



MANTRA AND CONSCIOUSNESS EXPANSION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Gayatri mantra is the main component of the Sandhya–Upasana ceremony, currently used as a practice to train meditation teachers and initiators in Siddha Samadhi Yoga – a meditation tradition in South India. The intent of the ceremony is to expand consciousness in multiple directions. The Gayatri is a meditation on OM, and the Sandhya ceremony is regarded as the most effective means of integrating with the universal consciousness connoted by OM. The author describes his experience of preparing for and participating in the ceremony – with attention to physiological, perceptual and cognitive shifts.

Introduction

This essay is a journey between the OM and GAYATRI mantras. I illustrate their interconnection by briefly talking about the science of mantra, then focus on the properties of the OM mantra, before discussing the Gayatri as a meditation on OM. The next step outlines how the Gayatri plays a central role in the Sandhya-Upasana ceremony, a ritual practice to train meditation teachers and initiators in Siddha Samadhi Yoga. Finally I describe my own phenomenology of participating in the training and ceremony.

The Science of Mantra

In the yogic traditions of meditation, mantras are Sanskrit words of power considered to be essential for the internal journey of self-knowledge. The resonance of the sound of mantra, operates as a total energy system that engages with all levels of an individual's being. Each syllable in a mantra is a set of tonal frequencies that resonate with, and activate, energy centers (chakras) in the body, connecting and unifying them into a single integrated system. The spiritual vibration of mantra cannot be explained in terms of sound waves in the ordinary sense, for there is much more to it than that. It is believed

that the Rishis of ancient India created Sanskrit as a sacred language. This creation emanated from the universal consciousness occupied by the Rishis, in that the name given to forms had the same energy resonance of the form. The form is known as yantra, the naming is mantra, and tantra is the methodology that links the two.

In meditation, mantra serves as a multidimensional hologram of energy – where that which is encased in the totality is also incorporated in the minimal units of the totality. (Prattis, 1997; Wilber, 1985) At one level the vibrations of this total energy system operate to engage with and calm the clutter of the mind, so that there is stillness. Once stillness is experienced, then the rest of this holographic vehicle comes into play, providing the arrow to cut through barriers that prevent access to inner consciousness. This provides the opportunity to experience a deeper level of silence and stillness. Specific mantras serve particular purposes and it is the precise use of breath in meditation that makes them effective.

The mantra may be chanted out loud or said silently in its different phases. The variation in pitch, tone and resonance adjusts the effect of the mantra's tonal set of frequencies to the energy center's capacity to receive activation. The repetition of mantra is to take one deeper into the resonance of syllable (external form) with activated energy center (internal essence). The different mantras, and the levels within each mantra, operate on different wavelengths, i.e. with discrete resonances.

The physical nature of the three lower chakras in the body relates to the level of worldly consciousness - power, wealth and progeny. These are superseded when the focus of energy is placed on the heart chakra through breath. Thus the choice to bring mantra into the body through the heart center, signals a step into spiritual birth, beyond the physical urges of life. The reality of this step is not just a mental, intellectual one, it comes through experiencing spiritual life, physically in the body. It is at this point that breath and focus become so important, for the stage is set for an integration of the higher chakras with the energy center of spiritual birth and transformation - the heart center.

Each chakra in the body responds to the sound structure of particular syllables chanted in isolation. Mantras that consist of a sequence of syllables may have a shifting of focus for each syllable; for instance from the crown to the throat to the heart chakras. On the other hand the focus for the sequence of sacred syllables may remain fixed on one

chakra, and from this location their collective energies are dispersed internally to other energy centers. Each form will be described later as they serve different purposes.

Mantra can also work independently of breath. The internal sound in your mind can extend over several breaths, and this introduces a sense of precision as to how mantra is used. The energy encased in the vibrational structure of mantra works on multidimensional levels within the mind and body. When you are distracted by thought processes in meditation, mantra has the effect of bringing you back to the stillness, and supports you **not** participating in the thought processes that naturally arise. In these instances of mantra use, the internal sound of the mantra can resonate independently of breath – lasting for several breaths or only for one breath. It comes and goes just as it comes and goes. That is all, and the purpose is to cut through the distractions of thought and bring your attention back to sitting quietly in meditation. In this way the mantra is said to protect the mind from the mind.

The combinations of different sounds have different effects when you move from the external form to the inner experience. The external form is when you chant the mantra out loud. The next step is to form the sound of the mantra without chanting it out loud. This is a prelude to the penultimate step of thinking the mantra silently within. The final step is not to think at all, nor is it to shape the sound of the mantra with precise tongue positions inside the mouth. You allow it to arise spontaneously from within. The same mantra thus has four levels of experience, which move you progressively from external form to transcendental experience, from the periphery of true expression to the essence of it. The four levels of mantra and the fifth level of accompanying silence draw their shape from archetypal structure, which is why mantra is such a powerful vehicle of transformation. It integrates you with deep inner consciousness, from whence it came. The different mantras, and the levels within each mantra, vibrate on different wavelengths. Thus each mantra affects specific parts of your cells, body, mind and being, producing connection and transformation. The four levels of mantra bring about a deeper integration and interconnection of separated systems in our beings, permitting a free flow of energy between physical and metaphysical systems. In other words energy is eventually experienced as primordial, undifferentiated essence, and thought, form and sound merge in the sophisticated science of mantra.

