

Take Your Soul on a Great Night Out

Sacred Chanting is Right in Your Neighborhood

By Jay Hanuman

You may know about big events like the Ecstatic Chant weekends at the Omega Institute, or you may have attended a sold-out Krishna Das concert, but did you know that there is probably a sacred chanting session happening in your area this very week? Kirtan is a form of “bhakti” (devotional) yoga that involves the singing of the Divine Names and mantras, usually in Sanskrit. It’s a wonderful and enjoyable way to worship that’s been steadily growing in popularity—both internationally and right here in Westchester and Putnam Counties.

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The word kirtan comes from the Sanskrit language, in which “kirt” which means “to name, to communicate, to celebrate, to praise, to glorify.” The word Sanskrit itself means “language brought to formal perfection.” Over the millennia, Sanskrit sages who understood the power of words continued to develop and refine this language



Cat Guthrie on guitar and Eileen O'Hare on harmonium; together they are BlisSing

in the hope of discovering their own divine nature. “They selected only those sounds which had the greatest clarity, purity, and power of resonance,” says Vyaas Houston from the American Sanskrit Institute. “The vibrational purity and resonating power of Sanskrit is above all an opera on a grand cosmic scale that you can sing with your whole heart and being.”

During the 1980’s, kirtan became a regular practice in many yoga ashram communities throughout the West. By the end of the 20th century, the experi-

ence of kirtan had expanded beyond these traditional ashram communities and into the larger public sphere. Today, kirtan continues to grow rapidly along with increasing interest in the world’s sacred traditions and the vibrant yoga movement in the West. It extends across cultures, races and religions and offers a profound experience of an ancient sacred tradition to the greater human community. Kirtan is a means to connect to the heart and divinity that lies within, as expressed by some of the tens of thousands of people who par-

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"The first time I went to a kirtan, I felt good that night," says Dennis Winge, a full-time musician who fell in love with this form of spiritual practice a year ago. "The next time, I felt good the whole next day. The third time, I felt good for two whole days and I thought 'Wait, there's something going on here!'"

Believing that there should be a kirtan, "on every block in every town every night of the week," Winge took it upon himself to learn the art of leading kirtan at a week-long Omega course last spring. Since then he has played with many great kirtan artists throughout the Northeast at yoga studios and well-known spiritual centers like Omega, Kripalu, and Ananda Ashram. Winge currently leads kirtan on the third Thursday of each month at 7:30 p.m. at the parish hall of St. Paul's on the Hill in Ossining.



Dennis Winge and Tara Porter at Kripalu

In addition to the monthly Ossining Kirtan, other opportunities for kirtan in Westchester and Putnam counties abound. Perhaps the most ubiquitous kirtan "wallah" or leader in Westchester

is Satya Franche Carlson, who's been leading her ensemble Ma Kirtan since 2006. She currently holds regular kirtans at Wainright House in Rye and numerous yoga studios in Westchester, Connecticut, and other parts of the Northeast. Satya, whose name means truth in Sanskrit, says she is very grateful to have assumed a leading role in the rising popularity of kirtan throughout Westchester. "It has become so popular in the last few years," says Satya. "People are really starting to feel the benefits of this heart opening meditation."

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In Putnam, a unique opportunity for sacred chanting called "BlisSing" is hosted by Eileen O'Hare and Cat Guthrie at a private residence in Garrison. This event is open to the public, and usually takes place two Tuesdays per month. O'Hare, a legacy carrier in the Andean Shamanic tradition, uses both English and Sanskrit in her chants and draws upon various traditions from around the world. "I am so grateful that the Garrison kirtan has been steadily growing," she says. "It is my favorite form of communal spiritual celebration."

Kirtan chants are most often sung in call and response fashion, and chant sheets that list the mantras are provided at most sessions. The Sanskrit word "mantra" can be broken etymologically into the root words "mana" (mind) and "tra" (deliver). Mantras thus have the



Satya Franche Carlson

power to deliver the mind from material consciousness or perception to spiritual consciousness or enlightenment. The mantras are generally short and easy to learn, and they may be recited a few times for practice before each chant begins. Traditionally, instruments such as a harmonium, tabla, gong and other percussion instruments are used, although kirtan can be easily adapted to many Western instruments such as violin, guitar, bass, and keyboard.

"The Divine Names we sing come from a place that's deeper than our thoughts or our minds," says Winge, "In fact, at our deepest level, they are us." The spiritual practice of kirtan, although largely taken from the Hindu tradition, is not about belonging to a religion or having any particular set of belief systems. Winge says that's one of the reasons he loves it so much. "There's nothing to debate or discuss," he says. "You just sit down and sing!"

For more information, visit denniswinge.com and click on "kirtan," or type the words "Ossining kirtan" in Facebook. Join the Satya Franche and Ma Kirtan mailing list by writing to makirtan10@gmail.com or typing "Satya Franche" in Facebook. To join the Garrison kirtan mailing list, email catguthrie@gmail.com.