

Group Chanting & Mantra Meditation
@ Lotus Garden Meditation Center
(Amand Ferguson, Spring 2012)



I visited the Lotus Meditation Garden. Upon entrance I could tell it was not a traditional Hindu worship site. I was very surprised by the location of the lotus garden. It was so beautiful and calm. There is a large house and a yoga studio to the left of it. To the left of the yoga studio was a large and beautiful yard and garden. *Krishna is the one who gives the life enduring message of the Bhagavada Gita so he is to be respected and celebrated. There are many paintings and small statues of Krishna located all around the Lotus Meditation Garden. According to my interviewee, Jenelle, the point of mediation is not to focus on anything particular but rather focus all of your energy inwards and attain true peace and clarity. To eliminate the mind of clutter and worry and become at peace in the heart and mind. While Jenelle did not want speculate on the thoughts of others she did tell me that after mediating she is usually able to, "address other problems and issues in a clam and peaceful way. By clearing my mind

I'm able to see the true and clear answer." During group meditation all participants face a beautiful wall mural of Krishna. All participants face Krishna as to dedicate their meditation or practice to Krishna. The specialist is like the instructor or group leader. They facilitate each movement within the process. The Meditation instructor sat in front of the mural facing the participants at first and then after they started they all faced the same direction. Group mediation allows many to come together to center their minds as one. Group mediation is a very intimate experience where participants are in close quarters and sometimes vulnerable positions so there is a sense of trust, love and respect between all staff and participants.

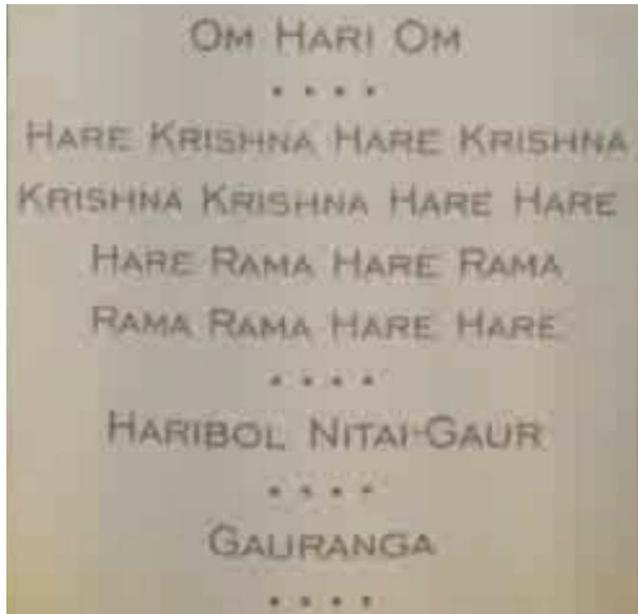




The lotus meditation garden strongly encourages meditation and offers many places around the grounds to meditate or worship in private and serenity. During my interview with Jenelle who is a resident staff member, she showed me a small shack near the back of the property that is available for private meditation. Anyone can meditate. Someone just needs a quiet, serene place where they can center their thoughts and focus their energy. It can be done alone or in a group or in front of a statue or in your living room. The practice of group meditation and chanting mantras is a community strengthening experience and shapes the reflection of participants by instituting shared ideas of calm, peacefulness and mutual respect. These reflections shape the way people practice by asserting components of calm breath and inner peace to the practice of mediation. Certain

steps need to be taken to successfully meditate and achieve inner peace. Once inner peace is achieved then that can and will shape reflection. Meditation allows one to center their thoughts and focus their energy to try to achieve inner peace. Peace is synonymous with calmness. When one can focus and repel all of the other distractions in life they can become truly calm. When one is calm and peaceful they are going to take that attitude towards other circumstances in their lives. Everyday life stresses can overwhelm some people and meditation is a way of coping with those stresses.





According to my interview, by singing and chanting the mantras aloud it allows for the heart to become free and for all of the people to share in the power of the message. By my interpretation that meant by reading the mantras aloud the heart and mind are cleared and ready to embrace the message of Krishna. By singing the mantras the full message is embraced by the heart and mind and the community is able to rejoice together and dance together. If they were to simply read the text it would not have the same effect and I don't think the people would feel as much of a connection. The words of the mantras are inspiring and uplifting. They change the mood of all who partake in the ceremony. The chanting is more than reading the mantras; it's about community and

real connections between people and families. It's also about the connection of meditation and Krishna.

The Sunday night chanting of the mantras is very community oriented. According to Jenelle, "sometimes you will see someone once and then never again and other people have been coming here for years and years." When people arrive on Sunday they all bring a vegetarian meal to share. People of all ages are welcome and children are running wild and playing. People are smiling and talking and dancing and they all seemed to closer than friends and more like family. As previously mentions doing group meditation is very intimate and involves great levels of trust and friendship. So it only seems natural that these great friends and families would embrace each other for a wonderful weekly meal where they can connect and rejoice. The words of the mantras seem to be uplifting and inspiring to the participants. The chanting brings out great smiles, laughter and dancing. Some people get really into it with their whole bodies and others seem to just go along with it. The environment became very upbeat and people began shouting and singing and dancing.

The similarities I see between *Janam Ashtami* and the Lotus Garden ceremonies are definitely the chanting. While the words and purposes may be different in each location the process of chanting in large groups is very similar. *In the Janam Ashtami ceremony, "In the evening, the family members gather together and sit down in the room where all the decoration has been done, and sing bhajans in praise of the lord Krishna"* (*Book of Hindu Festivals and Ceremonies. Pg. 121*). The

biggest similarity I noticed between the Rath Yatra and Lotus Garden ceremonies was the group meditation, singing and the encouragement of children and outsiders to join along in the celebration. Both ceremonies have a very different purpose and celebrate different things. For both ceremonies there are a lot of preparations, community involvement and a certain code of ethics per say that accompany each action. From what I observed at the Lotus Garden there were less focus on the preparation and process and more focus on the connections and the spiritual empowerment felt by all.