The most widely known form of mantra is the omniscient, sacred syllable OM. It is a primordial sound, inherent in the Universe, and when you go deep inside that is the sound that is supposed to be heard, spontaneously arising. After OM is chanted out loud on the out-breath there is a pause and a long silence, and its internal sound in your mind can extend over several breaths. The sound of OM allows a statement of an individual's potential for oneness and wholeness to be put out into the Universe. The Universe is one and whole, and responds to the resonance of OM in the silence of the answering in-breath. The Universe always replies "Yes" – "Yes, you are one and whole." This secures a foundation for the next issuing forth of OM. You then move to other levels of mantra, until eventually it may spontaneously arise from within.

Mantra is a deepening form of meditation. It is frequently accompanied by a corresponding focus on color and symbol. The vibrational frequencies inherent in different colors and symbols, prepare the way for the mantra's wavelength to penetrate deeper into inner consciousness. The repetition of the mantra is a way to enter stillness and unify yourself with Universal Divinity; so that the microcosm of the individual is united with the macrocosm of Universal Consciousness. Mantra provides an integrating power between mind, heart, body, soul and consciousness, as an alignment is produced that lies beyond thought and imagery. It takes you away from self-consciousness, mental clutter and ego centered preoccupations into a stillness that allows inner consciousness to rise up and integrate with awareness.

OM Mantra

OM as mantra has four phases. In Sanskrit there are three letters A, U, M and a following silence that constitutes OM, Divinity without limitations. As it is practised in meditation, the components - A, U, M - denote at one level the impure state of the meditator. At the same time the undifferentiated OM is pure Universal consciousness. It is the necessary silence between the ending and the new beginning of each OM, that enables you to abandon self-consciousness and personal afflictions, allowing the exalted nature of Universal mind to become part of your transformation. OM is the sound/resonance/vibration of infinite Divine reality. As a totality of undifferentiated, pure consciousness we can think of it as the Macrocosm, the seeds of which are present

as potential in every individual as the Microcosm, though this is mostly unknown and unseen. From this perspective, every person contains all aspects of existence as potential – from the grossest physical level to the highest, most subtle spiritual level.

As a unified sound OM represents all dimensions of Divinity. Differentiated into the components of A, U, M, the phenomenal and noumenal worlds of the individual are separately represented. The humming sound at the end of the OM mantra, and ensuing silence, is a threshold, which brings the individual to experience the sense of the absolute beyond all existential worlds. In addition to the three main phonetic components – matras - of OM (A–U–M), there is a half matra known as Candra-bindu, which denotes the vibration of the humming sound after it can no longer be heard. This is the threshold, which takes the mantra into the Absolute, beyond its constituent parts, and the participant beyond her existential realities into the transcendent. OM signifies infinite Divine reality, from which all understandings of the universe arise. By repetition through the various levels, the participant attunes himself to this consciousness and he is then lifted up spiritually. The repetition connects the individual to this cosmic ocean of consciousness, and his mind opens up for inspiration to flow to him from this ocean. OM always precedes the syllables in any mantra, such is its power. It symbolizes the union of the infinite with the finite, and is designed to transform the ordinary, mundane aspects of expression into Divine qualities. The requisite attitude of surrender and openness while chanting the mantra enables the individual to realize her essential identity with supreme Divinity, as she is the microcosmic counterpart of it. (Mukhyananda, 1989,16) The suspension of disbelief is a vital ingredient in the process of contemplating upon this symbol.

It is common knowledge in physics that the energies of the Universe can be categorized as the forces of creation, maintenance and destruction. (Capra, 1983) In Hindu cosmology, these energies are represented by Brahma, Vishnu and Siva respectively. The sound of the mantra OM (A-U-M), takes this connection a step further. The Sanskrit symbols for A, U, M correspond at one level to the deities of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva respectively, and therefore to the categories of Universal energy identified in physics. When the OM mantra is chanted, these cosmological metaphors of Universal energies enter the body directly, because different parts of the breathing system are affected through its

vibration. The A syllable, which begins at the back of the mouth, is felt in the abdominal area of the breathing system. The U syllable, in the middle of the mouth, impacts the chest area and the M syllable, chanted through closed lips, activates the respiratory system in the throat and head.

