

let's get it OM

Chanting is the new mindfulness, a way to connect to the divine – or just cope with modern life. But does it work? Christa D'Souza, not a natural joiner-in, finds out

Illustration by Kate Gibb

The Apollo Theatre in Harlem, some time in the late Eighties. A performance given by a troupe of Tibetan Buddhist monks hosted by Richard Gere and his then brand-new girlfriend Cindy Crawford. Up the monks got on stage in their saffron robes and spectacles, and right away they started to chant. *Om mani padme hum*, on and on and on it went, for four hours, perhaps more, like a washing-machine cycle that never ends. That was my first proper encounter with chanting and – unless you count the *oms* that top and tail a yoga class – my last.

Scroll forward a quarter of a century, and here I am sitting cross-legged in a studio at Triyoga on the King's Road, about to try it again but this time, crucially, joining in. Not Buddhist chanting, though; this is *kirtan*, a Sanskrit-based form of devotional singing in which a group repeats a mantra sung by a leader over and over again, call-and-response style. (A little like military cadencing – “I-don't-know-but-I've-been-told...” kind of thing. But not.)

The class is being given by Nikki Slade, a former stage actress who is now Britain's best-known *kirtan* leader, and has taught “vibrational attunement” and chanting to all manner of clients and corporations, Deutsche Bank, Cisco and M&C Saatchi included. An attractive, empathetic blonde somewhere in her early fifties, she tinkers with her Bina harmonium, a little portable organ operated by keys and bellows – Victorian ladies used to play them in India during the British Empire – while her drummer sets up his kit. There are about 20 of us taking the class this Friday

evening, mostly women, a couple of men still in their suits, not a dreadlock or pierced eyebrow in sight, with only one newbie – me – sitting apprehensively on my bolster cushion, wondering if I will make it to the end. Though I quite like singing in church, I am not a joiner-in by nature and part of me wants to escape while I can. Will we have to hold hands? Will we have to do interpretative dancing? Should I have sat nearer the exit?

It's not even that I am that much of a spiritual philistine. I know my Jivamukti from my Kundalini. I've been taught how to transcendently meditate (in the late Nineties, by an ex-media exec off Hampstead High Street, complete with flower ceremony and my own secret mantra). And, yes, of course there is a mindfulness app on my phone. Everyone, even my mother, has a mindfulness app on their phone. (According to *Fortune* magazine, the mindfulness and meditation industry brought in \$1 billion in 2015.) But, to be honest, I haven't used it in almost a year. It's something about the cheery cartoonish icons to get to the next level. Something about its narrator's blokey yet insistent voice. And besides. They say, with guided meditation or mindfulness, every time a thought floats in, you have to lovingly let it float away – but what if said thought (bad thought) has got its own plan and insists on scudding back, at 10 times the intensity, just to spite you? What if you're not really meditating, you're asleep?

Enter (or rather re-enter) chanting, a practice that evolved in ancient India as a way for the lay person to connect with the divine, and which now, for want of a better way of describing it, has become a bit of a “thing”. Not quite available on every high street (yet) and still associated in people's minds with >





Hare Krishnas on Oxford Street, the practice is nonetheless seeping steadily into the mainstream, not unlike the way yoga did 10, maybe even five years ago. “We have offered chanting in our *kirtan* and Kundalini classes since we opened 16 years ago,” as Jonathan Sattin – co-founder of Triyoga and himself an avid chanter – says, “but attendance in both has more than doubled in the past few years and we have plans to add more chanting classes to the schedule to meet the demand.”

Donna Karan, Boy George, Kate Bosworth, Orlando Bloom and Bloom’s ex, Miranda Kerr (who chanted *nam myoho renge kyo*, an expression of determination, as their son, Flynn, was born), are just some of its celebrity devotees. They are all followers of the teachings of the 13th-century Buddhist monk Nichiren. Then there’s the gang who leans towards Sanskrit-based *kirtan*, such as Oprah Winfrey, who had Hollywood *kirtan* queen Snatam Kaur chant at her 58th birthday party. Russell Brand was mad for Snatam, too, but in more recent years has “defected” to Hare Krishna.

