

MASTERS OF THE MIND

by Linda Holt, Yoga Journal

MANTRA: THE ART OF SOUND AND INNER SILENCE

An interview with Sri Shyamji Bhatnagar

by Sarida Brown

For the last 40 years, Sri (Shyamji) has taught Chakra InnerTuning, his method for psycho-spiritual growth based on the ability to balance the chakras with sound and melody.

SARIDA BROWN: What is mantra?

SRI SHYAMJI BHATNAGAR: Mantra really has two functions, one is to expand the mind, and second is to go beyond it. Mind is a very strange phenomenon in the sense that it functions with the energy of ego and as long as we keep on identifying ourselves with the mind, whether it's a thinking or a feeling mind, We function within the realm of ego, and as you know, all the great literatures of the world suggest that ego has to be surrendered. I have to diverge a little: many people who have not matured - meaning, their ego has not matured use a spiritual lifestyle to hide behind, instead of confronting the fact that they have not matured yet. The mind plays games, you see, and we really have to be able to analyse our own mind, otherwise we will succumb to some of the spiritual disciplines prematurely, and we will never be able to follow them to their depth.

I will give you an example. There was a twelve year old boy who read somewhere that if you breathe two breaths per minute you are in the state of meditation. So he sat down and put a watch in front of him and practiced a little and started to breathe two breaths per minute. When he was able to do that for five minutes he went to a great master, and told him that he was able to breathe two breaths per minute: 'Can you give me a mantra so I can meditate with it?'

The master knew what was going on, so he told him to just sit down and not think of monkeys, and he would be able to meditate. So the little boy went home and sat down and decided not to think about monkeys - and guess what? All he saw was a tree, with monkeys in it. He went running to the master saying 'Master, Master, I can't help but think about monkeys'. So this is an example of a master not giving a mantra to somebody who's not ready for it. Of course there are mantras for twelve year olds which he could have given. But he wanted to let him know that his ego had not matured yet, that he was aspiring to something that he was not ready for, and doing it for his self image, to impress others. Eventually the master taught him a mantra for his age, and actually he went on to be a very good yogi. As I said, the function of the mantra is two-fold: one is to expand, and the second is to go beyond the conditioned mind, that is a spiritual use. I have expanded upon the chakra system that has existed in India for thousands of years in such a way that if you make a study of chakra psychology in depth you can analyze your own mind in a way that will tell you where you might be hiding behind its nooks and corners.

Mind always thinks in terms of contentment or discontentment. So when you wake up you have a list of priorities to meet. That's what we do every day, whether our priorities are at the small village level or an international level. All the priorities deal with either the first chakra mind, livelihood; or the second chakra mind, relationships and business; or the third chakra mind, somehow maintaining your power and your control; the fourth chakra mind, helping people; the fifth chakra mind, creativity, communication; or the sixth chakra mind that wants to meditate; or the seventh chakra mind that wants to be with its own divinity, withdrawn from the world, as happens in sleep.

All these minds make demands on us, although in many of us some of them are not yet functioning well, because the lower chakra minds have to be somewhat contented before the higher chakra minds will

come into play. The duty of the master when they see a student is to give them the appropriate mantra, because one mantra is going to do miracles for one person, and another mantra for another person that's why there are millions of mantras to choose from.

Then there are different types of mantras: ceremonial mantras; functional mantras for the society that are done at work, marriages and deaths; and devotional mantras to get into the mood of spiritual ecstasy.

SARIDA BROWN: You are especially known for your chanting. What is the power of sound that you bring through the singing of the mantra, and that you teach your students?

SRI SHYAMJI BHATNAGAR: I don't sing, 1 chant: there is a difference. Most singers from whatever tradition, when they sing, quickly breathe through their mouth in order to continue the melody or the improvisation, and then they release the air slowly to sing as long as they can within the breath that they have.

There are two types of chanting - one is devotional chanting, and one is chanting to internalize your senses to experience your own divinity. When you have concepts of the divine that is outside yourself, those concepts are based on religions. I make a clear distinction between spirituality and religion. You can be religious and spiritual, but you can be spiritual without being religious, because ultimately we have to accept that the divine is omnipresent and doesn't come with a beard or a veil - if there is a veil, that's our own mind that we have to clear so that the veil is lifted, and that can only happen if we go searching inside our self. But in the beginning people are very social, they like to do things together, and therefore there are churches and mosques and all kinds of religious places where people sit and the priest comes and ordains and talks and gives wisdom, but that's all to maintain a social order. Maybe we need that for many lifetimes, and then in some lifetime we realize that this search has been just like that of a musk deer. The great yogi sufl poet, Kabir, who's my favorite of all Indian poets, says we are like a musk deer looking for the source of the beautiful aroma that's in fact coming from his own navel, and he's searching for it outside and gets stuck in some bushes with his big antlers, and dies. Kabir says that's just like people, searching for the divine outside, while it has been inside all along. Modern scientific theory informs us that the human brain is composed of two distinct hemispheres: one governing logical and verbal expression and one controlling intuition and aesthetics. In India, this concept has been understood for thousands of years. Two masters of Tantric Yoga -- the yoga which uses symbols and sacraments to lead to liberation from the chains of "maya," the illusory phenomenal world -- were interviewed by Yoga Journal. Working together, but taking opposite approaches to the same goal, these modern sages combine the wisdom of western psychology with the traditional practices of India to help men and women find meaning and purpose in their lives.