Each sound activates specific energy flows from the cellular level to the respiratory level. The combination of the sounds of A-U-M enlivens the entire breathing system and prana (life force energy) penetrates to all parts of the body. When we consider OM in terms of its constituent parts, A, U, M, correspond to different states of consciousness: Waking, Dream, Deep Sleep respectively. When OM is taken as a whole, however, – as a complete word or unified sound - it denotes the super conscious state of Samadhi or Turiya, which is a series of levels of consciousness beyond the Waking, Dream, Deep Sleep states. We begin at the level of science and the cosmological representations of the forces and functions recognized by physics - creation, maintenance and destruction. This connection is taken from the mind into the body and cells through the vibrations of the OM mantra. Thus one begins with the Universe and proceeds through mental concepts, symbolic metaphor and vibration to encompass physics, cosmology, mind, body, cell and state of consciousness. (Prattis,1997, 250) All of this rests on a simple axiom - internal and external, physical and metaphysical are not different, rather they are synchronistic levels of correspondence of the same underlying reality. The connection between levels is provided by human awareness. When that awareness is brought to bear on the full significance of the OM mantra, then we have a bridge between the Microcosm of the individual and the Macrocosm of the Universe. Figure 1 illustrates some of these the connections.

Figure 1: OM Mantra**OM (A - U - M)**

<u>HINDU</u>				
<u>PHYSICS</u>	<u>MYTHOLOGY</u>	<u>OM</u>	<u>BODY</u>	<u>CONSCIOUSNESS</u>
CREATION	BRAHMA	A	ABDOMEN	WAKING
MAINTENANCE	VISHNU	U	CHEST	DREAM
DESTRUCTION	SIVA	M	THROAT	DEEP SLEEP

Meditations on OM

1: Breathe into the heart center, up to the crown on the in-breath. On the out-breath take the energy of breath throughout the body, grounding it through the feet into the earth, and prepare a foundation for chanting the OM mantra. Do this for five minutes. When you are calm and still, breathe in gently and with great reverence. On the out-breath, chant the mantra out loud. The first letter A is formed in the back of the mouth, the U is in the centre of the mouth and M is resonated through closed lips. As this is done on the out-breath, feel the energy of mantra flooding the body from crown to toes, and also feel it extending out from the body. Then feel the silence on the next slow in-breath preparing you, without thought, for the next OM. Chant the mantra out loud for a while (for at least ten minutes), then go through the other levels of mantra so that you move from the periphery of external form to the experience of essence. First of all chant the mantra silently, forming the syllables of OM with your mouth and tongue but make no sound for ten minutes. Then think the mantra silently in your mind for a further ten minutes. Finally be absolutely still and silent.

In this mantra the differences between your present state of consciousness as distinct from pure Universal consciousness eventually dissipate, and separation becomes meaningless once OM becomes established in your body and consciousness. Once you

feel this is well established, repeat the mantra only when you are aware that thoughts and distractions have carried you away from meditation. Here the mantra works to keep you in a deep and still meditative silence. Remain in the primordial silence of the final stage, simply breathing in and out, for approximately twenty minutes, then reflect on its significance for you.

2: Meditation on OM, AH, HUNG Mantra

Mantra can also be accompanied by color. The color spectrum is an array of vibrational frequencies, as are the separate syllables of mantra. When they are placed together in conjunction with particular chakras, an accelerated impact on the body's energy centers and cells is effected. A classic Buddhist form of mantra associates the colours white, red and blue with the syllables OM, AH, HUNG, placed respectively at the forehead, throat and heart centers. This form is very much like a cascading benediction, integrating the higher faculties of transcendence and expression with the heart center.

Sit comfortably with the spine erect and the hands either in your lap or lightly on the knees with thumb and forefinger connected in a circle. Prepare the body for this mantra by taking breath up to the crown through the heart center on the in-breath, then down to the feet on the out-breath. Relax into the calm of this meditative state for five minutes, then take energy into the heart center and up to the crown with the in-breath. On a slow out-breath place OM in brilliant white light at the brow center, AH in red light at the throat center, and HUNG in blue light at the heart center. Then feel the stillness and silence of the next slow in-breath and repeat the mantra out loud. Continue for at least ten breaths, or until it feels stable, then progress to the next stages of experiencing it silently within. Continue with the mantra for a while then abandon it and enter silence. Note the changes in energy circulation in the body and return to the mantra only when thoughts and distractions carry your attention away from the meditation. Note also the deep calm and stillness and if you so wish, write down the first thoughts that arise from this meditation.

This meditation invokes the power and presence of Guru Rinpoche – the Indian saint who first brought Buddhism to Tibet. The white light at the forehead that accompanies the OM, brings a corresponding light from the forehead of Guru Rinpoche, and this aids in the purification of all physical defilements. The AH syllable and the red

light at the throat produce vibrations that purify all speech forms. The final HUNG syllable and blue light integrates you with heart consciousness, and aids in purifying mental blockages to the truth of being. OM always precedes the other syllables in a mantra and symbolises the union of the infinite with the finite. This particular mantra is designed to transform the ordinary, mundane aspects of expression into Buddha like qualities.

