

THE PRACTICE OF MANTRA

In the late 60's, I was still living in New York City. An unusual sight began to appear in the streets of New York - small groups of young Americans, chanting "Hari Krishna, Hari Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hari Hari". They were clad in orange robes with their heads shaved except for a single shikha or chori (a tuft of hair left at the top most point). This was my introduction to the ancient practice of manta - the chanting of the names of God or deities, or words of power and particular syllables as a spiritual practice.

By 1970 I had moved to Woodstock and was working in the Ajna Occult Bookstore. Professor Richard Alpert, a colleague and fellow LSD pioneer of Tim Leary's at Harvard, had made his "voyage to the East". Alpert returned from his spiritual pilgrimage, traveling through India, with a new name, Baba Ram Das. His adventures were detailed in the book, *Be Here Now*; first published in 1971 by the Lama Foundation in New Mexico.

A seminal work that had widespread influence on the hippy culture, and the early ripples of the "New Age", *Be Here Now's* first edition was accompanied by a vinyl recording of Ram Das and friends chanting mantras from different cultures. There was the "Shema" that I remembered from going to Jewish temples as a child, along with the aforementioned "Hari Krishna", the Buddhist mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum", and other poems and teachings about the practice of mantra.

It seems as if every culture over at least the past 5,000 years has had mantra or repetitious prayer as a major ingredient of their spiritual practice. There is a recognition there of the sacred power of sound, of specific, audible vibrations, produced by the voice of a human being, to put one in a state of deep relaxation and possibly devotion.

In the almost 50 years since then, I have found the practice of mantra to be one of the easiest forms of sound healing, and one of the most effective. As a daily practice for centering, and for regularizing breathing, it is free, portable, and can be done in almost any environment. In addition to using it almost daily myself, it is something that I teach my students and clients and encourage them to practice.

"One immediate effect of mantra meditation is to relax the body. In this form of meditation, it seems that the more the body relaxes, the more active the mind becomes. It is as if energy is released by the body, which can be used by the mind.

"Mantra meditation most probably works largely through habituation. If a person is in a room all day with, say, a loudly ticking clock, his mind eventually turns off the sound of the ticking. Although he hears the ticking, it simply does not register. The person is said to have become habituated to the ticking sound, so that he no longer pays attention to it. This is an important mechanism through which the mind filters out the commonplace and allows the thinker to concentrate on what is important.

"When one repeats a mantra over and over, the mind also becomes habituated to it. Eventually, one becomes able to say it without the words registering in the conscious mind. By this time, one has also formed the habit of erasing all thought from the mind while reciting the mantra. It is therefore a highly effective psychological means of

removing all thought from the mind.... The mantra can serve as a means of clearing the mind of mundane thought, leaving it open to other transcendental experiences. This can be true no matter how nonmystical the mantra is. Indeed, in certain types of clinical meditation, a nonsense word can be used as the mantra.

“Nevertheless, if the mantra has spiritual power in its own right, it not only clears the mind of mundane thought, but also puts the meditator into a special spiritual space. The form of the mantra can be extremely important if one wishes to accomplish a specific spiritual goal in one’s meditation.”

—Aryeh Kaplan, Jewish Meditation, A Practical Guide, Schocken Books, NYC © 1985

This explanation of how mantra works is, of course, only one person’s particular emphasis. It does, however, bear directly on the connection between repeated sound and the induction of trance. If we accept the premise that hypnotic trance and meditative states are intimately related, then the above description of what happens in the mind when one repeats a mantra is also an extremely apt description of hypnosis.

THE “SO HAM’ MANTRA

One of the most basic and easiest to pronounce mantras that is on the “all time hit parade” of popular mantras is *So Ham*.

To begin, as you attune to your breath, introduce the mantra, *so-ham*, using the syllable *so* on the inhalation and *ham* on the exhalation. The meaning of this mantra is simply “I am”, similar to the answer Moses received when he asked who was appearing to him through the burning bush. (past, present and future: i.e. I am that I am; I am that I have always been and ever will be...)

A few basic mantras from different traditions:

Hindu:

Om Nama Shiva-ya - To invoke Lord Shiva

Hari Krishna Hari Krishna Krishna Krishna Hari Hari - Praise of Vishnu (Krishna)

Aum Gan Ganapataye Namah - To please Lord Ganesh

Hebrew:

Shema Yisrael, Adonoy Elohenu, Adonoy Echad - Listen, Israel, Our God Is One

Tibetan:

Om Tare Tu Tare Ture Soha - To Invoke (Or Praise) Green Tara

Om Mani Pema Hung - The Jewel In The Lotus

Muslim:

La ilaha il’Allah Hu - There Is Nothing But God (Allah)

Christian:

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me

Beatles:

All You Need Is Love - Love Is All You Need

AN EXERCISE FOR PRACTICING MANTRA

Before beginning mantra, it is helpful to take a few minutes of silent, sitting meditation. During this time, attention should be on the posture... making sure spine is straight, jaw and belly relaxed. Focus awareness on the breath, allowing a slow, regular rhythm to develop - breathing in and out through the nose.

