

9.
PEACE
+
QUIET

FULL-VOLUME MEDITATION

ONE WOMAN'S SEARCH for PEACE, EQUANIMITY, and a PERFECTLY PRONOUNCED OM.

By Arianne Cohen



AH, MEDITATION. It's so still, so quiet, so ... utterly defeating. For a technology-addled New Yorker like myself, the act of sitting completely still for longer than ten minutes is highly stressful. But what if I added some music to the routine? Could keep things interesting, right? I went to five chanting teachers to find out.

LEARNING TO OM

STEP ONE My first stop was the Iyengar Yoga Institute in Chelsea, where I joined a dozen serene-looking students sitting in a circle. "The only reason to chant is to experience a moment of eternity," said the instructor, Leslie Freyberg. She began to teach us the basic *om*. It starts with a guttural *uohh*, moves to a mid-mouth *ooohhh*, and closes out with a vibrating *mmmmm*. I had no idea what we were *mmmming*, but it all sounded vaguely orgasmic to me. "Feel the molecules dancing through your head," Freyberg intoned. I opened my eyes and stole a peek. She was chanting with her eyes closed, her lips curled into a secret smile that you never see in public. Whatever she was feeling, I wanted to feel it too.

A LITTLE BACKGROUND

STEP TWO Next, I signed up for an hour-long private class with Guta Hedewig, who's the director of programming at Yoga Sutra in Midtown. We sat on pillows facing each other in an empty yoga studio, and in her German-accented voice, she condensed the history of chanting into five minutes. Sanskrit is the language of yoga. Before it was written, people memorized thousands of verses and passed them down over thousands of years

without losing a word. There are only three notes. "I teach people mantras so they can go home and do it themselves. You don't need class every week." Perfect. She picked up a huge book and chose a three-line chant, making me repeat each phrase dozens of times until I got it right. It was not unlike my bat mitzvah Torah training. I went home feeling like I'd accomplished something and taped my chant ("Asato ma sat gamaya...") up at my desk, to sing whenever I'm stressed.

CHANT LIKE A VIRGIN

STEP THREE I desperately wanted to nab an appointment with Vyaas Houston, the guru who taught Madonna to chant, but he informed me that he's going on sabbatical, because he wants to do something else with his life. Go figure. He referred me to his disciple Jo Brill, who runs private, fourteen-hour Sanskrit-alphabet classes on weekends. She agreed to meet me for a quickie one-hour primer instead. The roughly 50 Sanskrit characters, Brill explained, are organized by mouth position, breath, and intensity: *uh, a, ee, eeee, oo, oooo*. It makes English look shabbily disorganized. Going home on the subway afterward, I silently mouthed a Krishna Das song on my iPod. Pretty good, I thought.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

STEP FOUR I didn't realize how pivotal those 50 Sanskrit sounds were until they were ripped away from me at Chakrasambara Buddhist Center, a beige, Buddha-filled loft in Chelsea. At the daily 5:30 P.M. chanting session, a tiny woman with a shaved gray head hit PLAY on iTunes. Speakers blasted a man singing in English, accompanied by many flutes, and for the next 40 minutes, every-

one sat on pillows and sang along. I quickly learned that chanting loses all its charm when you're singing lines like "Oh, glorious and precious root guru, please sit on the lotus and moon seat at my heart." When the recording stopped, everyone's eyes remained closed. We were, apparently, meditating. I was jarred by loud drums. Then more singing. Then silence again. Then a song with a cymbal. I rushed out.

THERE IS NO FINISH LINE

STEP FIVE I hoped for a less agitating experience at Korean Buddhism Jogei Zen Temple, which takes up five floors of a gorgeous brownstone on the Upper West Side. Myoji Sunim, a bald, preternaturally extroverted Korean monk, opened the door and prattled happily with me for a half-hour over tea. She led me to a temple room for her twice-daily practice. Along with five others, I launched into 30 minutes of bowing and minor-key chanting in Korean: *Saaaam-seee jeeee-burrrrr-uuuu baaan-yaaa*. Then we meditated for 80 minutes. Or rather, they meditated. I stared at a wall for a while, until I realized that I could chant the verses Guta taught me in my head silently. That worked—I even felt a few molecules dancing in my head. Afterward, I was escorted to a temple upstairs so that Sunim could "check in on my mind." She gestured for me to bow and sit facing her at an altar. "Who are you?" she asked. I stared blankly. She tried again. I guessed, "Ari-*anne?*" She shook her head. "It's okay. After practice long time, one day you tell me." She put a bell in front of me. "What is this?" "A bell?" She shook her head. "It's empty. That Zen." She rang a different bell, bowed, and gestured for me to leave.

I CAN'T SAY I found that illusive moment of eternity, but I did learn this: Unlike silent meditation, chanting lets me feel productive—I'm simultaneously chilling out and revving up my mind. In other words, it's better than Zen: It's multitasking. ■

WHERE TO CHANT

- Iyengar Yoga Institute,**
150 W. 22nd St., nr. Seventh Ave., eleventh fl.; 212-691-9642; free-\$20.
- Yoga Sutra, 501 Fifth Ave., nr. 42nd St., second fl.;** 212-490-1443; \$100 per hour for private lessons; \$350 for weekly classes, held Tuesdays, February 19–April 22.
- Jo Brill, 646-961-4981;** private lessons, \$100 per hour.
- Chakrasambara Buddhist Center,**
322 Eighth Ave., nr. 26th St., Ste. 502; 212-924-6706; free.
- Korean Buddhism Jogei Zen Temple,**
42 W. 96th St., nr. Central Park W.; 212-665-3641; \$5 suggested donation.