

Chanting for Her in Sanskrit

This paper will present concepts pertaining to chanting in Sanskrit that I have learned this from three authors: Joachim-Ernst Berendt, Kay Gardner, and Robert Gass. As a feminist and devotee of Kali, I will add my own comments to their teachings. I intend to remember these truths as I sing Sanskrit chants, whether by myself or in groups. I will also give a sense of my own approach to a particular Sita-Ram chant.

What to Remember

Nature is more than vibration - She is harmony

The point is commonly made that everything-from the smallest atom to the largest galaxy-vibrates, and that we as human beings are capable of hearing only a small spectrum of these vibrations. Kay Gardner expresses this idea as follows:

All things vibrate, from the tiniest atom to the largest galaxy, and everything in between. For us, what usually turns a vibration into sound is whether or not our ears can hear it. This is a sensory perception and involves how our brains process the messages received from our ears. Even if we humans don't actually hear sound vibrations, they are occurring on all levels, from the deepest vibrations we feel in our bodies but don't hear with our ears (infrasound), to the highest sounds we can neither hear nor directly feel (ultrasound).ⁱ

However, to Joachim-Ernst Berendt, the notion that everything is vibration-and thus sound-is not sufficiently precise. He teaches that billions of vibrations actually self-organize into a few thousand harmonic patterns:

From the standpoint of physics, there are billions of different possible vibrations. But the cosmos--the universe-chooses from these billions of possibilities with overwhelming preference for those few thousand vibrations that make harmonic sense (and in the final analysis, that means: musical sense): the proportions of the overtone scale, the major

scale (And less frequently the minor scale), the Lambdoma,ⁱⁱ and certain church music scales and Indian ragas. This is true of almost all proportions on the cosmos-planetary orbits, DNA genes, the shapers of leaves and crystals, the proportions in the periodic table, body forms, the quanta of atomic nucleus, the spins of electrons.ⁱⁱⁱ

Her harmony - the source of physical manifestation - is the core of human spirituality

Robert Gass notes that this vast harmony comes first, as the source of all physical manifestation, in virtually all spiritual traditions. Emerging from the deep space of the universe, it is Her vibration, frequency, sound, and ultimately harmonic tone that creates form and births the physical world. This point has long been perceived and confirmed within the “mystical” strains of planetary religious cultures, be they Egyptian, Sufi, Platonic, African. Australian, Polynesian, Tahitian, Hawaiian, Japanese, Hopi, Christian, Abrahamic, etc.^{iv}

Her harmony is only superficially solid

Her harmony only appears to be solid. This point has been confirmed in modern particle physics and quantum mechanics, and naturally, it has been repeated forever by members of the vast choir of planetary “mystics.” As particles move ceaselessly in different modes of vibration and harmonic tone, the resulting waves, each of which contains only the tiniest bit of matter in itself, simply meet up with each other to create the illusion of solid matter.

Therefore as I sing, the density of my body, and of everything around me, is only apparent.

Her harmony seduces the ear of womb and tomb

Our ears attune to her harmony as soon as possible. Both Gass and Gardner note that hearing is the first sense that develops in the womb. The cochlea of the ear is fully developed in the fifth month, equipping us to react to sound for another 4.5-5 months as we swim in our mother's bellies. At birth, the bones of the middle ear are the only ones fully formed.^v

Hearing is the last sense to fade before death, so our ears linger within Her harmony until the last possible moment. I remember instructing my mother and sister—who kept vigil on my father's last night—to speak and sing with love until he became completely still.

The ear and seashell stand for Her yoni.

The ear and seashell are epiphenomena of Her yoni. Berendt describes how the ear is often symbolized by mussel or conch, and states that both ears and shells symbolize the yoni's power to receive and engulf, to create union. He also remarks that the ancient Chinese considered the ears to be yin sense organs—“female, receptive, careful, intuitive and spiritual, depth-oriented, perceiving the whole as one”—as opposed to eyes, yang sense organs, “male, aggressive, dominating, rational, surface oriented, analyzing things.”^{vi}

I note that shells are drawn from oceans, the yonis of the planet, and recall the eternal fascination of “listening” to the ocean's roar in large seashells as a child. Today, the trumpet's breath of the conch often greets me in ritual.

Fill the drum of the belly—the womb space—to honor birth

Berendt remarks that in Tibetan monastic and Central Asian shamanic singing traditions, sound “originates in the belly and spreads from there throughout the body”, and that “Westerners are debilitated by the extent to which we displace our energy into the chest and head.”^{vii} My own training along these lines was mightily corrected in 1973-4, when I learned to center in my belly while training as a baladi (belly) dancer with Widad Spidari, a Bedouin artist from Jordan.