According to Harish Johari, India's foremost exponent of Yantra Yoga, students of Tantric Yoga who have devoted their energies exclusively to the practice of mantras (the repetition of certain sounds which lead to higher consciousness) may have been missing an important part of their training.

Johari says the sound patterns of mantra, so conducive to states of peace and awareness, are best balanced by the practice of Yantra Yoga, the yoga of visual symbols. During one of his rare visits to this country, Master Johari, who is also internationally known as a sculptor, author and poet, conducted a workshop in the Princeton, N.J. branch of SRI (Self Research Institute) Center International. On a bright winter day, he took time during a painting session to talk to Yoga Journal about this important yoga, so little known outside of India.

Incense filled the upper room of the bungalow as the small, dark man in the white kurta spoke. A dozen students sat on the floor, painting mandalas (symmetrical visual images of Indian cosmographies), as the sound of a distant tamboura provided a haunting background for their practice.

"Mantra (sound) and yantra (visual symbols) are the two most basic or fundamental expressions of Tantric Yoga, which is, of course, the yoga which employs our senses to help us develop intuition," Johari said. "When we talk about the intuition, we run into a subject which is very popular with western scientists and psychologists: the two hemispheres of the human brain. To many, this is a new idea! But even in the West, there is a tradition of acknowledging that the brain is divided into two hemispheres: the left, which is the logical, analytic side, and the right, which is the artistic, intuitive side. Descartes said we had two brains: a thinker brain and an artistic brain.

"In India, of course, this concept stretches back many thousands of years. Shiva and Shakti, the male and female ... all the basic pairs of opposites which suggest this bipolarity of the human brain. This is the concept underlying the hermaphrodite, which is such a common symbol in Indian art. When man began using only the logical side of his brain, he relinquished the possibility of wholeness. Tantra is an important way of integrating both hemispheres of the brain once again, and Yantra Yoga plays a vital role in reawakening the intuitive insights which have been dormant because of so many years of analytical thinking."

One of the imbalances, which Master Johari sees in our culture's overemphasis on logic, is the creation of doubt. "Doubt weakens the will," he said, "and has resulted in systems of education, that perpetuate a negative view of self and the world around us.

"Where is the university which will teach us how to become men and women? We know how the Eskimos are living; we know how the people in India are poor and starving," he said with an ironic smile, "but are we taught that the left hemisphere governs rational thought and the right hemisphere controls the artistic impulses? Are we taught what it is to be human ... what time to wake, eat? No, we are taught only to go by desires. I like this, whether it is in season or not, whether it grows in this place or not. I like it. So, people become more and more disoriented and wander further from their real foundations."

Master Johari believes that in all things one should work toward synchronizing the brain. "The right side processes visual patterns and can easily be stimulated by working with yantras," he observed. "The left side is verbal and responds readily to mantras. Despite what you've heard, Tantric Yoga is not something dealing with sexual practices, as has been publicized widely in the marketplaces of America and Europe! Tantra is living practice, bringing the ideals of philosophy into the realities of day-to-day life."

Active as a Yantra Yoga teacher since 1966, Master Johari urges individuals who wish to get in touch with their right hemisphere to "sit down and color yantras! Start with the Ganesh yantra first. Ganesh is the symbol with which we start everything in Tantric Yoga. It is very difficult to believe that someone with an elephant's head and a big potbelly, who looks so funny, can be a god! But what is creating that problem? Your left hemisphere! If you can get around it and start seeing beyond that -- if you can suspend your rational doubt, you are already on your way to spiritual growth. When your right hemisphere is exercised, balance comes in between the two. You get the real message: that energy is energy -- it can express itself in any form."

SARIDA BROWN: You are saying that there is a difference between spirituality and religion?

SRI SHYAMJI BHATNAGAR: Absolutely! Any method that will bring you to go inside will be spiritual; any method that causes you to look for the divine outside is religious. Religion then becomes an institution, and once something is institutionalized it usually loses the spirit.