Gayatri Mantra

Transformation is about new levels of conscious connection, and follows a particular sequence of metaphor, vibration and form. The metaphorical level is where you initially become familiar with concepts of newness and change. Vibration refers to the frequencies of energy that are activated as the metaphor merges with awareness, and physically penetrates into the body. The discernment of this embodied consciousness is the prelude for form, which enters every day reality as changed behavior, through commitment to enact the qualities in the metaphor (Prattis 1997). Without commitment, and support from community and ritual structures, there is often the creation of uncertainty, and an inability to trust the ritual experience to translate changed perceptions and new awareness into behavior.

The Gayatri mantra is the most powerful mantra of purification and transformation known to the yogic traditions. I would like to elaborate on its effects on human consciousness. The Gayatri is designed to expand consciousness in multiple directions. It facilitates healing and releases karma (Sai Baba, 1995), as the process of chanting it shakes loose the fetters of suffering. The successive sounds of the Sanskrit syllables and words are designed to move the individual into different states of spiritual consciousness (Saraydarian 1989), first of all by calming the mind and body, then through activating the energy centers of the body, which brings about a deeper connection with internal essence. It is an invocation for enlightenment that can have the effect of drawing other individuals into the same state. The repetition of the Gayatri mantra creates a unique series of vibrations that integrates a person's mental awareness with deeper levels of the unified energy system that is believed to be at the core of being. Progressively, the mantra takes the individual into the experience of stages of expansion of consciousness, propelling the devotee into different

cognitive/perceptual states. The tonal design of the sounds produces purification and integration, so that the individual at the physical, emotional and mental level becomes more open and receptive to inner guidance. From this foundation other levels of enlightenment and openness ensue. The Gayatri mantra is a meditation on OM. The sound of it is designed to move an individual from the realms of existential reality to the experience of the transcendental absolute dimension. As the “mother” of the Rg, Yagur and Sama Vedas, the Gayatri brings about the conjunction of the individual self with the cosmos, and unifies the individual and Universal at all levels. Thus the Gayatri mantra incorporates all components of OM symbolism – a prayer to Divine Reality for human enlightenment.

Figure 2: THE GAYATRI MANTRA

<i>OM</i>	<i>OM</i>
<i>BHUR BHUVA SVAH</i>	<i>ALL ON EARTH, MID-WORLD AND HEAVEN</i>
<i>TAT SAVITUR VARENYAM</i>	<i>MEDITATE UPON THE LIGHT ADORABLE</i>
<i>BHARGO DEVASYA DHIMAH</i>	<i>OF THE DIVINE SUN OF LIFE</i>
<i>DHIYO YONAH PRACHODAYAT</i>	<i>TO ENLIGHTEN OUR SOULS</i>

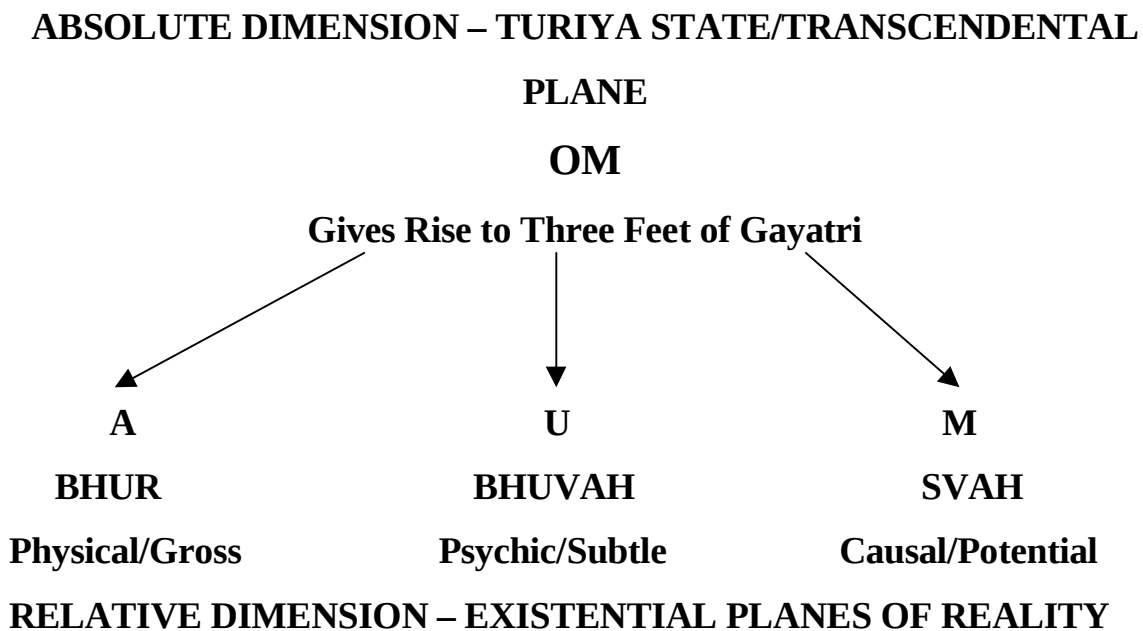
The three matras (phonetic components) of OM give rise to the three feet of the Gayatri: 1. Bhur, the physical body or gross plane;
 2. Bhuvah, the psychic body or subtle plane and
 3. Svah the causal body or potential plane.

