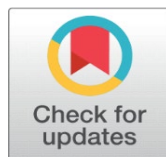
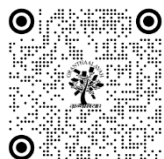


MANTRA CHANTING: WELL-BEING OF MIDDLE AGE PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

Vedic mantra chanting has been an integral part of our ancient Indian system. It has been recognized for its profound impact on the overall well-being of humans and plants. Extensive research has been conducted on specific mantras such as OM, Gayathri, and Maha Mrityunjay, highlighting their positive effects on humans including memory, attention, and mental clarity. However, within the gamut of different mantras, the effects of chanting Vishnu Sahasranamam mantra remain largely unexplored. This paper aims to bridge this gap by not only identifying and addressing the limited research available on the Vishnu Sahasranamam mantra's effects on the overall well-being of people but also tries to understand the effects of chanting these mantras specifically on the middle-aged group which as per Encyclopedia Britannica (2024) is between the age of 40-60 years. By synthesizing existing literature and proposing avenues for further research, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the holistic benefits of various mantra chanting in enhancing overall well-being of humans especially, the middle age group.

Keywords: Mantra Chanting, Mantra Meditation, OM, Gayatri mantra, Maha Mrityunjay, Vishnu Sahasranamam, Well-being, Middle age. Medical and paramedical professionals universally acknowledge that each stage of life, including middle age, is characterized by unique physical, emotional, social, and cognitive attributes. The human lifespan has significantly increased due to advancements in healthcare, nutrition, and living conditions. Consequently, the age brackets defining life stages have shifted, particularly expanding the middle age range. Traditionally considered to be lower, this stage now often encompasses a broader spectrum between the age of 40-60 years due to improved longevity, making it more inclusive of those who may experience its associated characteristics slightly earlier or later

1. INTRODUCTION

During middle age, individuals typically undergo a variety of physiological changes. These include a gradual decline in physical strength and endurance, changes in metabolism, and the onset of age-related health conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and osteoporosis. Emotional and psychological changes are also prominent during this period. Many individuals face what is commonly referred to as a midlife crisis, characterized by introspection and a re-evaluation of life goals and achievements. This stage often involves coping with the stress of aging, the potential onset of menopause in women, and the need to adjust to changing family dynamics, such as children leaving home or caring for aging parents.

Socially, middle age is often marked by shifts in personal and professional roles. Many individuals experience peak career years during this time, taking on greater responsibilities at work while simultaneously preparing for future retirement. This dual focus can lead to increased stress and the need for effective work-life balance strategies. Social networks may also change, with some friendships deepening and others fading as life circumstances evolve. The transition to becoming an empty nester can alter marital relationships, sometimes leading to renewed connections with one's spouse or, conversely, highlighting existing marital issues.

Cognitively, middle-aged individuals may notice changes in memory, processing speed, and problem-solving abilities. While some cognitive decline is a natural part of aging, many people in this age group remain intellectually active and continue to pursue lifelong learning opportunities. Engaging in mentally stimulating activities, such as reading, puzzles, and learning new skills, can help maintain cognitive health and delay the onset of more serious age-related cognitive impairments.

In the Indian system of life stages these are known as the Ashramas which provide a holistic framework for understanding the progression of human life. This system divides life into four stages: Brahmacharya (the student stage), Grihastha (the householder stage), Vanaprastha (the hermit stage), and Sannyasa (the renunciate stage), each traditionally spanning about 25 years. The Grihastha stage, which aligns roughly with the modern concept of middle age, is a period dedicated to fulfilling familial and societal duties. Individuals are expected to establish their careers, raise families, and contribute to the community during this time.

Following the Grihastha stage, individuals transition to the Vanaprastha stage, where they gradually withdraw from worldly responsibilities and begin to focus on spiritual growth and preparation for the final stage of life, Sannyasa. The Sannyasa stage represents renunciation and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment, marking a complete withdrawal from material concerns.

In modern times, the rigid adherence to these 25-year stages has become less common, but the underlying principles of balance between material and spiritual life remain relevant. The Ashrama system emphasizes the importance of adapting one's focus and priorities in accordance with the natural progression of life, a concept that resonates with contemporary understanding of the changing needs and challenges faced at different life stages.

