

The Practice of Yoga Part 3: Japa Yoga: A Sound Practice

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Mananat-trayate iti Mantrah, by the constant remembrance of the mantra, you are protected from endless rounds of suffering.

It could be said that among all the branches of Yoga, the crest jewel is Japa Yoga, the science of the repetition of mantras. One of the pillars of Yoga for thousands of years, it doesn't require strenuous exercise of the body, mind, or will power. Simple, yet direct and effective, it uses specific sound formulas to calm, clear, and uplift the mind, readying it for the highest spiritual experiences. It can be practiced just about anywhere and at anytime. Japa Yoga is suitable for anyone of any age, and for anyone of any faith tradition.

Mantras

Mantras (literally, to protect the mind) are sound syllables representing aspects of the Divine. They are not just fabricated words used as labels for objects, but sounds heard in deep meditative states by great sages. They are the subtle vibratory essence of things, presented as sounds that can be repeated. In a process that is like tuning a radio dial to receive what the broadcasting station is transmitting, mantra repetition tunes the mind to receive the Divine vibration.

Japa Yoga is based on the science of sound vibration. Sounds have the ability to create or destroy; to soothe or agitate. Many people shudder when they hear a metal utensil scrape the bottom of a metal pan. At the same time, vacationers seek out the shoreline in order to lie back and let the sound of the waves soothe their tattered nerves. Mantras are sounds that calm and strengthen the mind, and for this reason they are ideally suited to serve as objects of meditation.

Students may choose a mantra themselves based on trial and error, or because it is associated with a particular deity with whom they feel a strong connection. For example, *OM Namah Shivaya* is a mantra connected with Lord Siva. However, since the word *siva* represents auspiciousness, the repetition of this mantra is not restricted to devotees of Lord Siva. Mantras transcend these designations. They are sound formulas whose fundamental benefit derives from their vibration, not associated ideas or images.

Some students receive a mantra from a master or adept in whom they have faith. In this case, they put their faith in the teacher to choose for them. The student is still making the essential choice in both scenarios. The difference is that in the former, the student chooses the mantra; in the latter, the student chooses the teacher who selects the mantra.

Japa Yoga is not limited to Sanskrit and Yoga. Repetition of powerful sounds and prayers – *Shalom*, *Maranatha*, and *Ave Maria*, for example - are used in many spiritual traditions.

OM

OM is mantra of mantras, the origin of all sounds. It is the hum of the business of Creation: the making, evolving, and dissolving of beings and objects. You can hear it in the roar of a fire, the deep rumble of the ocean or the ground-shaking rush of a tornado's winds. It is always vibrating within us, replaying the drama of creation, evolution and dissolution on many levels. This hum can be heard in deep meditation; when external sound is transcended and internal chatter stilled.

The identity of sound with the creative force and intelligence of the universe is not limited to Yoga. It is a principle found in many spiritual traditions. The Bible declares, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”* (John, 1.1) The Rig Veda, one of the most ancient scriptures in the world, contains a similar passage, *“In the beginning was Brahman (God) and with Brahman was sabda (primordial sound) and sabda was truly the Supreme Brahman.”*

OM is composed of three letters: A, U, and M (OM rhymes with “home” since the A and U, when combined, become a long “O” sound). “A” is the first sound. You simply open your mouth and make a sound. All audible sound begins with this action. It represents creation. The “U” is formed when the sound rolls forward toward the lips with the help of the tongue and cheeks. This represents evolution. Finally, to make the “M” sound the lips come together. This last sound represents dissolution. So together “A,” “U” and “M” signify creation, evolution and dissolution. The entire cycle of life is represented in these three letters. The same three letters also signify the waking, dreaming, and deep dreamless sleep states. Beyond these three states is a fourth state, the Absolute, the silence that transcends all limitations.

Some of the more widely known mantras include *OM Shanti, Hari OM, OM Namah Shivaya, and OM Mani Padme Hum*. Most, but not all mantras used for meditation contain OM.

