



LET'S GET IT OM

Today's chanting classes are as much about socialising as spirituality. Rebecca Newman sings their praises

ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLIN SCHNOOR

It's 11 o'clock on Saturday morning and in a converted church on London's Golborne Road, there's a sense of ecstasy in the air. Sixty-two people of assorted ages – among them a middle-aged West Indian man in a purple shirt, some Spanish student types, and plenty of mid-career professional women – are sitting cross-legged on mats, chanting their last reverberant *Om*. But this is no Buddhist meeting. Nor a religious gathering. We've just completed a 90-minute yoga class bookended with a call-and-response style chant called kirtan.

The class is being led by Manizeh Rimer, a Pakistan-born, Switzerland-raised former technology investment banker, now a Jivamukti yoga teacher and kirtan leader with a feverish following. Today, she is wearing her dark hair half up, bright-blue Adidas Originals by Wales Bonner track pants (Grace Wales Bonner is a regular attendee) and a white T-shirt emblazoned with the words "crack your heart wide open".

Love Supreme Projects, founded by Rimer in 2022, attracts starry singers and fashion designers with a range of 35-40 weekly classes. Of these, Rimer's Jivamukti session on a Saturday has become the most popular, with waiting lists numbering more than 40 people per session and a similar number joining online to participate remotely. Chanting, according to Rimer, "helps you get to whatever's in your heart and to release it and clear out

the cobwebs". As Marie-Louise Sciò, CEO of Pellicano Hotels attests: "It works. It's changed my life."

Love Supreme Projects HQ – once Stella McCartney's design studio – is as chic as its founder: all polished concrete and high windows. "There's the most amazing energy swirling round the room. It really does make you feel connected," says Melissa Morris, founder of leather-goods brand *Métier* and a Saturday-morning regular. Most come for the mesmeric quality of Rimer's voice, and the chords from her ragamala harmonium, echoed by jazz musician Ben Hazleton who plays the double bass alongside her.

Mindfulness and breath awareness represent key pillars of an estimated global meditation market of \$8bn. But chanting offers a fast track to calm and self-awareness – and it's shaking off the associations it might once have had with Hare Krishnas outside Tottenham Court Road station. "Where sitting meditation is really hard, repeating something over and over forces the mind to quieten down," says Rimer. "Chanting does the work for you."

Rimer came to chanting when she was working 22-hour days and suffering incipient burnout. "I am not religious. Not at all. But I was looking for spirituality," she says. Seeking something to help manage life – "with all its ups and downs" – she attended the New York Jivamukti Centre. Here, in addition to yoga, Rimer was introduced to kirtan via Sharon Gannon and David Life, the centre's founders, who were influential in bringing chanting to a western audience. Aged 28, Rimer quit her job and retrained as a yoga teacher. In 2005, she founded Jivamukti Yoga London, then moved abroad. Since 2012, she has studied to lead kirtans under the

tutelage of Grammy-nominated singer Jai Uttal. But it has only been in the wake of the pandemic that demand for her class has exploded.

Back on Golborne Road, Rimer's voice is warm and clear, underpinned by the soft tones of the harmonium. She sings a simple mantra for 15 minutes at the beginning and end of the class, depending on what comes to her on the day. One might be "Bolo Ram", a Sanskrit phrase that means singing (*bolo*) to the master of the universe (*ram*). The patterns are easy to follow: as we sing, they rise and fall in volume and intensity. Some people are off-key. But weirdly, this isn't annoying. Instead, the combined voices are uplifting.

REPEATING SOMETHING OVER AND OVER FORCES THE MIND TO QUIETEN DOWN

I never expected to be a chanteuse. I'm an OK singer but a terrible follower. Nevertheless, around a decade ago, I checked into a pink-painted ashram in Goa where I was directed to reluctantly join several hundred people for a two-hour kirtan. I found a seat near the door of the hall hung with the scent of lotus blossom. But, barely 10 minutes in, my awkwardness evaporated. As our voices melted together, we became part of a greater organism. As we intoned, I felt pulled out of my individual self, into something more fundamental, more universal. It was euphoric. Cathartic. Like when the music peaks in a nightclub.

As Dr Andrew Newberg, professor and director of research, Marcus Institute of Integrative Health at Thomas Jefferson University and Hospital, explains, chanting's

power is that while it can stimulate "calm and bliss" in the practitioner it can also provoke "a sensation of arousal and ecstasy". This is down to its ability to simultaneously work upon the sympathetic, fight-or-flight aspect of the nervous system and, at the same time, promote the parasympathetic.

