

# Introducing Ann Arbor Kirtan ~ An Ancient Yoga Tradition Combines Satsang, Sacred Music and Chanting

By: Glenn Burdick  
and Dennis Chernin

Photography by Linda Lawson

We are two longtime friends and colleagues. About two years ago, we decided it was time to share our mutual passion for meditation, mantra and Sanskrit chanting with the local community. Out of this vision, Ann Arbor Kirtan was born. There have always been wonderful local spiritual groups who practice kirtan regularly. Our vision moved us to create an opportunity for the many people who love chanting and want even more opportunities to chant, or who may not be affiliated with such a group or who prefer to remain outside of a formal religious organization altogether. We had hoped that experienced chanters, as well as those new to these practices, would feel welcome and participate wholeheartedly, and it appears that this hope is coming to fruition.

Kirtan (pronounced *keer-tahn*) comes to us from India. An ancient yoga tradition, it is one of the oldest sacred music traditions in the world. Recently it has been popularized by such notable people as

### Dennis Chernin

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Krishna Das, Jai Uttal, Ragani, and Deva Premal. Kirtan is a participatory, call-and-response, cross-cultural music experience that incorporates the audience into the event. Musically, Ann Arbor Kirtan combines Indian and western instruments and melodies, including bass guitar, guitar, dulcimer, keyboard, cello, tambura, harmonium, flute, cymbals, tabla, and an assortment of other drums.

Kirtan is a participatory and cross-cultural music experience in which the participants are of equal or greater importance than the musicians and chant leaders. Kirtan involves satsang, a Sanskrit term meaning where people gather together as a community to remember, to turn inward and to help each other find our own inner path. Using ancient Sanskrit mantras and repeating them over and over, kirtan calls upon universal energies which serve to quiet the mind and bring us back to the center of our being.

Kirtan practiced over time can lead to a state of unity and deeper connection with oneself, one's community, and more expanded states of consciousness. The chanting is



Ann Arbor Kirtan members (left to right): Atmaram, John Churchville, Judy Piazza, Dennis Chernin, Madhavi Mai, Glenn Burdick, Rosanne Emanuele and Karen Levin.

quieting, meditative, and at the same time moving and exhilarating. Although the language of kirtan is often in Sanskrit, the true language of kirtan is universal, because it is a language of the heart. Thus, kirtan is part mantra and nada yoga (yoga of vibratory frequency and sound) and also bhakti yoga (yoga of devotion and the heart).

Chanting is a form of spiritual self-expression. The individual chanter expresses who they are in that moment, giving themselves wholeheartedly to the chant, and in turn opening their heart and moving their personal process forward in a significant and powerful way. You don't have to be feeling blissful or be a 'true believer' to experience this. One can simply participate as an experiment and see for oneself.

Ann Arbor Kirtan is a not-for-profit organization of volunteer musicians and singers, coming from a variety of yogic disciplines and professions, who engage in chanting as a spiritual practice. Each of us has had some kind of direct experience of the power of mantra and chanting, and through this became committed to including chanting as part of our regular spiritual practice.

We started Ann Arbor Kirtan simply because we love to chant and wanted more opportunities to chant with dozens of others on a regular basis. We have always felt supported and inspired by the beautiful instrumental music of chanting and wanted others to feel supported and honored in this same way. For years, various of our members have been profoundly moved by the authentic chanting offered within such religious/spiritual organizations as the Siddha Yoga Meditation Center of Ann Arbor and the Amma group. We are in no way seeking to replace the great ongoing work of these communities. We are simply sharing what inspires us with as many people in our community as possible, including those who would otherwise not know about or get to experience Kirtan.

We did not come together for the purpose of performing to an audience. In fact, we've done everything we can think of to minimize the separation of the chant leaders/musicians and the participants, and still maintain enough structure for it all to work well. Participants are offered chanting sheets with the Sanskrit words and English translation,

We include a number of chants that anybody can readily join in on, though it can take a little while for a newcomer to get comfortable with the pronunciation of a chant or two. However, one can always just close their eyes and meditate on the beautiful melodies, instruments and voices in the room.

The bottom line is we are a group of individuals from various professions who felt, 'if we build it they will come'. Happily they have! Recently after one of our monthly Kirtan nights a young couple new to chanting was overheard commenting, 'this is such an amazing way to spend a Friday night!' Well said! Chanting is a moving experience that is easy to do, requires no special equipment, is not weather dependent, and it's free! What's not to like?