At this point, I sing as though I am belly dancing, making my belly-womb into a pregnant air-filled drum with each inhalation. I remember that song also takes its power the belly-womb, for that is where we lived when we first perceived sound in the motherheart.

The voice is an instrument of Her winds

Gardner defines the voice as follows: “The human vocal instrument is comprised of an air supply (lungs), a “reed” (vocal cords), and a resonator (larynx, pharynx, and mouth). The voice, then, is a (non-cylindrical, non-conical) wind instrument with several areas of resonance.”^{viii}

The voice is an instrument of Her healing

The most healing instrument of all is your own voice.—C.W. Child^{ix}

Gardner teaches that the human voice can heal pain and release imbalanced or blocked energies. She relates that in yogic medicine, the sounds of speech, chant, and song are known to affect the functioning of the body, mind, and spirit. The upper palate boasts 84 meridians, and moreover, just above it, the “brain’s brain,” or hypothalamus gland, is affected by sound. It governs the “autonomic nervous system, reflexes and emotional reactions, appetite, body temperature, and facilitation of brain impulses related to reflexive and skilled movement.”^x

Extending this point, Gass reveals that medical research has shown that chanting and singing “oxygenate the cells, lower blood pressure and heart rate, increase lymphatic circulation, increase levels of melatonin, reduce stress-related hormones, release endorphins (the body’s natural painkillers), and boost the production of interleukin-I (a protein associated with blood and platelet production)”^{xi}

Her people—in India—revere chanting the most

Gass, who surveyed chanting around the world, says that “of all the traditions we will visit, there is none in which chant plays a more central role than Hindu/Vedic culture.” He notes correctly that Sanskrit is “...a 3,000 year-old science of sound, composed of sounds and words based on the subtle vibrations that underlie the elements of the world, there is an inherent connection between the sound of Sanskrit and the actual reality that it represents.” He adds that Sanskrit chants “...have been infused with extraordinary power from the devotions of literally billions of people over thousands of years, creating a kind of energy field (a morphic field) that we tap into today as we intone the sacred syllables.”^{xii}

Sanskrit chanting is a yoga, or path of union, with Her

However, I do take issue with Gass on one important point. He explains that in Hindu Vedic culture, sound vibration is the basic nature of the universe: Nada Brahman: sound is God. In so doing, he only presents the patriarchal strain of Indian cosmology.

Within India’s Shakta (Goddess) tradition, Kali, the original and unique prime mover, creates cosmic eggs parthenogenetically, and from Her own menstrual blood. She does not create sexually and she has no partner. At the second stage of creation, Brahman—the prime male God—manifests, but He is absolute nothingness, the absence of structure, the absence of movement. It is his female counterpart, Saraswati, who creates all of the distinctions, forms, and activities that allow vibration, sound, melody, harmony, rhythm, the alphabet, the word and all languages, all wisdom, to exist.

Therefore, chanting for Her—for Kali, for Saraswati—is for me a yoga, a path of union with the Divine Mother, and a way for me to tune into connection with my divine nature.

The discipline of uniting with Her in chant

Berendt notes that a terrific spiritual responsibility attends the attempt to study Indian music: “Missed notes, imprecise rhythms, slurred embellishments, inattention, lacking concentration, a lack of *vinaya* (humility, respect, modesty, devotion) all serve to create confusion and, finally, chaos—not only in music but also in the world.”^{xiii}

He also relays seven essential rules of conduct written by Pandit Patekar, a master of classical Indian music. ‘These rules are so beautiful that I have presented them here in their entirety:

1. Temporarily release yourself in thought from the usual way of thinking and concentrate on the higher, spiritual aspects of life. Music offers the best means for such concentration.
2. Place the universal in the forefront of your contemplation, and endeavor to lay aside or to forget the habit of looking at partial aspects only.
3. Immerse yourself in a mood of meditation and contemplation.
4. Establish a link with the supernatural aspects of reality.
5. Leave aside all inner preconceptions.
6. Try to think your way inside the artist. In other words, try to feel with him and to become one with both artist and theme.
7. Be still and spiritualized, both inwardly and outwardly.^{xiv}

In connection with the discipline of approaching Her through chant, I also appreciate Gardner’s remarks on ego-cleansing:

Come to quiet. Visualize the warm, bright light of Divine Love filling your entire being, flowing through you, replacing any busy or *judgemental* thoughts (italics mine) with crystal-clear light. When you have the awareness that you are a reflection of that Divine light and that Love is channeled through you, you are ready to do the healing work.^{xv}

