



Vedic Chanting

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Vedic Chanting is one of the most important tools of yoga for health and healing and yet is not widely understood in Australia. This practice refers to chanting the mantras of the Vedas, observing strict rules to preserve their authentic meaning. Vedic comes from the sanskrit word 'veda' meaning knowledge. It is from the Vedas that all Indian philosophy flows. Chanting is the interaction of fire and air in our system producing a sound that resonates from deep within. It is an enlivening, harmonious and strengthening practice for our body, mind and spirit.

Relevance of Vedic Chanting today

The universal guidelines in the Vedas are as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago. The verses, or mantras, of the Vedas give voice to the ancient

oral language of Vedic Sanskrit. They contain a rich collection of poetry and drama together with scientific, technical and philosophical texts. The Vedas also give us guidelines for living our lives in a positive, productive, and healthy way. The transmission of these Vedic mantras has occurred with exceptional rigour and integrity according to an oral tradition dating back over 3,000 years. This is why UNESCO proclaimed the tradition of Vedic Chant a 'Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' in 2003.¹

Vedic Chanting is a path to self realisation

I wrote about the connection between breath, sound and mantra in the "Yoga & Chanting" article in Issue 56 of this magazine.² In this article, we will explore how Vedic chanting fits within yoga and how you can incorporate it into your



own yoga practice. The Sutras of Patanjali, a foundational text for all students of yoga, provide a context for Vedic Chanting. There are four chapters of Yoga Sutras and they provide a complete guide to yoga. Patanjali's Yoga Sutras tell us there are eight limbs of yoga (ashtanga yoga). The Sanskrit word 'ashtanga' can be split into two words: 'ashta' meaning eight and 'anga' meaning limbs.

The first five limbs of yoga are the more external practices as follows:

1. social disciplines (yama) teach us how to interact with the world around us. This is important as our lives are enhanced through relationships with others.

2. personal disciplines (niyama) help us to reduce the suffering we experience in life.

3. physical postures (asana) keep our body fit and flexible.

4. breathing regulation (pranayama) is a powerful cleansing practice at physical and psychological levels.

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5. restraint of the senses (pratyahara) means not allowing the senses to be a cause of distraction from our chosen direction.

The three remaining limbs are the internal practices. They are:

6. concentration (dharana) focusing on the object. This level of concentration means we are able to direct our mind towards an object and maintain that direction without distraction.

7. meditation (dhyana) connecting with the object. This follows on from concentration (dharana) and means our mental activities form an uninterrupted flow only in relation to the object of focus.

8. complete integration with the object of focus (samadhi) is the state when our mental activities are integrated with the object and nothing else.

Vedic chanting is an internal practice and hence fits into the seventh and eighth limbs of yoga.

Purifying for body and mind

Vedic chanting cleanses our system to purify and remove the knots, the negative habits or patterns which limit our perception. This is a fundamental part of yoga. When we chant we clear away the negative patterns of behaviour (negative samskaras) which can develop as we live our lives. Chanting helps us create better habits (positive samskaras) as we grow. All our experiences leave impressions inside us and those impressions create

habits which influence our actions. It is the negative habits based on the impurities (kleshas), described in Chapter Two of the Yoga Sutras, which cloud our perception, leading us to make incorrect decisions upon which we act and then these actions cause us to suffer.

For example, if we go to the gym, our muscles may get stiff and sore and we may be left with the impression that exercise causes pain. Our subconscious instinctively seeks to prevent us experiencing pain and

so this may create a habit of avoiding exercise. Chanting clears the clouds of those negative habits and enables us to perceive more positively and with greater clarity. As a result we bring less suffering onto ourselves and those around us.

