

Yoga Aktuell / Germany

Translation of original German text



Dave, you've been touring for some time in countless yoga centers and other locations in America. Last year was the first time you toured Europe – and you're going to come back this year - would you say there is any difference performing on this or the other side of the Atlantic?

Crowds differ in temperament from city to city, but the experience of chanting seems to be the same wherever I go. Singing opens emotional pathways in a kind of cleansing catharsis. This has the effect of shifting one's center of awareness from head to heart, which is one of the aims of yoga. The mind is wired to put things into categories, but the heart seeks unity. And the search for love is the same everywhere.

Sanskrit is the mother tongue of many modern languages, (including German and English), and therefore a point of linguistic unity. Sounds like Oh and Mmmm and Ah and Shhhh convey meanings that any baby ever born understands. For most people in both Europe and America, Sanskrit is experienced as an oddly familiar kind of nonsense.

Since one of the aims of chanting is to stop the mind's identification with thinking, this nonsense turns out to be very useful. If you deprive the mind of the babble of pictures and words it is usually focused on, you become aware of an expansive and joyful silence that seems to hold the mind within itself. In this state of awareness, there is no sense of separation or difference.

Could you sense a difference between different countries in Europe?

The Irish have a strong culture of singing together in public, and it took very little to get them to let go. In contrast, the British needed a lot of encouragement to participate. Americans have a stereotype of German and Swiss people being very serious and restrained, and French and Italian people being very passionate. But my experience of chanting in these countries has been the opposite. The crowds that participated most enthusiastically during my last tour were actually in Munich and Zurich.

Could you explain from your point of view, what "kirtan" is?

In my work, I am trying to translate the ancient traditions of yoga into an accessible modern art. Kirtan is a musical model of how body and soul touch the larger universe. It's a meditation on particles and waves, mind and heart, duality and unity. And it's also a really, really good time.

The intention of kirtan is consciousness-transformative, directing the singers to vanish into the song as drops merge into the ocean. The form is simple, easily learned, and instantly memorable. A lead group calls out the mantras and melodies. The crowd responds, singing, clapping and dancing as the rhythms of tablas, finger cymbals, harmonium, tamboura, bass, guitar and other instruments build and accelerate.

The Sanskrit mantras are primarily recitations of names given to the divine. But perhaps the true understanding of the mantras can be found in the sense of unity, well-being and timelessness that they elicit. The mantras quiet the mind, and the music frees the heart. Ecstasy is both the process and the product. In this way, the chant is completely congruent with the philosophy that the mantras express.

One of the things that interests me most about kirtan is how the call and response aspect of it blurs the distinction between performer and audience. I project the mantras above the band because it makes for a crisp presentation and allows people to participate easily. It also allows us to darken the room, which seems to help people to let go of their inhibitions and sing. I frequently invite local musicians to sit in with us, because kirtan invites the creation of community.

As a form, kirtan is both extremely expansive and utterly reductive. It's a challenge as a musician to develop the arrangement and maintain musical interest and yet never pull people out of the hypnotic space of the chant. I'm simultaneously invoking the traditions of the gospel tent show, performance art, musical theatre and stadium rock concert, because these are forms that Western audiences relate to, and it gives them a context to find their way in.

...and could there be a different understanding or approach?



Even though I'm singing the names of Hindu gods and goddesses, I'm not really chanting to anything or anyone in an objective sense. At one point, Bhagavan Das, who many people regard as the original gangsta of kirtan in the West, and who I have a lot of respect for, interpreted this as meaning that I didn't believe in God. For him, and for the many people who strongly relate to the gods and goddesses, the names are themselves the form of deities, and to chant the names is to feel the divine become real. That's how the door opens for them.

For me, the deities and their mythologies function as psychological metaphors, and as

representations of the different forces that together make up the universe. But I'm motivated by my interest in getting to a place of pure, loving awareness beyond images and concepts, subjects and objects. That's what God is for me. It's an awareness I can only really touch in moments of profound inner silence, and chanting is what gets me there. Honestly, it doesn't matter which route you choose. It turns out there's only one direction in the universe. Whether you reach out or reach in, you end up touching the same place.