Send a beam of intention straight to Her heart

Gardner speaks at length of the significance of intention, or clarity of purpose, in chanting: “The first and most important element in healing music, then, is the intent with which it is created and the intent with which it is presented. Intent begins and ends the circle of musical healing.”^{xvi}

In addition, near the end of her book, when she lists nine elements intrinsic to sound --healing drone, repetition, harmonics, rhythm, harmony, melody, instrumental color, form, and intent— she reiterates the centrality of intent:

“Of the nine elements that contribute to healing through music and sound, the most important is intent. Without purity of heart and mind, true and lasting healing cannot occur. At the beginning of every healing process, whether or not it involves sound and music, a short prayer or blessing should be uttered.”^{xvii}

Gass echoes her focus on intention: “Chant has its greatest impact when we engage the power of our own desires and will. Sincerity of heart and mind are what matter. The goal of the mantra must be present in your mind. To whom am I chanting? and for what?”^{xviii}

Later, while describing techniques to increase the power of group chant—including listening to the group, surrendering yet throwing body, heart, and soul into the music, staying awake rather than trancing out, and leaving judgement behind—he places intention at the very top of his list:

“Focus group intent when introducing a chant. Suggest that each person honor that place within themselves. Guide the shape, coherence and direction of the group energy field.”^{xix}

Chanting as one, we are reborn within Her vast harmony

Gass teaches that “group chant transforms the energy field of an assembly from one state of being to another.” Elements identified in chant-such as breath,

melody, rhythm, vowels, harmonics, meaning of lyrics, group entrainment, sonic effects, and of course, intent-establish a profound energy pattern. He compares individuals to liquids, and visualizes the sound vibrational template of group chant as the mold into which these liquids are poured, creating a new entity. He urges the leader to “listen for the sound that is the meeting place of all the individual sounds- the moment of blending where the many become one.”^{xx}

AUM: Rebirth within Her

All three authors treat the primordial seed syllable at some length. OM-actually made up of three distinct sounds- is properly pronounced A-U-M. The mantra AUM, considered the most powerful of all Sanskrit sacred syllables and the sound of the creative force in the universe, is the sound that contains all other sounds. The following ideas about this seed mantra allow me to ground AUM in Ma’s galactic presence.

To begin with, I have taken very seriously Gardner’s citation of a Womanspirit article by Lunasea. She writes that the three pure vowels-that is, those that are not diphthongs-namely A, U, and I are “the original holy trinity.” Lunasea says that A is for ‘Ah,’ breathing; U is for ‘Oo,’ sucking; and I is for ‘Ee,’ eating.^{xxi}

A as in “awesome”

I feel this vowel begin in the belly and resonate in the chest cavity. As mentioned above, Lunasea places this vowel in the breath, and all chant does begin with breath based in the belly womb-space! Gardner associates A with the heart chakra; I would add the lungs as co-creators of breath. She also names the qualities of centering, healing and compassion as intrinsic to this vowel. I associate A with Saraswati, the creative aspect of the triune Goddess, remembering that in the Tibetan tradition, A corresponds to Earth’s center.

U as in “ooh-la-la”

I feel this vowel being in the belly and resonate in the lower zones of my torso. Lunasea places this vowel in the sucking instinct. I note that as infants, we suck to stay alive, to nurture and ground ourselves, and that digestion and excretions are based in the belly and lower torso. Gardner associates U with the root chakra, and identifies physical and sexual energy and passion as intrinsic to this vowel. I associate it with Lakshmi, the maintaining, conserving, protective aspect of the triune Goddess, and remember that in the Tibetan tradition, U corresponds to Earth's surface.

M as in “Ma:

I feel this consonant begin in the belly and vibrate on my lips, resonating throughout my entire head, stimulating my third eye and providing insight. The syllable MA is universally associated with the mother because it is the easiest syllable for human infants to pronounce. I associate MA with Ma Kali, the prime, non-sexual creator of the entire cosmos, as well as its destroyer and regenerator. In Tibetan tradition, M corresponds to space.

Lunasea does not treat the consonant M. Still it is interesting that she associated “I” the third pure vowel, with eating, suggesting a movement toward the head in her sense of Ma's sacred trinity. I also note that Gardner links the brow or pineal chakra with “I” as well as qualities of oneness, universal love and bliss.

Therefore, I would like to remember to start by singing AUM and visualizing each repetition as a rebirth within Her that spreads from my chest (A), to my lower torso (U), and finally to my head (M). I also visualize it in the Tibetan tradition as extending from Earth's center to Earth's surface, and from there into space. When chanting in a group, I would like to wait until this sound is in sympathetic or synchronous vibration before beginning any further chants.