Chanting's other health benefits include decreased anxiety and more focused attention. Studies have shown it can lower blood pressure and reduce inflammation, and promote restorative delta brainwaves usually associated with deep sleep (Rimer tells me Radiohead's Ed O'Brien is fascinated by the sound frequencies of her chanting).

Kirtan, which has a musical element to its mantra chanting, has roots that can be traced back to India around the sixth century. But chanting comes in many guises, including Gregorian, Buddhist (where mantras are generally sung in a monotone fashion) and those sung by Native Americans and indigenous Australians. "When you chant in a group, a sense of unity emerges," says Nicole Vignola, neuroscientist and author of *Rewire: Break the Cycle, Alter Your Thoughts and Create Lasting Change*. "You're all breathing together, voicing the same sounds; you can feel part of a lineage of people who've sung those same sounds for centuries." Faith doesn't need to enter into it. "We all thirst to feel part of something bigger," adds Nikki Slade who, in addition to her regular slots at London's Triyoga, has brought chanting to the folks of Deutsche Bank, M&C Saatchi, The Priory and Wandsworth Prison. "Chanting gives a space to find connection without a specific religion."

Beyond Love Supreme Projects and Triyoga, one can chant at London spaces Mantra Lounge or OmNom; in New York, head to Souk Studio. Or join the 4,000-odd people who head to Buddhafest in the Blackdown Hills near Taunton. Alternatively, join Slade or Jai Uttal chanting on Spotify (Rimer will release her own digital library next year). Tara Swart, neuroscientist and senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management, tells me she does it in the shower – making it time-efficient, private and effective.

I go to class when I can, sometimes using it as a circuit-breaker. Sometimes I chant in my car when I'm stuck in traffic. As Morris says, "I'm busy, I can't go and sit on a rock all day. The way Manizeh teaches, you can take it into your everyday life." Adds Rimer: "You don't need kit. It's not expensive." (At Love Supreme Projects, there's a free weekly kirtan for the community, and Rimer offers reduced rates to those who qualify.) "Once chanting becomes a soundtrack in your life, you can dial in when you need it." ■HTSI



MANIZEH RIMER'S FIVE-STEP CHANTING GUIDE

1. Put on any of the following songs of mantras: "Krishna Krishna" by Alice Coltrane; "Hara Hara Hara Mahadev" by Jai Uttal; "Ong Namo" by Snamat Kaur; "Ma Durga" by Krishna Das; "Angel's Prayer" feat. Manorama and others.
2. Listen with your eyes closed, preferably with a pair of good headphones.
3. When you're ready, start repeating the mantras along with the song.
4. Don't be critical about what you sound like!
5. Chant these mantras anywhere, whenever they start to come into your mind. Let them out through your voice. Feel your heart crack open.

Left: Manizeh Rimer leads a kirtan class at Love Supreme Projects alongside musician Ben Hazleton

IT'S A WRAP

Clara Baldock goes undercover with nine stylish blankets

There's no shortage of shawls and blankets to swaddle yourself in this season. Designer Rose Uniacke has created a bespoke shawl to mark her reimaging of the Victoria Beckham Dover Street flagship store in London this Christmas. Designed exclusively for the fashion house, the golden olive throw is handwoven from Bactrian camel hair harvested by nomadic households of the Mongolian Steppe. Cashmere brand Oyuna has collaborated with British architect John Pawson to launch five muted blankets inspired by his work, particularly the Lake Crossing in Kew Gardens. And for alpaca and llama wool, look to Life, the debut wearables collection from fabric firm de Le Cuona. The throws feature jacquard designs, fringes and plush bouclé, and will look as striking wrapped around you as draped over the sofa. ■HTSI



1. MAGNIBERG alpaca Queen blanket, €320. 2. DENIS COLOMB cashmere Nara Himalayan blanket, £1,235, abask.com. 3. CHATHAM x EMMA HARLING mohair and merino wool Plaid blanket, \$395. 4. DE LE CUONA alpaca and wool throw, £830. 5. BRUNELLO CUCINELLI cashmere double-cloth Striped throw, £2,850. 6. THE HOUSE OF LYRIA cashmere and silk Formia Polychrom blanket, £1,350, artemest.com. 7. OYUNA x JOHN PAWSON cashmere throw, £1,295. 8. LORO PIANA cashmere and wool Tartan Flannel Plaid blanket, £1,525