

Chanting: Moved by Love

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Some time ago, my husband, who doesn't practice Zen, asked me why we chanted. I began to regurgitate some Zen teaching on the matter, mimicking Zen Master Seung Sahn's words and left it at that, but my answer wasn't satisfactory to me or to him, and so I began to dive more deeply into this practice handed down to us from our Korean teachers.

I've always accepted chanting as a part of our practice, but in my early practice, chanting seemed secondary to sitting meditation. The sangha chanted, and because they chanted, I chanted. I had favorite chants, of course, and some that were hard for me to sit through initially, but I didn't give the matter any thought. It wasn't until later that I began to appreciate that this vocalization gave a different kind of focus for meditation practice. Zen Master Seung Sahn said that we can chant any syllables, and if we believe in them strongly enough, the chanting will be efficacious for our practice, so it isn't just the words we use, but the chanting, the sounds themselves, the vibrations, and the perception of those vibrations that make all the difference.

Zen Master Seung Sahn had clear teaching about chanting meditation. He said that perceiving our voice is the same as perceiving our true nature. He taught that the perceiving itself is our true nature. Each one of us is not separate from the sound, and thus we are not separate from the universe. Further, chanting can keep us centered, and if we perceive the sound of our voice and the voices around us, then we can keep a mind that is clear and compassionate and open. He spoke of our chanting together and perceiving this one voice as the sound of world peace. As we are not separate from the universe, neither are we separate from one another, and chanting is an action that solidifies that oneness. When we perceive the voices of the world and chant together with the world, then that is already peace.

Dae Soen Sa Nim's teaching points to this wonderful sense of unity we can feel in our experience of the sounds we create together. I personally feel this most keenly when chanting the opening lines of the Heart Sutra in English, when the words are slow enough that our voices have time to find just the right tone to merge with the tone of everyone else. The term for this feeling of unity is *kama muta*, Sanskrit for "moved by love." *Kama muta* is the feeling we get when we have a sudden feeling of oneness or union with others. *Kama muta* happens when our voices blend and the sense of separateness dissipates.

There was a recent video on Facebook of two groups brought together by Koolulam, an organization that seeks to bring Israelis together for mass singing events. In this

video, three thousand Muslims and Jews, none of whom knew each other, were taught the song "One Day" by Matisyahu. In one hour, they were taught the song and the harmonization. It was then recorded and uploaded to YouTube. The results were stunning. Singing together, there was no heartbreak or dissension. There was just the beauty of the music they were making together. There was only the sound of the voices harmonizing together. And as they sang, they began to move to the rhythm of the music, many hands lifted up, and you could see the joy in their faces. The comments on Facebook were full of heart healing and compassion. When the COVID pandemic caused a lockdown in Italy, videos emerged of Italian neighbors coming out onto their balconies and singing together. There was this sense of "We are all in this together." How is it that music can be so powerful in bringing us together?

Singing and chanting together was recognized from the very beginnings of ancient spiritual practices as a way of creating community and bringing the mysterious into our present experience. Nearly every religious tradition utilizes singing or chanting in their rites of passage and rituals of worship. Vedic chants from the Hindu tradition are nearly four thousand years old, making it likely that the Buddha also chanted or was familiar with chanting. And the Buddha's teachings were passed down in an oral tradition—probably through the use of chanting. Throughout the Lotus Sutra or the Avatamsaka Sutra, we find the speaker changing from prose to a verse, or *gatha*. I suspect that these verse forms were used to memorize and chant the sutras, thus passing the teaching from one person to another, one generation to another. We continue that oral tradition every practice when we chant the Heart Sutra.

Although the beginnings of vocalization practice were perhaps intuited by our spiritual forebears, science underscores the reasons why it's been so important in our rituals and forms. Chanting together stimulates the release of oxytocin—a neuropeptide that is sometimes characterized as the "love hormone" and is associated with empathy, trust, and relationship building. The sound of our voices blending brings forth that sense of community, of unity. While we are chanting in unison, we are also in time together—in sync with one another. In the book *How God Changes Your Brain* (Random House, 2009), Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman write about how this synchronicity in moving, chanting, or singing is shown in psychological research to bring forth our innate compassion and empathy for one another. Chanting together in unison creates world peace because we are, in essence, co-creating a milieu in which compassion, generosity, and empathy for others

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becomes a reality.

