

Some Basics On Mantra
from
Meditation For The Love Of It
by Sally Kempton

The word “mantra” means “a tool for the mind.” Specifically, mantras are articulated sounds that approximate the “unsounded sound,” the vibration of the Infinite that throbs in the silence of pure Consciousness. These inner vibrations are far too subtle to be heard by the physical ears or articulated by the tongue. However, the lineage mantras of the different spiritual traditions—heard by sages in deep meditation and then transmitted to their disciples—carry that high, subtle vibration embedded in their syllables. Such mantras are called “awakened,” enlivened by the power of Consciousness, because the full power of pure, universal Consciousness is within them. Repeating such an enlivened mantra gradually draws the mind inward, back to the source of the mantra—which is the spaciousness of the original great mind, the deep Self. That is the basic principle of mantra practice.

However, the way the mantra works and the secrets of how it works are quite subtle. To understand the inner practice of mantra, we must turn to the texts of the Indian tantric tradition, where the science of mantra is explained in all its complexity.

Tantric teaching texts like the Shiva Sutras tell us that the words of a mantra are only its shell, a kind of jacket. The real essence of a mantra is the subtle energy embedded in its syllables, rather like the code in a computerized key card. As in the keycard, that energy needs to be activated in order to work for us.

There are two ways that a mantra gets activated. One is through your practice: you repeat the mantra with focus and feeling until it gradually sinks into your body and mind at deeper and deeper levels. The second method, which the tantras agree is not only easier but also more powerful, is to receive a mantra that has been empowered by a teacher or a lineage of teachers. This is like having the mantra activated at the source, because then it is imbued with the effort and the inner experience of the teachers who have practiced with it over the centuries.

The more direct the transmission, the more power is embedded in the mantra. But the transmission doesn’t have to come in the form of a whisper in the ear, as in the old guru-disciple stories. The transmission can be verbal, it can come through writing, or it can be received in a dream or meditation. When you receive a mantra through transmission, the key code has been unlocked for you.

Practicing with a Mantra

The simplest, most basic way of working with a mantra is to combine it with the breath. You breathe in softly, thinking the mantra with the inhalation. You exhale gently, thinking the mantra with the exhalation. If you’re practicing with a long mantra, like Om Namah Shivaya or Om Mane Padme Hum, you might find it hard to coordinate it with your

breathing. One solution is to adjust the speed of your mantra repetition to the speed of your breathing. If you begin by mentally repeating the mantra rather quickly, you will probably find that your repetition slows down automatically as you get deeper into meditation and your breath slows. Another solution is not to try to coordinate it with the breathing, but simply to think the mantra to yourself over and over again.

Many people find there is a lot of power in enunciating the syllables of a mantra precisely and distinctly. But I've always found that the mantra opens up more easily if I don't try so hard to enunciate. Instead I allow a slight slurring, a blurring together, of the syllables. I've noticed that when I repeat a mantra with "hard" focus, trying to keep each syllables separate, I tend to create a sense of difference between myself and the mantra, and this can become a barrier that keeps me from releasing into meditation. In mantra practice, as in any technique, the effort we make needs to be soft and subtle—the effortless effort that we spoke about in chapter 3. We focus, yes, but our focus is not a grasping concentration, not a mental fist gripped around the technique. Instead, we hold the mantra in our awareness with as much delicacy as if we were holding a bird that had alighted on our arm.

THE LEVELS OF MANTRA

As we become more intimate with a mantra, we begin to experience it on progressively deeper levels. A mantra has three basic aspects. On the simplest level, of course, a mantra is an object of focus. It is a thought you can cling to in order to keep other thoughts at bay. On a deeper level, the mantra is an energy that comes from, and connects you to, a specific grace-stream, to a teacher or teaching lineage, or to the energy of a deity. At this level, it channels subtle energy into your system, and functions within you as a subtle force of transformation. On the deepest level of all, the mantra is pure radiance, pure silence, and pure love. According to the Shiva Sutras, this is the *rahasya*, or secret, within the mantra. At its core, a mantra is the light of supreme Awareness itself. The Parasurama Kalpa Sutra, one of the esoteric texts of the North Indian yogic tradition, says Mantra maheshvara, or "Mantra is [a form of] the supreme Reality." In the tantric traditions, mantras are regarded as sound-forms of specific deities. A practitioner will repeat a mantra as a way of connecting with the subtle power personified in a deity form like Durga or Tara. In fact, the tradition says that mantra is actually the most powerful form of deity energy, because it connects to the essential vibratory energy at the heart of the deity form. Certain mantras, however, are said to hold within them the light of the formless reality beyond all forms. Om is one of those, as is Om Namah Shivaya. That's why practice of these mantras can offer such a direct and immediate experience of the sacred. The tetragrammaton, YHWH, sometimes used as a mantra in Kabbalistic meditation, is said to be encoded in the DNA, and to connect a human being to her inborn spiritual essence. Similarly, the breath mantra Hamsa or So'ham, which corresponds to similar mantric sounds found in Hebrew and Arabic, is traditionally believed to be embedded in the subtle cellular structure of the energy system.

