



ACHIEVE PEAK HAPPINESS THROUGH KIRTAN

BY: MICHAEL COHEN

PEAK HAPPINESS

"How was it?" he asked. Before my mind could even consider a response, words sprung forth from the depths of my being - "Amazing... absolutely amazing." He tilted his head, squinted at me and declared, "You know, in all the years I've known you, I don't think I've ever seen you this happy."

This conversation took place in South Beach (Miami, FL) with one of my closest friends. It was New Years Eve 2003. My friend and the woman who would one day become his wife decided to celebrate their first New Years together with a great meal, and a night of drinking and dancing out on the town. I had something different in mind.

I felt called to join a local spiritual community in a New Years celebration that featured food and Kirtan (sacred chanting). I arrived unannounced, without knowing a single person. When I shared with the chant organizers that I was a musician and loved Kirtan, they immediately put me in the choir. For 3 solid hours I chanted my heart open a few feet away from some of the most masterful singers and drummers I'd ever experienced. I didn't have one 'real' conversation with anyone that evening. And yet, I felt an incredible sense of coming home.

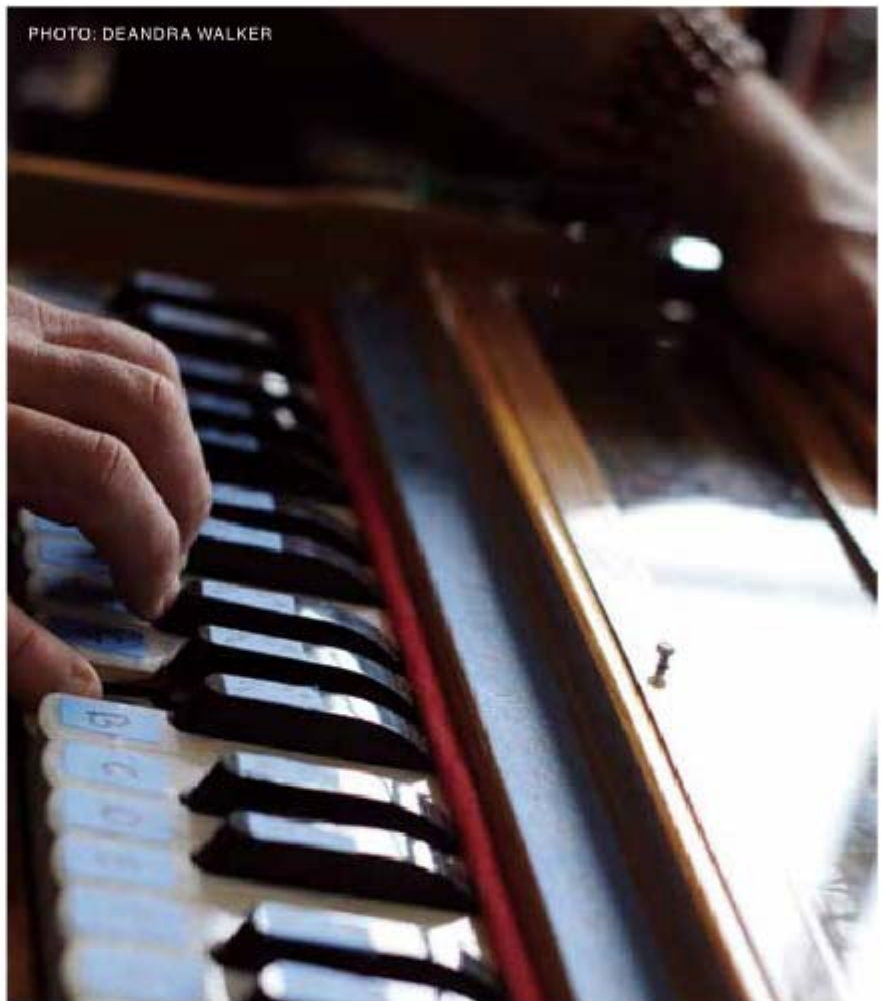
What my dear friend said was, in fact, quite true. After three hours of chanting - with total strangers - I achieved a state best described as "peak happiness."

"Perhaps," he advised me, "you ought to do this more frequently."

WHAT IS KIRTAN?

Kirtan - my pathway to "peak happiness" - is an ancient spiritual practice and an integral part of the Indian yoga tradition. Kirtan is call and response chanting which utilizes Sanskrit mantras to calm the mind, open the heart and generate profound connection with self, others and the Divine. As the central prac-

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tice of Bhakti Yoga (one of the 4 Paths of Yoga), Kirtan easily and consistently generates moods of gratitude, joy and profound happiness.

Following my friend's advice led me to participate in Kirtan events, join a Kirtan band and eventually begin leading Kirtan. I discovered Kirtan musicians used traditional Indian instruments such as harmonium (a mini acoustic keyboard) and tablas or mrdingam (Indian drums), as well as Western instruments like guitar, bass, drum kit, flute, violin and more. I even experienced Kirtan that incorporated dancers, healers, fire spinners, visual artists, DJ's and even Video Jockey's!

I became fascinated by Kirtan's ability to blur the distinction between performer and audience, and individual and collective. The leader calls (chants) and the participants respond (chant back). Unlike most music, which involves performers and an audience, through the mechanism of call and response, each and every audience member truly becomes part of the band.

Participants sing and breathe together, calling out the names of the Divine. Throughout the chant experience, a disparate group of participants become as one - collectively surfing currents of sound and energy. This profound synchronization leads individual chanters to dissolve into the chant like waves disappearing into the ocean. From this state of greater unity, bliss arises.