After this centering process, open lips slightly and begin to exhale through the mouth, using yogic “ujai” breath... feel the breath and hear it make a very faint sound, like a far-off ocean surf in the back of the throat. By experimenting with controlling the flow of air through the larynx and vocal cords, one can learn to lengthen the outbreath

Eventually, as a greater volume of air passes through the larynx/pharynx area, the vocal cords will begin to vibrate, producing more of a voiced tone. Experiment, by shaping the cheeks and lips, with different vowel sounds on these extended outbreaths.

Here are three ways of practicing mantra:

- I. Verbally. If the mantra is fully voiced, there is maximum vibration. Beside the intention, and the “meaning” of the words, the vibration has an effect on bone and soft tissue.
- II. Subvocally. If one is in a public place, or does not wish to intrude on others in their vicinity, the mantra can be done in this manner, mouthing the syllables with perhaps a slight whisper.
- III. Soundlessly. The most subtle form of mantra, as one repeats this, it is heard in the mind and can act as a centering device and to focus.

Mantras can be practiced as a solo activity or in a large or small group of like-minded people.

Here’s a short teaching story...

This is a true story having to do with my practice of the Tibetan mantra Om Mani Padme Hum; sometimes written Aum Mani Pema Hung, (an attempt phonetically to capture the actual pronunciation). This mantra, called the Avalokitesvara (sanskrit) or Chenrezig (Tibetan) mantra, more or less translates as “The Jewel in the Lotus” In the Vajrayana tradition, it is one of the “core” mantras. I first received transmission of this particular mantra in 1972 during an all night meditation session with one of my American friends and spiritual teachers.

In 1975 I took Refuge with Kalu Rinpoche, senior meditation master in the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. In my meditation practice I continued to practice chanting Om Mani Padme Hum. To become a Buddhist is to take refuge in the Three Jewels, also called the Three Treasures. The Three Jewels are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha ... The English word refuge refers to a place of shelter and protection from danger.

Tibetan monks are noted for their skill at throat-singing, a specialized form of chanting in which, by amplifying the voice's upper partials, the chanter can produce multiple distinct pitches simultaneously. (See Chapter on “Breathing, Toning and Extended Vocal Techniques”). Having heard, and been very moved by recordings of the Gyuto Tantric practitioners, I was attempting to emulate this particular technique when chanting the Chenrezig mantra.

Some years later, Kalu Rinpoche had returned to my area to give further teachings. Students who had questions about their practice were offered the opportunity for private interview with Rinpoche (honorific title for highly respected lama). I requested that and soon found myself in a small room with my teacher. Since he did not speak or understand English, all of our conversation went through a Tibetan translator.

“Rinpoche,” I said, “I took Refuge with you, and I have been meditating and practicing developing compassion and wisdom. I have also been doing this mantra...” At this point I demonstrated my own version of Om Mani Padme Hum, attempting to produce the overtones that I had found so fascinating when I heard recordings of Tibetan monks. I didn’t feel very confident about my technique and basically was asking for feedback or correction.

Instead, when the translator had conveyed my questions to Kalu Rinpoche, what I got back was “Rinpoche says that’s really good that you are doing Chenrezig mantra”.

Thinking that he hadn’t understood my question, I repeated it, wording it slightly differently: “Yes, thank you. But since I didn’t have a formal teacher from the lineage for this mantra and technique, I want to know if I am doing it properly.” The translator spoke to Kalu Rinpoche in Tibetan, who smiled and answered. The translator shrugged, turned to me and again said, “Rinpoche says, “Yes, that is good that you are doing Chenrezig mantra”.

Like the phrase “lost in translation”, I figured that either the translator wasn’t doing a good job, or Rinpoche didn’t understand the nature of my query. I tried a third time. This time I got a slightly longer and more satisfying answer...

Basically, to paraphrase, he told me that there was a certain value to doing it in that style, as it had the “weight” of centuries of millions of people chanting it that way. It might have a certain “morphic resonance” on the astral plane (my words). But, he continued, as the dharma spread to America and other western cultures, it would undoubtedly continue to evolve and adapt, and that new forms would emerge. And that was okay, too. But the most important thing, he emphasized, was that I was doing this practice diligently and with proper intention.