Next events:

Fridays April 20, May 18, June 15, July 20, August 17, 2007  
7:30-9:30 PM

Friends Meeting House 1420 Hill St. Ann Arbor, Mi, 48104  
Call: 734-973-3030  
www.kirtanannarbor.org



### Glenn Burdick

The practices of working with mantras and chanting are as powerful and effective today as they were a thousand years ago... In my experience, losing oneself in the mantras and the beautiful melodies of kirtan can bring us to into direct contact with our inner self. Once a person has this experience they just can't get enough opportunities to chant!



Madhavi Mai

Kirtan is a form of prayer for me, a direct means for connecting with our higher Self/God. When we sing the divine names, the vibrations are expansive, healing and joyful. Kirtan is a practice that opens our hearts, deepens our devotion and connection with spirit. Like all prayer, it's most powerful when shared in a group.

Today, there are three parts of my spiritual practice: meditation through specific sitting meditative and breathing practices, meditation through the flowing movements of tai chi and bagua, and meditation through the sounds, chants, and vibratory frequency of kirtan and mantra. My hope is to continue to offer the wonderful group experience of kirtan to the community so we can chant and meditate together. My desire is that our kirtan gatherings will continue to grow and attract people from very diverse backgrounds.

of suffering was replaced by peace and gratitude. This is the power of mantra and meditation, and it is something I regularly teach clients in my work as a psychotherapist and in the mindfulness-based stress reduction program I conduct.

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**Madhavi Mai (Chant leader; cymbals):**

As a classical Indian dancer (in the Bharatanayam style of Tamil Nadu), currently teaching at Oakland University in Rochester, and at my studio in Ann Arbor, I perform solo and with my ensemble, Sadhana Dancers. I'm also a singer songwriter, collaborating with local musicians; and a real estate broker.

**Glenn Burdick (Guitar):**

A living mantra has the power to put us directly in contact with our deepest nature. My first experience of this came shortly after I met my spiritual teacher, an Indian holy

I've been singing kirtan as a spiritual practice since I discovered it in the late seventies, when I lived in Chennai, India. I loved how easy/accessible it was - I could participate at some level, the first time! Kirtan was something I could enjoy and benefit from immediately, that served me well as I trained for five years in Bharatanayam dance - that is complex and difficult.

We interviewed our musicians and singers, asking each to share experiences that brought them to the spiritual practice of chanting. Some of their stories are quite intimate, and we appreciate their rare degree of openness and authenticity. It is quite clear in the reading why this practice became such a central part of each individual's journey. Below are excerpts from the interviews with each member of Ann Arbor Kirtan.

**Dennis Chernin (Chant Leader):**

My journey into the ancient world of yogic chanting actually began a bit awkwardly. As a young physician drawn towards Eastern thought, alternative methods of healing, homeopathy, and art and science of yogic breathing and meditation, I felt paradoxically somewhat uncomfortable and a bit embarrassed about chanting out loud in ancient Sanskrit. What was a nice Jewish boy from Cleveland doing, not only living in a yoga ashram at the Himalayan Institute in the late 70's and early 80's, with my wife, Jan, and my children, but also chanting in Sanskrit with fellow meditation students at the end of a long workday.

And to add to my self consciousness, I couldn't quite comprehend what the orange robed, shaved headed Hare Krishna devotees were doing, who we'd see on the streets, chanting loudly, dancing around, and clanging their cacophonous symbols. Were they doing the same thing that I was doing?

At the same time, however, I loved the Beatle's early foray into Indian music and especially George Harrison's work. I had always been fascinated by the wonderful tones and rhythms of the Indian drum, the tabla. And I felt quite at ease repeating and using Sanskrit mantras in my quiet sitting meditation practice.

Over the years, I began to have some very powerful and life transforming inner experiences of hearing and feeling beautiful inner sounds in my meditation. One early experience that was exhilarating occurred when I was meditating with my spiritual teacher, Swami Rama. After the meditation ended, I continued to hear/experience the seed of all sound vibrations, the mantra OM, deep within my mind for a long time. I felt great ecstasy and total immersion in something much larger than my small self. It was then that I realized the great power of mantra and sound vibration and this has been a guide for me ever since. This experience continues to the present time, when, at times, that same universal and beautiful OM sound spontaneously arises and permeates my consciousness.

I began to feel more and more at peace with sharing these experiences with others. Teaching meditation and participating with kirtan became wonderful vehicles for this. And ironically, while I still dress in western style jeans, sweaters, and corduroys, I find myself enjoying and chanting in large groups, and singing the same kind of Hare Krishna chants I heard on the streets many years ago...

man named Swami Muktananda, in 1976 and received his initiation. He had the rare ability to initiate a seeker rather immediately into the mysteries of the Inner Self. Chanting took place several hours each day in his ashram.