Chanting is even on the runway. Prabal Gurung opened his spring/summer 2016 show with 30 chanting Buddhist monks in remembrance of the earthquake that had just hit his native Nepal. Spectators at the Givenchy show, meanwhile, were treated to a single monk chanting a Kabbalah mantra of gratitude as they found their seats, all part of a *tableau vivant* created by performance artist Marina Abramovic for the house’s then creative director, Riccardo Tisci.

But back to class. Nikki starts with the most popular Hindu mantra, *om namah shivaya*, the loose translation of which is “I bow to Shiva” – Shiva being the supreme reality or the inner self. (You may recognise it from Elizabeth Gilbert’s book *Eat Pray Love* – it was the mantra given to her by her first guru.) Nikki has a voice like a lark (she was Lulu’s understudy in the Eighties musical *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*) and even if I get nothing else out of this, it’s very nice to listen to her. After a couple of rounds of *om namah shivaya*, though, I join in, my alto voice “trueing” with Nikki’s soprano almost of its own accord, and after 10 minutes or so, once the initial horror of sitting in a room full of swaying, chanting bodies subsides, I feel a concrete sense of relaxation. It’s the same kind of benevolent, shoulder-slumping, letting-go feeling after that first slug of wine. As the class progresses, the chanting gets louder, faster, more rowdy. Out of curiosity, I open my eyes. A mistake. The sight of two women energetically dancing and a man flailing his arms around, dripping with sweat, puts me off my stride, so I shut them again. Then, Pied Piper-style, Nikki takes it down and that almost illegal-feeling state of relaxation

returns. Like transcendental meditation or mindfulness, but more so and much easier as you don’t have to think, you don’t have to unthink, you – in the time-honoured words of Nike – just do it. As I could have told my younger self, chanting is not a spectator sport. The one drawback is how I’m going to get away with doing this at home.

“It’s hard to really let yourself go unless you are alone in the house. That’s why the car is perfect. I used to listen to the radio and now, if I’m alone, I’ll chant to a CD instead.” So says Shana Wilby, 57, wife of the actor James Wilby and mother of four, who took her first one-to-one chanting class with Nikki just over a year ago. Like me, she practised yoga and mindfulness but felt that none of it – particularly as her children left home and she underwent the menopause – was quite hitting the spot. Becoming “vibrationally fit”, as Nikki describes it, has been a life-changing experience for Wilby. “Each time I do it, I feel a deep connection with my inner self – and an overwhelming sense of joy – no

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matter what is happening on a practical level. It’s hard to describe but it’s a bit like ‘going home’. I still have the pressures of daily life but chanting has opened a precious retreat. If I have to miss it I feel quite out of kilter.”

“Chanting has transformed my life,” says Nikita Karizma, 25, a designer whose glam-rock pieces have been worn by Poppy Delevingne and Marina Diamandis of Marina & The Diamonds. She was introduced to the practice during her final year at the London College of Fashion: “Putting my graduate collection together was stressful, but going to the *kirtan* temple enabled me to work into the night no problem.” The spiritual equivalent of the wakefulness-promoting drug Modafinil? Is that what this is? “Well, it’s very different from silent meditation,” says Karizma. “The sound vibrating through your body gives you this incredible positive energy.”

“I tried to explain to someone why I did it the other day without much success,” says Josh, a music industry friend of mine who was introduced to Buddhist chanting by a girlfriend 12 years ago, and describes himself as a “Bujew... Or is it a Jewbu? Anyway, there are a lot of us around.”

“It’s simple in one way but utterly profound in another. I know when I chant twice a day I feel in rhythm with the universe, I find myself in the right place at the right time, meeting the right people and ultimately making better decisions for myself.”

Filling the hole in the doughnut, hitting the spot, reaching the parts that meditation and mindfulness don’t... However you want to describe it, chanting certainly won’t do you any harm. Studies have shown that it can lower heart rate and blood pressure and may even effect the release of melatonin, the hormone that aids sleep and healing responses. In a 2013 experiment, performed by researchers at UCLA on a group of dementia care-givers (a notoriously stressed cohort), it was shown that those who practised Kirtan Kriya (*saa taa naa maa*, as it goes) for just 12 minutes a day for eight weeks had significantly lower inflammation responses than those who simply listened to relaxing music. In a study published 12 years earlier by Luciano Bernardi, professor of internal medicine at the University of Pavia in Italy, it was found that the rhythmic chanting employed while reciting the rosary helped synchronise cardiovascular rhythms.

