

YOGA & CHANTING

We're often asked to chant in a yoga class yet many of us know little about this ancient practice. What is the purpose or meaning? What are the benefits?

Senior AYL writer, Peggy Hailstone, talks to Vedic Chant Teacher, Debby Badger, about this complementary yoga practice and its potential for transformation.

Q: WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO CHANTING?

A: My introduction to chanting began 22 years ago while attending a women's retreat. I heard some music I loved, which was Om Namah Shivaya. It was a particularly difficult emotional time in my life, and singing along with this 'song' seemed to calm me. Although I had no idea what it meant, I felt its soothing effects. Much later I learnt it means, 'I honour the divine within'.

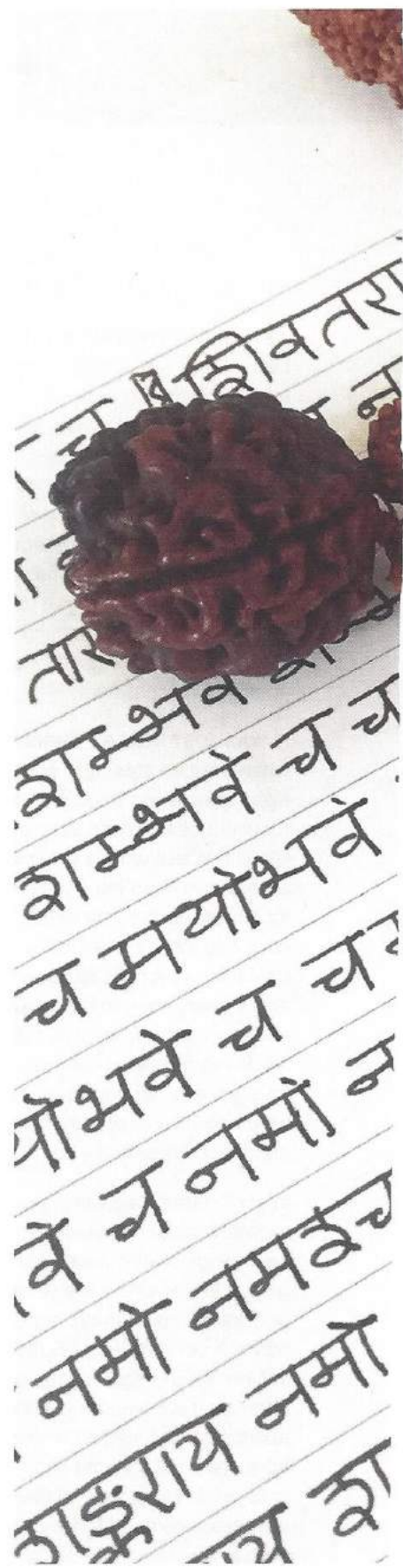
Later, in 2005, the Gayatri Mantra, chanted by TKV Desikachar, was given to me as part of my personal practice. A seed was planted. My teacher explained the meaning of the mantra as, 'asking the sun to

dispel the darkness of ignorance and to provide clarity and strength'. It was the beginning of my journey into the wonder and wisdom of Vedic mantras.

Q: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN VEDIC AND NON-VEDIC CHANTING?

A: The Vedas are a vast collection of mantras or verses that form the foundation of all Indian philosophy. Vedic mantras are said to have been heard thousands of years ago by great sages in deep states of meditation. As such, they are deemed not to have been created by humans but to be the voice of the Divine spirit. Vedic mantras are known as sruti (that which was heard).

In contrast, non-vedic mantras are created by humans. They may be derived from the Vedas to make it easy for people to understand Vedic wisdom, or they may be composed





by great sages. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, which give different solutions to remove suffering, are a good example. Known as *smṛti* (that which is remembered), these are not part of the Vedas.

Q: HOW IS VEDIC CHANTING TAUGHT?

A: An important aspect of Vedic chanting is the relationship between the teacher and the student. For generations Vedic mantras have been transmitted from guru to disciple, from teacher to student, according to an oral tradition. The mantras of the Vedas are taught by call and response, exactly as they have been for thousands of years. The teacher chants while the student listens carefully. The student then repeats the chant while the teacher listens carefully. In the listening, and being listened to, something powerful happens. Absolute attention by the teacher for the student, and by the student for the teacher, opens the hearts and minds of both. When the student feels heard they begin to hear their own voice in a new way, and they recognise their own unique value.

Q: WHY DOES VEDIC CHANTING HAVE STRICT RULES?

