

# The Healing Power of

## Kirtan and Mantras



Kathleen Karlsen

Neuroscientists are beginning to recognize the amazingly positive effects of group singing. Kirtan is a form of devotional group singing. Kirtan is the repetition of mantras or longer chants known as bhajans. This form of group singing is sometimes led in a call and response format and sometimes as a sing-a-long.

Research is proving that group singing dispels anxiety and depression even more effectively than medication. Best of all, there are no problematic side effects. Group singing changes the chemistry of the brain and the body. Singing releases endorphins and oxytocin (feel-good hormones) and reduces cortisol (a stress-related hormone). The practice of group singing appears to be a magical antidote to the modern poisons of stress and isolation.

These changes have been shown to happen irrespective of skill level. In other words, you don't have to be a skilled singer to reap the benefits! Most chants repeat the same lines two or more times, making them easy to learn. Kirtan is also ideal if you are self-conscious about singing—your voice will blend with everyone around you—and no prior musical experience is required.

Chanting is also known as Mantra Yoga. The word "mantra" is derived from two Sanskrit words. "Man" is from "manas" or mind. "Tra" is from "traï," meaning to protect or free from. Mantras are formulas with distinct impacts on emotional, mental and spiritual states. Mantras are used to gain freedom from a limited state of mind. In addition, mantras can be used to revitalize the physical body as well as heal the emotions and the spirit.

At the physical level, every sound literally vibrates the cells, bones, organs, and fluids in the body. There are eighty-four acupuncture meridians that flow through the mouth and upper palate. Placement of the tongue in various positions to form words during chanting connects these meridians to the brain, increasing the energy flow to the pituitary, thalamus, hypothalamus, and pineal glands.

The rishis of India (Hindu sages) have experimented for thousands of years with the effects of chanting and sound.

Mantras are coded compilations of sound designed to stimulate health and longevity as well as to create elevated mental and spiritual states. For example, the sound "uhm" is purported to energize and purify the blood. The sound "aha" is stimulating for the hormonal system.

These sounds are particularly prominent in Sanskrit, the most common language used in chanting. The

positive impact on the brain of learning mantras is being referred to by neuroscientists as the "Sanskrit effect". Science is showing that the ancient practice of chanting is akin to yoga and meditation and possess an equivalent or possibly even greater healing power for the body, mind and spirit. ■



Kathleen Karlsen regularly holds community kirtan and mantra workshops in the Bozeman area. She is the leader of the Shakti Bliss Kirtan Band and has completed two levels of training at the Kirtan Leadership Institute in Boulder, CO.

See [Facebook.com/shaktiblisskirtan](https://Facebook.com/shaktiblisskirtan) and visit: [Meetup.com/shakti-bliss](https://Meetup.com/shakti-bliss).

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### RESOURCES:

- Hom, Stacy. Singing Changes your Brain, *Time Magazine*, August 16, 2013
- Paramhansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1946
- Cohen, Mike. *Bhakti and Beyond: A Bhakti Yoga Perspective on Kirtan*, 2008
- Hartzell, James. *A Neuroscientist Explores the Sanskrit Effect*. *Scientific American*, January 2, 2018

## UPCOMING BOZEMAN EVENTS

**Friday, May 4 ~ 7-8:30 pm**

*Renew Yoga, 438 E. Mendenhall*

**Bija Mantras • \$20**

**Saturday, May 12 ~ 7-8:30 pm**

*Your Yoga, 20 E. Main St.*

**KIRTAN with the Shakti Bliss Band • FREE**

**Friday, June 1 ~ 7-8:30 pm**

*Renew Yoga, 438 E. Mendenhall*

**Mantras & Mandalas • \$20**

**Saturday, June 9 ~ 7-8:30 pm**

*Your Yoga, 20 E. Main St.*

**KIRTAN with the Shakti Bliss Band • FREE**