

# KIRTAN - FROM THE HEART

(SADHANA SERIES)



Swami Suryadevananda



[suryadevananda.org](http://suryadevananda.org)

## Kirtan - From the Heart

There is a difference between emotion and devotion. We are not focusing on the linguistic point of view but perhaps, it may help if we start right there. Wikipedia defines emotion as, “Emotion, in everyday speech, is any relatively brief conscious experience characterized by intense mental activity and a high degree of pleasure or displeasure” —among other things.

Wikipedia also lists some emotions and we have to question where emotions fit into ‘love of God’? Here again, the word ‘love’ can be looked at similarly and one will find just as many definitions or possibilities.

Both words, ‘emotion’ and ‘love’ seem to be defined in the framework of duality. We are not getting technical here but it is useful to put things into context as once we start on the wrong foot, we will veer on a tangent that will strengthen with practice and be just another mechanical activity that goes around in circles.

Devotion is something quite different. To be devoted to in the yoga sense is ‘*to give oneself to*’. An important difference between emotion, love and devotion is; emotion and love seem to include getting and perhaps preserves the sense of self in order to give but also to receive. Devotion however, is the voluntary and wholehearted offering of oneself to the Lord. There is no thought of ‘getting’ in devotion and perhaps, that is also what it means ‘to be devoted’.

Kirtan is an excellent way to create this channel for the flow of the heart. To avoid mechanical singing or chanting, we must be able to start the flow of devotion and at the same time, be vigilant so that we do recognize the rise of other mental surges but do not identify with them.



### Emotions

affection • anger • angst • anguish •  
annoyance • anxiety • apathy • arousal •  
awe • boredom • confidence • contentment  
• courage • curiosity • depression • desire •  
despair • disappointment • disgust • dread •  
ecstasy • embarrassment • envy • euphoria •  
excitement • fear • frustration • gratitude •  
grief • guilt • happiness • hatred • hope •  
horror • hostility • hurt • hysteria •  
indifference • interest • jealousy • joy •  
loathing • loneliness • love • lust • outrage •  
panic • passion • pity • pleasure • pride •  
rage • regret • remorse • sadness •  
satisfaction • schadenfreude • self-  
confidence • shame • shock • shyness •  
sorrow • suffering • surprise • trust • wonder  
• worry • zeal • zest

Wikipedia

## Kirtan

Kirtan, is 'singing the Lord's Names' to a simple and melodious tune. What are called 'ishta mantras' like 'Om Namah Shivaya' and 'Om Namo Narayanaya' among such other ishta mantras are usually included in kirtan though many other short mantras are also sung.

Let us look closer at '*Om Namah Shivaya*' for instance. Om – represents the Absolute; Namah - means among many things 'salutations unto' and Shivaya – represents 'The Lord'. Salutations to the Lord – is a simple meaning of this mantra without adding any mythological reference or context. The uniqueness of kirtan is that there is no mention of 'I' am singing this to 'you' etc., with 'Om Namah Shivaya' – Salutations to Shiva – is what is sung and when these words are said with feeling, the seeker loses track of himself while still maintaining full alertness and vigilance. This is key – not to just lose track of oneself as that can happen in many different ways but to still be fully vigilant where one is conscious of all other rising thoughts but steady in one's faith so one does not get mixed up with other thoughts. Gradually, the seeker will feel himself clearly distinct from the rise and fall of thoughts and eventually from the thought stream which will just flow by till it weakens further.

Try to have a small time gap between say your work or any activity which can stir up the mind and use this time to have a cup of tea and freshen up while you also watch the mind. In this period, don't read or play with any devices – just sit, have some tea if necessary and breathe as you let all other thoughts go by not entertaining them. If thoughts rise, simply bring to mind that *now is not the time* and all matters will be addressed later and relax. This will slow the activity of the mind as it will get the signal that you are about to shift gears and it can slow down. Back to the practical side: Om Namah Shivaya is one of the mantras used and the seeker sings this to a simple melodious tune. Initially, you can use several mantras for kirtan. Rotating the mantras will help keep the mind fresh and reduce mechanicalness. As you progress, you should be able to sit for a while with just a few mantras and later, with just one.

