



Mantram Repetition: a Portable Practice for Being Mindful

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Published online: 23 June 2020

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Repetition of a mantram at various times throughout the day is a widespread and ancient practice that can be used to foster mindfulness as well as manage stress and cultivate resilience. This is sometimes called portable mantram repetition to distinguish it from using a mantram (or mantra) as a focus in sitting meditation. According to many traditions and teachers, the greatest spiritual benefit from portable repetition of a mantram or short prayer phrase comes from repeating it on as many occasions as possible. In our modern world, engaging in portable mantram repetition means finding ways to silently repeat one's mantram at many free moments throughout one's daily routines—such as when walking, when waiting, or on many other occasions as described below. Perhaps the fullest description of how to engage in portable mantram repetition comes to us from Indian-born spiritual teacher Sri Eknath Easwaran (1910–1999). In this article, we explain Easwaran's (2008, 2013) approach on how to begin using a mantram in one's own daily living.

Choosing a Mantram

A mantram is a word or phrase that is a “short, powerful spiritual formula [for] calling up what is best and deepest in ourselves” (Easwaran 2008, p. 12). Mantram is a Sanskrit term that helps distinguish this practice from the use of secular slogans. Unlike a personal affirmation, motto, or pep talk, a mantram embodies and invokes a sacred legacy, often interpreted as a way to connect with a “higher” or “other” sacred power, helping us tap into

our greatest inner resources or spirit. Mantram repetition is elegant in its simplicity yet profound. Its power has been affirmed for millennia in diverse traditions and cultures.

Easwaran encourages everyone to choose a traditional mantram that is a spiritual word or phrase from one of the great wisdom traditions (see Table 1). Choose something that has been “hallowed” by repetition over centuries (Easwaran 2013, p. 164). Do not make up your own, although many people are tempted to choose a slogan, motto, or affirmation about a characteristic or trait they wish to experience. Over time, a mantram is understood (and attested) to tap deeper into one's consciousness. The words themselves act as profound and timeless invocations of imperishable truths. To experience the full power of a mantram, please choose from among mantrams that have been used and hallowed by centuries of devout seeking and affirmed by saints and sages.

The process of selecting a mantram is as personal as the mantram itself. Individuals choose a mantram based on any number of reasons. They may be responsive to a word or phrase that is associated with a particular spiritual tradition, or they may instead purposefully choose a hallowed phrase without any prior personal associations.

When starting out, some people allow several days or weeks to “try one on for size”: If it remains satisfying, keep it. If not, try another. If you have difficulty choosing, you could try Mahatma Gandhi's mantram: *Rama*—an invocation for eternal joy within. Once you have selected your mantram, do not change it—otherwise, “you will be like a person digging shallow holes in many places; you will never go deep enough to find water” (Easwaran 2008, p. 13). Keep the same mantram for the rest of your life. The longer and more often you repeat it, the stronger and more effective it becomes. Choose wisely.

In Easwaran's method, it is good to know the meaning of one's mantram, not necessarily its dictionary definition, but rather one or more interpretations that continue to inspire committed spiritual aspirants and that can inspire us. As shown in Table 1, for example, Mahatma Gandhi's mantram *Rama* can be interpreted as “eternal joy within”; Judaism's *Ribono Shel Olam* means “Lord of the Universe”; and Buddhism's *Om Mani Padme Hum* has often been interpreted as “The jewel

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Table 1 Selected examples for choosing a mantram or holy name or phrase

If you have this in mind...	Then consider choosing this mantram...
Christian	
Jesus Prayer	Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me
Mother of Jesus	Hail Mary [or] Ave Maria
Son of God	Om Yesu Christu [or] Jesus, Jesus
Muslim	
Lord God, the One	Allah, Allah
God is great	Allahu Akbar
In the name of God, merciful, compassionate	Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim
Hindu	
Eternal joy within	Rama, Rama
Invocation to beauty and fearlessness	Om Namah Shivaya
In honor of the Divine Mother	Om Bhavani
Names of God	Hare Rama... Hare Krishna... [Mahamantram]
Buddhist	
Jewel (self) in the lotus of the heart	Om Mane Padme Hum
I bow to the Buddha of Infinite Light	Namo Amida Butsu
Jewish	
Blessed art Thou, King of the Universe	Barukh Atah Adonai
Lord of the Universe	Ribono Shel Olam

in the lotus of the heart.” Similarly, the process of mantram repetition has gone by many names in different traditions. Buddhists in the Pure Land traditions engage in *nembutsu* when they repeat “Namo Amida Butsu,” Hindus perform *japa* by repeating “Rama” or other mantras, Muslims perform *dhikr* by repeating the name of Allah, Jews perform *gilgul* by repeating “Ribono Shel Olam,” and Christians may seek to pray unceasingly by repeating the name of Jesus or the Jesus Prayer.

How the Mantram Works

Psychologically, mantram repetition serves two overarching functions that are intertwined. First, it helps manage immediate stressors by calming, recentering, and strengthening the mind. Second, when used consistently over time, mantram repetition also fosters long-term psychological capacities such as resilience—the ability to quickly recover balance after a crisis—and deepened mindfulness, including qualities such as equanimity and compassion.

For cultivating these longer-term benefits and also for the mantram to be maximally effective for managing stress, we must work the mantram into our day and repeat it not only when we are stressed but also at times when we are *not* stressed. For example, we can cultivate a habit of repeating our mantram when we are walking, when we are waiting in line, or, importantly, when we are falling asleep at night.