SARIDA BROWN: Do we find the spirit within through chanting?

SRI SHYAMJI BHATNAGAR: Yes, through sound, through breath. The more relaxed you become, the less breath you need. When you are excited you breathe fast, and when you calm down, the breath rate reduces. In Microchakra Psychology™ we say if you are breathing 16 breaths or more per minute, you are functioning from the first chakra mind; 12 breaths per minute, your awareness is coming from the second chakra mind; 10 breaths per minute from the third chakra; 8 breaths per minute from the fourth; at 5 breaths per minute the fifth chakra mind becomes active, when you are creative and you are, so to speak, in communion. Two breaths per minute comes when you are in the state of meditation. Then sometimes you don't appear to breathe at all, and that is the state of samadhi, in which you are totally unaware of the outside world, and you are absolutely merged into your own source within yourself I am so grateful to have been born in the culture where these concepts existed and I was fortunate to meet an extraordinary man when I was twelve years old who taught me these things and has influenced my whole life.

SARIDA BROWN: So breath carries our consciousness?

SRI SHYAMJI BHATNAGAR: That's right, it actually energizes our awareness. I save the word 'consciousness' or the divine. I prefer to use consciousness I instead of the word 'God', because consciousness is omnipresent. You can understand the whole theory of creation if you start with the point of consciousness, rather than those denominational stories of creation that first there was a God, so now the rational mind will say 'If first there was a God, then who created God?' so that becomes a problem to solve. But nobody has a problem with consciousness, because consciousness just is, and whether you believe in a doctrine like reincarnation or not is perfectly fine. Consciousness is going to be here. When this universe was not here, consciousness was still here, and when the universe will be gone, consciousness will still be here, so this creation is just a phase in time, and time is a construct of mind.

SARIDA BROWN: So, when we use the word 'consciousness' in place of God, it doesn't divide people.

SRI SHYAMJI BHATNAGAR: That's right. Otherwise people will fight over Allah and Ram and God. I think it is basically for religious reasons that people have wars, or in the past it has been like that. Now, industrialized nations can start a war because they want the minerals from a country and they don't want to use up their own resources until they have exhausted the rest of the I poor world'.

SARIDA BROWN: So, this is another religion?

SRI SHYAMJI BHATNAGAR: Yes, it's called power religion!

SARIDA BROWN: We've talked about mantra, breath and consciousness. What about sound?

SRI SHYAMJI BHATNAGAR: When you hear the word 'sound', you probably think back to when you studied physics at school, and you were taught that when the tuning fork vibrates, sound travels through the air to our eardrums and that's how we hear things. That's partially true, but in the science of

mantra, which is also a science of sound, we believe that sound is the cause and not the effect of vibration. In the mantra system there is a silent sound which seems like a contradiction in terms, but there is a silent sound: our thoughts have sound, our feelings have sound, we think in terms of sound, words are sound and it's only at the level of their delivery that sound becomes audible, otherwise the sound is silent. If it wasn't so, how could there be people who can hear your feelings and your thoughts? I know many people who do that.

Thoughts and feelings are all based on sound. In mantra we use the audible sound to tune into our own silent sound, that is the function of mantra. In Sanskrit, an ancient language of India, manna means 'mind', and 'man' is a being who has a mind, and mind is restless by nature. Until all seven chakra minds reach a level of contentment, this restlessness is not going to go away. Mantras are designed so that, temporarily, any chakra mind can experience a sense of gratitude, so that this restlessness stops for a time and you can be spared to meditate for a while. Then when your meditation is over, you can tell from the first thought that comes to you which chakra mind your awareness has been pushed into. But you have to be able to look at yourself objectively to do this, and it is a difficult task without a teacher who has been able to do it for him or herself.

So for this function of sound, how the sound is delivered is very important: when you are breathing 8 breaths per minute the effect of your mantra chanting will be different from when you are breathing 3 or 4 breaths per minute. There are also many other factors that contribute to the effectiveness of a mantra.

SARIDA BROWN: Could you talk about the relation between the sound that we express individually, and cosmic sound?

SRI SHYAMJI BHATNAGAR: Cosmic sound is the sound of fundamental or primal stress where the creation separated from the stasis. Consciousness at that stage was in the state of stasis, and sound in the state of stasis is a silent sound. But within the stasis there was the life force called prana in an unmanifest state. As prana separated from the stasis, that 'crack in the cosmic egg, created the audible sound. Now whether you call it the Big Bang, or a small bang, or the Word, or whatever, it was sound that caused the creation to take place because audible sound creates akasha, as it is called in Sanskrit it has been poorly translated as 'ether'. Sound produces ether, and without ether there would be no space, and there has to be space before creation can begin, and before light can appear. Sound therefore is the primary factor.