Chanting also helps us with our sitting meditation. If you've ever just sat down on your cushion without some chanting prior to it, you can tell the difference. I could sense that in my own practice, and so always included one or two chants before my sitting practice at home. At a retreat a few years ago, one of my teachers said that he believed chanting helped us settle into our sitting meditation. The word *settle* caught my attention. Settling in this context connotes "coming to rest" or "sinking into." It was interesting to learn that chanting increases serotonin levels, which stabilizes our mood—lessening anxiety and bringing calmness to our heart and mind. Sarah Keating writes in "The World's Most Accessible Stress Reliever" (BBC, May 2020) that cortisol levels also decrease with chanting, letting our muscles relax and slowing our heart rate. The deep, diaphragmatic breathing often required of chanting increases vagal nerve tone, which slows the beating of our heart and lowers our blood pressure. Because of these physiological changes, chanting helps us come to rest in our sitting meditation practice with more focus and concentration. Newberg and Waldman also point out that even doing a quiet mantra has been shown to activate areas of the brain that decrease anxiety and increase our connection to others.

None of this will help, though, without some effort. Many of us have had the experience of chanting on

autopilot while our brains have taken us in all different directions and then suddenly we're at the end of the chant. Or sometimes we end up repeating verses or skipping verses—and suddenly everyone in the sangha is confused! Zen Master So Sahn in the *Mirror of Zen* cautions us against chanting in a pro forma manner: "Merely chanting with the lips is nothing more than recitation of the Buddha's name. Chanting with a one-pointed mind is true chanting. Just mouthing the words without mindfulness, absorbed in habitual thinking, will do no real good for your practice." As with all meditation practice, we must bring our attention back over and over again to the chant, the sound of our voice and the sounds of the voices around us. Zen Master Dae Bong said, "If there is any kind of thinking, any kind of feeling, or any kind of thing going on, take that energy and put it into the sound. Then there is no thinking at all, only the sound."

Chanting is a wonderful practice both in together action and when practicing alone. The energy of strong together action in chanting upholds us, bonds us, and soothes the heat of our passions and thinking mind. The solitary chants or mantras at dawn bring centeredness to the day. The sound of chanting carries into the room and out into the world, touching lives with the compassion of Kwan Seum Bosal or the blessings of the Great Dharani. ♦

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Amanda Gorman said in her article: "Fear can be love trying its best in the dark." The darkness of desire, anger, and ignorance, of attachment to emotion, can be cut through with practice. With practice, we can reveal our Buddha nature and use it to act—to help.

Ultimately, Amanda realized that there was nothing else to do but to go to the inauguration. She said, "I can't say I was completely confident in my choice, but I was completely committed to it." She made a choice to just do it, 100 percent. Many of us have had times in our lives when there was nothing else to do but have great faith in our actions, even if we were uncertain of the outcome. In our school, we're fortunate to have a lot of resources to help us attain clear direction—online sangha and practice, local Zen centers, the teachings of the Buddha and our teachers, and so on. All of these provide direction so we can see the moment clearly, "try try try" and not be attached to the result. I'm afraid of what the future will bring for my dad. However, practice helps me transcend the fear of what may come, and see in each moment how to help him and our family as we move with his experience. Each time, we see what happens next, and just do it again.

And that is complete.

Right now, we are practicing Heart Kyol Che, our winter period of intense practice. During this time, we can focus on the opportunity to enhance our practice in many ways. One of the ways in which we can practice is being mindful that our job is to help others: How can we use our practice to attain just this moment, so that we can "be engaged," to help? Please keep this in mind as we practice today, and through Heart Kyol Che. And, thank you all for practicing so diligently. ♦

Senior dharma teacher Laura Otto-Salaj began practice with the Original Root Zen Center in Racine, WI, in 1992, and assisted with the start and development of the Milwaukee Zen Group (now the Great Lake Zen Center) in 1993. Trained as a social psychologist, she spent many years at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee conducting research on the intersection of sexual risk behavior, addiction, and trauma, and also training doctoral and masters level students in social work and research methods before retiring in 2020. She currently practices with the Great Lake Zen Center in Milwaukee.