

## **Text from the Tradition: The Wisdom Way of Knowing and The Wisdom Jesus by Cynthia Bourgeault**

*The Role of Chant in Contemplative Prayer* (text drawn from pp. 105-106; 161-162)

What meditation accomplishes in silence, chanting accomplishes in sound; it wakes up the emotional center and sets it vibrating to the frequency of love and adoration while feeding the body with mysterious food of divine life. Sacred chanting is an extremely powerful way of awakening and purifying the heart because it allows us to experience, beyond the distortions of our own personal passions, the power and profundity of the divine passion itself.

Chanting is at the heart of all sacred traditions worldwide, and for very good reason; it is fundamentally a deep immersion experience in the creative power of the universe itself because to make music, you must engage those three core elements out of which the earth was fashioned and through which all spiritual transformation happens. The first element of course, is breath. Many of the great world religions picture the earth as being created and sustained by the steady, rhythmic breathing of God. Virtually every tradition starts you off on a spiritual practice by bringing attention to your breath and teaching you to breathe fully and consciously. The second element is tone, or vibration, the sound you make when you add voice to that breath. Again, many of the world's sacred traditions tell us that creation came into existence through the power of vibration. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Mythologically, the word was "spoken" into existence. And when we add our tone, we join this speaking. The third element is intentionality. The great wisdom traditions have always claimed that the universe is not merely a random event, but the intricate unfolding of a divine intelligence and purpose. The coherence of divine intention is what ultimately holds everything together. In much the same way, when you chant, the quality of your intention and attention is what makes the difference between boredom and beauty. As you give yourself to the words you are chanting, their spiritual power comes alive in you.

In the Christian tradition, sacred chanting has always centered on the psalms, and this is a wonderful tradition to consider, even in your own home and even if you don't consider yourself musically gifted. At its simplest, chanting is simply a matter of putting voice to the words you see on a page. Open your Bible to the psalms, take a deep breath, and start singing. On a single tone is fine. Don't be embarrassed or self-conscious about how you sound; instead, simply sense the wonder of your own breath and your own tone. Out of these two elements all sacred traditions agree, the divine source brought the created realm into being, and these two elements are right there in you! In a mysterious way, your true voice, whether large or small, high or low, bold or timorous, is very closely related to your true self; and as you learn to sing out of your own natural being without pretense or strain, the beauty of your unique quality of aliveness will shine through.

## **Teaching on Text from the Tradition:** by Christine Luna Munger

Many of us experience intense self-consciousness when we sing. Rather than serving as “the beauty of our unique quality of aliveness,” such as Cynthia celebrates, singing can plunge many of us into deep ego-centered self-preoccupation. Truly, and especially in modern Western cultures, a lack of singing as part of normal daily rhythms while we work or play, could be understood as a reflective shadow expressing our sense of separation from one another and from creation. When we forget interconnection, we lose confidence in joining our own voices with all the other voices within creation that already sing beautiful sounds.

Song, and especially chant, is a powerful spiritual practice because of its ability to ignite all three of our centers of knowing—the words of chant draw upon our *intellect*, as they connect concept to reality; the resonance of chant connects to *heart*, as it connects perception to action; and the breath of chant works in our *body*, as it integrates flesh and spirit in oxygen and blood. Practically, chant empowers us to create new habits by drawing from life-giving patterns.

Some of you know that I was inspired when Matthew Wright encouraged us at the Episcopal House of Prayer to make up our own chants, much as Cynthia encourages in her writing. Just a few weeks ago, words for a new chant came to me, and as I played with putting them into tone, I noticed that the sound and words wouldn't come together until and I had repeated them enough, over and over, until their meaning melted into me. Once the meaning settled in, I could finally align my sound with the content of the words, even though this one was particularly complex: What is, is what is; and what is, is what was; and what was, is what ever shall be. As I fumbled over the words and tried to match them to a tone, my own memories, hopes and struggles flooded into the process. Having “worked” the words into the context of my lived experience, I can now sing the chant without stumbling over the words or my own self-preoccupation.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

- What are your favorite chants or sacred songs? (share it with us in song!)
- What is your experience of feeling connected or disconnected through sound, song, or chant?