In this manner OM connects the Absolute Dimension of the transcendental plane, with the Relative Dimension of the three planes of existential reality. OM represents the fourth plane of consciousness – the Turiya or Samadhi state, which is beyond time, space and causation. The other three planes of existential reality - Bhur, Bhuvah and Svah (gross, subtle and potential respectively), are within time, space and causation, yet rest on the Fourth plane which is their source. The Macrocosm is represented by all four planes. The Microcosm – the individual – contains the same four planes as seeds within his consciousness. The Gayatri-Upasana (prayer-ritual) is the tonal, ritual design to realize the

transformation of these seeds into spiritual experience. The ritualistic techniques of the ceremony have as their design the removal of physical, psychic and mental obstacles, so that the devotee can eventually rise above the manifestation of an ego-centered life, and come to rest in Divine Consciousness.

This is how the Gayatri-Upasana was explained to me. Eventually I understood its components and effects, but was assured that even if I did not, my consciousness would attune to its direction. (I was also told that the benefit is far greater if the ceremony is done with understanding. This, however, was not communicated to me until *after* I had a grasp of what was taking place – symbolically and phenomenologically!)

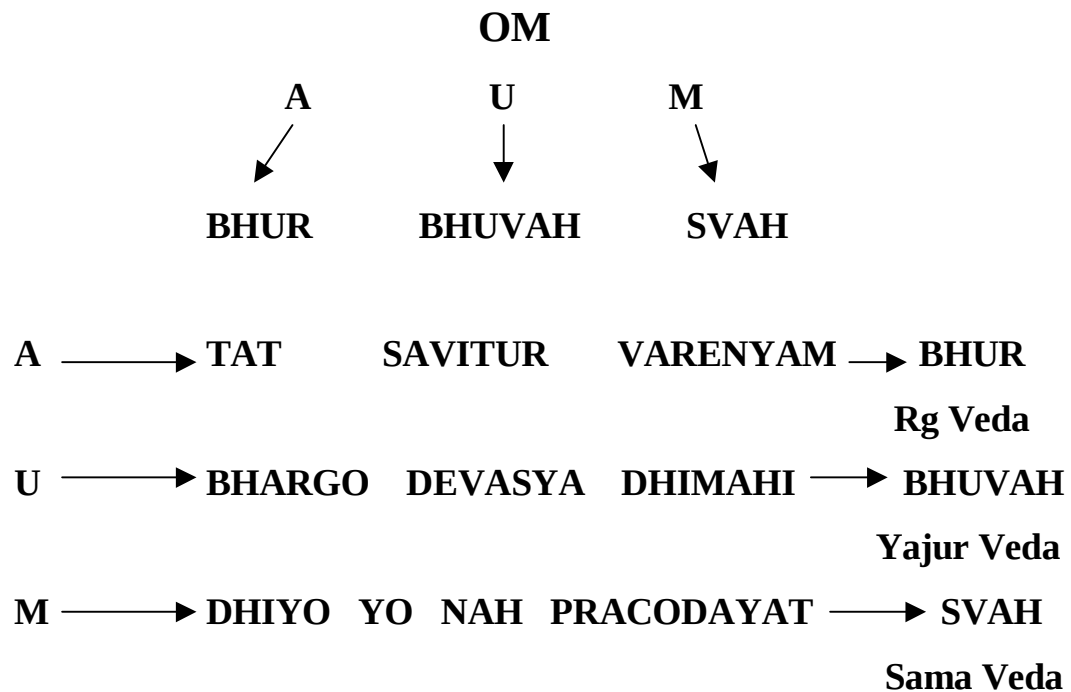
Figure 3: The Three Feet of the Gayatri



The Gayatri is regarded as the mother of the three Vedas, the foundation of Hinduism. The second line of the mantra (Tat Savitur Varenyam) springs from the A component of OM, and expands into the Rg Veda and the plane Bhur. The third line (Bhargo Devasya Dhimahi) comes from U, which contains the creative components for the Yajur Veda and the plane of Bhuvah. From M comes the final line of the mantra (Dhiyo Yo Nah Pracodayat), which expands into the Sama Veda and the Svah plane. The first

Veda is about Devotion, the second provides a blueprint for Work, and the third Veda refers to the constituents of Knowledge. All of these components are woven into a precise, almost mathematical, tapestry that takes its shape and definition from the constituent units of OM – as Figure 4 illustrates.