What are the origins of kirtan?

Historically, Kirtan (from the Sanskrit word meaning "to sing") is a folk form of mantra chanting that arose from the Bhakti movement of 15th century India. The Bhaktis wrote ecstatic love poems to the divine, and went around singing all the time. 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.

Although the form of Kirtan is very old, Kirtan is not a piece of dusty ethno musicological taxidermy. It's a living, breathing, organism spreading its genes out into the world. The Bhaktis had no use for orthodoxy. They saw the expression and form of the divine in every direction they looked.

How did you first become involved with yoga and mantra chanting?

A film editing project took me to an ashram in India. I wasn't consciously seeking anything, and I knew very little about Eastern spiritual traditions. I had been practicing hatha yoga for a few years, but my interest was mostly motivated by the need to manage a persistent back problem. On a number of occasions I had been invited to meet different spiritual teachers who were visiting Los Angeles, where I lived, but I had always declined.

I had a brief professional involvement with someone who had lived in an ashram, and one day I received a phone call from her asking if I would be interested in a project that would take me to India. Her contacts had asked her if she knew anyone who would be right for this job, so she sat down to meditate on it. She said that she knew this would sound strange to me, but I had appeared in her meditation as being the person who was meant to go. Although I was skeptical, at the time I was also quite broke, and an all expense paid trip to India seemed far preferable to spinning in the void of Hollywood unemployment.

At the ashram, I didn't at first have any understanding of the Sanskrit they were chanting, but the sound of it had a powerful effect on me. Because I was an employee and not a devotee, at first I didn't participate directly in the chants. I would sit and listen to people chant from across the road. I would then figure out the tunes on an Appalachian dulcimer and a Chinese accordion I had brought with me to keep myself entertained.



My job involved distilling lengthy talks by the guru into fifteen minute short subjects suitable for viewing by newcomers to Eastern philosophy. There was a certain logic in hiring me for this work, since I myself was a beginner. I spent every day immersed in the teachings of yoga. The people overseeing my work were knowledgeable and open to discourse. The guru was warm and witty and very accessible to me, and I ended up having some experiences so astonishing and transformative that they shifted the course of my life.

India blasted me into billions of spinning particles and then slowly reshaped me, a process that was somehow simultaneously both excruciating and ecstatic. I chose to stay on in India when the film editing work was done, because I needed time to integrate what had happened to me. Since I had already been volunteering my time at the local grade school, the ashram sent me to assist and eventually teach there. There was a harmonium there for me to practice on, and we would chant every day. Although I did receive formal instruction in the traditions of Indian music from teachers at the ashram, I really learned more about the heart and soul of chanting by singing with the kids. Basically, a bunch of schoolchildren taught me to chant!

What propelled you toward leading kirtan as a profession?

After I returned from India to Los Angeles, I became involved in a volunteer organization that taught meditation and chanting and yoga to prison inmates. The inmates taught me to speak about spiritual subjects in a manner that was humorous and direct and practical. I started recording 'Brink', a CD of songs I had written while I was in India, and continued supporting myself as an editor. I continued to practice yoga, but I had no intention or idea that chanting would ever be more than an avocation.

Then I received an invitation from Yoga Works, a studio in Santa Monica, California, asking me if I'd be interested in leading regular call-and-response kirtan nights that would be open to the public. I got a little band together, and distributed a flyer. At first not many people came, but eventually word spread. I started traveling with yoga teacher friends to sing for their workshops at American yoga conferences in Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit and Phoenix. More invitations to other cities followed, until I gradually realized that performing and recording had become a full time way of life.

How could chanting help people in their yogic practice?

In yoga, the principal obstacle we are dealing with is not our body, it's our mind. The aim of both yoga asana and chanting is to still the mind and connect us with our own inner wisdom. Chanting simply adds sound to pranayama and seated asanas, so it's a natural extension of a yoga practice.

One aspect of yoga asana that makes it different from other forms of physical exercise is that it focuses on breathing. Singers have always had to learn to use their breath to support their voices. So asana and chanting are both ways of becoming aware of your breathing, and working with it.