“When you sit in a room chanting with other people, you are changing your biology.” So speaks Dr Alan Watkins, an honorary senior lecturer in neuroscience and psychological medicine at Imperial College London. He cites, as explanation, the ground-breaking discovery made in 1665 by Dutch physicist Christiaan Huygens, who, upon inventing the pendulum clock, noted how they always sweetly ended up ticking in time together, even when he deliberately pushed them out of sync.

“He called it ‘entrainment,’” explains Watkins, from the Hampshire HQ of his leadership and teamwork training company, Complete Coherence, “which means the synchronisation in anything that oscillates or creates a frequency. The signal or frequency of the largest pendulum was training the other clocks to follow its lead.”

There’s a biological reason, in other words, why human beings chanted while working in the fields or building the pyramids; why we are drawn to sing in choirs and chant on the terraces at football matches; why, too, a murmuration of starlings or a shoal of fish never collide or scatter. And why certain types of music – think of that Nineties band Enigma, whose reinterpretation of Gregorian chanting made it one of the most popular musical acts of the time; or that maddening “Umbrella” (“... ella, ella, eh, eh, eh”) hit of Rihanna’s – wedge themselves into the public consciousness more than others. My family

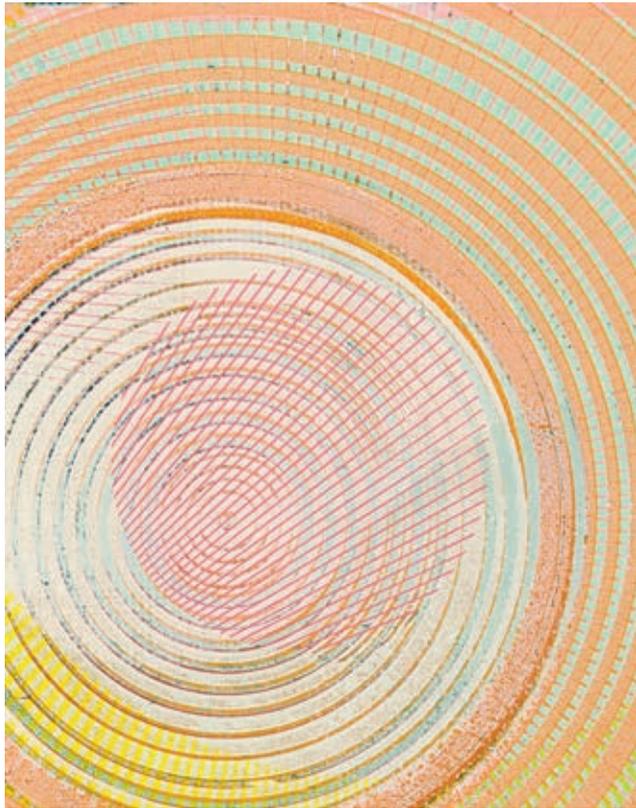
think it is the funniest, weirdest thing in the world, the idea of me chanting – am I also going to start wearing purple? Be the crazy patchouli-smelling lady who gobbles up food samples in shops? – but when I remember how we “No, no, no, yeah, yeah, yeah”-d our way up and down the A303 all last winter (from the song “Choices” by rap band E-40, the teen mantra of 2016), how it connected the four of us in a way that listening to Radio 4 never does, I can’t help thinking: what were we doing then if we weren’t chanting?

“I’ve found over the years that the most sceptical people are often the first to be devoted,” says Nikki Slade, who, as well as teaching chanting in Wandsworth prison, is the resident “voice facilitator” at the Priory Hospital in north London. “That initial embarrassment and resistance is just the ego doing a bit of mudslinging as it knows its days are numbered. My prophesy is that we will look back 100 years from now and think, ‘My God! How did we survive those dark ages without chanting...’”