**Sitting:** Your prayer and meditation area is the best place to sit, keep it clean, simple and clean. Try to make the practice of sitting in the same place daily. Have a good sitting posture in which you can sit for the duration without moving (much initially). Light some incense or a candle as a reminder to yourself of your aspiration and begin. Set the timer, have a couple opening prayers and begin.

**Volume:** You can start off a little louder but lower the volume to a little above audible to encourage the mind to listen keenly. When the attention is keen, keep the volume low – just above a whisper and when the attention wanes, increase the volume a little to remind the mind 'this way, not on other thoughts'. As you progress, you can use all three modulations: aloud, whisper and even mental as you feel your concentration rising or slipping. Even though you may lower the volume, make sure the mantra is sung clearly and heard clearly – this will create an

activity loop or track which will contrast other thoughts and keep you from getting mixed up with them.

**Tune:** There is no right or wrong tune at all. You have to be careful that you are not eating the words when you lower the volume – pronounce each word fully, even when you lower the volume. This will keep the mind from drifting or getting into the mechanical mode. The correctness of pronunciation is not important but clarity is. So, we are singing this beautiful mantra but we are also asked to listen to it carefully. Why listen to it? Why listen to something that we ourselves are singing? We already know what we are singing so what is the point in 'listening keenly' to the mantra? Listening very keenly introverts the mind unto itself, especially so when you lower the volume to barely audible but still clear. This prepares the mind very nicely for meditation as one learns how to keep the mind on itself while not being distracted by rising thoughts though aware of them.

**Devotion:** With all this theory, you may question the need for devotion in all of this. Friends, it is very important to have real devotion to the chosen ideal and the mantra which reaches within to it as real love or devotion alone can give what you are doing a stronger current and this will keep you from getting mixed-up with other thoughts that may be quite strong, having strengthened over time and use. I am mentioning this just before practice so that you can keep real love for the chosen ideal or devotion close and not make the means more important than the end. The means will itself blossom into the end – there is no difference. Treat the means with the love and ardor you may have for the end and you will be tread with sure steps.

**Let's begin:** The next two pages (5 & 6) are the actual practice of kirtan so set the timer and let's begin. Now is the time to pray!



## Now Kirtan

### Some mantras for kirtan...

1. Om Namaḥ Śivāya (*salutations unto the auspicious Lord*)
2. Om Namō Nārāyanāya (*salutations unto the Lord*)
3. Harī Nārāyaṅ (*...the Lord with and without form*)
4. Nārāyanā, Harī Nārāyanāya (*...the Lord with and without form*)
5. Śrī Rām, Jai Rām, Jai Jai Rām Om  
Śrī Rām, Jai Rām, Jai Jai Rām Om (*salutations unto Lord Rama*)

6. Haré Rāmā, Haré Rāmā, Rāmā Rāmā, Haré Haré  
Haré Kriśna, Haré Kriśna, Kriśna Kriśna, Haré Haré

*(Maha Mantra – this was Swami Sivananda’s favorite mantra for kirtan. Being long, it also requires deeper breathing, even if you are chanting it in two breaths or with a break and this stretching the breath brings a little pranayama into play which weakens distractions by making less energy available to them.)*

7. Hé Bhagavān (*O Lord*)
8. O my dear Lord, O sweet Lord, I am Thine, all is Thine... (this can be sung to the same tune as Hé Bhagavān above it.)
9. Hé Bhagavān (*O Lord – repeated again in closing*)



## Universal Prayer of Swami Sivananda

O adorable Lord of Mercy and Love!

Salutations and prostrations unto Thee.

Thou art Omnipresent, Omnipotent, Omniscient;

Thou art Satchidananda.

(Existence-Consciousness-Bliss Absolute)

Thou art the Indweller of all beings.

Grant us an understanding heart,

Equal vision, balanced mind,

Faith, devotion and wisdom.

Grant us inner spiritual strength

To resist temptation and to control the mind.

Free us from egoism, lust, greed, hatred and anger.

Fill our hearts with divine virtues.

Let us behold Thee in all these names and forms.

