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Releasing the Mind: The Wellness Benefits of Mantra

By Art Blevins

One of the primary reasons music has many wellness benefits, is that by its very nature, one must stay in the present moment in order to fully engage with the music, whether one is dancing, singing along, playing, or merely listening. One particular kind of music, mantra chanting, not only facilitates one's ability to stay rooted and mindful in the present moment, it is also intended to open up an expanded state of consciousness. Its simple repetitive nature is designed to capture your attention, making it easy to jump in and sing along. And, this participation is itself beneficial! Research has shown that creating your own vibrations is good for you from a wellness perspective in much the same way that diet and exercise is beneficial (see [benefits of humming](#)). In addition, by choosing a mantra that is meaningful to you, there is a natural elevation of one's sense of emotional and spiritual well-being.

What Is Mantra Chanting?

Let's start with what it is not. To this day, the chanting of mantras is commonly written off as superstition and witchcraft by nonparticipants. [1] However, this is simply pop culture's misunderstanding of beneficial practices from other cultures.

The word "mantra" comes from the ancient Sanskrit language. **Man'** means mind, and **tra'** means release. So, a mantra is a combination of sounds meant to release the mind from anxieties. [2]

Mantra is a form of meditation continually repeating a chosen sound, word, phrase or set of syllables (silently or aloud) while passively disregarding any internal or external distractions. The practice of mantra meditation helps to slow down thoughts, improve mental clarity, and enhance peace of mind. [3] The sound or mantra in meditation is proposed to act as an effective vehicle for overriding mental

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speech (which is the predominant form of conscious thinking for most people), thus continually redirecting negative or intrusive automatic thoughts which perpetuate psychological distress. Mantra can have positive effects on anxiety, stress, depression, burnout, anger and psychological distress. [4]

The wellness benefits of mantra include helping one to maintain mindfulness and focus. "Chanting is one example of how music can enhance wellbeing and quality of life — and an interesting one, because it combines many elements of other music-based activities, but also includes meditation and mindfulness elements which may add fuel to the power of music." [5] Meditation doesn't come easily to everyone, and many people find it takes time and practice to maintain focus. A mantra can make this easier by reducing wandering thoughts. If you're repeating a mantra, in your head or out loud, that mantra occupies your awareness and helps prevent it from drifting off in other directions. Thus, it helps one maintain focus. This can be especially helpful if your mind tends to wander a lot when trying to meditate. [6]

When Cognitive Science and Psychology researcher Dr. Gemma Perry [7] first tried chanting, she had no idea what to expect. "I was at a yoga studio and everyone was chanting a particular phrase 108 times and I didn't know what was going on," she says. But Perry, who was suffering from severe depression, says she found chanting to be so therapeutic she tried it again the following week. A decade on, she's completing a PhD to try to uncover if science can explain it. Despite having been practiced for thousands of years by almost every culture in the world, many consider chanting to have only spiritual advantages. It's only now that its physiological and psychological benefits are being accepted more widely in the West. "Scientific studies have found that chanting can decrease stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms, as well as increase positive mood, feelings of relaxation and focused attention," Perry says. "It is possible that, regardless of the tradition or belief system involved in the chanting practice, chanting may have a physiological and psychological effect no matter what you are chanting." [5]

Mantra chanting offers long-term benefits as well. "Once you've practiced meditation for many years, most people tend to change the way they approach daily life, placing value on a sense of equanimity and mindfulness that is not restricted to an actual meditation session." [5]

No Religious or Spiritual Intent Is Needed or Required

Mantra can be practiced by anyone in the world without any conflict of faith with the respective religion. [2] Since the 1970s, Herbert Benson, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and founder of the [Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine](http://www.benson-henry.org) at Massachusetts General Hospital, has been researching how meditation and prayer can alter mental and physical states. He's been particularly interested in what brings on a meditative state, which he calls "the relaxation response." Benson has experimented with subjects repeating Sanskrit mantras as well as nonreligious words, such as "one." He's found that regardless of what the practitioner repeats, the word or phrase has nearly the same effects: relaxation and the ability to better cope with life's unexpected stressors. [8] The repetition itself is a way to focus the mind, quite apart from the meaning of the chant or mantra.