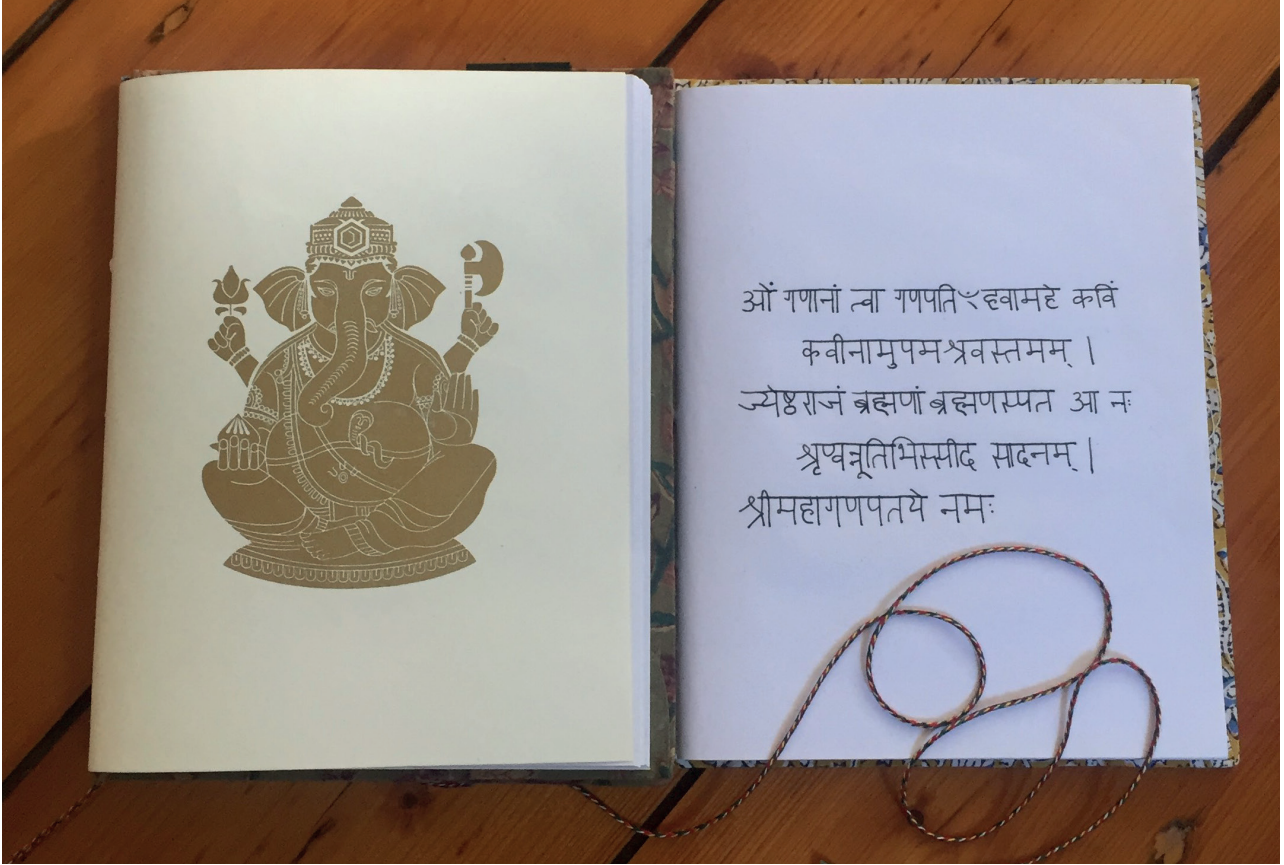
Examples of the healing potential of Vedic chanting

I am a teacher of Vedic chanting and offer students around Australia private Vedic chanting classes online and at my studio in Melbourne. These are some experiences of my students.

One student, a yoga teacher, says "I look forward to my weekly Vedic chanting classes. I want to improve my chanting to enable me to share mantra with my students with precision and clarity. I was looking for a practical way to deepen my understanding of Sanskrit and have found the focus these online sessions require is immense. I feel deeply satisfied after each session. The attention to detail is incredible and although I have to repeat things many times for them to stick, I understand how important it is to this yoga discipline."

Another student, also a yoga teacher, who has suffered with anxiety and depression as a result of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) recently told me "As I chant I can feel the anxiety releasing layer by layer. Chanting has allowed me to go from the maximum dose of anti-anxiety medication to no medication at all. When I feel anxiety coming on, I chant. It has also helped me with depression. Rather than the depressive thoughts taking over, I now am able to ruminate on my chanting. If I feel in the loop of negative thoughts, I chant."

A further student, an actor, was intuitively drawn to Vedic chanting although she has never practised yoga. She says, "I feel very grounded when I chant. I love that I'm learning an ancient language. I chant as part of my preparation for a performance. I often find time to chant in the



The Sanskrit mantra- Shri Maha Ganapataye Namah Photo: vedicchanting.com.au

morning and also find myself randomly chanting familiar phrases throughout the day. I am grateful for this opportunity to expand.”

What are the benefits of Vedic chanting?

Sanskrit words reveal their meaning in beautiful and practical ways. For example, ‘adhyayanam’ is one of the Sanskrit words for chanting and is made up of two words; ‘adhi’ meaning ‘inner’ and ‘ayanam’ meaning ‘to move.’ Together, these two words give us the meaning of chanting, ‘to move towards our inner self, our heart’.