A: In Vedic chanting strict rules are observed to preserve the precise meanings and pristine nature of the mantras. Correct pronunciation is important. For instance, if you want to call your friend, you use their correct name or they won't respond. When you are chanting, if you use incorrect pronunciation you may invite something in that was unintended.

Q: IS VEDIC CHANTING ALWAYS DONE IN SANSKRIT?

A: The language of the Vedas is Sanskrit, so the answer is yes. Numerous points of articulation in

the mouth and throat are required for pronunciation of Sanskrit words. This creates oral dexterity. The Sanskrit alphabet contains sounds and words that are quite difficult to pronounce. You have to be totally focused, aware of the position of the tongue, and where the sounds come from. Gradually your confidence develops as you continue to refine your ability. It is not necessary to have a musical background for chanting and often people who have been discouraged from singing find their voice as they chant.

Interestingly the Sanskrit word for chanting is *adhyayanam* (*adhi* meaning 'inside' and *ayanam* meaning 'to move toward'). Therefore chanting literally means 'to move toward our inner self, our heart'. It's a process of moving toward self-realisation which is the same goal as yoga.

Q: SO WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF CHANTING?

A: The ultimate goal of yoga is to reduce suffering and chanting is no different. Mantra means, 'that which protects you'. In Sanskrit it is *mananat trayate iti mantrah*, which translates as 'a mantra is that which helps you to cross over, to move from the shore of suffering to the shore of no suffering'.

Chanting also offers a number of physical benefits. These occur through the breath, the emotions, and at the cerebral and cellular level.

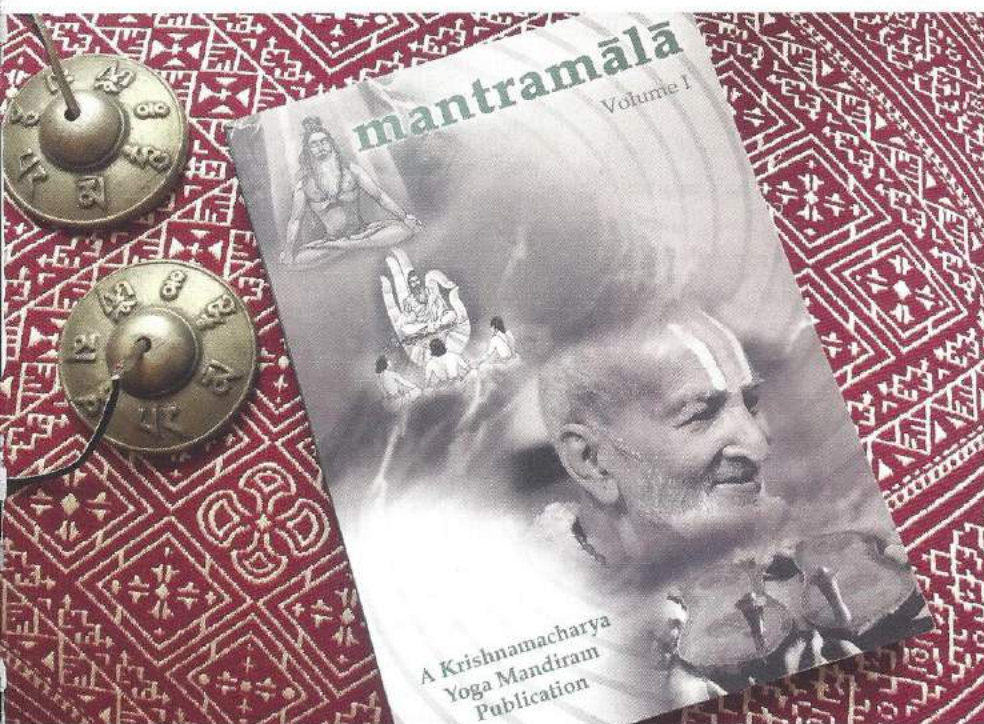
For example, if disturbed by a physical, mental, or emotional condition you may feel constriction in the chest which is often reflected in posture. Chanting is an appropriate yogic tool to relieve tightness and make the heart-space feel light and free.



Debby Badger

Those of us who practice or teach yoga know that breath is life force; it's the physical manifestation of prana. The more you chant the longer the exhalation becomes. Your inhalation also lengthens, and soon the whole breath is long. A long, smooth breath invites prana into the system. It also enhances vitality and longevity. The exhalation is also important. When you chant, the abdomen contracts as you exhale. At a deeper level, exhalation is a process of elimination and reduction of what is no longer needed. The activity of the abdomen required for aspiration (when pronouncing some Sanskrit sounds) can improve the function of





Krishnamacharya Book

abdominal and reproductive organs. For instance, regular practice of chanting can ease the problem of constipation.