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Mantra's Connection to Spirituality and Religion

Regardless of your religious and/or spiritual background (or absence thereof), chanting with proper intention of heart and mind can make the action more effective and meaningful. [1] Mantra and chant can be found in many languages, including English, Hebrew, Latin, and Hindi. It also has deep roots in every major spiritual tradition including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, as well as Eastern traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. [9] In these contexts, mantra can be a prayer or divine utterance, often repeated rhythmically, in succession, sometimes out loud. [1] For example, a popular mantra for Christians is simply the name Jesus. Also, the Jesus Prayer — “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me” — is an ancient Christian mantra. Catholics commonly repeat the Hail Mary prayer or Ave Maria, or Halleluiah. Many Jews recite “Barukh atah Adonai” (“Blessed art thou, oh Lord”); while Muslims repeat the name Allah like a mantra. [8] One of the most universally recited mantras is the sacred Hindu syllable Aum (also spelled Om) which is also the energetic root of other, longer Hindu mantras. Chanting is often accompanied by the fingering of beads to facilitate counting of mantra repetitions, as with “mala” beads in the Hindu tradition, and the Rosary, in the Catholic and the Islamic traditions. [9]

What does the Scientific Research Say?

Scientific research indicates mantra chanting can offer many of the same benefits as other forms of meditation, including [6]:

- Increased cerebral blood flow
- Improved cognitive function, visuospatial and verbal memory
- Reduced stress and anxiety
- Less fatigue, increased low of energy
- A greater sense of calm, a more positive outlook
- Increased self-awareness and self-compassion

Generally speaking, it remains a substantial challenge for researchers to attempt to translate a phenomenon of traditions that emphasizes life-long growth into an effective intervention utilized in Western culture that may alleviate distress. Despite this fact, it should be reported that the vast majority of research studies report positive outcomes and mantra meditation is considered a useful adjunct to workplace wellbeing initiatives and educational programs. Positive trends are evident which suggests that such programs may have exciting educational, occupational and psychotherapeutic potential, offering the general population an individual approach that avoids the side effects of medications, the stigma of treatment as well as barriers related to issues of cost and accessibility. [4]

The Beatles and Mantra

The Beatles were well known proponents of mantra chanting. When asked what got him started on his journey that led to his discovery of the benefits of mantra, one of The Beatles (Harrison) replied the following. [10]

“You know, having been successful and meeting everybody we thought worth meeting and finding out they weren’t worth meeting, and having had more hit records than everybody else and having done it bigger than everybody else. It was like reaching the top of a wall and then

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looking over and seeing that there's so much more on the other side. So, I felt it was part of my duty to say, "Oh, okay, maybe you are thinking this is all you need – to be rich and famous – but actually it isn't." [10]

He went on to explain that although he had received riches and fame beyond what most people could ever hope for, he found that there was 'nothing higher' than the happiness he experienced from chanting. [10]

"I had bought that album (mantra)...and John (Lennon) and I listened to it. I remember we sang it for days, John and I, with ukulele banjos, sailing through the Greek islands chanting...like six hours we sang, because we couldn't stop once we got going. As soon as we stopped it was like the lights went out. It went on to the point where our jaws were aching, singing the mantra over and over and over and over. We felt exalted; it was a very happy time for us." [10]

When asked about the difference between meditation and chanting...

"It's really the same sort of thing as meditation, but I think it has a quicker effect." "Chanting...is a type of meditation that can be practiced even if the mind is in turbulence. You can even be doing it and other things at the same time. That's what's so nice.... Chanting doesn't stop you from being creative or productive. It actually helps you concentrate." [10]

If The Beatles found that mantra chanting could bring more profound happiness than success, fame, and fortune, why not give it a try yourself?

How Do I Try Mantra Chanting for Myself?

Selecting a Mantra

Choose a word you like the sound of, or one that makes you happy, or one that can also reinforce a sense of calm or joy. [6] However, meaning is not absolutely necessary. Some mantras are "nonsense" words or phrases intended to interrupt one's usual train of thought to allow a deeper awareness to emerge. [9] So, the bottom line is simply to choose something that works for you.

If you are not familiar with mantra chanting, we suggest that you first spend some time exploring your options. And for this reason, here we provide links to a variety of mantras. There are many to choose from, so take your time and become familiar with the various choices. Select any that speak to you.

