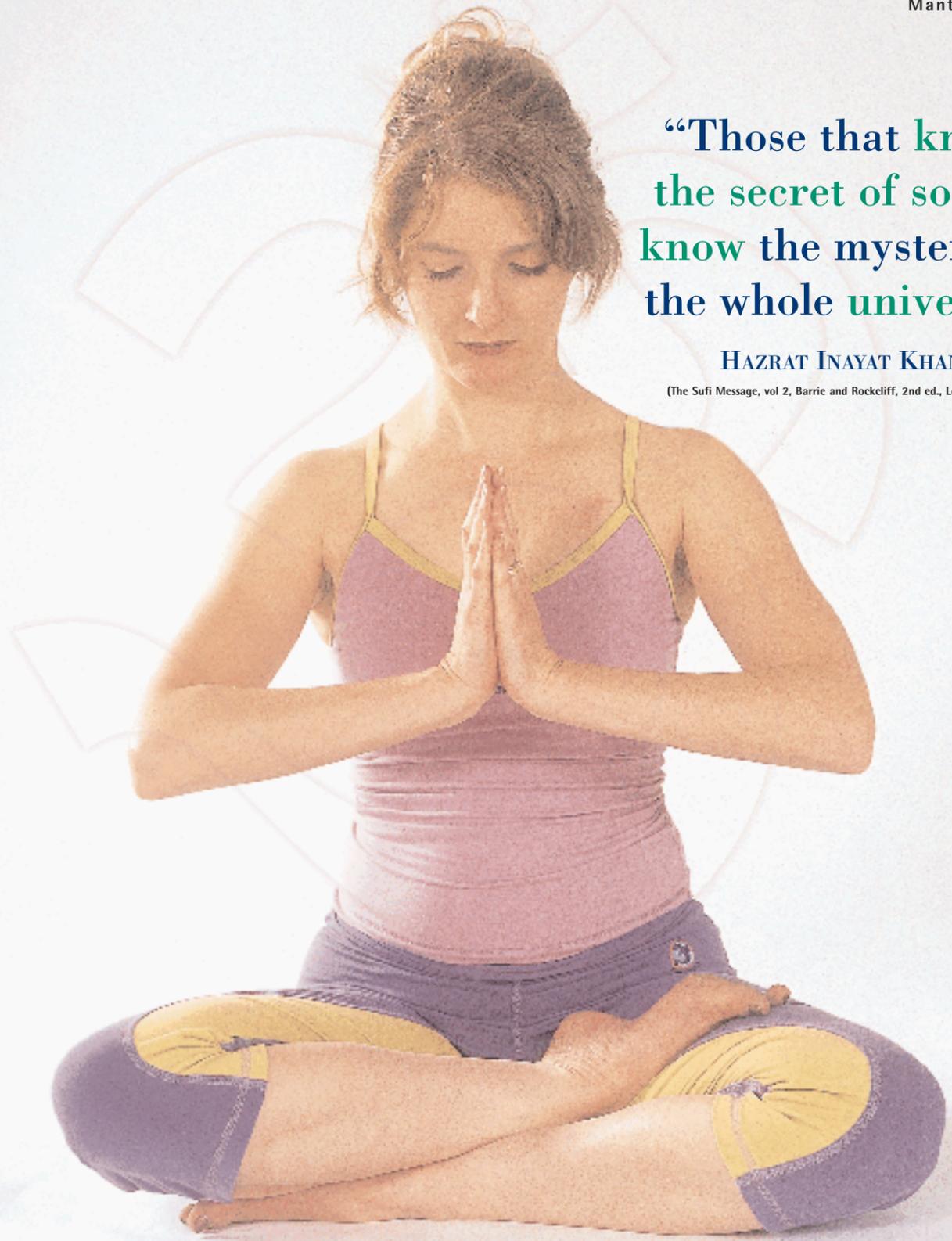


“Those that know  
the secret of sound  
know the mystery of  
the whole universe”

HAZRAT INAYAT KHAN

(The Sufi Message, vol 2, Barrie and Rockcliff, 2nd ed., London 1972)



BY KRISTA BERNARD

# Mantras

**Mantra repetition is also a tool which can release us from the trappings of our grasping mind, hence serving as a focusing device.**

Sound is an energy made up of vibrations or wavelengths. Sound waves affect matter. For example, sound of a certain wavelength can shatter glass, whereas other wavelengths have the capability to heal.