One morning I rushed into the noon chant, and took a seat. The holiness of the chant struck me immediately, and in a few seconds an extraordinary energy began moving up my back and spine and up through my head, to the exact rhythm of the chanting and drumming. My whole body was vibrating with this gorgeous chant. The chant was inside of me, vibrating me and it opened my spiritual heart. I felt ecstatic, yet humble and profoundly grateful. This same experience of chanting continued for quite some time, and chanting or simply repeating the mantra effortlessly brought me into a state of complete relaxation, inner stillness and gratitude. Meditation as a technique gave way to meditation as the experience of simply resting in my true nature.

Over time my experience of mantra and chanting became more subtle, yet to this day it remains the most direct route to my spiritual heart. I have met many people over the years that have had similar experiences.

Recently I was on vacation at a wonderful yoga retreat center in the Caribbean. Some uncomfortable feelings from my childhood began surfacing and were dominating my experience...not at all what I had planned for my vacation! At each of the twice daily meditation periods I would have the same experience. I would sit down with a very turbulent mind, and a body that wanted anything but that. I would expect meditation to be very difficult.

Since I learned long ago to relate to such feelings in a mindful and friendly manner, I was able to release my resistance to them to a great extent, becoming calmly present to the agitation. I would then begin repeating the mantra, and within a minute or two my mind would be completely still, conscious and alert, with not a single thought or fluctuation of mind. The sense

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As a devotee of satguru Amrithanandamayi (affectionately known as Amma), kirtan, yoga and meditation are prescribed daily spiritual practices for me. Our weekly satsangs (spiritual gatherings) are predominantly singing devotional songs in six languages!



Judy Piazza

I would hope those who join with us in kirtan get a sense of devotion, an opening of the heart, a swelling of love as we fall away from the predominant mind influence ... a chance to sing together ... an experience of the power of mantra for personal and planetary change.

The devotional element is not exclusive to kirtan, but kirtan is definitely a form of devotional singing. In this way it's different from popular or classical music, as it's purpose is not entertainment, but "inner-attainment", as our friend Muruga says. I also sing and compose English devotional songs that are no less transformative for me.

The goal always is to heal and celebrate! It would be synchronistic if we could also, through this collective spiritual practice -donate the love offerings to charities that help those most in need. Kirtan is an easy, transformative practice that I hope will benefit all who come to our public kirtans.

**Judy Piazza (Chant leader; dulcimer; percussion):**

My life is my work, my play, my being. I am now living at the Ojai Foundation, in Ojai, CA. where I participate in community who lives close to the land, off the grid, and with a deep vision of indigenous wisdom traditions

pertaining to respect for life of every kind. My work as musician revolves around education, healing, performance, and more, with rhythm and voice being key elements. For some time I have offered Evenings of Devotional Song in Michigan, California and other locations, both solo and with other musicians.

## Introducing Ann Arbor Kirtan ~ Satsang, Sacred Music and Chanting *(continued)*

About ten years ago I became consistently involved in learning the Yoga of Sound, of which kirtan is a part. I have traveled to India with Russill Paul to be infused by the sense of devotion that Mother India breathes.

Kirtan is a spiritual practice for me. The call and response allows us to enter a state of devotion. Because kirtan is sung in Sanskrit, or in Sanskrit influenced dialects, the sounds emanate from an energetic language that has power and can make magic. The influence then is direct, affected by the shape of the sound, the action of the lips, mouth, and tongue, the raga or scale used. The transmission goes beyond our thinking mind, directly into the heart, which can swell in love and devotion. By chanting the divine names, syllables, and phrases, we can change the state of being, we can change the world.

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### Rosanne Emanuele (Response singer)

While singing in children's choir I was surprised by physical sensations of the sung notes vibrating within and wondered, rather embarrassedly, if the Presbyterian kid to the left and right of me was feeling the same thrill. It was deeply personal and enveloping, and so delicious. This was my initial experience of sound drawing me to spirit. And to me this is the value and charm of chanting that sacred sound can draw us to an expanding spirit.

I was blessed to have a father and grandfather with deep rich singing voices. Beautiful music and singing was a valued mode of celebration in our home. Special occasions at our house meant guitar and mandolin playing in the kitchen and several singers opening their throats and souls to Italian ballads and beloved folksongs late into the night. My parents, as newlyweds, sang on the radio and with the Florentine Opera Company chorus in Milwaukee which our cousin founded.

In the 70's while studying yoga and meditation I was again touched by the beautiful rich Sanskrit sounds and was lucky to receive semi-private Indian chanting training for the summer of 1976. Here was another invitation to connect the opening of the throat with the heart and spirit.