The moment prana separates from the stasis, it is what we call the female, creative principle to a Hindu, stasis is masculine. There is prana everywhere, in the galaxy, in an atom, and you can dissect it and do anything with it: you can't kill the prana, it can only be transferred from one place to another. From the ether comes the air, and there can be no movement without air, and then fire, and with the fire cooling down come the waters and then from the waters comes the earth, and then the creatures of the earth. But we as consciousness have not just evolved on earth; we as consciousness were, even in the state of stasis so why do we identify with this body created from the five elements? This body is only a case in which I live, and I also live in my house, yet I don't identify myself with my house. That's the difference between whether you are a physical being or a metaphysical being. All our lives we train ourselves to be physical beings, and then when the spiritual mind opens up, it says 'Hey, but you are not just a physical being, there is something more to you', then you have to find the tools to define 'Who I could be if I am not this body?'

There are three desire principles that human beings go through, if they discover them all in one lifetime. One is that 'I am this body, and I receive the information through my senses, and I do my best and that's all there is'. The first three chakras are associated with this first desire principle. The second principle is that 'I am very fortunate to have my first, second and third chakra needs met, I'm very grateful for that and I'd like to help other people so they can be as well as I am'. The third desire principle is 'But what is this universe? Who am I? That is the spiritual need. So in the second principle is the point of view of religion: 'You. Not me, but You, A Lord'. But in the third, 'If the Lord is in me, then who am I calling on all the time in the outside world? Why don't I have a taste of it myself, because that might be what people have been calling enlightenment in many cultures, or Nirvana or Moksha. But religions don't like that third desire principle, because it shakes the power and the politics of the politicians of religion, so that is why yogis and sufis had to extricate themselves from societies and live outside on the periphery, to do their own spiritual work.

SARIDA BROWN: So through mantra and sound we come to recognize who we truly are?

SRI SHYAMJI BHATNAGAR: Yes, we can, and there are not too many other ways that are so far known to mankind.

SARIDA BROWN: You speak of akasha as a principal state in the universe, that is created by d sound. What is akasha, and how is it relevant to us?

SRI SHYAMJI BHATNAGAR: Akasha is the fifth element. We all know about earth, water, fire and air. But for all these to be able to exist, there has to be akasha. The densest meaning of akasha is space, which is everywhere, but there are different qualities of akasha. Sound produces akasha. that's why I mentioned that there was a silent sound. We produce akasha by the offering of our sound.

In the stasis - and with the movement of the prana, that sound became audible, and that audible sound then creates audible akasha. That audible akasha is what you hear when you go into the space. It can be so loud that if we heard it our ears would become deaf in an instant.

When we chant or speak, we create akasha. The meanings of the words are travelling in akasha, and you transmit akasha as you transmit air which is the carrier of the sound. There is fire in the sound also, the warmth that you hear, and there can be a flow, and you can also hear the rhythm, so all five elements are present everywhere, in different proportions. This body is basically made up of what is between the molecules. When you look at bones or crystals, which are solid, the spaces between the molecules are so small that the molecules seem to be sticking together; then look at flowing water, the molecules are far apart from each other; in fire they're even farther apart; in air they are even farther apart; in space there are hardly any molecules, because it's all space. So akasha creates more space between the molecules that we are made of, that we are. The more space between your molecules, the more flexible your body is, the more flexible your thoughts are, the more flexible your feelings are, the more accommodating you are: it's the lack of space that makes you tight, stressed, and prone to disease. Akasha is an unspoken nutriment.

SARIDA BROWN: So what effect do we have from akasha when we chant?

SRI SHYAMJI BHATNAGAR: We produce akasha by the offering of our sound, and that akasha is then absorbed. Let's say you're sitting by yourself and chanting (and you have learned to chant properly), then you create quality akasha, which you will then absorb and it will make you feel spacious and calmer

inside, your rate of breathing will slow down, your temperature will normalize, tensions will seemingly disappear. We produce akasha with any sound that is made, and there are also negative akasha, for instance the sound of a gun, or an airplane flying overhead, or a truck passing by, or metal colliding ? and people are repelled by the negative akasha they experience. Then there are people you make friends with because you like their voice? they are creating more pleasant akasha. There are singers who create beautiful akasha, but the finest quality of akasha is produced with the mantra. The finest is called surya akasha.

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Sri SHYAMJI BHATNAGAR, internationally recognized master of the ancient science of sound is the founder of the Sound Research Institute (SRI Centre) based in Princeton, New Jersey, USA. He leads special programs in Microchakra Psychology™, human energy studies and InnerTuning® counseling.