The single-note drone: Her stance

Gardner writes that in ancient Asia and Europe-and in India to this day, the single-note drone establishes an emphasis upon a single, sacred tone. She also notes that singing in unison brings feelings of strength, solidity, security and calmness, since each voice added to one pitch reinforces it until it becomes centering and whole, and since unison stands for One, the Source, the root, or fundamental. In fascinating demonstration, she shows that on an oscilloscope, a machine that creates a visual display in response to a sound, unison creates a perfect circle.^{xxii}

Finally, this unison drone is also the dimension of harmony that accompanies a single melody line.^{xxiii}

I see the drone as Ma's legs and feet as she stands upon Siva.

The melody: Her voice

Gardner quotes Dane Rudhyar to say that melody emanates from the single-note drone "as a stem arises out of a seed." The reiterated tone symbolizes the roots of the melodic plant, the sustaining power of its growth."^{xxiv}

Gardner also writes that "...as long as melody was primary, with simple, consonant harmonies based upon melodic functions, music was a healing force, for each mode had its own character and healing power."^{xxv}

I visualize lines of melody as emanations of Her voice.

The rhythm: Her Pulse

Gardner teaches that "rhythm as pulse can assist in the healing process, for in healing music, the function of rhythm is to duplicate the healthy pulse."^{xxvi}

I have learned to appreciate rhythms as emanations of Her pulse.

Sita, Ram, and Hanuman by -Krishna Das, Breath of Heart

Namo...Namo...

Jaya Sita Ram

Jai Jai Hanuman

Sita Ram Ram Ram Sita Ram Ram Ram

Hare Ram Ram Ram Ram Ram Ram Ram Ram

What is this chant about?

This chant is about the mysteries of love and death. It is about the union of the soul, the inner self, our divine nature with the divine (Goddess, God, Divine Love, etc.) It is also about our union with one another, as human beings. As it honors our capability of uniting with the divine and with one another, it brings forth the point where we open, give way, merge, into the universal radiance of an absolutely certain, solid, deathless, eternal, perfect love. Therefore, as a way of beginning to enter into this chant, you may first wish to remember the times in your life when you experienced union with Goddess, or God, or whatever your sense of the Divine might be. You may also remember when you were as one with someone you loved.

What do the words mean?

The word Namō at the beginning means “I bow, I surrender to the Divine, I take refuge in the Divine, I fuse my life force with the universal life force.” This is not to be understood as being dominated by a deity, but as letting your ego melt away so that the door of your own soul can effortlessly enter the ocean of the divine. The word Jaya or Jai also means “I bow, I surrender to the Divine.” It also carries an extremely forceful sense of “victory, glory, power to the Divine.” The words Sita and Ram refer to lovers, here seen as Goddess and God. Sita and Ram surmount overwhelming obstacles in the fight to be reunited. The seed syllable Ram also stimulates the solar plexus chakra, and its repetition lends a tremendous dimension of vitality and power to this chant.

Hanuman, the monkey God, is the purified mind, as well as the heart behind the heart (did she mean head?) she must have meant head that makes all union possible. (to me this is a poetic idea...the heart behind the heart..i would not change it.)

What is my intention for this chant?

I intend for this chant to be a prayer of peace between women and men, between men and women. By means of radical honesty, may we end the war of long standing; may we put an end to our fears and trust one another as true friends; may peace be upon us. Standing together as allies in coalitions, may our strength shatter the strength of all weapons long used to divide us. As we speak with and listen to one another, may our words be sweet and strong. I sent this intention out of love for Ma. I feel that as women and men come into a state of greater peace, She will be loved by all as never before.

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Krishna Das Breath of Heart cd

i	Gardner, p. 159
ii	Joachim-Ernst Berendt, 62
iii	Berendt, p. 90
iv	Gass, pp. 35-37
v	Gass, p. 23; Gardner, p. 226
vi	Berendt, p. 5
vii	Berendt, p. 129-131
viii	Gardner, p.181
ix	Gardner, p. 180
x	Gardner, p.183
xi	Gass, page 45
xii	Gass, page 60-70
xiii	Berendt, p. 156
xiv	Berendt, p. 168
xv	Gardner, p. 10
xvi	Gardner, p. 8
xvii	Gardner, p. 227—229
xviii	Gass, p. 48
xix	Gass, pp.151-153
xx	Gass, p. 151
xxi	Gardner, p. 50
xxii	Gardner, p. 105
xxiii	Gardner, p. 145
xxiv	Gardner, p. 145
xxv	Gardner, p. 138
xxvi	Gardner, p. 75