Figure 4: Gayatri as Mother of the Vedas



In Hindu cosmology, an individual's first birth is from the mother's womb. The Gayatri-Upasana is when an individual experiences his second birth as a spiritual being. (Sai Baba, 1995) The Gayatri is considered as the great connector and intermediary between the Microcosm and the Macrocosm, and its total design is to bring about conjunction of the individual self with the cosmic self, so that there is unification of the individual with the Universal at all levels.

Gayatri Sandhya-Upasana

The Gayatri mantra has been described as the most universal, non-personal

invocation of integration and transformation which anybody can use irrespective of culture, language or religion.(Bharati 1995; Mukhyananda 1989) Sai Baba, the Indian sage, states very clearly that the Gayatri is universal in character, and does not belong to any caste, sect or religion.(1995) It is incorporated in a ceremony, or Upasana, for training meditation teachers in Siddha Samadhi Yoga – a meditation system currently popular in South India. Upasana refers to intimate, intense contemplation. Literally it means “sitting or placing oneself mentally near to the object of meditation.” In Sanskrit there is an expression: *Yat dhyayati tat bhavati* – which translates as:

Whatever one contemplates or meditates upon intensely, that he becomes.

Sandhya refers both to the ceremony of prayer ritual involving the Gayatri, and to the conjunction times of the day when it is held – sunrise, mid-day or sunset. The idea is that the more one repeats the Gayatri within a formal Sandhya-Upasana (contemplation ceremony), the more one recalls the expansive consciousness of pure Divinity, and feels close to it's protection and grace. Ultimately the devotee realizes an essential identity with it, as he is the microcosmic counterpart of it.

I spent 1996 and 1997 in India at the invitation of Rishi Prabhakar, the founder of Siddha Samadhi Yoga, to teach and take advanced training in meditation. I taught and trained in a system of meditation for adults and children, was initiated through many levels and eventually ordained as an initiator. Siddha Samadhi Yoga is based on the ethical standards that reflect the ancient “Brahmapodesum” program of the Rishis. Re-established in the 1950's as Siddha Samadhi Yoga, this tradition has attracted some fifteen million adherents, mostly in South India. The initial focus is on pranayama and meditation to calm the body and mind. Then the meditation courses embark on creating a new leadership cadre for the modern world - one that operates without corruption and greed. The emphasis is on integrity and responsibility for all sectors of society and the world, by first of all taking responsibility for one's own integrity. The focus on responsibility and freedom to not be the body or the mind, provides a shift to a sense of leadership that has the authority of a wisdom based on compassion and love. Advanced programs of meditation then take the evolving process further and provide the instruments to deepen the shift into a new leadership. This is one aspect of “moksha” –

liberation – as true leadership emerges once an individual comes to a stop, reconnects to their Universal nature and assumes the selfless responsibility of true leadership.

The Vedic tradition I was studying and teaching was ecumenical in character, and represented a universal consciousness that manifested in very practical ways as a wisdom tradition totally relevant to the modern day. It was a sterling example of engaged spirituality, as it necessarily entailed rural development, civic responsibility, anti-corruption programs and praying with all the religious communities in India on a regular basis. This particular commitment to Global Religious Harmony was an active engagement to heal and transform the deeply rooted schisms in Indian society. It also had a marvelous outreach to introduce meditation into schools, training colleges, universities and factories. I was very privileged and honored to have so many of the treasures of India's wisdom traditions opened up to me. I taught meditation in Mumbai and Bangalore, and had studied this particular tradition of meditation for five years prior to going to India.

A critical part of the training experience in India was two 28 day training sessions, six months apart, held at remote ashrams. They were the high points that the rest of the year's training built up to. The first was held near Vinukonda in Andhra Pradesh, the second at Malarawadi, near Bangalore in Karnataka. I was part of a cohort of 25 teachers for the first session, and of 40 for the second. The gender ratio for both cohorts was 70:30, males to females and except for myself, everyone was Hindu and from South India.

The Gayatri Sandhya was conducted at sunrise and sunset every day. The Gayatri mantra was the main component of a long Sanskrit chant that prepared each participant for the full effects of the mantra. The initial phases of the chant and ceremony have to do with purification of intent, regulating breath to provide physical harmony, reciting the cosmic creation mantras, before the Gayatri is invoked and meditated upon. Initially the Gayatri is chanted out loud, then contemplated upon in total stillness and silence. The ceremony then continues with valedictions, salutations, thanks to the Gayatri, and apologies for any flaws in the uttering of the mantras or performance in the ritual. At the beginning and the end of the Upasana, one is required to pray for the peace, happiness and well being of all sentient beings.