Mantras are sacred sounds, prayers or thoughts that affect consciousness. On a vibrational level, these Sanskrit words, syllables or phrases have the power to heal and lift us to higher states of consciousness.

It is believed that their use leads to an increase in harmony and coherence in brainwave patterns, extending them to octaves of vibration beyond our normal brainwave function. These deeper, slower alpha, theta and delta brainwave rhythms are smoother and more rhythmic and are often associated with clarity, awareness and creativity. It is the busy beta brainwave rhythms that keeps us in the state of constant activity.

Mantra repetition is also a tool which can release us from the trappings of our grasping mind, hence serving as a focusing device. By concentrating on the repetition of sound, either internally or externally, it is possible to make the mind one-pointed, calm and equanimous. It is an excellent practice for bringing about pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses) and dharana (concentration or complete attention), which are the fifth and sixth limbs of yoga.

The word mantra is derived from the root words *man*, which means to think, imagine or believe, and *tra*, which means instrument or protection. Hence, mantra is often translated as instrument of thought, or protection for concentration. It is not imperative to know the meaning of a mantra. Its sound will have a subtle effect on us whether we intellectualise its symbology or not. Some teachers believe that it is more beneficial if a mantra is repeated with an understanding of intention. Others believe that the true meaning of a mantra lies in the absence of meaning; by bringing our awareness to the absence of meaning, it may be possible to get a glimpse of reality. For those who wish to chant the name of a deity, such as Krishna or Ganesha, the practice should be done with great bhakti (devotion). It is then antara sadhana – an inner quest, in which the aspirant merges with the divinity.

There are many ways in which to use a mantra and there is no right or wrong. A mantra can be utilised in a slow traffic jam, or

on the train to work; it can be used whilst taking a walk along the beach, or just before a stressful job interview. Practise singing or chanting the mantra out loud, become absorbed in its vibration. After a time there may be no thought and you may just feel light and joyful, or in the state of simply being.

Mantra repetition (also referred to as japa – meaning to rotate, mutter, or whisper) can be whispered or done mentally. The vibration is far beyond the physical sound. Whichever form of japa you choose, remember to link the mantra with the breath, as this aids concentration.

Mental japa can be assisted by using a mala or rosary. A mala is a string of small beads, usually 108 in number. The beads are separated from each other by a special knot known as a brahmagranthi, representing the knot of creation which ties us to name and form. There is also one extra bead in the mala, which is known as the meru bead. This is usually larger and is offset from the continuity of the main loop. To practice japa using a mala you simply move along one bead each time you repeat the mantra. Traditionally practitioners turn around at the meru bead (not crossing over it) and use only the middle finger and thumb of the right hand to roll the beads; the index finger and little fingers should not touch the beads.

Mantras are often used as a preparation for dhyana, (meditation, the seventh limb of yoga). It is said in yoga that there are three obstacles to meditation. These are impurity, ignorance and mental distraction. These obstacles can be removed through the practice of japa, or mantra repetition. To prepare for mantra repetition leading to meditation, it is recommended to sit in padmasana (lotus posture). This posture directs the proper flow of prana (life force, energy) from mooladhara (base) chakra to sahasrara (crown) chakra and brings steadiness of the body, which assists in steadiness of the mind. Beginners may wish to sit in sukhasana (simple cross-legged position). Relax and begin the practice of mentally repeating the chosen mantra. Eventually the concentration will get stronger and longer. There should, however, be no strain or tense concentration. The mind will only detach itself from the externalised state when there is a constant and relaxed state of japa awareness.