The way we breathe and the way we experience time are very related. When the mind is agitated, breathing becomes very short and irregular, and one experiences time as moving very fast. One way to slow your mind down is to slow down your breathing. And when the mind slows down, the apparent movement of time also slows. When the mind stops, time stops too.

What kind of attitude should one have, singing these holy names and mantras?

I think it's best to just start wherever you are, without trying to adopt any attitude. Irreverence or skepticism can open as many doors as devotion. Mantras are intended as a tool to open the prison of attachments that the mind creates, so I don't think one should be fixated on any one way to repeat them. It's fine to chant with a specific intention, but it's also OK to just relax and enjoy yourself. All I ask of people who come to chant is that they be willing to participate and notice what comes up for them. Yoga doesn't ask us to believe, it asks us to practice. We examine our experience until we can witness the truth in the book of our own heart. No one else can read it for us, or tell us what it means.

When was the first time you actually realized the impact of devotional singing, was it from the very first time? Or is there a certain development towards a direction?

I had been walking on this road my whole life without knowing that it led to the temple. Since the beginning, singing has been a way for me to transmute whatever hurt or anger I felt into something that helped bring me closer to love. So in a certain sense, for me, singing has always been a devotional act.

Before I encountered mantras, I used to invent the languages I sang in. Writing lyrics can be intricate intellectual work, and I found that singing wordlessly gave me a much more immediate, spontaneous, and effortless way of tapping into my emotional life. I also discovered that certain sounds had the ability to transport me into a different sort of consciousness, into a place of great ecstasy or great stillness. So when I first heard Sanskrit chanted in India, although I was astonished to encounter a syllabary of these sounds, I also experienced a profound sense of recognition.



My private acts of discovery were nothing compared to my first experiences of chanting en masse. A large group of people singing together intentionally, breathing together, is a cloud of intelligence, turning like a flock of birds, until the song itself vanishes into the skies of silence. It's a mighty thing to be a part of. You feel somehow intimate with all the strangers surrounding you, bigger than your little concept of yourself, and intensely, vividly, alive.

Have any other kirtan singers been influential for you?

No. I learned to sing kirtan as a member of a lead group. The style of kirtan I learned in the Siddha Yoga ashram wasn't focused on a particular lead

singer. The directive was to blend your voice seamlessly into that of another, to lose your individual sense of self, to produce a sound that was bigger than any one individual.

In the ashram, I had to work for a long time to resolve a certain tension. As an artist, I wanted to be able to explore specific ideas about how to sing, arrange and develop the music. But as a resident of a monastic community, I was being asked to suppress my need for self-expression and learn to serve the chant. In Indian music there is no harmony, in a Western sense. One experiences a tonal center, and then the tension and resolution of a melody moving against it. Unity is expressed by everyone singing the same note, and one can experience a powerful and unbounded sense of bliss in this. But I come from a tradition in the West that expresses ecstasy through solos and harmony and counterpoint, in which polyphony points toward a different conception of spiritual and philosophical unity.

Ultimately, I could not resolve this tension in the ashram. Hatha yoga centers and art galleries have proved to be much more conducive laboratories. Although Kirtan is rooted in a very old and profoundly joyful Eastern tradition, as Westerners, we can't help but bring our own cultural biases with us. Still, it is possible for us to be authentic, in the sense that what we are doing originates in the heart. To align the individual-dissolving Eastern tradition of kirtan with the individual-affirming Western traditions of gospel and jazz and rock music is no contradiction. Both arise from the same impulse toward giving form to what is ecstatic and liberating and transcendent.

I don't sound like an Indian, and I don't want to. The kirtan singing style I've evolved is informed by gospel and blues singers, and also country and blue grass. These are significant call and response forms in American music, and that's what I grew up with. But that said, in terms of traditional devotional music, there are some Bauls and Qawwali singers that really blow my mind. In my next life, I'll sound like that.

What other music / musicians have been influential?

