

Learning Kirtan

Written by Felicia M. Tomasko, RN

The tradition of kirtan was brought to these shores by gurus, saints, devotees and musicians as the kirtan scene seems to explode exponentially, the call-and-response form of participatory chant continues its democratic ascendancy into Yoga studios, living rooms and thousand-plus seat theaters. Along this trajectory, audience members, Yoga teachers, professional musicians and novices are all learning chords and actively demystifying the secrets of sacred chant.

Studying music, mantra, chant and even the intricacies of creating and holding the ritual space of the energetic art of kirtan is not necessarily new, but there is currently an increase in the kirtan wallah passing the baton – or the harmonium, as it were – to invite a deeper level of participation in the community. Judging by the weekly classes, one-on-one tutorials, group sleep-over experiences in retreat centers immersing oneself in the kirtan experience and even forming full-on kirtan bands with new friends, learning kirtan is the new Yoga. We've asked some community members to describe their experience with the genre.

Flight Flava

By April Martin

i board.
baggage securely stowed.
seatbelt fastened.
electronic devices in the off position.
i am ready for takeoff.
externally rotated.
where is my complementary beverage?

one mantra in and a kartal explosion.
airborne. eyes wide. darting.
judgment and assumptions exploding sporadically.
Holy sheeeeeiiiiii*****
i look around.

17 people.
2 wingmen.
1 Dave Stringer.

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5 days.

eyes wide. climbing in altitude. climbing in speed. i chant and i chant.
3 mantras. 6 hours a day. eyes wide.
i chant to i. i chant for i.

eyes wide.
climbing and chanting.

17 souls.
2 wings.
1 Dave Stringer.
2 days.

Eyes wide. At cruising speed.
At cruising altitude.

I chant to I. I chant for I. I hit the One.
I wake up to the One. I am the One.

17 Stars. Shining.
2 Golden Wings.
1 Dave Stringer.
Destination complete.

I deplane. No baggage. No beverage.
Heart chakra in its upright and on position. Internally motivated.
I sing for I. I sing for i.
I sing for All.

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Dave Stringer's Flight School

Cleared For Takeoff: Dave Stringer By Tim Cannon

I first met Dave Stringer while on retreat at Esalen where he was collaborating with Dr. Lorin Roche in the spontaneous musical recitation of the poetry of the Radiance Sutras. The Yoga retreat I was attending merged with theirs in an ecstatic melding of body movement, sound, meditation and free-form in-the-moment spirit-filled bliss.

When I heard Dave was heading back to Esalen to hold a Kirtan Flight School, my heart burst with excitement. By virtue of being an airline pilot, I feel that Dave and I have a lot in common through the function of our roles in our chosen careers: There is a mysticism in flying, one of ecstatic bliss which also requires the knowledge of navigating the landscape in which we operate mindfully and intuitively. While the rules of commercial aviation don't necessarily

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encourage creative expression to enhance added excitement, Captain Dave skillfully defies the laws of physics through expression of surprise, excitement and joy.

We arrived back at Esalen for Flight School with Dave and his Chesire Cat grin. Dave unloaded a trunk full of percussion instruments and were each given a set of kartals. Within minutes he had us keeping time. Using these instruments, he taught us a variety of tempos and the art of using these small hand cymbals to bring energy to the chant.

Throughout the retreat, we were organized into four groups, giving us the opportunity to experiment with new instruments, expanding our potential world of kirtan as we knew it. After trading instruments among ourselves a few times, each group worked up a few chants, giving us the freedom of expression under the guidance of our loving teacher.

The final night was an opportunity for each group to share their translation of Dave's chants. What ensued was another time warp eruption of spontaneous spirit and bhakti bliss. The message in Dave's ready smile was that the gift is in giving itself.

Tim Cannon is a commercial airline pilot for SkyWest Airlines. Through his journey in Yoga, he has found his heart as his center and the best way to expand this is through the path of bhakti.

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