

THE WAY OF LOVE: KIRTAN AS WORSHIP

An Interview with Vaiyasaki Das

In 1978, Vaiyasaki Das arrived in Bangladesh. On a boat trip down the Meghna River he chanced upon a local kirtan band on its way to a festival. He decided to follow them and attend that festival. That night his life changed forever. He discovered the ancient Bengali art of raga kirtan and was moved as never before. In this interview, the legendary kirtan singer shares the wisdom of the art and heart of kirtan.

Integral Yoga Magazine (IYM): How did you get your name and how did you become drawn to the ancient Bengali *kirtan* tradition?

Vaiyasaki Das (VD): My guru, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, gave me this name. It is the name of a great sage who attained perfection through *kirtan*. Once I discovered what the name meant and, because I loved music, I felt that was a message there from my guru. Doors opened and I went through them; the bridges appeared and I crossed them.

In the early 1970s, I met some Bengali people and heard their *kirtan*, and it blew me away. I was overpowered and in tears. In that part of India, the mood is more open, more emotionally expressive. I was very drawn to that style. I was living in India in 1975 and studying Sanskrit.

Then a few years later, I heard some Bengali *kirtan* groups and wanted to learn that style of *kirtan*. So I went to Bangladesh and began studying Bengali. I was traveling by boat one day and noticed there was a group of musicians in the boat. I met them and began studying with them. They did fantastic *kirtans*, a type of *kirtan* I had never heard before, and I soon learned that this was the *raga kirtan* style.

IYM: What is the difference between *kirtan* and *raga kirtan*?

VD: It's the emotional content. This type of *kirtan* is based on Indian musical *ragas*, that are very long in length and that evoke the different *bhavas*, or devotional moods associated with the *leelas* (transcendental play) of the female and male dimensions of God. Each *raga* is carefully crafted to bring out a particular emotion such as longing, union, separation and so on. In *raga kirtan* you have a deep primeval relationship of the notes that evoke certain moods and feelings at different times of the day. This type of chanting has to do with emotion, harmony, expression and the beauty of the particular *raga*.

Most *ragas* are female personalities (*raginis*) that are depicted in Indian paintings. If you sing a *raga* improperly, it causes pain to the *ragini*—that personification of beauty, of a devotional mood. It's a deep science based on harmony, sound and consciousness. You connect to that primeval source, like one would connect to a muse in

poetry. You invoke that presence and it becomes so much more powerful. The more you give, the more you receive.

For example, when I begin the *kirtan*, I'm singing. At a certain point, it's not just me; something has taken me over. I'm flowing from the depths of *Paramatma*. When I begin, I'm not connected, but then I connect to that heart current, to the *Hladini Shakti*—the devotional energy, pure love. It's like an electric current. When we turn on a light switch in our home, we won't get light if we haven't paid the electric bill. In the same way, if we are not connected to *Hladini Shakti*, we won't get the same experience.

IYM: Why do you think *kirtan* has become so popular in the West?

VD: Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, who is considered the father of chanting, said this would spread around the whole planet. And now we've seen this prediction come true! When we chant, we attune to the experience that everything is *sat-chid-ananda*. We're connecting to the eternal, full of knowledge and consciousness, full of loving bliss and devotion. We're connecting to the spiritual world.

When we chant Sanskrit mantras, every word is a song and every step is a dance. Bharata Natyam is the way Lord Siva moves. Odissi dance is the way Lord Krishna moves. Every step is a dance, every thought is a thought of love and every act is an act of devotion—this is the spiritual realm that we connect to through the mantra.

When we sing from the heart and we can lose ourselves and feel at one with the mantra. We are no longer the observer watching someone perform, but we are part of the experience. Someone who is an experienced *kirtaniya*, a *kirtan* leader, can lead the audience to places with ease that they couldn't get to on their own. The more emotion the leader puts in, the more those in the audience can lose their inhibitions, open their hearts and just flow.

IYM: What is the motivation for a *kirtaniya*?

VD: How I express it is that we never stop to say thank you to God, the source for the air, for the food, the water, the shelter that protects us. *Kirtan* is my way of saying thank you. We want to give back. What we can give is our love. For me, it is my way of saying thank you through the gift of my song. We are the eternal beloved ones, and we've forgotten we are beloved, but the supreme Lover hasn't forgotten.

Whatever our concept of *kirtan* defines our experience of that *kirtan*. If we only have a small understanding of the purpose of *kirtan*, then we only go to one place. We limit ourselves by what we conceive and understand. If we open to the unlimited infinity of love and devotion, we are able to connect with that. What we think of as reality in the material realm is simply a reflection. Imagine there is a tree growing on the bank of a lake. You see the tree's reflection in the lake, but the tree is upside down. In the same way, this material world is a reflection and it is topsy-turvy. In the shadow or reflection, you see the tree and its fruits, but you can't grab or taste them.