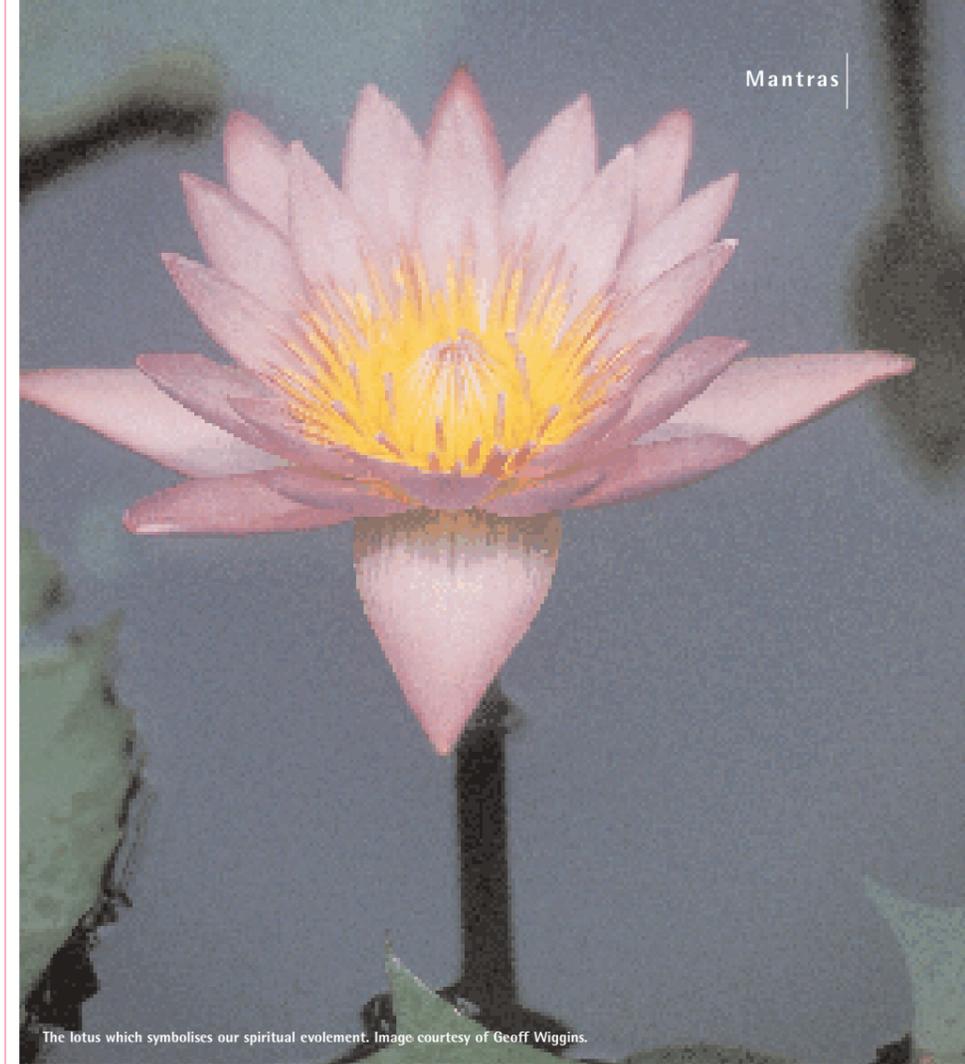
It is also possible to practise a mantra by writing it down at the same time as repeating it

mentally. Mantra writing is known as likhita japa. It is beneficial to have a special book set aside for this purpose and before you start, decide how many times you wish to repeat the mantra, or for how long. Do not write as fast as possible, but write with the utmost care, concentration and sense of aesthetics. Observe and consider each repetition and you may notice that there is progress in concentration. You can write from left to right, or vice-versa, or even create patterns with the mantra. The writing can be in Sanskrit or its translation. It is even possible to make up your own mantra (which could be in the form of an affirmation or a sublime idea such as love, compassion, eternity, consciousness). If other thoughts enter the mind while practising japa (they surely will!), continue on, just observing the thoughts as they come and go without grasping them.

Writing the Sanskrit letter Om is a beautiful place to start practising likhita japa or mantra writing. Om, in its symbolic form, can be seen as a representation of liberation by lifting the veil of illusion. The long lower curve symbolises the dream state, whilst the upper curve is the waking state. The curve issuing from the centre is a representation of deep, dreamless sleep. The crowning crescent is a symbol of illusion, which is known in Sanskrit as maya. The dot represents samadhi (transcendence, the eighth limb of yoga).

During the Indian month of Shraavan, Hindus follow a tradition of plucking leaves from the bilva tree in order to write mantras on them in red powder paste. The leaves are then offered to a deity. The practice continues for the whole month, the aspirant sometimes writing all day. Each leaf has three petals and often the mantra written is Om Namah Shivaya, (This mantra salutes Shiva, the destroyer. It has a purifying energy pattern that destroys our negative qualities).

An example of some other Hindu mantras are: RAM – this mantra is a powerful mantra and invokes truth, righteousness and virtue in the male aspect. SITA – this is the female aspect of the energy pattern of Ram. It can also be joined with Ram and chanted as Sitaram – embodying the energy of a perfect union. SHYAM – this is the male aspect of love and compassion and transmutes all emotions into unconditional love. RADHA – represents cosmic love of the divine mother and is the female aspect of Shyam.