Here are some suggested Mantra options (playlists/links):

- From Boquete Health & Hospice's own 'Magic of Music' Team!
 - [Thank You Mantra](#)
 - [Om \(108 times\) – 15 minutes](#)
- Traditional Christian Mantras
 - [Jesus Prayer / Prayer of the Heart](#)
 - [Ave Maria / Hail Mary](#)
 - [Complete Gregorian Chant - Rosary](#)

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- [Orthodox Lent Chant](#)
- Traditional Hindu and Buddhist Mantras
 - [Om Mani Padme Hum](#)
 - [Om Namah Shivaya](#)
 - [Gayatri Mantra](#)
 - [Sarvesham Svastir Bhavatu \(Peace Mantra\) - Tina Turner](#)
 - [Full Album Chants of India - Ravi Shankar - Produced by George Harrison](#)
 - [Full Mantra Album "Inner World" by the Dalai Lama](#)
- Traditional Jewish Mantras
 - [Elohim \(Hebrew for "God"\)](#)
 - [Barukh atah Adonai \("Blessed art thou, oh Lord"\)](#)
 - [YHWH Mantra](#)
- Modern Mantra – Try the chorus of these relatively modern songs as your mantra
 - [My Sweet Lord - George Harrison](#)
 - [Give Peace a Chance - John Lennon](#)
 - [Let It Be - The Beatles](#)
 - [Hallelujah - Leonard Cohen](#)
 - [God Is The Light - Cat Stevens](#)
 - [Three Little Birds - Bob Marley](#)
 - [What a Wonderful World - Louis Armstrong](#)
 - [I Can See Clearly Now- Johnny Nash](#)
 - [What the World Needs Now Is Love - Jackie DeShannon](#)
 - [Don't Worry Be Happy - Bobby McFerrin](#)
 - [Happy - Pharrell Williams](#)
 - [Always Look On The Bright Side of Life - Monty Python](#)
 - [Beautiful Day - U2](#)
 - [Hello Hurricane - Switchfoot](#)
 - [I Am That I Am - Peter Tosh](#)

How to Chant Your Mantra [6]:

1. Get comfortable. Find a quiet place where you can meditate without disruptions. Find a position you can hold for the length of your meditation, whether that's sitting on the floor, in a chair, lying down, or even walking.
2. Set the Time. Decide how long you want to meditate (anywhere from 3 to 30 minutes) and set a timer or use a timed piece of chanting music.
3. Start with a few deep breaths. Pay attention to your breathing without doing anything to try and modify it. Just focus on the sensation of it entering your lungs and filling your body.
4. Use your mantra. Continue breathing slowly and steadily through your nose as you begin to chant your mantra. You can say it out loud (this might help more with mantras intended to produce vibrations) or repeat it silently. It often helps to match the mantra to your breathing.

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5. Let your breath guide you. As you settle into the meditation, your mantra and breathing will eventually settle into a rhythm. Unless you're attempting to use a specific breathing technique, following this flow may help your meditation feel more natural.
6. Remember to gently redirect wandering thoughts. As you meditate, you'll probably notice your attention begin to wander. When this happens, don't try and force those unwanted thoughts away. Instead, just acknowledge them, let them go, and then pick the mantra back up.
7. Close the meditation. When your timer goes off, or the meditation music comes to a close, don't jump up right away. Instead, take a few moments to sit with your (hopefully) quiet mind. Check in with yourself. Do you feel more relaxed? More optimistic? This closing exercise lets you check in with yourself and track your progress.

Feel Free to Change Your Mantra

Figure out which mantra really draws you. If you don't have much success with the first mantra, it may help to find one that resonates more with your current frame of mind. There's no harm in changing it as necessary. You don't need to use the same mantra every time, either. Perhaps in the morning, you want to focus on strength and compassion for the day ahead, and in the evening, you'd like to achieve a sense of restful internal peace. The key to mantra meditation is finding one that works for you. [6]

Be Patient and Keep Trying

If your mind wanders while you repeat your chant or mantra, you are in good company! There is no need to be hard on yourself. Acknowledge your distractions gently and return your attention to the chant or mantra. [9] To see optimal benefits, you'll want to maintain a consistent practice. Try not to worry about how long you meditate with your mantra at first. Instead, make a habit of doing it every day. In time, you'll find it easier to stay with your mantra for longer periods. Practicing daily at the same time and place can also help you get into a regular routine. [6]

Anytime Anywhere!