Prior to the two 28 day retreats each participant had months of preparation - with attention to specific meditations, dietary regime, and sexual abstinence. Furthermore each one of us was required to learn the entire chant and ceremony that contained the Gayatri as its central focus. In the ceremony the identification of the microcosm with the macrocosm was mentally visualized through a process called Anga-Nyasa, whereby the right hand and separate fingers would touch different parts of the body while uttering the mantras of their cosmic counterparts. The idea is that by connecting oneself mentally and physically to this cosmic reservoir, one's mind becomes a conduit for the flow of inspiration from the Cosmic Mind. First of all the Gayatri is invoked as the source of the three Vedas, then the different phenomenal and noumenal worlds are located in one's body by touching the points that correspond to each syllable of the mantra. In addition the chanting of the Gayatri is co-ordinated with the four components of breath: inhalation, holding the air inside, exhalation, holding the emptiness. The phases of breath are known as Pooraka, Kumbhaka, Rechaka, and Shoonyaka respectively. During each distinct phase of breath, the Gayatri mantra would be chanted mentally in order to facilitate, in turn, the expansion of mind, intellect, consciousness, and the dissolution of ego with the respective phases of breath. Then one would contemplate on the Gayatri in total silence.

There was a mathematical precision in tone, pitch and resonance of the chant, as it was exactly co-ordinated with the different components of breath and hand movements over the body. The mantras and ritual would change according to time of day, and with the particular Veda that was being honored. In the training I undertook, the Sama Veda, which focused on the constituents of Knowledge, was the form reflected in the chanting of the Gayatri. I also had to be aware of the other variants that corresponded to the Rg and Yajur Vedas. I frequently wondered if I would ever get it right! Yet I had very skilled and patient teachers, who made the effort to transmit this oral tradition, thousands of years old, to a westerner who was not used to this form of education. Correct and clear pronunciation, tone and preparation were essential, as was the understanding of the mystical significance of each component of the mantra and ceremony. I benefited a great deal from the persistence and kindness of my teachers and cohorts, as they were determined that I should get through.

Preparation for each ceremony was through extensive pranayama – breathing exercises – before sunrise and sunset, and our attention was always brought to the purpose of the Sandhya before we did it – the union of the individual and the Universal was always kept in view. The rituals of the Sandhya had to be performed with grace, and clumsiness was frowned upon. In the early days I certainly drew a lot of frowns from the Swamys and Rishis who oversaw the training and conduct of the Gayatri Sandhya-Upasana. Each ceremony lasted for approximately one hour. Over the two 28 day training periods, the twice daily repetitions in a tightly supervised and undisturbed environment, were designed to facilitate both physical and spiritual purification by eliminating weaknesses and obstacles to integration, through the correct performance of the Gayatri Sandhya.

The effects of the Gayatri Sandhya-Upasana were far reaching, both physiologically and cognitively. During the first 28 day period the twice daily recitation brought on heavy night time fevers. I would feel perfectly fine during the day, yet at night it felt as though I was running a high fever, although I had no unusual increase in temperature. The following day I again would feel fine. I checked with my cohort and found that everyone was feeling a similar discomfort, though nobody was ill. I asked the Swamy who was conducting the training session about this, and he indicated that we were all feeling the initial effects of the Gayatri Sandhya. Before it could penetrate our being and expand consciousness there was a great deal of “dross” to burn off – hence the fever like states. I reported back to my cohort to everyone’s relief. My consultations with the Swamy became quite an amusing ritual all on its own, as members of my cohort would not ask questions. Yet they encouraged me to do so and gave me questions of their own. The Swamy had a benevolent attitude towards me and would tell me what he considered I should be allowed to hear. My fellow trainees would eagerly wait for the results of my consultations, crowd round and listen to whatever I had to report. In this way I was able to receive a clear picture of what was happening with my cohort, as well as checking through on my own phenomenology.

Other physiological changes during the ritual had to do with energy sensations at the back and top of my skull. I often felt as though something was crawling under my skin. In addition it often felt as though flies were buzzing around the back of my head,

whereas this was not the case. Some of the men had their head shaved in a traditional manner with a small tuft of hair left in place at the top, back part of the skull. This was explained to me as an antenna, to draw in the energy of the Gayatri as it changed brain patterns and consciousness. Although the Swamy did not put it in these terms – it was as though the right and left brain were being rewired. When I questioned if this was the case, the Swamy responded that this was a legitimate way of looking at it. His explanation was that the Gayatri was dissolving patterns of brain separation built up during life-times, so that a return to a fully functioning brain and consciousness could emanate.

