Mantras and Meditation
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A Small California Foundation Works Toward Peace, Purification and Joy

Pillows and cushions speckled the floor. Candles, flowers and incense were being carefully prepared. People were arriving, settling in. Some had drums, tamborines, finger cymbals and other musical instruments. The large two-story house was coming alive on this cool, February, Sunday morning in a small city just outside of Sacramento, California. The "dhoon" was about to begin, led by Shantibaba, a soft-spoken Indian teacher.

What followed was a four-hour chanting/meditation session (dhoon) centered upon a mantra specifically "designed" by Sadguru Datta as an "independent tool" in an "age of independence."

This mantra, Hari Om Tat Sat Jai Guru Datta, is said to be a siddhi mantra with the power to yield spontaneous meditation and initiate a purification that eventually awakens the kundalini force within. The power of Lord Datta himself is reportedly the key to the special quality of personal unfoldment here, for his energy is said to be working with the aspirant through this mantra. Initially, each individual has a unique experience with the mantra, for each person has a different karma. But all ultimately "become centered, uncomplicated, able to learn and develop from within, without the help of an external guru."

Guru Datta, usually symbolized as a being with three heads and six arms to portray his essence as Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, is described as that which is beyond form but was experienced in form by Swami Punitachariji "Bapu" - as a result of his years of spiritual sadhana. Bapu describes that experience:

"The atmosphere was very calm and peaceful; Lord Datta was sitting on a rock in perfect meditation. The siddhas and saints of the past and present were showering

flowers upon him from space and were chanting the mantra Hari Om Tat Sat Jai Guru Datta to music." At this point Bapu says he was filled with joy and bliss and lost all desires. And when Lord Datta asked him if he had any wish, Bapu said, "Oh Sadguru, I know that after seeing you one becomes desireless; however if there still remains some good desire then I consider that it must be rising with your inner inspiration. If you want to offer me something more, please give me some unique thing for humanity." In response to this request. Lord Datta apparently gave Bapu the mantra Hari Om Tat Sat Jai Guru Datta for the benefit of mankind and described its meaning thusly: "This is the mantra of Brahman, Essence, the Absolute. Men will benefit through this mantra by elevating their awareness and will experience peace and joy."

Bapu became a vehicle for Lord Datta after this experience and started a movement of sorts, balanced on faith and centered in personal experience. In the US his work is continued by Shantibaba, a gentle soft-spoken man in his mid-forties who claims no personal attainments of his own save those naturally gained through repeating this one mantra.

Very little religious or spiritual philosophy is put forward along with this mantra, although during retreats and meditation sessions passages are sometimes read from Yoga Vasistha. Anyone can take up its practice. There are no restrictions of any kind. Nor are there rigid requirements such as the observance of special diet, brahmachariya, pranayama, hatha yoga or specific meditation techniques. The mantra is said to do everything. Claims for its immediate effects range from weight loss and spontaneous dietetic alterations to an uncontrollable sense of restlessness, all for the sake of bringing the aspirant in line with his own, pure, inner being. It is described as "a living seed of spirituality" that fulfills a great need in the "present dark age of spirituality" when it is "almost impossible to find a spiritual master or purified soul" and easy to be "misguided by 'holy men' pretending to be spiritual masters." Those who practice its repetition with regularity encourage anyone of any religious background to give it a try.

"During the few months that I have been chanting this mantra, I cannot think of any area of my life that has NOT undergone change - most pleasant, some unpleasant, but all much needed," says Joan Fields of California. "I have undergone both planned and spontaneous physical cleansings, quit a 20-year smoking habit, and experienced a multitude of insights, spiritual highs, and the most profound meditations of my life. And best of all, I've only just begun this wonderful spiritual adventure!"

"I began to practice the mantra regularly, doing dhoon with a group and malas and meditation at home," says Russell Schreiber of Colorado. "After a few dhoons, my mind began to chant the mantra automatically all day and at least part of the night. During this period, which lasted about two weeks, I had a large amount of physical energy and exuberance, getting large amounts of work done. And slowly I began to have some experiences in my meditation."

In the United States the Anasuya Foundation is the organization working behind the scenes to promote the mantra. It is a modest non-profit venture-actually just a small facility from which free literature is distributed-located in Carmichael, California. However, small groups spring up here and there throughout the United States, England, Germany and India, and frequently invite Shantibaba to come, stay and inspire the group with the spirit of the mantra. Bapu himself resides in India at Girnar Sadhana Ashram in Junagadh (Gujarat). The ashram is reportedly very popular, and plans are to expand the facilities with a number of meditation huts and shrines to Lord Dattatreya.

Shantibaba describes Bapu and the mantra in the following way: "Bapu-we don't know how old he is, maybe in his high sixties-spent the last 45 years traveling from the Himalayas to the Ganges. He has done his sadhana searching for the truth. After spending 12 years on Mount Girnar, he had a physical meeting with Lord Dattatreya. And there he heard the mantra. This mantra is in the language of the siddhas. It is a siddha mantra. It brings its own live energy with it. It works through the inner yoga. That is the mystic way, the mystic yoga. How does it work? We still don't know. But the promise that came with the mantra was that it would bring a set of experiences to an individual according to the design of their mind, body and past conditionings-that it would work through purification and transformation. This mantra brings the right experience for you, creating the trust and faith and still beginning the purification that eventually connects you to your own inner guide, your own higher self, your own spirit. This is a three-pan process. First peace, then purification and then the joy. Each one of us has to experience it."

"I heard about this," says Shantibaba, "when I was in India seven or eight years ago. I went to a meeting. There were 100 people or so. And I got some kind of experience chanting. After the chanting was over, I couldn't even move. But I was an intellectual and did not believe in just faith. I wanted to try more, test more. I went to [Bapu's] Ashram and tried to figure it out. It did not make any more sense, so, I thought, maybe I should do some japa with the people in the small villages close by. Then, I will see. So I went to the villages and tried the chant with the people, and they started to have experiences with this one mantra. They were

completely illiterate and did not know anything about this mantra. But they were falling down and having these experiences. So, I was thinking, well, this mantra does have something. It works. And it works for anyone. I got convinced."

Anasuya's representatives are reluctant to call themselves an organization, let alone a movement. Yet, reportedly mere are "centers" in several countries around the world. There is no formal membership, therefore a count of devotees is not available. Though no mention is made of Hinduism, Anasuya is a Hindu/non-Hindu group offering a secret of the East to all looking for a glimmer of hope and spiritual solace.

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