

Sound for wellbeing - the world of sound in yoga

Sound in the form of tones, mantras / prayers, recitation and singing play a major role in all spiritual traditions and are deeply rooted in yoga. In this interview, Nitya Mohan, daughter of AG and Indra Mohan and experienced yoga teacher, introduces us to the deeper meaning of sound in yoga practice. As a trained musician in Indian classical music, she combines music with yoga, transports and enriches her teachings with her pure mantra singing. She encourages yoga practitioners to use their own voice to deepen the yoga practice.

Anja: Hello Nitya, thank you for taking the time to introduce us to your work with sound in Yoga. Before we start to explore sound and mantras in yoga, can you give us a bit of your background?

Nitya: Good day Anja. Thank you for this opportunity. A little bit about my background – I was blessed to have grown up with Yoga, music and chanting from very early in my life. My father met his guru Shri T. Krishnamacharya when I was 1 year old and my parents A.G.Mohan and Indra Mohan have both been practicing and teaching for over 50 years now. So my father introduced me to yoga as well as vedic chanting from the age of 5 or 6. I was also lucky to have my maternal grandmother live with us – she was a classical musician and she taught me to sing from the age of 5. I then went on to study music at University and learnt both the South Indian and North Indian traditions of classical Indian music. My brother Ganesh and I also studied Sanskrit from a very young age. So the work that I really love to do today is with a combination of these beautiful areas of wisdom and learning – Yoga, Music, Chanting and Sanskrit.

Anja: So, sound seems to play a major role in yoga. Why is sound so important?

Nitya: Yoga is about bringing balance and health to mind and body. In our yoga practices, we attempt to achieve this through the practice of asanas, pranayama and meditation. All these areas are naturally linked by Sound.

Body - when I chant or sing, the vibrations of that sound are real in my body for me to connect to.

Breath - there is no sound without the breath. Even as we speak we are exhaling. Every sound is produced with the support of the breath.

Mind – our thoughts, feelings and emotions are expressed through our sounds. The pitch, tone, pace, words – the sounds I make reflect the contents of my mind directly.

Sound forms a natural link between body, breath and mind and influences all three. It is one of the most accessible and powerful tools we all have within our easy reach. The Yogasutras mention mantras under Svadhyaya (Vyaasa's commentary for II.1 Sadhana Padah – sutra 2) as a means for self-reflection and moving closer to one's self.

Anja: In your last workshop you explained that ,vrittis' can be seen as inner sounds. Can you elaborate on this?

Nitya: A vritti is any mental movement – a thought, an emotion, a feeling. All inner mental movements are vibrations ultimately. Also, our thinking is often in some language or the other, language is words, all words are inner sounds. All our thoughts are inner sounds. Therefore, if I can change my inner world, I can change my outer world. After all, I am what I think. To bring about positive vrittis as well, sound is a big support.

Anja: Most of us are familiar with Mantras. In modern times we can listen to Mantras in all kind of songs. What is a mantra traditionally? When does a mantra become powerful?

Nitya: The word Mantra means: 'man' – mind, and 'tra' – to protect. That which protects my mind is a mantra. In essence, a mantra is a sound that I establish a connection with, which can lead my mind from a scattered state to a focused one. A mantra can be used in Asana practice to work with my body and breath. It can be used in Pranayama to work with my breath and my mind. And it can become the bridge that leads to meditation effortlessly. The power of a mantra comes from the Sound and vibrations it creates as well as the intentions or **Bhavanas** that I establish as I connect with it.

Anja: The Gayatri Mantra is a well-known mantra. It is deeply rooted in the Vedas. Why should it only used in the Vedic recitation tradition?

Nitya: Some Vedic mantras like the Gayatri, were traditionally governed by rules that defined the tones, pitches, intonations, length of syllables, splitting of the syllables, the meter, rhythm etc. The intention was to best preserve the knowledge in the oral tradition. There are several non-vedic mantras that can be chanted more freely, without as many rules. Depending upon the intention of our mantra practice, it would serve us well to choose the mantra that allows us to deepen our practice in the best manner.

Anja: Sound and particularly singing can be a very deep and powerful practice. You are a Musician trained in Indian music and your way of chanting and singing mantras with different scales is very beautiful and touches deeply. Could you explain a bit about this?

Nitya: Yes music connects all of us irrespective of culture, background, age or race. It is a universal language. And I use the universality of music with its different notes and scales based on my knowledge of classical Indian music and I combine it with the words and mantras from the yogic tradition. Practically, from my experience of teaching over the years, I find that this allows many of us to actually experience states of mind that are not so easily accessible sometimes through other practices. Any work with music in these universal scales and notes, is deeply uplifting and calming. Therefore, we achieve that state of Sattva – which is the goal of yoga through this beautiful path.

Anja: Shri Krishnamacharya recommended to connect mantras with pranayama, as a tool of ,counting'/lengthening the breath, but also to bring in more mindfulness. What is the basis for this?

Nitya: The word Pranayama means Prana – in this context the breath, and Ayama – to lengthen or extend. Patanjali in the Yogasutras (Chapter II.50 – 2nd chapter sutra 50) says that the goal of Pranayama is to make the breath Dirgha – long and steady, and Suksma – subtle and smooth. These are the qualities of the breath that we are working towards. Using a mantra in pranayama helps for both Dirgha as well as Suksma. A mantra helps to lengthen the breath. It also aids in making the mind steady through focus on the meaning of the mantra. We know that the flow of our breath and the flow of thoughts in our mind are linked. Whenever there is any emotional disturbance, my breath goes out of sync. When I use a mantra, it makes my mind as well as my breath steady in Pranayama. There are many ways of doing this. A mantra can be used aloud initially and then internalised through a Pranayama practice. It can be used on inhale or exhale internally or all through the breathing cycle.

Anja: Recent research on the Vagus nerve consolidates what we experience when we practice long deep exhalation with or without sound. You and your brother, Dr. Ganesh Mohan, are very interested in linking new findings on the nervous system to traditional teaching. What can we take from these new findings for our practice?

Nitya: Yes, my brother Ganesh is a doctor of Western medicine and has studied Ayurveda as well. He is extremely interested in seeing these connections and validating both ways the ancient practices and the modern medical research and understanding. There has been tons of research on the Vagus nerve and music or sound. Deep exhalation is automatically engaged with sound. I cannot produce any proper sounds as I inhale. When I sing or chant, it naturally engages a deeper exhalation. If I can combine the yogic breathing techniques with singing, for example – If I engage with an exhale from the abdomen and allow the Sound to also be supported from there, then the Sound and the exhale support each other and gradually intensify and deepen each other as well. Overall, it works wonders for our parasympathetic nervous system!

Anja: How do you use sound and mantras in your personal practice?

Nitya: I use mantras as part of my daily practice and rituals. When I sing and chant, that is also my meditation.

Anja: What would you recommend to yoga students on how to start using sound in their yoga practice?

Nitya: It is very simple – start singing, start chanting. Don't worry about how you sound. Our nervous system never judges us! Whether we sing well, that is, whether it is out of tune or in tune, as long as we are enjoying it, our nervous system will release those endomorphins and oxytocins. So sing, chant and enjoy it – make it a part of your daily practice in whatever way you can – it is as simple as that. Start today!

Dear Nitya, thank you for your beautiful explanations. Looking forward to seeing and practicing with you this June in Germany.

Quelle:

Swami Hariharānanda Āranya: Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali, Ausgabe 1983