John Coltrane, Steve Reich, George Harrison and Jimi Hendrix have all had an impact on the way I hear kirtan. Eastern European klezmer and Greek rembetika and Spanish flamenco are all relevant. So are Aretha Franklin and Van Morrison.

How do you prepare yourself for a kirtan?

On the road, I get a large cup of coffee, and deal as equanimously as possible with whatever details of travel and setup are in front of me. I've had to enlarge my concept of the practice of yoga to include every aspect of traveling and loading sound gear and meeting new people. And I've had to learn to access an inner place of joyful composure, because I seldom have the luxury of privacy before the show.

When I'm on tour, I sing 5 or 6 nights a week for up to three hours. Physically, it's very challenging. Often, we've driven for hours to get to the city we're playing in, and I don't get a chance to warm up vocally before the show. My voice stays pretty consistent from one night to the next because I look at each kirtan as a practice, not as a performance. I do as much hatha yoga as the schedule permits. But more than anything, I need to make sure that I get plenty of sleep.

I begin each kirtan session by singing the same mantras. First, an invocation of gratitude to my teacher that helps me to surrender and become empty. Second, I chant a text from Shankaracharya, the Advaita Vedanta philosopher, that says in effect, no matter what difficulties and delusions I have experienced today, my true nature is one of unbounded consciousness and bliss. Then, I welcome

everyone and introduce the first mantra we'll chant together.

Trying to be devotional every night is a burden because I don't always feel that way, and it seems more important to connect with people than bullshit them. Some nights I'm just relying on the chant to move through my stuff, and being fed by the freedom of someone in the crowd. Other times, I'm the one who can't stop beaming with joy. It doesn't matter what my personal experience is on any given night, because I'm there to facilitate, not to perform. People's experience of their own inner self is not dependent on what mood I'm in or how many pujas I've done.



Do you see anything, while singing - I mean when your eyes are closed?

In yoga, one of the paradoxes is that your drishti, your intention or point of focus, must be strong, but at the same time you have to relinquish any goal orientation. So most of the time, I just chant, watch what washes across my field of awareness, and then let it go. Sometimes it's profound, and sometimes it's mundane. But the most important thing isn't actually what happens during the chant, it's what happens in the moments of silence just after the chant is finished.

This summer, beginning of July you'll be giving a retreat on the island of Crete / Greece in cooperation with the Jivamukti yoga center in Munich. How did this start out?

When you try to follow a chain of events back to their beginning, it's very hard to know what the first action was. But early on in my career, when I was only leading kirtan one night a month in Los Angeles, I was invited to sing at the Jivamukti yoga studio in New York. Gabriela Bozic and Patrick Broome, who now direct the Munich Jivamukti yoga center, became aware of me back then. But it took some time before my practice and the Jivamukti community in Munich had evolved to where we could meet each other. When we finally came together in the fall of 2005, the energy was very powerful. Petros Haffenrichter, who leads kirtan and teaches yoga at Jivamukti, sat in with me and my group and the feeling was beautiful. The retreat in Crete was in the early stages of planning, and I had already been invited to return to Europe in 2006 to play some festivals, so it seemed an excellent opportunity to spend more time with each other.

Where else will we be able to meet Dave Stringer this year? And what lies ahead for you as an artist?

I will be leading kirtan in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and Greece this year, and touring the Eastern USA and Canada again in the fall. In 2007, my touring cycle will start again in the Western states of the USA, and then continue on to Mexico and again to Europe. In 2008, I will go to Australia for the first time. As I move into the future, I'm looking to forge alliances between art institutions and yoga studios as a means of presenting my work.

The challenge for me now is to experience the entire process of my life and work as yoga. I do know that my sustained encounter with mantra chanting has irrevocably shifted the course of my art. I once read that Thomas Jefferson, one of America's founding fathers, took a copy of the Bible and cut out the parts that most resonated with him, then reassembled his selections into a work that reflected his own way of saying his prayers. I suppose it is fair to say that as an artist, I am engaged in something of a similar process with yoga. I don't know exactly where I'm going. I'm just trying to report honestly from where I am. The road extends out before me, seemingly without end. And I am forever finding myself at the beginning.