2. MANTRA AND ITS MEANING

A mantra is a divine sound or word, revealed to the Vedic sages during deep meditation and trance. It is believed that these mantras revealed themselves to the sages in their deep meditation and encapsulate spiritual and divine energy in a condensed form. Essentially, a mantra is a sacred formula that embodies a deity's essence through sound and vibration. The concept of a mantra, described in Sanskrit as 'Mananattrayate iti Mantrah,' means that constant repetition or contemplation of the mantra protects and liberates one from the cycle of birth and death. This practice is believed to lead the individual soul (Jiva) to freedom from sin, and ultimate liberation (Moksha), while helping achieve the fourfold goals of life: Dharma (duty), Artha (wealth), Kama (desire), and Moksha (liberation).

The word 'mantra' is derived from the Sanskrit roots 'Man,' meaning 'to think,' and 'Tra,' meaning 'to control'. Hence, a mantra is a mental instrument for controlling the mind from worldly thoughts and feelings which is essential to access higher spiritual realms. In ancient Vedic texts, there are many mantras like Gayathri mantra, Maha Mrityunjya mantra, Om Namo Bhagwate Vasudevayay which have different deities and specific purpose for recitation. Gayathri mantra invokes Sun God and heals the chanter while infusing Prana Shakti. Maha Mrityunjay manta fills the person with psychological and physical well-being, protecting the person from diseases and even sometimes evading death.

From the late 18th century through the early 19th century, there has been a rising interest among researchers in exploring and reviving the ancient wisdom of the Vedas, particularly focusing on the positive effects of Vedic chanting on living organisms, including both humans and plants. While a few studies, such as those by Karnick (1982)ii, Deshpande (2013)iii, and Dr. Deekshitulu (2015)iv, have investigated and recorded the beneficial effects of certain Vedic mantras for medical and psychological benefits—like counteracting poisons, treating snake bites, aiding pregnancy, and enhancing cognitive and mood states—much of this knowledge remains unexplored.

A few decades ago, village elders held extensive wisdom about using specific mantras to facilitate easy childbirth, heal snake bites, and infuse water with healing properties for pain relief.

Unfortunately, this vast repository of knowledge has largely disappeared, and finding practitioners of this ancient healing tradition has become difficult.

Early 19th-century literature, although interested in the effects of mantra chanting, primarily focused on the scientific analysis of Vedic mantras in general or specific mantras such as OM, the Gayatri Mantra, the Maha Mrityunjay Mantra.

Many research have been conducted in the past to understand the effects of these mantras on various aspects like medical, psychological, cognitive but very few have been conducted to understand their effects on the specific middle group. And a very limited studies have been undertaken to study Vishnu Sahasranamam.

3. OM

According to the Upanishads, OM is a sacred syllable symbolizing the divine. Lord Krishna in the Bhagwat Gita identifies himself with the word, 'OM' and explains it to Arjuna on the battlefield the benefits of chanting OM which eventually will make Arjuna i.e the Jiva (soul) unite with Krishna (Brahma). As the treasure trove of the significance of chanting Mantras have been lost over centuries researchers of the modern times are once again trying to dig into the lost ancient knowledge and trying to explore the chanting of OM chanting and its effects on the mental state of human beings. One such study by Anubhav tries to explore the comprehensive review of the positive effects of AUM chanting, also known as OM chanting, on mental health and well-being. In this literature review the researcher collated the findings of many researchers conducted in the past and observed that OM chanting has been found to significantly reduce stress and anxiety levels. Studies indicate that engaging in OM chanting leads to a decrease in perceived stress levels and anxiety symptoms. Moreover, it has been compared favourably to mindfulness meditation in reducing anxiety. It has also been associated with an improvement in mood, increased feelings of happiness and contentment, improvements in cognitive flexibility and attentional control, improved sleep quality and a reduction in symptoms of insomnia. OM chanting is often used as a spiritual practice, promoting inner peace and spiritual growth. Studies have shown that it enhances spiritual well-being and increases feelings of connectedness to the universe, leading to a sense of transcendence and connectedness to nature.

Arati et al.^{vi} delves into a specific age group and explores the extent of depression, anxiety, stress, and cognitive functioning of elderly women with hypertension to evaluate the impact of OM chanting. 40 hypertensive women aged 50-60, with blood pressure between 120-179/ $\leq$ 109 mmHg was made a part of the study and were divided into two groups. Control Group (n=20) received only medication. Intervention Group (n=20) performed OM chanting daily for six months in addition to medication. The chanting session was conducted at a fixed time every day and was supervised. Blood pressure, pulse rate, Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS), and Mini Mental State Examination (MMSE) scores were recorded pre- and post-intervention. Results of the study revealed significant reductions in systolic and diastolic blood pressure, pulse rate, depression, anxiety, and stress in the intervention group and MMSE scores also significantly improved post- intervention, indicating enhanced cognitive function.