A week on and I find myself at the Study Society next to the former Royal Ballet School on the Talgarth Road, which offers all sorts of esoteric courses – Dervish Whirling among them (with buckets for nauseous initiates, I’m told). Tonight, though, is a two-hour chanting session held by Sivani Mata, 29, a bit of a star on the *kirtan* circuit. The *satsang* (Sanskrit for company truth) is held in a rather austere living room with lots of candles and incense and cushions to sit on. It’s hard to pinpoint the crowd. A fur parka or two. A mixture of young and middle-aged, men and women. A blonde twentysomething who looks like she has never done it before. Leaning against one of the battered sofas is Sivani’s mother, ex-*Vogue* stylist Nikki Brewster, a striking woman with long grey hair who lives with her daughter in Kensal Green. Sivani herself, a bundle of positive almost kittenish energy, is swathed in scarves and sequins, her hair in little plaits – just what you want your *kirtan* leader to be, really. The session is twice the length of Nikki’s and each mantra lasts much longer. One in particular, *om anandamayi ma*, feels like it is never going to end, but not, strangely, in a bad way. Someone nearby is singing off-key, but unusually – very unusually for me – it does not put me off. All I can feel is a sense of tolerance and even kinship. Is this, perhaps, what taking

ayahuasca is like? A couple of days later I try out a *kirtan* class given by a lovely fellow called Craig, where we are all given plastic egg shakers to shake, but only, he counsels kindly, if I feel like it (which I do, because, in the moment, it actually feels right).

Thinking up ways to integrate chanting into the mainstream becomes a minor obsession. School? Check. St James in west London, where Sanskrit mantras are chanted in morning assembly. My friend Nicola’s children go there, so I go to one. The kids know all the words by heart and, as primary school kids in assembly go, are unusually un-fidgety. Farming? Check again. If you have seen *The Story of the Weeping Camel* you



will remember the scene where the mother who rejected her calf at birth finally lets it nurse, tears pouring down her muzzle, after being chanted to by a local musician. Jeweller Alexandra Jefford, who has chanted as part of her yoga practice for years, has recently added two delicate diamond *om* symbols to her collection. “I wanted the *om* to be a whisper around my neck,” she says. Beauty products, another yes. Because if sound frequency can alter matter, why not?

“People come back to me and say there’s something in my products. But they don’t know what, because I don’t normally shout out about it, it’s just there. Intention, for me, is everything.” This is Annee de Mamiel, whose line of organic, paraben-free skin products sell at Space NK and Net-a-Porter. Each of her oils, which she personally

blends at her farmhouse in Hertfordshire, has its own mantra. When she has finished chanting that mantra she will meditate and pass her tuning forks over the mixture to create three words of intention that will go on the label, then each batch is left to sit for between six and eight weeks to absorb all the positive, mindful energy. Which may make you want to throw this magazine across the room, except that the autumn facial oil is to die for; one of the products – the Altitude Oil – made it into this magazine’s recent list of the 100 greatest beauty products of all time; and the cleanser is even better than Eve Lom’s.

Friday evening in Covent Garden, and it feels as if the entire school-leaving population of Italy has descended upon Neal’s Yard. Not one of them, though, is going to the Mantra Lounge, where weekly *kirtans* are held, complete with free vegan cake. There must be about 100 of us squeezed into the candlelit basement, me squigged between an older Indian lady who asks if I’ve visited the Hare Krishna temple in Soho and a pretty millennial who works for the Prince’s Trust and reminds me of the model Adwoa Aboah. Our guide Jahnavi Harrison, who was brought up with her siblings at the Bhaktivedanta Manor in Watford, the mock-Tudor Hare Krishna headquarters where George Harrison used to live, is an articulate strawberry blonde with a passion for bringing “mantra” into everyday life. *Kirtanlondon.com* is her baby and she’s very much a star on the expanding *kirtan* circuit, with *kirtan* outposts in Brisbane, Vancouver, Moscow and Johannesburg. She and her team have run *kirtan* sessions for

corporate clients such as HSBC and ad agency Ernst & Young, and performed at Burning Man. Interestingly, there’s no mention anywhere in the literature or on the website that it is exclusively Hare Krishna. “Some people have preconceptions which may hinder them from just experiencing it before making a judgement,” as Harrison, who counts Russell Brand and Rachel Weisz as former audience participants, diplomatically puts it.

Hare Krishna or not, it feels like a constructive thing to do of a Friday night, a hell of a lot more constructive than going out and getting trashed, and you don’t have to change in and out of yoga kit, either. There is the added bonus of being able to tell others that this is your “thing”. Yoga shmogga – they’ll all be copying you soon. ■