HOW THE MANTRA WORKS

Of course, all this is not necessarily apparent at first. When you initially begin to practice with a mantra, you are usually working purely with the syllables, and you seem to spend much of your time in meditation losing track of them. You try to stay with the mantra, but

without even knowing how it happens, you keep finding yourself somewhere else—thinking about the laundry, worrying about what your brother-in-law said yesterday, wondering whether to drive to the city or to take the train. This moment when you catch yourself thinking, however, is a powerful point of practice. At such a moment, there are a couple of possibilities. You could follow the original thought or to let yourself get caught up in an inner commentary on the process—such as berating yourself for thinking—or you could choose to bring yourself back to the mantra. The practice, clearly, is to bring yourself back. Without surrendering to the reverie or getting upset with ourselves for thinking, we just come back to the mantra. After a while, the mantra begins to act as a sort of magnet that aligns their on filings of your scattered attention. This practice of gathering up the rays of our mental energy and bringing them into alignment is referred to in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras as *dharana*, which literally means “concentration.”

At any point in this process, the shakti embedded in the mantra can plunge us into meditation—sometimes right in the middle of a particularly nagging thought! Here is where the right *bhavana* can often help, quickening the mantra energy by adding feeling to your practice.

Someone once told me that the mantra given by her teacher seemed impenetrable to her—“just Sanskrit words with no meaning”—until she was asked to repeat the mantra with the feeling that she was gently dropping the syllables into her heart. That *bhavana* made the mantra more personal for her. She began to notice that when she dropped the mantra into her heart region, she experienced a soft expansion of tenderness there, as if she were receiving an inner caress. Love began to arise in her. The mantra syllables seemed to merge into her heart.

For this woman, a devotional *bhavana* had helped open up the mantra. For someone else, repeating the mantra with the feeling that the syllables pulsate with enlightening energy, or offering the mantra to the inner Beloved, might provide the opening. You could think of the mantra as light or even visualize the syllables in letters of light inside your awareness. If you are a visual person, in fact, you may need to do a visualization as you repeat the mantra before you succeed in opening the mantra for yourself. If you respond more to sound, try having the feeling that the mantra is being sung to you, try to hear it being chanted inside. If you tend to be kinesthetic, feel for the pulsation in the mantra, the energy experience of it. I'm a kinesthetic meditator, and mantra practice only began to work strongly for me after I learned to think of the syllables as energies and to feel each syllable pulsating inside me as I repeated it. Then the energy of the mantra began to open up for me into a pulsing sweetness, a feeling of gathering love.

Eventually, as we become sensitized to the feel of the mantra, we learn how to hold the syllables within our awareness in such a way that we can actually sense the vibration, the throb of shakti, in the syllables. At this point, we begin to learn how to merge our attention into the mantra energy, and, as we do, we feel the mantra beginning to sink through the layers of our subtle being and to affect us at deeper and deeper levels. It moves from the conscious level, where we have to repeat it distinctly with every breath, to amore subconscious space, where we feel the mantra beneath our conscious awareness. Eventually the syllables seem to pulsate with love, with Awareness, with an expansive feeling, or even with light. In other words, we begin to experience a palpable sense of

Presence in the mantra as we repeat it. One of the important Shaivite texts, the Spanda Karikas, refers to that Presence as the spanda (throb)--the original pulsation of divine energy that creates the universe and remains embedded within every particle of it. The mantra is actually one of the main vehicles we can use to become aware of that ground energy.

Once you start to feel that energy, you begin to love repeating the mantra. Like the poet-saints Tukaram and Namdev and Jnaneshwar, whose essential practice was to repeat the names of God, you experience deep joy in simply turning the syllables over and over in your mind.

That experience of an energetic presence in the syllables is a sign that the mantra has cracked open for you and that you are experiencing the real mantra, the inner mantra. Ramana Maharshionce said, "Mantra is our real nature. When we realize the Self, then mantra repetition goes on without effort. What is the means at one stage becomes the goal at another."

This experience can happen quite early in your practice. When you are deep in meditation, you will sometimes feel the mantra dissolving into light, into pure energy, or into bliss. People have "seen" the form of a deity arising out of the mantra. In meditation, one man saw himself riding astride the mantra syllables, which had formed an arc of light that ended in an ocean of radiance. A young woman repeating the mantra So'ham began to hear the mantra repeating itself spontaneously, then felt her awareness open until she experienced herself as pure vastness.

