

kirtan in the bhakti tradition

Fiona Agombar speaks with Narayani

Can you explain what the Kirtan tradition is, Narayani?

N: Kirtan originated in India. It is based around one person leading a group in chanting, using call and response. The musician chants in Sanskrit and the group sings back. It can be taken faster or slower, louder or softer to change the effect and in this way Kirtan takes participants on an inner journey. Kirtan actually comes from Bhakti Yoga, leading participants to union through devotional love. It's a very profound way of opening up the heart using the combination of Sanskrit with sound. For example, I may chant different names which are aspects of the Divine. By repetition, they will resonate through the body in a very powerful way. Kirtan has the ability to help open the chakras, particularly Anahata – the heart centre.

Do you mean that we experience the Divine with our hearts rather than our minds?

N: Yes. Bhakti Yoga is considered by some to be the easiest way to do so. Chanting leads us to connect with our inner divinity in a way that can't be understood through the intellect. In this way, Kirtan can help connect us directly to what is known as the self, awareness, consciousness or atman

Kirtan is very popular abroad. Why do you think it has taken longer to gain recognition here in the UK?

N: Who knows, maybe the British are more inhibited than say, the Americans! But when people try it and realise that they don't have to be good at singing and that it's not about performance, then they really love letting go and getting carried by the group energy and the chanting. It really is something that anyone can enjoy. For most

people, Kirtan and chanting is a powerful and deeply moving experience. It's becoming more popular here – I've been leading groups now for 3 years and I am now being invited all around the UK, to camps, festivals and Yoga centres.

How did you become a Kirtan singer?

N: A few years ago I used to go to the Sivananda Centre in Putney to do a Yoga asana class. One evening I went to Satsang. When I left, I felt that my whole head was vibrating. I went on to do the Sivananda teacher training course in America. As part of that, each student had to lead a chant during the early morning Satsang. I was terrified as until then I believed that I couldn't sing! But when I was asked to do it, I realised that people enjoyed it and loved my voice. I went on to join the centre as a staff member and led Kirtan almost daily in the Satsang. When I came back to the UK, the first thing I did was to buy a harmonium. This was in 2005 and all the big American Kirtan singers were over that year. I went to all of them! Then I came across Chloe Goodchild who teaches voice facilitation and I knew that she was the teacher for me. I trained with Chloe and, through her, connected to my Guru, Ananda Mayi Ma. I led more and more groups and then had my first Kirtan in a formal concert at Triyoga in London on the 7th of the 7th month in 2007 – at 7pm! The timing seemed to be auspicious. I now go to India regularly to continue with my voice training and spend time at the Ananda Mayi Ma ashram in Omkareshwar, where we sing Kirtan every day.

What effect did this have on you at a personal level?

N: Kirtan and Yoga have made such a huge difference in my life.

I went from being someone who was living quite a hedonistic lifestyle and who was deeply unhappy, to being a person who now lives a much more balanced and yogic life. I really want to pass that on.

Can you explain the difference between Satsang and Kirtan?

N: Satsang is when a gathering of like-minded people come together for a teaching – usually this will be a discussion around the idea of truth, sometimes with questions or meditation. Kirtan, also meaning joyful singing from the heart, is specifically the call and response repetition of the names of the Divine, and can be part of Satsang, as it is in the Sivananda tradition.

Your chants are very beautiful – I find them haunting and uplifting. How did you come to actually write your own stuff?

N: Composing my own music happened very spontaneously. I love the traditional chants and spent a long time trying to learn new ones when I first started leading Kirtan. I soon realised that I could only lead chants that resonated with me in a certain way; when I get a particular vibration. As I was trying to learn these chants, I found more and more that, as I would sing, a whole new melody would come, or a variation on the melody of the traditional chant and it was only at that point that I got the vibration. So I just sat down and started singing and seeing what would come out. Often the melodies come and then I find words from chants I know to fit in. Or I will have the words of a chant going on in my head and a melody will come from that. I've had very little formal training as a musician – I think I made grade 4 on the violin and maybe 2 on the saxophone when I was at school – but the work that I have done with Chloe has had a big effect on opening up my creativity and given me the confidence to explore my voice.

You are now becoming quite well known, you play regular gigs in London and throughout the UK. As you've become more popular you've extended your line-up. You work with a number of tabla players and a wonderful violinist, Lucy Crisfield.

N: Yes, I work with some wonderful musicians. Tabla is such a beautiful instrument and brings a wonderful dynamic element to the music, it's always my percussion of choice! I have been blessed to connect with some extraordinary tabla players; I am always in awe of how much time and energy has to go into practice and study in order to play the way they do.

Do you do any other voicework apart from Kirtan?

N: I facilitate many voice workshops and also do 1 to 1 sessions. I travel all over the UK to work with groups, often combining the day with a Kirtan Concert in the evening.

You have recently released your second album, 'Maatri Sharanam'. Please tell me more about that

N: It was a long time in the making! Nearly one and a half years before I actually found the right musicians and producer to create it. It was named by the Swamis in the ashram I visit in India and is in dedication to my spiritual guide and Guru Ananda Mayi Ma. All the chants are ones I have written or sung over the last 2 years, so it's great to finally have them recorded for people to enjoy at home!

Thank you very much.

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