Japa

Japa means to repeat. Japa Yoga is an exact science, but simple to practice. It’s just a matter of repeating a mantra while maintaining an attentive awareness of its sound.

A good routine is to sit for at least fifteen minutes, twice a day. A good preparation is to do a few chants or affirmations. Then, watch the breath for a few moments. Then add the mantra repetition to the flow of the breath. The mantra can be combined in any way you find most natural. With practice, it will seem that the breath is repeating the mantra, and you’re just watching. At this point, mantra japa becomes much easier and you will see more benefits.

You can also combine mantra repetition with visualization of one of the higher chakras (heart, or above), or with visualization of whatever name and form of the Divine the mantra is associated with or that is your *Ishta Devata* (form of God beloved by you).

Japa can be done verbally, with lip movement only, and mentally. Repeating it out loud has the advantage of shutting out external sounds and being a little easier to do. As the mind becomes more focused, you can move to repetition with lip movement, and then, finally to mental repetition, which is the most powerful.

You can also perform *Likhita Japa*, writing of the mantra. Keep a notebook for this purpose. Sessions can be organized by time, or by number of pages. Write clearly, mentally repeating the mantra as you go. Don’t look up until you are finished.

You can also do japa while walking. Repeat your mantra with each step in whatever way seems most comfortable. In the similar way, you can repeat your mantra while you chew your food, drive, or prepare to sleep as well. Make repetition of your mantra a thread that runs throughout your day, every day. Gradually, a part of your mind will become anchored in the vibration of your mantra at all times.

Mantra japa can achieve anything. It is a powerful means to Self-realization, it can heal diseases doctors declare incurable, it brings harmony to the practitioner and to the environment, and it burns away ignorance and suffering. The power of mantras is such that even mechanical repetition of has a great purifying and uplifting effect on the heart or the mind.

Practical Hints for Japa

1. Try not to change the tune, and carefully hear each syllable as you repeat it. Pay special attention to “m” and “n” sounds since they help raise the vibration upward to the highest chakra.
2. Use of a mala (rosary) is very helpful, especially in the beginning. Malas usually consist of 108, 54, or 27 beads, with an additional bead (*meru*) that represents the highest truth. As you repeat your mantra, move the mala one bead.

Begin with the bead next to the meru. Hold the mala so that the beads don't touch the floor. Use the middle finger and the thumb of the right hand to move the beads. When you get to the end, don't cross over it, but turn the beads around and begin again. Using a mala helps time your sessions and acts as a release-valve for any restless energy. And by linking the mind to a physical act, it aids in concentration.

Over time, your mala will absorb the vibration of your mantra, and will become a powerful reminder and aid in your yogic life. Malas can be worn around the neck or on the wrist, or kept at your meditation altar.

3. Experiment with different mantras. Over time, your mind may be attracted to one. Take that as your personal mantra. Once you've chosen a mantra, it's better to stick to it for life. That will help deepen your practice more quickly. At the same time, there is no harm in repeating other mantras during kirtan (chanting sessions), or other such occasions. The main idea is that your daily meditation session should be centered on your personal mantra.
4. If, after experimenting with different mantras, you are unsure of which to use, seek out a Guru or Yoga adept who can select one for you. Mantras given by Gurus as part of mantra initiation (becoming a disciple of a master) are enlivened or activated through the Guru, who passes the vibration of the mantra into the student.
5. Face east or north during the practice. This enhances the efficacy of mantra japa by aligning you with the earth's magnetic flows.
6. Maintain a nice even pace when doing japa, not too fast or too slow. If you're a very tired or the mind is wandering a lot, you can repeat more quickly, and if you are agitated, repeat it more slowly than usual.
7. Your personal mantra should be kept private. Casually disclosing it to others who do not share your understanding may prompt interactions that may shake your faith, or disturb the faith of another.

Persevere in your practice. You will soon experience the indescribable joy and peace your mantra can uncover: The peace and joy that is your True Nature.

OM Shanti, Shanti, Shanti.