We all look here and there in the material realm for love. But it's not the real thing, the real mango. What we try to do in *kirtan* is to connect with the reality where everything is fully conscious, fully blissful, pure. We're going for the real thing, from the pure source.

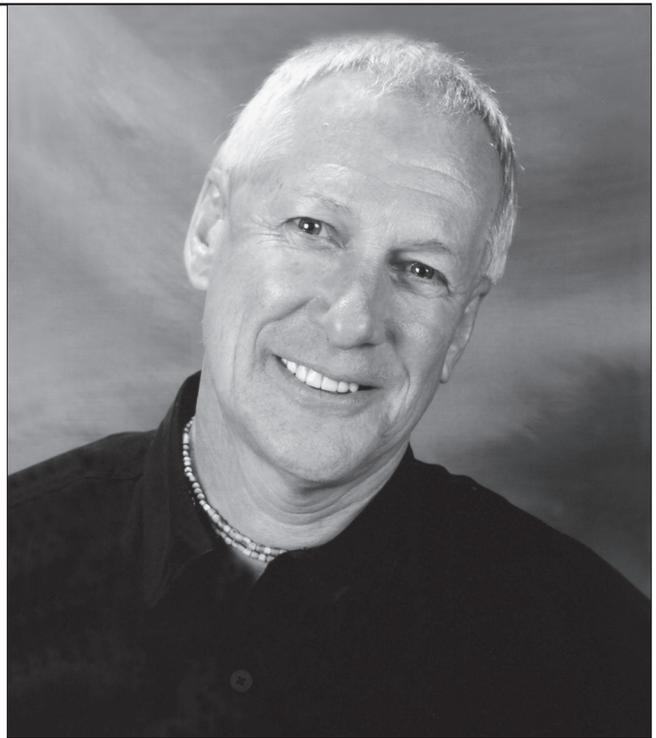
IYM: Would you explain more about the lineage of *kirtan*?

VD: Before Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, there were very strict rules on how mantras were chanted. You could only chant if you were a priest or a Brahmin, and you could only chant in the temple. Mahaprabhu felt that mantras were so powerful that they should not be limited or restricted in this way. In order to not offend the priests and the traditions, he took the mantras, put them to rhythm and music and encouraged everyone in the villages to sing and dance.

He sang with such emotion and feeling that other *sannyasis* felt uncomfortable about it, at that time. They came from a tradition of *dhyaana*, of a meditative repetition of mantra. They questioned, "What is this crying, all this emotion? We are peaceful yogis." Mahaprabhu explained that this is the Yoga of devotion. He explained that when we chant God's names, we are singing from the heart, we are connecting with the divine through the heart where God resides. We go beyond our own selves. It's a transcendental experience. That is why Mahaprabhu said that we don't have to be the greatest yogis to experience this transcendental love.

IYM: In *The Yoga of Kirtan* you gave a beautiful explanation of how *kirtan* is like offering a *puja*, a worship service to one's chosen deity or expression of the divine, which is the essence of Bhakti Yoga.

VD: *Kirtan* is a very powerful way to offer *puja*, as you have to really be there, to be present. Bhakti Yoga, the Yoga of devotion, is not done with hands and legs, but with our consciousness, with our hearts. We are entering into a loving exchange with the divine. During *kirtan*, the different melodies I utilize to sing the holy names are like the garments we use to decorate the deity. The songs are



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like colored silks that make the holy name more beautiful. The different rhythms of the drums are like ornaments—the bracelets, pendants and jewels used to adorn the deity—which make the name more attractive. The water offered is the emotion of the heart, the tears that flow.

When we do *arati* during a *puja*, we offer the ghee lamp and camphor to God. During *kirtan*, we offer the flame of our devotion. When we are devoted to something we give our complete energy, consciousness and attention—that's the flame. During a *puja*, we would decorate the deity with flowers and offer flowers in worship. In *kirtan*, the flower we offer is the flower of our life. We give our life by surrendering to the process of chanting. As we chant more and more and become more awake, we're offering the flower of our blossoming realization.

The nectar we experience during *kirtan* is not experienced just by the chanter but also by the deities who are receiving the *kirtan*, because it's a reciprocal relationship. Lord Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita*, "As you approach Me, I reciprocate accordingly." This means that if we approach God ten percent, God gives us ten percent. However, the ten percent that God gives is more! If we give 100 percent, God reciprocates with God's 100 percent. Isn't that a good deal for us?

Vaiyasaki Das is a master musician, kirtaniya and devotee. He has recorded numerous CDs of the powerful raga melodies from the Bengali *kirtan* tradition, which he chants in Bengali and Sanskrit. He travels the globe leading *kirtans*, conducting *kirtan* workshops and retreats, as well as tours of holy places in India. For more information, please visit: www.kirtan.org