The process of Nyasa, co-ordinating hand and finger movements to touch different parts of the body as the chant identified their cosmic counterparts, also produced distinct physiological changes in terms of energy movement within the body. After the first week I could feel energy moving inside my body as I traced out a precise matrix with hand, fingers and sound. By the third week it was as though I could “see” the energy moving in the bodies of my fellow trainees. All the women and approximately half the men had similar discernments. When asked about this, the Swamy simply smiled and said that the Gayatri was working very hard for us! Physiologically we all experienced at different times extreme trembling and shaking throughout the body, extreme sensations of heat and cold, but from a different level of consciousness to that of everyday awareness. It was as though the different body experiences were noted and observed from a great distance. I often felt that I was not the body whose sensations I was experiencing. This was actually a vital part of the training, to have personal confirmation of the concept that “I” am not the body. The “I” experienced was the cosmic counterpart of the “I” that usually defines my sense of who I am.

The most significant cognitive changes came about through chanting the Gayatri with the four different phases of breath (in-breath/holding fullness/out-breath/holding emptiness), and the four levels of mantra (chanting out loud/ mouthing silently/thinking/spontaneous arising). These combinations produced hyperlucidity and sharpness. I felt very still and very alert, as though I was climbing stairs of consciousness as the level of mantra changed from chanting out loud to being thought of during each phase of breath. As I continued to engage physically and cognitively with the Gayatri, its

meaning took on deeper significance. It was as though the actual experience of the Gayatri opened doorways to yet deeper understandings of the same symbolic complex. Also, I asked fewer questions. Furthermore, the promptings of my cohort to ask questions also diminished. The queries, points of information, and need to know that had been so imperative at previous levels of consciousness, became redundant at other levels of consciousness. It was obvious to me that I was moving through a series of states of consciousness to different plateaus of cognition. In the process, however, I always felt a sense of being present and aware of where I was, totally cognizant of what was taking place in the different levels of consciousness experienced. Grof (1993) refers to this as dual consciousness, whereas I experienced it as multiple consciousness levels. My take on this was that new spaces were opening up in my mind, while I was also very aware of being located in the physical realm. This was confirmed for me by the Swamy, without my asking. During the first training period I did not experience the fourth level of mantra – of it spontaneously arising. Our guiding Swamy told us that we were not ready for that, as it was not an experience for this phase of our training and perhaps not for the next, so not to worry. He was an exceptional guide and caretaker for all of us, and a demanding task-master.

The second training period was with a different cohort. They were all experienced meditation teachers and had completed the Gayatri Sandhya-Upasana numerous times. This was a “refresher” for them, and my teachers considered that it would be better for me to continue with this cohort rather than the previous one. The greater experience of my new fellow trainees helped enormously, as they could confirm and amplify for me the experiences I had recorded in my diaries. I also believe that the group synergy, which evolved with this cohort, enabled me to go further than I could have possibly done with my previous cohort. Friends from the previous group that I later conferred with did not have the experiences that ensued for me. One in particular was astonishing. With the new cohort, the sunset Sandhya was always held by running water, which deepened the silence, stillness and everything else I have reported. In the third week of the second training period, the chanting of the Gayatri took place with all of us standing, up to our waists, in the water. When it came to the point of suspending thought and allowing the Gayatri to arise spontaneously, to my total astonishment it did just that.

At the same time I could feel and identify the particles of mud between my toes, see minute electrons in the air around me and then look down on my group of 40 trainees from a great height, as I felt encompassed by the evening sky. Also I felt as though I encompassed the sunset, the evening sky and everything beyond it. This experience was repeated with varying intensity, during every sunset rendition of the Gayatri-Sandhya.

In my diaries I recorded the experiences in poetry and art work – a totally inadequate exposition for something that cannot be fully expressed in either. However, I persist with this inadequacy, in order to convey to the reader a semblance of the experience. I should add that the experiences did not just arise from the Gayatri Sandhya-Upasana. The two years in India, and the five years beforehand, lead to the possibility of these experiences arising. The preparation, supervision and correction, created the conditions for what I believe is a latent human experience to arise to conscious awareness.

I never felt that it was necessary to communicate this to the Swamy or to members of my cohort, as I went into a complete and total silence during the last ten days of the Gayatri - Sandhya. I do not recall talking to anyone, and was very aware that everyone very carefully left me in the silence. Before I took my leave from the ashram, the Swamy asked to speak to me. He described my experience in complete, precise detail and arranged a parting ceremony, which was also an initiation. It never felt appropriate to ask members of my cohort what they had experienced. It was really none of my business, either as an anthropologist or a meditation teacher. There were other perceptual and cognitive experiences that I am not at liberty to communicate, and yet others that I choose not to relate. My teachers told me that the Gayatri would henceforth continue to work on my consciousness, whether I was aware of it or not. Furthermore, any awareness that I may have, would provide an arrow of insight into further changes. I can attest from personal experience that the Gayatri-Sandhya had major life changing effects. I certainly became a better and more skilful teacher, both to meditation and university students. As for the rest of my life - that it is still a work in progress!

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