Science now supports the benefits shown to be at physical, mental and emotional levels. According to studies in neuroscience rigorous memorising can help the brain. In the article Neuroscience and the Sanskrit Effect Azriel ReShel talks about research by Dr. James Hartzell into the effects of chanting Sanskrit mantras. Hartzell, a Sanskrit devotee, neuroscientist and postdoctoral researcher at Spain’s Basque Centre on Cognition, Brain

and Language, says “The power of sound and chanting is becoming widely documented, and even short chants have an energising and healing effect on the body and mind of those who are chanting sacred mantras or verses.”³ Another study conducted on the effect of chanting ‘Om’ on mood and social connection found that just ten minutes of chanting in a group increased social connection and decreased negative mood (Perry, Polito, Thompson, 2016). Gemma Perry states that the effects found “are likely to be from factors such as synchronous behaviour, slowed breathing, focused attention, and decreased mind wandering.”

When chanting Vedic mantras we experience:

- protection (rakshanam) of the body and the mind. The vibrations of the sound remove impurities of the body and calm the mind.
- the abdomen in a state of contraction and the process of exhalation enhances the elimination and reduction of impurities from our system. This helps the body become

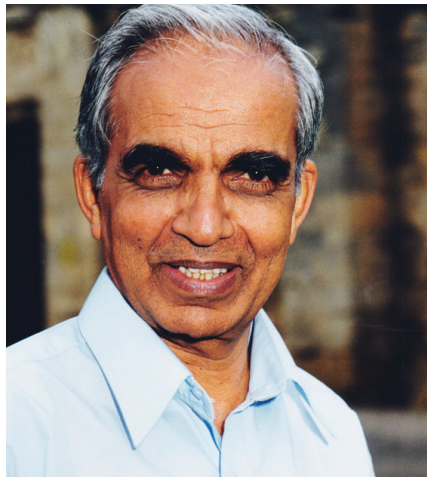
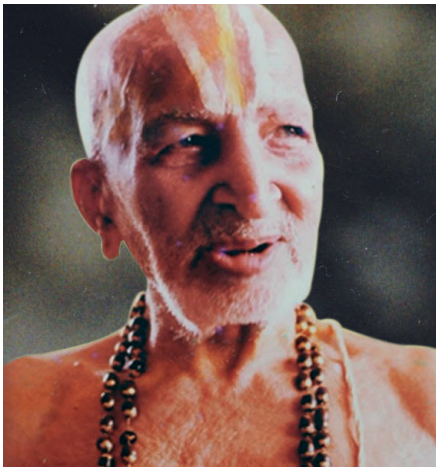
light (laghu) and free.

- improved power of memory and ability to concentrate.
- one of the best forms of meditation. so

How to practice chanting OM

This is how you can have an experience of Vedic chanting. Begin by taking a breath in, open your mouth wide to form the “O” to allow the sound to come out. Feel the sound rising from deep within you, and as you make this sound, your lower abdomen contracts. For this exercise keep your mouth open for as long as is comfortable for your breath, then close your lips to sound “M” for a short moment and finally cut the “M” sound to allow space for the silence which remains. Repeat this several times.

Always allow time to sit quietly once you have completed chanting to feel the resonance of the sound within you. Soften your gaze or close your eyes. Become aware of how



(l - r) T. Krishnamacharya , TKV Desikachar Photo: kym.org Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, Chennai, India

you feel. Without being conscious of it, your breath will lengthen. This experience will help you to understand the strong relationship between breath, sound and mantra.

In 2011 my first chanting teacher, Asa Myren, returned home to Sweden and suggested I might be able to teach chanting. I was surprised as I considered myself a

planted all those years ago has blossomed.



References

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OM represents the primordial sound of the universe and links us with the highest force. Chanting OM brings strength and stillness to us. This is often the first small step into the wonders of Vedic chanting. As TKV Desikachar said “Just do it, something will happen.”

My dharma is to teach Vedic chanting

I was first introduced to Vedic chanting in 2005 when my husband and I attended a chanting class together. He was a little reluctant as he had work to do and also had a headache. I encouraged him to come with me and following the class he thanked me, saying “my headache has gone and I feel calm and clear”. He was able to complete the work he had to do in a much more efficient manner and a seed was sown for me that would slowly germinate over time.

beginner and was happier being the student than the teacher. However the seed planted in 2005 had been growing and in 2013 I enrolled in Vedic Chant Teacher Training in Chennai, India. I have now been teaching Vedic chanting for over five years and this year commenced the first Australian Vedic Chant Teacher Training course led by my teacher, Radha Sundararajan. As a student of TKV Desikachar for 30 years, Radha has inspired my devotion to Vedic chanting and I am privileged to be part of bringing this wonderful heritage to a wider audience.

When Radha gave me her blessings to go forth and teach Vedic chanting; she told me “your tongue has been kissed by the gods”. After all, as she explained “Vedic chanting is not a human composition but is believed to be the breath of the gods.” The seed

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