

hare krishna hare krishna krishna krishna hare hare hare rama hare rama rama rama hare hare  
 govinda jaya jaya gopala jaya jaya radha ramana hari govinda jaya jaya  
 om namah sivaya om namah sivaya om namah sivaya om namah sivaya om namah om

# devotional chanting

## Lila Conway

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 Inspired Times' yogini, Lila, has a deep connection with India, works worldwide as a yoga instructor and has written regularly for our publication since its inception. Lila's love of chanting is infectious and a strong aspect of her life. Here she gives us an insight into the joy it can bring...



Imagine hundreds of people singing and dancing together in ecstasy, getting completely lost in the music and joy of the moment... not a trace of alcohol or drugs in sight, the only high coming from a loving celebration of the Divine. A new wave of devotional music is swiftly sweeping the globe and the fever is infectious! Devotional singing is an expression of love for the Divine, the Supreme, the Eternal Beloved or God. It is an ancient practice found within most forms of spiritual traditions including Hinduism, Vaisnavism, Sikhism, Sufism, Christianity and more.

In Bhakti Yoga (the yoga of devotion), devotional chanting is known as kirtan, a Sanskrit word meaning 'to glorify' or 'to praise'. Kirtan can be practiced individually, however, collective group chanting is encouraged. There is usually a person leading the kirtan in a call and response style of chanting Sanskrit mantras, hymns, poetry, all in praise of the holy names of God. Traditionally only cartals (cymbals) and mrdanga (a double ended drum) were used to keep the beat and rhythm... the sound of the drum is said to be the heartbeat of the Divine.

Whilst many kirtan leaders have a musical background, it is not essential; the only key ingredients are love and devotion.

As the kirtan leader begins to sing, the mood is set and usually begins in a slow and sweet melody enabling the congregation to firstly follow the melody and secondly meditate on the holy names. Those new to kirtan may not fully understand the meanings but the holy names themselves will reveal their own beauty and grace. It is a process of stepping out of the head and into the heart. As you begin chanting, all worries and concerns slowly fall away... your mind has only one thought, the divine holy name which is the same as God him/herself. As you meditate on the beauty and wonders of the Supreme, it is not uncommon to become lost in the sea of people collectively chanting, but individually feeling that nothing exists aside from you and the holy name. A devotee, singing with feeling from their heart enchants the Divine... there is nothing more pleasing to God.

As the pace quickens, voices and clapping get louder; the sacred sound vibration permeates every cell of your being and you simply have to dance! Kirtan is the highest nectar, it brings an ocean of happiness to the heart, nourishes the inner being on every level and brings so much joy in daily life.

life like clouds drifting across the sky, chanting is so effortless, joyful, peaceful and nourishing that it never feels like work, a discipline or any of those terms that make a spiritual practice seem unappealing! Instead as soon as the drone of the harmonium begins there is an instant feeling of relaxation, of letting go, a deepening of the breath and a feeling of coming home. In an instant there is permission to let go of the doer-ship and simply be in the present, leaving all anxieties and thoughts to one side. What grace this must be that kirtan takes us so quickly into silence, the 'peace of God that surpasses all understanding'. I still wonder sometimes how I ended up leading kirtan. In fact, before a spiritual awakening towards the end of the last century I was about as far from singing the praises of God

## Jahnavi Harrison

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 Born and raised in a family of English Bhakti yogis, Jahnavi is a multi-disciplinary artist, trained in Western classical violin, South Indian dance and Carnatic music. Her latest project, Kirtan London, aims to make devotional chanting accessible to a diverse audience.



Sacred call and response chanting (kirtan) has been the soundtrack to my life since birth. I grew up at Bhaktivedanta Manor in Hertfordshire, a spiritual community of Bhakti yoga practitioners - more commonly known as Hare Krishnas, or the guys that wear bed sheets! The Manor estate also included a primary school which aimed to give as much spiritual input as academic. Singing and studying sacred texts was an important part of our daily routine.

Though I grew up seeing people from diverse backgrounds coming to the community, I never could have imagined the incredible growth of interest in the lifestyle and practices of yoga as it became more popular throughout the mainstream. Through my teens it was something I was embarrassed about - something that

alienated me from others. I was terribly shy and would never have imagined that my life calling would grow to become sharing these practices with others. After graduating from university, I joined a group of friends and we formed a US-based band called *As Kindred Spirits*. We toured the world for five years, bringing the rich and dynamic culture of Bhakti yoga to contemporary audiences through song, storytelling, poetry, dance and drama. In the past year I've returned to the UK and have started a project called *Kirtan London* that aims to make the kirtan experience accessible and relevant to all different groups of people. We have been holding regular events in the city, including six hour kirtans; special extended stints of chanting for an in-depth experience like no other.

Chanting is the thread that binds and runs through every moment of my life. For a Bhakti yoga practitioner, the communal experience of kirtan is just as important as the quiet, private practise of japa - chanting the sacred names on a mala (rosary). I chant every morning for two hours. It definitely sets the day up. The effect of chanting is tangible and real, to the degree that I give it focus, time and attention. Just as watering a tree's root automatically feeds every branch and leaf, I can really perceive how the practice of devotional chanting nourishes my relationships, my life outlook and daily activities. It offers a genuine, portable, fun and profound way to connect with the divine person. I always think of the famous line from the Nat King Cole song - 'the greatest thing, you'll ever learn, is just to love and be loved in return.' For me that sums it up, kirtan is a constant learning experience in loving reciprocation.

## Tim Chalice

[www.timchalice.com](http://www.timchalice.com)  
 Music has always played a strong part in Tim's life. He currently runs chanting groups in the South West and, since becoming a parent, has been inspired to offer parent & baby chanting sessions. His CD 'Devotional Heart' is now out.



I am so grateful for the simple practice of kirtan (devotional chanting). While other practices have come and gone in my

as you could get, but with hindsight there does seem to have been a Divine hand steering me to this place. Music and singing have been with me since an early age and years later I pursued an interest in healing and sound healing. This searching culminated in 2005 when I began exploring *The Naked Voice* practices with Chloe Goodchild which included a great deal of devotional chanting. There was something in this communal, participatory experience that ignited me. There was no need to impress or perform or even sing 'well', none of these things mattered. Rather it was a chance to connect the power of the voice with the beauty of the heart, true soul music. Since then many things in my life have changed but chanting has been my constant companion and refuge.

Kirtan is a very forgiving practice. It doesn't chide me if I have been away too long and still lets me dive straight into its oceanic heart. With repetition of these Divine names I can quickly let go of all thoughts and conditioning and rest there for a while.

According to the Vedas (ancient Hindu scriptures) there are four great ages. We are currently believed to be in the Kali Yuga or Dark Age. Whereas in previous ages those seeking spiritual perfection had to perform long austerities, the prescribed method now for attaining the Supreme is kirtan, chanting the names of God. As we try to negotiate these turbulent times, bombarded with external noise, the chatter of the mind and endless distractions, the simplest, most effective thing we can do is keep chanting. Ram Ram.