Even my profession as an acupuncturist specializes in stimulating that good and toasty vibration within. This is considered the starting point toward improved healthy functioning. I regularly invite my patients, already primed to respond to their own silent vibration, to participate in

the soothing outward sounds of sung Sanskrit as the A2K assembles to collectively chant. I feel chanting has great possibility of connecting us to that opening and calm that we all seek. Since there are a number of spiritual groups in Ann Arbor, I feel Ann Arbor Kirtan can provide a unifying situation for us to join voices in chant and bless one another and our town with monthly healing gatherings.

### Atmaram (Harmonium):

My mother tells a story about how before I could talk I would wake up every morning singing unintelligibly, and when I became a teenager she signed me up for the Youth Choir at our church. I had always loved music and

particularly enjoyed how gospel music lifted my spirits. Around this same time I had fallen from our tree house and fractured some vertebra in my lower back. It was taking too long to heal, so in 1969 I signed-up for a hatha yoga class that was being offered by our local community center. My first yoga instructor was a student of Swami Satchidananda and I was soon going to the Integral Yoga Institute in Detroit for further instruction. It was there that I first experienced the power of kirtan chanting.

When the Om Namah Shivaya mantra rolled off the kirtan leader's tongue it felt like a deja vu, but this was deeper and more satisfying, like a deja vu of the soul. I was overwhelmed by the feeling of contentment and joy and spontaneously began meditating on the mantra. Later I met Swami Muktananda who gave me the spiritual name Atmaram. I moved into the Ann Arbor Siddha Yoga Dham ashram

in 1974 and learned to play the harmonium and tambura, and became immersed in the practice of meditation, mantra repetition, and chanting.

Over the years, as I incorporated these practices into my daily life, I gradually began to feel less like a human being having spiritual experiences and more like a spiritual being having human experiences. Kirtan and chanting scripture became a form of prayer and a recourse for spiritual and emotional healing for me. After my wife was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis I had a profound need for deeper communion with the God and I began to pray to the divine mother on a daily basis. I was re-acquainted with my 'deja vu of the soul' but missed the company of other yogis on the path. With Ann Arbor Kirtan, not only had I found a venue to support my personal practice, but an opportunity to serve to the local yoga community.

### John Churchville (Tabla drums):

I have been playing the tabla drums in AA Kirtan since its first gathering in 2005. Musically speaking, Kirtan at its best is a beautiful blend of Indian light classical and folk with Western new age meditation music. The sound of the Indian instruments like tabla, harmonium, and the instruments is what makes this style of Kirtan so inviting. The music provides the support for the singers and helps to lift the chanting to very powerful levels.

I personally love to be involved with kirtan for the sense of community it creates and also the ability to play very intense, soothing music for 2 hours straight. As the tabla

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player I feel a strong sense of responsibility as the heart-beat of each chant. When the chants pick up momentum, the music must follow and help to push it forward. When this is done successfully, there is an energy that fills the room like no other I have experienced.

### Karen Levin (Response singer):

My first experience with kirtan was at a kundalini yoga class in the early 1970s, when I was in college, and we did a lot of chanting sacred sanskrit sounds, following the yoga postures. I was amazed at how joyful and yet calm it would make me feel, and I was very drawn to this practice. About 5 years later I was introduced to siddha yoga and Swami Muktananda, and chanting took on a whole new meaning. I experienced it as a way to connect with the Divine, or inner Self. I started chanting with a group in Ann Arbor several times a week, and also spent time with the Siddha community in upper state New York, chanting together with up to a 1000 people. It was a very powerful experience for me. Chanting was also helpful at that time, as it



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Karen Levin

In my practice as an individual and family psychotherapist, I find that it is even more important for me to create balance and harmony in my life, through chanting, meditation, and yoga... Ann Arbor Kirtan is an opportunity for others to experience an opening/ expansion of their heart, and feel the joy from chanting together.

was during that period that my father died suddenly. I was able to throw myself into this practice as a way to release the sadness and grieving.

I continue to chant as often as I can, in groups, and also on my own. I find that chanting at any time is good, as well as very helpful when dealing with difficult emotions such as sadness, anxiety or an agitated mind. In my practice as an individual and family psychotherapist, I find that it is even more important for me to create balance and harmony in my life, through chanting, meditation, and yoga. Sometimes chanting can be easier than meditation, to focus on the sound, open the heart, and drop into the experience. It can also be helpful to do before meditation, in calming the mind.

Ann Arbor Kirtan is an opportunity for others to experience an opening/ expansion of their heart, and feel the joy from chanting together. No matter what spiritual or religious tradition one is from, anyone can come and reap the benefit from it. I hope that as many people as possible find out about what we're doing and can come and experience it.

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