When I repeat the my own mantra with great feeling, I sometimes find that its energy will fill my body, and then seem to turn into a human-sized white lingam—the pillarlike form worshiped in India as a representation of the formless Absolute. Then that form will disappear, and I will be left with a feeling of silent, pulsing presence.

When the mantra begins to reveal itself at the deepest level, both the syllables and the feeling of pulsation disappear completely, and we experience only pure Awareness, the mantra as pure silence. This is a samadhi state—a conscious state of absorption in love, power, and crystalline Awareness.

THE ESSENTIAL BHAVA: FEELING THE PRESENCE IN THE SYLLABLES

Any mantra will work much more quickly if you can remember that the radiance of supreme Awareness is present inside the syllables. This is a core instruction that applies not only to mantra repetition, but also to every practice that we do. It is the ultimate bhava, and yet it can seem quite abstract and difficult to practice at first.

The best way to work with this instruction is not to try to eat it whole, so to speak, but to use it as an invitation to investigate our experience of the mantra. Working with an instruction like "Feel the presence of God, of universal Consciousness, in the mantra syllables" confronts you with the gap between the teaching and your experience. It challenges you to understand how pure Consciousness could possibly be present inside a word. The answer you come up with needs to be a real answer, not just an intellectual formulation. For that to happen, you need to question yourself, to inquire, "What am I really

experiencing? How do I need to hold myself so that the mantra will reveal its inner essence? How can I get deeper into the mantra?"

Holding this kind of awake, contemplative awareness as you repeat a mantra makes your practice very alive. It keeps it from becoming mechanical. It leads to insight. I recently talked to a man who told me that when he first heard the instruction "Feel the presence of the Self in the mantra syllables," it drove him so crazy that he finally began asking the mantra itself to help him out. "What do they mean when they say you are God?" he asked over and over again. One day the mantra answered him. It began to vibrate waves of ecstasy all through his chest. The feeling of ecstasy expanded, and along with the mantra, the man's awareness and his sense of being began to expand outward until he felt as though his body contained a vast spaciousness.

The Kashmiri sage Somananda gave a key instruction on mantra repetition. He said that you should do it with the feeling that you, the mantra, and the goal of the mantra are not different. In other words, it's all about identification. The idea is that you should think that the mantra describes who you are, just the way you might normally assume that your body or your personal history is you. When someone calls your name, you respond. In just the same way, if you identify with the mantra, with the light and transformative energy in the mantra, it shifts you into a meditative state immediately. Again, this instruction is an invitation to contemplation. It is a way to enter into a more vibrant relationship with the mantra. As you think about how to go about identifying yourself with the mantra, you might find yourself discovering a lot about what you are and what the mantra really is. How do you practice identifying yourself with a word? I've asked many people over the years how they practice identifying themselves with a mantra, and I've heard many imaginative responses. One way is to imagine that the mantra is a cloud that surrounds you on all sides. Another is to imagine it as water, or as light, and to see yourself immersed in it. Still another is to bring yourself as energy closer and closer to the mantra until you feel that you are inside it. All of these practices help to open up the experience of repeating a mantra.

Sensing the Mantra as Light

Sit quietly, and begin to breathe with the mantra *Namah Shivaya*. Let your focus be soft, and don't try to control the breath in any way. Breathe in with the subtle thought 'ham' and out with the thought 'so.' (Or simply think 'So'ham, so'ham," to yourself at a relaxed pace.)

Consider that as you focus on the mantra, its syllables are reminding you that you are Consciousness, that in your essence, you are the light of awareness itself. Let yourself take this in. The mantra is calling your name, the name of your true Self. Take a moment or two to feel and contemplate what this means.

Then let go of that contemplation, and simply focus softly on the energy within the mantra syllables as they drop into your inner space.

Sense the energy that pulses within the sounds, and imagine that the mantra syllables are pulsating light. Let the light appear in its own way. It might be golden or white, or you might sense it simply as an energetic lightness. Even if you aren't visual, you can often sense light as an energy within the mantra syllables.

Feel that this light, this energy carries infinite blessing. Feel the light-energy in the mantra syllables pour into and through your body with each breath.

With each breath, let the light energy within the syllables expand. Begin to feel that you are inside the mantra's energy and that the mantra's light is pouring through your body until it fills you and surrounds you on every side, like a river of liquid luminosity, or like a pulsating cloud of energy. Relax into the sensations, taking rest in the mantra as it fills your being.

If thoughts arise—even great insights!—let the thought go as soon as you notice it, and bring your attention back to the mantra and to the expanding sense of its energy and light.