

# WHY CHANT?

by Denise Benitez

The pink blossomed tree,  
The bees,  
The hum,  
Are One.

At the beginning of almost every Anusara class you will attend, there is a period of time where you will take a seat, close your eyes, and create a direction for your practice. This brief seated time serves as a doorway; you are leaving day to day, task oriented mind and entering sacred time. In the yoga practice, you will be directing your awareness with skill and wisdom, as opposed to the erratic nature of your daily mind, immersed as it is in the challenges of completing things, schedules, time and space. A quality of distracted accomplishment can seem to dominate most of our waking hours.

At the end of this seated transition, we chant the sound Om and then the Anusara invocation, which is a four line Sanskrit blessing for our practice.

If you are new to yoga, or even if you have chanted the invocation for a long time, you may find yourself wondering why we take valuable time away from our short hour and a half of practice to sing words from an ancient language and a far away time. You may even, as one student said recently, “tolerate it.”

So why should we modern busy yogis sing these archaic and unfamiliar words as we sit in a Seattle yoga studio? What relevance do they have to our lives?

In some ways, we don't even need to know. The sages tell us that the power of the chant itself is enough, that it doesn't even need to be translated or investigated in order for the beneficial power of the words to find their way into our being. Some chants have been sung with such devotion, for so long, that they have a life of their own, resonating in the general sphere of being which we all share. Chanting these potent words is like stepping into an already powerful river of sound and healing.

Sound is vibration, and the ancient yogis intuited that all creation was made of vibration, of constantly shifting, changing, rhythmical harmonies of time, space, matter. A modern definition of matter is “energy condensed to a low vibration.” One definition of music is a “comprehensive system of organized vibration.” When we intentionally intone a sound, such as the word Om, we create a vibration through our bones, muscles, skull, organs. Every part of our bodies receives this wave, and it feels pleasurable and familiar. Perhaps we have cellular memories of the sounds we experienced in utero, or the mysterious phenomenon of sound when we were babies, and not yet initiated into the meaning of words, when the world for us was truly vibration.

The universe itself is humming, apparently in B flat, according to astronomers. Our bodies also are humming, at various pitches for bones, muscles, organs. The rhythms of our bodies entrain with one another, or with the dominant speed of things, so that our heart beats faster when we work on the computer, and slower when we chant together.

When we chant in Sanskrit, students often ask, “What does it mean?” And of course it is important to know the approximate meaning of what we are saying. Yet I also like to ask, when I am chanting, “What does it feel like?” The sound of the chant is different at the beginning of class than the end of class, different on a cold day than a warm day, different when everyone's energy is up or when there is a lull in the air, different when the sun is out or the moon is full.

I like to think that, when we chant together, we gather the tapestry of our individual voices, our scattered energies, our wayward thoughts, and bring them to this time and space, in preparation for practice. We unite with the lineage of yoginis and yogis, who have chanted and practiced for millenia. We also confirm our own community as Anusara practitioners, knowing we can go to an Anusara class anywhere in the world, and sing our “camp song”, as I sometimes call it.

In this way, the chant becomes a yoking device, a method of yoga, of bringing our hearts, minds, bodies, spirits, worlds together. The chant elegantly delineates yoga space from commuting space or work space. It is a tool to harmonize our scattered attention into the here and now; this miraculous moment of human existence.

In a yoga practice, time and space can fall away and the practitioner finds herself in an altered space of deep curiosity and patience. Chanting can be a doorway to this state.

The chant becomes a river we all step into together, one that unites us, comforts us, inspires us. My students have sung it to dying mothers, sung themselves through pain with it, sung it to keep going. They have cried with joy when they have been away from class for a long time and come back, and heard the chant. I have been stunned when I have heard hundreds of Anusara practitioners chanting the invocation at workshops, a perfect blending of voices that pierces the heart of the listener, who is the singer, who is the listener, who is the singer.