Chanting also synchronises the brain's left and right hemispheres. The practices help oxygenate the brain, reduce heart rate and blood pressure, and can assist in creating calm brain activity. This leads to more positive thoughts which consequently settle our emotions. In this state we are more able to experience our true capacity for joy and inner peace.

At the cellular level, chanting mantras enables energy to be released so the body can return to its natural state of resonance (with the potential to affect a cure). Each cell is constantly receiving and processing thousands of signals from the external environment and these signals are transmitted to the body's nervous system. If the received signals are positive, the cell

sends constructive messages through the body. Immersion in Vedic chanting provides an environment for beneficial responses to flow thus increasing health and vitality. The human body is an energetic organism and the vibrations caused by chanting enliven the whole system. Conversely, if some part of the body begins to vibrate at a counter frequency, the energy becomes stuck and disease sets in.

Q: HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND THE LINK BETWEEN BREATH AND SOUND, AND MANTRA?

A: There is a fundamental connection between breath and sound. Two of the sanskrit words for sound are sabda and nada. Sabda is the sound that permeates outside us. Nada is the sound that comes from within (believed to be situated in the lower abdomen). Nada comes from the words na meaning fire, and da meaning air. Nada is the sound which evolves from the interaction of the fire in the navel with the air in

the chest region. When the digestive fire is weak, the voice will be raspy and soft. When the digestive fire is strong, the voice will be loud and clear. Similarly in the lung area – for people who have asthma or wheezing – the breath is unable to flow smoothly and the voice may not be strong. Regular chanting can help remove blocks in the bronchial tubes which will allow the breath to flow and the voice to become smooth.

Q: YOU MENTIONED IN YOUR INTERVIEW ON ABC RADIO THAT YOU'VE BEEN TAUGHT IN THE TRADITION OF KRISHNAMACHARYA AND DESIKACHAR. WHAT IS THEIR LEGACY OF VEDIC CHANTING THAT YOU THINK IS IMPORTANT TO PASS ON TO OTHERS?

A: Sri T. Krishnamacharya, the grandfather of modern yoga, found a text which said, 'in times of crisis, anyone, even if not a Brahmin, may chant vedic mantras'. This opened vedic chanting up to a wider range of people. In fact Krishnamacharya was the first person to teach women to chant. He recognised that unless more people were taught, this important oral tradition, this vast wealth of knowledge, would possibly die and be lost to humanity.

Krishnamacharya also believed in the absolute power of the vedic mantras, stating that even if one did not know the mantra meaning they would be relieved from suffering. He taught chanting as one of the five components of a fulfilling yoga experience: the others being asana (physical postures); pranayama (breath regulation); dyanam (meditation); and yajña (ritual).

In addition, Krishnamacharya believed chanting played an important role in healing. As a beginner, chanting is done loudly (outward) and gradually the powerful sound of the mantra takes you inward into the silence of your own heart. You

then develop an internal relationship with the mantra. This doesn't happen immediately. Like yoga, chanting is a step-by-step process. When you chant you link with elements of nature, higher forces, or qualities you wish to absorb.

Q: HOW HAS CHANTING BEEN TRANSFORMATIONAL FOR YOU?

A: Vedic chanting helped me find my voice and express myself in ways beyond anything I could ever have imagined. I now have the confidence to teach and be self-reliant. I became acutely aware of this progress recently when I did an extended interview about Vedic chanting for ABC radio. I wouldn't have been able to do this a few years ago. My heart would have been pounding, my mouth full of glue, and my tongue

so twisted I would have been unable to speak. Now I'm able to take such things in my stride.

Along with increased self-confidence chanting has improved my physical health. Long-standing issues affecting my wellbeing have improved significantly. I've developed resilience to cope better with whatever life sends my way.

For 12 years now I've consistently studied Vedic chanting. During this time I travelled to Chennai to complete a formal two-year teacher training program, and attended the Australian National University to extend my knowledge of the Sanskrit language. This training has given me a strong technical foundation, but most importantly it's helped

me realise I have a true love of chanting and a passion for bringing this powerful yogic tool to anyone who wants to deepen their understanding and experience of these precious teachings.

Debby Badger is a Melbourne-based Yoga and Vedic Chant Teacher. She runs individual and group yoga and chanting classes at Indi House Yoga. She is currently taking enrolments for her inaugural Vedic Teacher-Training program which begins in February 2018. For further information, visit www.vedicchanting.com.au. To listen to Debby's ABC radio interview visit www.vedicchanting.com.au/media/