The mantram “is most effective when we say it silently, in the mind, with as much concentration as possible” (Easwaran

2008, p. 22). For example, you should not repeat your mantram while thinking about your grocery shopping list. When repeating a mantram, your thinking slows down and you consolidate the skill of focusing your attention on just one thing—initially, your mantram. This is done internally, quietly, inside the mind. Although this may sound difficult at first, over time with consistent, daily practice, repeating a mantram builds expertise in directing the attention at will. It improves your ability to concentrate and improves awareness. The internal skill of concentration on a mantram is gradually transferrable externally to a variety of tasks, supporting focused or one-pointed attention. The practice of repeating a mantram with intention and focus thus becomes a means to better concentration on other things from the mundane (doing dishes) to the sublime (being intimate with a partner).

Importantly, repeating a mantram may often be beneficially combined with routine or mechanical activities that do not require our full attention. That is because when we are walking or washing dishes, for example, the “monkey mind” can easily wander off to innumerable distractions from the past and future—a few worries, a half-remembered song, and a bit of planning that “scatters your awareness and leaves you anywhere but here and now. The mantram brings you back to the present. Later, when you turn to something you *do* want to give attention to, you will be much more present – which means you will enjoy it more and do a better job” (Easwaran 2013, p. 72). However, we should avoid repeating a mantram during potentially dangerous activities, such as driving a car or chopping vegetables, and instead give them our entire one-pointed attention.

From moment to moment, mantram repetition improves intentionality and presence in at least three ways: (1) Mantram is like a pause button for the mind. (2) Mantram brings us immediately into the present moment. (3) Mantram strengthens our ability to cultivate presence and active listening and focus on one thing at a time. This does not preclude managing numerous things rapidly, but in the seconds of doing one action, the mind becomes focused, like a laser. Repeating a mantram is an immediate reminder to be here now, in the moment. And by reflecting our spiritual ideals, the mantram strengthens our ongoing awareness of the spiritual dimension of our being, helping ensure our fullest and most complete presence in the moment.

When to Use a Mantram

Most of us have many occasions during the day when we can beneficially use a mantram. Over time you will discover more and more occasions. A mantram can be repeated at any time and any place. To make it part of your routine, repeating a mantram is particularly helpful when waiting in elevators, when walking or exercising, when sitting at a stop light, and especially before falling asleep at night. Mantram can be repeated at numerous non-stressful times throughout the day. For example, you can routinely repeat it upon opening a door when grasping the handle, helping to clear and recenter your mind. Repeat a mantram when walking from meeting to meeting to get a mental mini-break to promote clarity and focus. Repeat a mantram when walking anywhere or while waiting, which allows for a short respite from external chaos. All of these are times to engage and strengthen the practice. A simple guideline is to make sure you repeat it at times when you *do not need it*, so it is readily available when you *do need it*. Then, it will be there for you without delay—readily available, quickly implemented, sustainable, and effective to bring your mind into the present moment.

Mantram repetition can also be used to prevent a potentially challenging situation from becoming worse. For example, a person who has fear of flying can begin repeating the mantram in anticipation of the trip. They can repeat the mantram while packing and all the way to the airport, while standing in the security line, all the way to their seat, and continuously until arrival at the destination. This keeps the mind in the present moment and away from imagined difficulties that may never materialize.

An excellent way you can integrate the mantram more deeply into your consciousness is by repeating it with concentration when exercising. Easwaran (2008, pp. 54–55) wrote:

Walking is one of the best times to repeat the mantram, especially if you walk briskly. The rhythm of your footsteps, the rhythm of the mantram, and the rhythm of

your breathing all harmonize to soothe and invigorate the body and mind. This happens naturally, and there is nothing mysterious about it. Breathing is closely connected with our state of mind. People who are tense or angry breathe rapidly and irregularly; those who are calm, loving, and secure breathe like a little child, smoothly, slowly, and deeply. A brisk walk helps to make your breathing rhythm deep and even, and the mantram will help to calm your mind. So at work, try a mantram break: take a brisk five- or ten-minute walk repeating the mantram and see how much better you feel than if you had stayed at your desk with a cup of coffee. The mantram goes well with other rhythmical forms of exercise too, like jogging, swimming, or bicycle riding, but I especially recommend walking because it requires no special equipment and no special time, and you can keep it up right into the evening of your life.

Of course, each person's opportunities and needs for repeating a mantram are somewhat different. For example, repeating a mantram when sick helps prevent unnecessary dwelling on pain or physical symptoms, as well as catastrophizing or worrying how long an illness will persist, all of which impede recovery. Repeating the mantram can also strengthen a person's faith that all will work out for the best—such faith can assist the body in tapping into deeper curative forces, including what Herbert Benson has called the power of “remembered wellness” (faith that one will heal).

Families can make good use of the mantram. When parents repeat a mantram themselves, even small children can learn to repeat a mantram to manage emotions—for example, when annoyed with a friend or sibling or when afraid while visiting a doctor or dentist. For small children, their mantram can be sung to them as a lullaby. The mantram can support people giving help to family who are ill or experiencing economic hardships, and can prevent or mitigate unproductive anxiety. Family members who are physically separated can draw comfort from mantram repetition. Conversely, families living in close quarters for extended periods may find the mantram an aid to maintaining patience. One individual's calmness may have a ripple effect. Families can sing their mantram(s) together.

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