The lotus which symbolises our spiritual evolution. Image courtesy of Geoff Wiggins.

In Indian culture and tradition, there are also thousands of mantras for specific uses. To keep you safe from snakes it is suggested to chant Om Narmadayai vicharana; for wealth, Om Lakshmi vam shri kamaladharam; for removing obstacles and difficulties, Om ram ram ram ram ro ro ram kashtam svaha. There are literally mantras for everything from marriage, to long life, for winning court cases, curing fever, stimulating digestive fire, purification of thought, for piles and pox, for safety of the child in the womb, for removing doubt and for sound sleep.

As well as the traditional Sanskrit mantras, there is a multitude of chants and mantras from other cultures and religions from around the world. Though meanings change from culture to culture, often there are similarities in tone, structure and rhythm. From Tibet comes OM MANI PADME HUM which means, the jewel of the lotus flower is within me, om being the universal sound, mani padme representing the jewel in the lotus – which is divine essence in the Buddhist tradition. The lotus symbolises our spiritual evolution. The roots are the base nature, the stem rising through the water is the intuitive search and

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the flower blossoming in the sunlight is the self realisation. Hum unites the individual with the universal energy. I AM THAT I AM is a powerful English version that brings about peace beyond the limits of body and mind and a feeling of oneness with the universe. SANCTUS, SANCTUS, SANCTUS, HOSANNA IN EXCELSIS, GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO is from the Christian tradition and chants the highest

glory to God. BISMILLAH IRRAHAMAN IRAHIM comes from Islam and translates as, In the name of God, the beneficent, the merciful. SHEMA YISROEL, ADONOI ELOHENU, ADONOI ECHOD is Hebrew for, Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, The Lord is One. TE GYA TE HARA GYA TE HARA SO GYA TE BO DHI SO WA KA is from Japan and it invokes a oneness with the Buddha. EARTH AM I, WATER AM I, AIR AND FIRE AND SPIRIT AM I is a New Age chant, acknowledging the oneness in all.

You do not need to be of any particular religion, belief or culture to make use of a particular mantra, you can select to use any mantra as long as it has appeal for you. In Hindu tradition there are three kinds of mantras; those given by the guru as per your inner need; universal mantras such as Om and Om Namah Shivaya and the Gayatri mantra, which can be sung or chanted to create a positive atmosphere; and healing mantras which can be transmitted to a sick person in order to help cure them.

### MANTRAS FOR THE CHAKRAS

Root mantras are single sounds, made up from primary sounds of the Sanskrit alphabet.

Each chakra resonates with a particular primary sound, therefore each sound can have the effect of cleansing and healing the corresponding chakra. This sound also has the capacity to purify the aura of the physical body. It is a powerful technique to use in daily practice and is well utilised in yoga therapy. The chakras also correspond to a particular element. By chanting or meditating on these primary, or seed sounds it is possible to release the energy encased in the sound, thus gaining access to the qualities of the element. Base chakra, Mooladhara. Situated at the perineum, base of the spine – Earth – LAM – pronounced Lung. Second chakra, Swadisthana. Situated in the lower abdomen – Water – VAM – pronounced Vung. Third chakra, Manipura. Situated in the solar plexus – Fire – RAM pronounced Rung. Fourth chakra, Anahata. Situated in the heart centre – Air – YAM pronounced young. Fifth chakra, Vishuddhi. Situated in the throat – Ether – HAM – pronounced Hung. Sixth chakra, Ajna. Situated in the eyebrow centre – Light – OM. Crown chakra, Sahasrara. Situated at the crown of the head – Thought – no particular mantra is associated with this chakra.

Mantra repetition brings about chitta shuddhi, or mental purification. Samskaras (past impressions, tied in with karma) and vasanas (future desires) are eliminated. But the only way to feel the subtle power and effect of a mantra is through practice and experience. Mantras have long been a secret esoteric tradition in mystic schools. Through their usage, it is possible to unlock some of the great mysteries of both our inner world and outer world, bringing about greater harmony.

Krista Bernard is a freelance writer who has been involved in the practice of yoga for the past 11 years both as a student and a teacher. In 2000, she was the winner of *Australian Geographic's* 'Young Adventurer of the Year' award for her tenacious solo bicycle trip from Indonesia to Egypt. Currently, she is doing an intensive nine-month yoga teacher training course in Byron Bay and has a vision of setting up a yoga studio and healing centre 'when the time is ripe'. She can be contacted on [kristabike@yahoo.com](mailto:kristabike@yahoo.com)