

The Authentic Voice: Yoga for Chanting

If one can focus one's heart on music,
it is just like warming something which has been frozen.
The music's beauty of rhythm regulates the beating of the heart,
which helps restore health of body, mind and soul, and bring them to their proper tuning.
The joy of life depends upon the perfect tuning of mind and body.

Inayat Khan

Western society claims an encouragement of individual expression, yet the practice of assertion is often met with anything but positive reinforcement. As a result, many people are unable to speak (much less chant) with their "true voice". Instead of the sound being ideally focussed at the front of the face, resonating in the sinuses, throat and chest, many people have lived much of their lives speaking from a soft-spoken "retreat point" at the back of their throats. Their voices are therefore based upon foundations of uncertainty and fear. It is unrealistic to expect these ingrained habits to change upon entering a chant circle. Ask yourself the following questions:

Have you ever felt uncomfortable participating in a chant, your throat hurting, running out of breath, or unable to match pitch?
Have you ever had people say to you; "I can't hear you"?
Were you told to "mouth the words" in grade 3 choir?
Were you part of "a child is better seen, not heard," upbringing?
Have you ever felt uncomfortable "speaking your mind"?
Does your voice feel fearful, sound hidden in the back of your throat, or gravely and scratchy?

In a chant circle, the already historically overwhelmed student is asked to learn and provide the following, often *all at the same time*.

- the melody
- the rhythm
- the sanskrit (!)
- the support of the people on either side
- the support of the teacher
- the completion of each phrase without taking an 'extra' breath
- the sustaining of the group momentum and energy
- the "proper" posture

For many, this is simply too much, too fast; the chant also becomes equated with uncertainty and fear, and often, the starting pitch given is perfect for the teacher's voice, but not for many others in the class; the discomfort levels rise. Even accomplished singers require a warm-up for the physical, mental and spiritual voice. Three Ohms, if they are centered at the back of the throat, do not provide the necessary preparation. For many, jumping into chanting in this manner is akin to choosing Urdhva Dhanurasana as the first pose of a Hatha I class.

Asking our students to sing "cold" will often result in the following: "The Singers Heave" comes from the assumption that singing is "difficult; they assume a need for more air and effort. They will inhale too fast, clench the abdomen inwards, thrust the lower ribs forward, lift the shoulders, and sing from their larynx, pushing air past the chords. This causes them to run out of breath, which makes them think they need more air... The voice sounds hard and inflexible. The second I call "The Retreat into the Cave". This manifests through holding the exhale back, ignoring the diaphragm completely; the impetus of the breath and voice abandons its proper "font of strength" position in the lower belly, and the voice sounds foggy and weak. In both

cases, the secondary respiratory muscles (scalenes, sternocleidomastoid, trapezius, and pectoralis minor) will overwork to sustain the group pace, and the primary respiratory muscles (the abdominals, intercostals and diaphragm), will either be constricted or asleep. Tension in the upper thoracic, neck, jaw, tongue and throat will follow; there will be little joy; the chant will feel constricted and fearful, instead of flexible and ecstatic. The following Five Steps for Vocal Freedom may be of some help.

1) Warm up the Breath: The Sigh, and Getting in Touch with your Inner Neanderthal

According to Master Great Nothing of Sung-Shan in the famous *Taoist Canon on Breathing*:

As for the proper inner breath, it is called the Embryonic breath.
Since it is naturally inside you, you do not have to seek outside for it.

In other words, the inhalation must be *natural* and sparked by the body (not the “outer” Will), and the exhale must be *released*, not held back, truncated, or forced. We make sound on the exhalation, which is the Yin side of the breath, however many equate “power” with “male or yang anger” and therefore shy away from accessing their own internal, righteous strength of the exhalation. To sing properly, a balance of masculine and feminine energies are needed. Notice; is the exhalation being truly released, or is it distorted, as if “bumping down the stairs”? Is the exhale drifting all the way to the bottom, or is it being truncated? Does the timing of the inhale feel chosen by the body, or are you using Will to decide when to inhale? Is the diaphragm working naturally, or is it asleep? Feel the instant softness and strength (!) that accompanies a true sigh. Drift into the end of the exhale, and wait for the internal spark of an inhale – let the body breathe you. Be aware though, many vulnerable emotions are hidden at the end of the exhalation; emotional releases may occur.

2) Warm up the Voice: The ‘hummm’ the ‘brrrrr’, the ‘rrrrr’ and the bumblebee

Here we learn to manage our air, create a free vocal mechanism, and place the voice forward. Hum with lips closed: the back of the tongue should be down, and a steady stream of powerful air should be coming through your nose. Intend the sound into your sinuses and sixth chakra; do not force, but *release* it there. Then, make a ‘brrrrr’ with the lips or a ‘rrrrr’ with the tongue. Check to see if the jaw is soft, and the throat is open. How long can you make it last? The bumblebee is made with a ‘sssszz’. If your nose itches or tickles, you’ve got it!

3) Warm up the Body: Connecting breath, voice and body

For those with throaty voices and constricted ribcages (the so-called asthma-band; really “fear armour”), lots of moon salutations and twists, while releasing ‘oo’ or ‘ohh’ vowels along with the sigh exhale. This will eventually free up the diaphragm. For those who are vocally retreating, and not accessing their internal breath power, lots of Sun salutations and standing poses, while releasing ‘oo’ or ‘ohh’ vowels along with the sigh exhale. This will link ‘power’ to ‘voice and breath’.

4) Sound Circle: One Thing at a Time

Now we are ready to sit in a circle and vibrate. To start, stay away from “singing”; first inspire “vocal play”, this is much less threatening. Allow everyone to become comfortable simply making sound. Upward-motion singing for many is a metaphor for “having to try harder in life”, so we begin with exploring our voices with downward spiraling ‘oo’ or ‘ohm’ sirens, owl hoots, deep Neanderthal grunts, all the time listening for open throats. Gradually create a soundscape full of every sound or rhythm imaginable; offer creative suggestions, then let them loose. You

might then suggest that “any movements that grow organically out of the rhythm or sound can be expressed”. Dancing may ensue; we are looking for joy and ecstasy here. They are now re-programming their brains to understand that there are no negative repercussions to come out of “speaking their minds” or expressing themselves openly.

5) Learning the Chant

The students are now vocally and mentally ready to learn a chant. Be aware that each time you add a new component (melody, words) many of the chanters may drop back into their throats if they feel less comfortable, more exposed or vulnerable. If it is a foreign language, teach text first, by itself. Then sing the melody on ‘oo’ or ‘Ohm’. Then put the two together, using each single phrase of the chant as a mantra. Be patient; play until a phrase is past their heads and feeling grounded in their body. When all of this turns to Joy, Confidence and Freedom, the rewards, both in chanting and in their daily lives, will be immeasurable.

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