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An alternative meditation for the attention-span challenged

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kirtan

*Posted: March 24, 2005**Akhanda Mandalakaram/Vyaptam Ye Na Characharam ...*

Sitting cross-legged in a dimly lit room of the Cedarburg Cultural Center, I struggled to echo the Sanskrit words on the screen in front of me, twisting my tongue and mind around the scary-looking syllables.

Photo/Jim Bovin

Singer Ragani leads a kirtan group on March 12 at the Cedarburg Cultural Center. Ragani explains the yoga-related chanting is like "jogging for the mind."

Chanting isn't usually how I spend my Saturday nights. But I was curious to check out the buzz over "Kirtan with Ragani," now supposedly the largest ongoing and independent kirtan (yoga-related, call-and-response chanting) group in the nation. The local group started in 2001, and the monthly kirtan in Shorewood is a madhouse: About 300 people pack into a church basement, lining up in the parking lot a half-hour before the event starts.

"I think people are hungry for something outside the usual music venues, something they can participate in," said Ragani, a pretty, dark-haired woman with a quick smile and a lush voice. "They can have a sacred experience that's not all prim and proper."

I felt a little like I was going to a sleepover. With my pillow in hand, I shucked my shoes with the pile of 70 others and padded over to the bright blue patterned cloths on the floor in front of the stage. Then the melancholy notes started to pour from Ragani's harmonium (hand-pumped, Indian organ), and the band kicked in.

Gan Gan Ganapati Namo Namaste/Namo Namaste ...

Hurrah! These words were much easier to pronounce. I found myself mesmerized by the joyful music, belting out the lyrics with confidence and tapping my foot as the song swelled in intensity. The crowd started clapping along, some adding to the rhythm with hand-held shakers.

I've always thought that in theory, meditation sounded like a good thing, but cursed by a short attention span, I've never been good at it. Singing the kirtan's foreign mantras helped clear the clutter from my brain. I had to concentrate enough to sing the words as well as I could, but because I didn't actually understand what I was singing, I wasn't distracted. I could see why Ragani called kirtan "a back door to meditation."

Photo/Jim Bovin

MKE's Nicole Sweeney listens to Ragani.

Shiva Shiva Hara Hara/Parvati Pati Shankara Hara Hara ...

The words looked deceptively simple, but I still needed to concentrate. Kirtan evolves more organically than traditional songs with a set beginning, middle and end. We repeated verses for an unknown number of times before switching to another one at random. I desperately scanned the overhead screen to find my place, but sometimes I couldn't even recognize which verse we were singing.

In the back, two women got out of their seats, closing their eyes as they bounced, shimmied and flung their arms skyward.

An hour into kirtan, we had only gotten through the opening prayer and two songs. "There are some things that take a little more time. Like jogging. You wouldn't go for a three-minute jog, would you?" Ragani explained. "This is kind of like jogging for the mind. You get into a certain groove."

kirtan music

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