STEPPING INTO THE PRACTICE OF KIRTAN

Kirtan requires no training or previous experience. The results from chanting are as available to a total newbie as a decades long practitioner. Chanting is a basic human experience we all engaged in as children. Unlike many practices that take years to move from beginner to competent to expert (i.e. tai chi, playing the piano, swing dancing), Kirtan is so easy and



natural that participants quickly experience the full effects of the practice. Kirtan transforms this youthful impulse for simple and fun musical communication into a potent vehicle for connecting deeply with ourselves, others and the Divine.

Those new to the practice will be relieved to know there's no need to obsess about correct pronunciation of Sanskrit mantras. Simply calling out to the Divine is enough. Bhakti Yogi, Janet Stone advises those new to this practice, "go easy on yourself, the calling out alone is enough... Thinking we have to have exactly correct pronunciation to be heard by God/the divine is like thinking that a baby must cry in just the right pronunciation to be heard by its mother."¹

In Kirtan, there's no need to worry about having a 'good' or 'bad' voice. Heartfelt and authentic participation is all that is required.

KIRTAN IN THE WEST

In the 15th century Kirtan democratized spirituality within India, offering access to potent mantras to common people and the upper classes alike. A second Kirtan wave crashed upon the shores of the West in the 1960's merging with pop culture and satisfying a thirst for Eastern spirituality.² Since the 1960's, Western Kirtan has migrated through ashram's, yoga studios and yoga/chant festivals. It has been shared through vinyl, CD's, downloads and streaming. As a musical form and spiritual practice, Kirtan is quite eclectic and ranges from traditional Indian approaches to more Westernized, secular and multi-cultural approaches. Kirtan can be folksy, and it can be funky! Like any alive and evolving spiritual practice, Kirtan seeks and finds niches to inhabit within our postmodern Western society and culture.

THE SCIENCE OF KIRTAN

Kirtan reliably and dutifully produces states of profound joy, peacefulness and connection. Participants often wonder, "Why does this make me feel so happy?"

There are many benefits to the practice of Kirtan. There's something fundamentally human and nourishing about ecstatically singing, clapping and perhaps even dancing with fellow members of our tribe. As a social practice, Kirtan is a rare opportunity to co-create an experience with others. It offers a potent collective practice that can balance our hyper-individualistic culture and lives.

A growing body of scientific research demonstrates the health benefits one can achieve through chanting. Scientists are discovering that the inner hum generated through Kirtan "helps to increase energy and stamina; improve clarity, focus, and reading comprehension; balance brain waves; and strengthen the immune system by increasing the number of our antibodies."³ Kirtan allows us to "access and tend to the deep parts of ourselves that can become disconnected and imbalanced." This process "stimulates the tenth cranial (vagus) nerve, which connects the ear to our deepest involuntary centers... heart, lung, and stomach."⁴

Chanting may offer a quick, fun and easy way to access the brain wave patterns achieved by long-time meditators. Studies show that chanting mantras for only 10-12 minutes can generate "shifts in brain-wave amplitudes consonant with the brain-wave profiles of deep, long-time meditators."⁵ A 2012 study at UCLA showed chanting mantras can create beneficial effects on stress and inflammation.⁶ And other studies found mantras supporting cardiovas-

cular health⁷ as well as improving depression and sleep⁸ as well as memory function.⁹

ACCESSING KIRTAN

Excited to experience Kirtan, but not sure where to start?

The New World Kirtan podcast (www.newworldkirtan.com) is a fantastic resource for Kirtan recordings and artist interviews. This podcast has thousands of regular listeners, and over half a million downloads since its inception.

Ready for a live Kirtan experience? Contact your local yoga studios, healing centers or spiritual centers to identify local Kirtan leaders and upcoming Kirtan events offered by touring Kirtan artists. You will find Kirtan at many yoga festivals (like Hanuman Festival in Boulder), as well as Kirtan focused festivals like Bhakti Fest which features a full lineup of top Kirtan artists.

Kirtan is fun and easy, and offers tremendous benefits to those who step into the practice. Give it a try - perhaps you too will achieve 'peak happiness!'

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PHOTO: KATELYN VONFELDT

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ <http://www.yogajournal.com/yoga-101/chanting-101-5-things-know-dont-get-kirtan/>
- ² For a wonderful timeline documenting the intersection of Kirtan and pop music, check out <http://www.yogajournal.com/article/lifestyle/sounds-divine/>
- ³ <http://psychologytomorrowmagazine.com/kirtan-chanting/> Kalyani, B. G., et al. Neurohemodynamic Correlates of "OM" chanting: A Pilot Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging Study. *International Journal of Yoga*, 2011 Jan-Jun; 4(1): 3-6.
- ⁴ <http://psychologytomorrowmagazine.com/kirtan-chanting/> Hernandez, Ana. *The Sacred Art of Chant*. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths (2005).
- ⁵ <http://psychologytomorrowmagazine.com/kirtan-chanting/> Khalsa, D.S. et al. Cerebral Blood Flow Changes During Chanting Meditation. *Nuclear Medicine Communications*, 2009, 3-6.
- ⁶ <http://www.eomega.org/article/kirtan-a-new-healing-tool-for-veterans> and <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22795617>
- ⁷ <http://www.eomega.org/article/kirtan-a-new-healing-tool-for-veterans> and <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC61046/>
- ⁸ <http://www.eomega.org/article/kirtan-a-new-healing-tool-for-veterans> and <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22454689>
- ⁹ <http://www.eomega.org/article/kirtan-a-new-healing-tool-for-veterans> and <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20164557>