. When the

last note rings out, many participants naturally fall into a profound silence characterized by a feeling of being incredibly present and aware, yet totally still.

During lovemaking and many ecstatic rituals like Kirtan and dancing, many people experience a softening of the boundaries between themselves and others, along with a sense of oneness with the world around them. This diminishment of feeling separate can also be observed in diminished activity in the brain's Occipital Parietal Lobe which is thought to be responsible for our sense of self and body image; of where our body ends, and the world beyond it begins.

In Yoga philosophy, this state is referred to as Satchitananda: being, consciousness and bliss. Vedanta describes this as the state of absorption in Brahman, the formless ground of being that gives rise to all form and is supreme consciousness itself. More poetically, the Bhakti poet Kabir wrote of the drop merging into the ocean, and the ocean simultaneously merging into the drop.

From a scientific perspective, we can say that both the Sympathetic and Parasympathetic Nervous

Systems are operating together to create a unified state encompassing both peak arousal and profound relaxation. And the brain's executive command creates a set of conditions that dissolves the feeling of boundaries between ourselves and others.

music, science and social revolution

Music has always served to facilitate the feeling of unity and sense of purpose and focus that has enabled social movements. The Bhakti movement of 15th century India introduced Kirtan and the ecstatic ritual of singing together to a mass audience. The Bhaktas wrote ecstatic love poems to the divine, and went around singing all the time. They taught mantras and spread ideas that had been previously been the exclusive knowledge of the priestly class to the common people. Their message was simple: Cultivate joy. See the divine in one another. In the eyes of Love, we are all the same. This was, and still is, a radical message, and it began the process of both upending the caste system and transmitting the ideas of Yoga philosophy to the world.

In the Western world of the 20th century, Rock and Roll and Jazz also rebelled against a sclerotic system of cultural elitism, uniting the voices and traditions of black and white people, and breaking down the barriers between so-called high and low culture. As a potent voice for the expression of unity and the necessity of equal rights, these new forms of

music combined the traditional and modern in new and exciting ways. They also gave young people a vehicle to ask questions about society and their role in it, transcending race, class, gender and ethnicity. Like the Bhaktas, this cultural movement also held that the individual was linked directly to the divine, and that music was a means to liberation.

Rock and Roll provided a vehicle through which the ideas of Yoga gained entrance and traction in Western culture. Yoga teachers and philosophers and swamis began to appear regularly in the West, often in the company of musicians, and the music these musicians made also began to transmit the ideas and modalities of Yoga. The directive of Yoga has always been to inquire and experience, not to believe without question. This suited the mindset of Rock and Roll and Jazz perfectly.

The discoveries of Science have also upended and transformed culture and our relationships. Inquiring into the nature of ourselves and our universe, both the Western discipline of Science and the Eastern discipline of Yoga have arrived at the obstacles of the heart and mind. How can we transcend their limits, live fully and thrive? Is it all just a matter of chemistry? Even if it is, doesn't that deepen the mystery in unexpected new directions? Singing, we move ourselves into a field out beyond questions and answers. Experiencing bliss, the heart becomes unbounded in a feeling of unity, and the mind is still.

About Dave Stringer

Dave Stringer is profiled in publications worldwide as one of the most innovative artists of the new kirtan movement. Stringer's sound invokes the transcendent mysticism of traditional Indian instruments with the exuberant, groove-oriented sensibility of American gospel and the ringing harmonies of Appalachia. His work translates the venerable traditions of kirtan and yoga into inspiring and thoroughly modern participatory theatre, open to a multiplicity of interpretations, and accessible to all. Dave and his band tour tirelessly, giving concerts, workshops and retreats throughout North and Central America, Europe, Asia and Australia.

Photo © Nic Frechen



About Dearbhla Kelly

Dearbhla Kelly is a Los Angeles-based writer and yoga teacher with a particular interest in neuroscience and philosophy. She began her academic training in Amsterdam and received degrees in philosophy in Dublin and Chicago. Her writing has been published in Yoga Journal, Huffington Post, Elephant Journal, Yoga Chicago and Origin Magazine.

For more information on Dearbhla Kelly visit her website www.durgayoga.com

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And to find out more about kirtan visit Dave Stringer's website - <http://davestringer.com/>



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