While mantra can be used for meditation, it can also be used at odd moments during your day — while falling asleep, when doing a repetitive task, or when sitting in a waiting room. [9] See what you experience if you can keep it going all the time — in your car, in your home, on your iPad, iPod, phone, everywhere.

The Beatles – *“(My Guru) told me once that we should just keep chanting all the time – or as much as possible. Once you do that, you realize the benefit.... that’s why I say that the more you do it, the more you don’t want to stop, because it feels so nice and peaceful.”* (Harrison) [10]

Individual or Group Practice?

Some find chanting, like meditation, to be awkward and less profound when practiced on their own. [1] And some forms of mantra chanting are tailor made for group settings (such as the call and response structure of 'kirtan'). However, individual practice is also beneficial. “Even when people are doing it as an individual practice there's positive effects on the parasympathetic nervous system,” says Gemma Perry, Ph.D. (Psychology). “You see improvements in focused attention, because when you're focusing on a sound, you're training the brain to use those muscles, and this can lead to an increased capacity for

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mindfulness and being aware of negative thought patterns.” [11] So, just as we encourage you to experiment with finding the right mantra fit for you, we also encourage you to gauge your own experience with individual practice, and chanting with other like-minded folks.

Expanded States of Consciousness

Aside from the wellness benefits, one of the primary purposes of mantra in the older traditions is to open up expanded states of consciousness. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to delve deeply into this aspect of mantra, as you experiment with mantra chanting, do not be surprised if your experience at times seems blissfully ‘other worldly’ - similar to the experience George Harrison described while sailing around the Greek isles with John Lennon. If you find this aspect of mantra chanting intriguing, you might want to inquire with authentic teachers from the various traditions in order to explore these expanded states of consciousness more fully.

Long Term Beneficial Effects

Mantra chanting offers not only immediate short-term benefits, but long-term benefits as well. "Once you've practiced mantra meditation for many years, most people tend to change the way they approach daily life, placing value on a sense of equanimity and mindfulness that is not restricted to an actual meditation session." [5] Years into her spiritual chanting practice, Musician Tina Malia credits mantra with saving her life. She has experienced deeper and deeper connections with the mantra. “It’s almost as if these mantras start to feel like your friends—even lovers,” she says. As she tours the globe performing in sacred-music and yoga festivals, she shares her love of mantra and its healing effects. “Sometimes I wish I could stand on the top of a building and shout it out to the world:

Mantra is free! It has no side effects! It’s simple and so easy!” [8]

So, what are you waiting for? Try it out for yourself and let us know what you think!

We Welcome Your Feedback

What is your experience with mantra and chanting? Are you interested in participating in local Boquete group mantra chanting activities? Let us know! Email us at Music@boquetehospice.org

Special Notes:

Mantra Chants in the ‘Magic of Music’ Lending Library

The ‘Magic of Music’ Team at Boquete Health & Hospice has a substantial collection of mantra and chants in our lending library, which is available to BH&H clients. This collection includes Gregorian chants, various other Christian chants, as well as mantras from many other cultures including Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Islamic, American Indian, African, Brazilian, and Hawaiian.

Mantra & Affirmations

The word “mantras” is sometimes used interchangeably with “affirmations.” Affirmations are a self-help technique that doesn’t stem from a specific culture or religion. They’re positive statements usually directed at the self and meant to calm, soothe, motivate, and encourage. There are common affirmations you can use to help relieve symptoms of anxiety or depression. You can even make up your own. Mantras and affirmations are different practices that are often confused for the other. They offer

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similar effects but have very different origins and cultural connotations. Mantras should be practiced with cultural care and sourced from authentic teachers within the tradition they come from. [3]

Cultural Appreciation vs. Appropriation

When it comes to mantras, being curious, wanting to learn, and taking classes with culturally competent teachers are great ways to connect with the practice in a respectful way. Cultural appropriation happens when someone who doesn't share the lived experience of the culture uses it for economic or social gain. For instance, someone hearing a mantra a few times in a yoga studio and then running a workshop on it is a clear example of appropriation. It's taking something from a culture that's not one's own and then using it for your own benefit without caring for or taking care of the people from whom the practice comes. To avoid this, one should seek out authentic sources from within the tradition. This is the difference between appropriation and appreciation. [3]

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