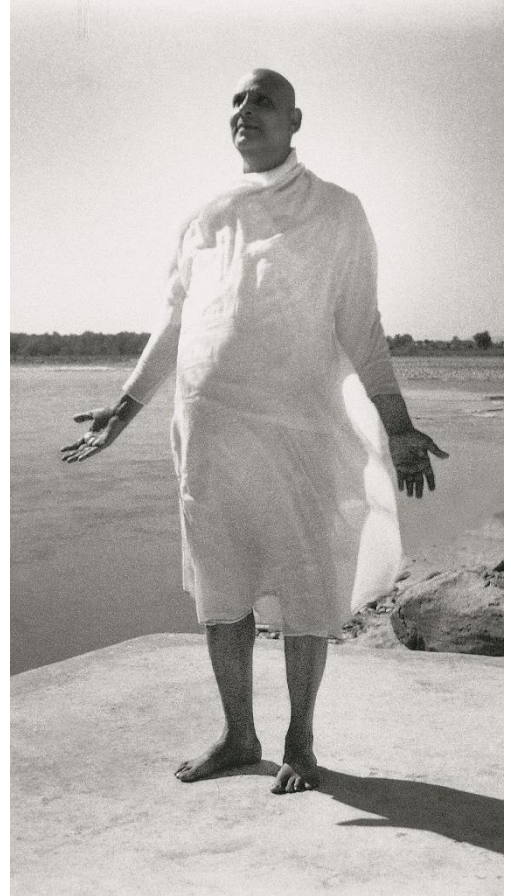
Let us serve Thee in all these names and forms.

Let us ever remember Thee.

Let us ever sing Thy Glories.

Let Thy Name be ever on our lips.

Let us abide in Thee for ever and ever.



Harī Om Tat Sat



(Usually, a single mantra is used as a closing mantra – ‘Harī Om Tat Sat’ includes the name of God with form, the Absolute, and as Auspiciousness.)

## On Swami Sivananda's Universal Prayer



This wonderful prayer is a teaching and a prayer at the same time. It is non-sectarian and can be used in prayer by one and all on any occasion and as frequently as we feel to pray.

The first verse reminds us that it is addressed to 'Adorable Lord' and there should be adoration in our heart. The next few lines tell about God and our relation to him. The God we worship is not someone among many and some place but being omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient – is here and now and does hear our prayer in the words we utter and the feelings we have behind them. This prayer is not a hope or a plea of sorts but a sort of door we open immediately whether we may feel it as such from the beginning or not. Any obstruction felt, is due to the commotion in our own mind.

In the second verse, the seeker asks for what is most important – divine virtues such as: an understanding heart, equal vision, balanced mind, faith, devotion, wisdom, inner spiritual strength to resist temptation and to control the mind. He also asks for help where it matters most – freedom from egoism, lust, greed and hatred as these are the chains that bind very deep. Lastly, he asks for the heart free of all clutter for God to fill our hearts with divine qualities as only like contacts like. In this one verse, we also see all that is important and of real value in life. It is no use to accumulate all the wealth of the world and be poor in these.

The third verse is very important as here, one resolves what one would do with what is sought and perhaps, why it is so important. We are not asking for 'things for our self' but for what has been referred to as 'divine wealth' so that we may constantly remember God and serve Him in all these forms and names.

In these three verses, we have a roadmap of how the spiritual path lays out: recognition of God's Omnipresence; plea for help where it matters most and this is also recognition of the real obstacles on the path; and; all of what we promise to do with what was sought. This prayer is not a mere plea or asking but a contract with God and if rooted in sincerity, light on the path which can withstand any storm.



## Recommended Reading

Life and Works of Swami Sivananda (Six Volumes), published by The Divine Life Society, Rishikesh, India.

**1. Biography of a Sage**

**2. Health and Hatha Yoga**

**3. Karma Yoga**

**4. Raja Yoga**

**5. Bhakti Yoga** (though I recommend the entire series, you will find this volume especially helpful for learning more on the yoga of devotion)

**6. Vedanta** (Jnana Yoga)



**Inspiring Songs and Kirtans** by Swami Sivananda, published by The Divine Life Society, Rishikesh, India. This book may be out of print at Rishikesh so you may have to check some other sources online.

**In the Hours of Communion** by Swami Sivananda, published by The Divine Life Society, Rishikesh, India.



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