In another study K.Anjanavii assessed the effects of OM chanting and Yoga Nidra on blood pressure (BP) and lipid profiles in hypertensive individuals in the age group of 25-60. Experimental group practiced OM chanting and Yoga Nidra five days a week for two months and the Control group continued with the usual medications with no further interventions. Significant reduction in systolic BP (SBP), diastolic BP (DBP), pulse pressure (PP), mean arterial pressure (MAP), and rate pressure product (RPP) in the experimental group compared to control group was observed. The study offered a safe complementary yet traditional therapy alongside medical treatment. Naveen Aalayam et al.^{viii} investigated the impact of 12 weeks of OM chanting on cognitive functions, specifically reaction time, and spatial and verbal memory on 20 healthy right-handed volunteers (9 men, 11 women) aged 25-55 years. Participants were divided into control and intervention groups. The intervention group practiced OM chanting for 20 minutes daily, five days a week, for 12 weeks with a postdesign. It has been found that a significant improvement took place in spatial memory and reaction time scores in the intervention group compared to the control group which made us believe that chanting of OM can significantly enhance spatial and verbal memory and reaction time while at the same time, the study gave a way to further researches to support the findings for the general population's well-being.

Yet another study was conducted by A.Jyotiix to understand the benefits of 5 minutes of OM chanting on heart rate and blood pressure in moderate hypertensive individuals who have poor control of their blood pressure even with medication. The study included 50 moderate hypertensive individuals aged 40-60 years who were administered antihypertensive therapy. The study observed that after 5 minutes of OM chanting, there was a statistically significant reduction in systolic blood pressure (by 14 mmHg), diastolic blood pressure (by 5 mmHg), and pulse rate (by 6 beats/min). These reductions indicate an immediate beneficial effect of OM chanting on cardiovascular parameters. The study discusses the implications of the findings, suggesting that OM chanting primarily benefits systolic hypertension by increasing parasympathetic activity and reducing sympathetic activity. It compares the results with previous studies on meditation and yoga, highlighting similar positive effects on blood pressure reduction.

4. GAYATHRI MANTRA

Anxiety is prevalent among the elderly and can significantly impact their quality of life if left untreated. Sang Ayu et al in their research combined mindfulness with the Gayatri mantra to alleviate anxiety in the geriatric population. The study explored the effects of this therapy on reducing anxiety in elderly Hindus. In a quasi-experimental design with 34 elderly participants the intervention involved mindfulness therapy with Gayatri mantra, administered over five weeks. Before the intervention, most participants had mild anxiety, which decreased to minimal levels after the intervention. The mean anxiety scores significantly decreased from 25.5 to 7.8 after the intervention. Additionally, significant improvements were observed across somatic, cognitive, and affective domains of anxiety.

5. SRI VISHNU SAHASRANAMAM: AN EXPLORATION OF ITS BENEFITS AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Sri Vishnu Sahasranamam stotra, comprising 1,000 names of Lord Vishnu, is compiled into 108 stanzas. Each name carries profound meaning and significance, reflecting a particular quality (guna) of the Supreme Being (Parmatama). It is believed to have a profound positive impact on the human mind, enhancing overall positivity and personality. According to ancient Indian texts, these 1,000 names were recited by Bhishma Pitamah, the grand patriarch of the Kuru dynasty, as he lay on his deathbed on the battlefield of Mahabharata. Bhishma imparted these names to his grandson Yudhishtira as his final philosophical teachings.

Among all hymns and praises dedicated to Lord Vishnu, the Vishnu Sahasranamam is revered as the most powerful and is held in great veneration globally. While numerous commentaries on the Vishnu Sahasranamam exist, the commentary (Bhashya) by Shri Adi Sankaracharya stands out as the most significant. With around 40 known commentaries, Adi Sankaracharya's is the earliest and remains unparalleled. Adi Sankaracharya has authored many commentaries on Hindu scriptures, including the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahmasutras, with the Vishnu Sahasranamam being his first commentary. Sankaracharya was firmly convinced that reciting the Vishnu Sahasranamam could elevate humanity from ignorance and despondency to enlightenment and pure bliss. In the current age (Kalyug), he believed that simply chanting or meditating on the names of Lord Vishnu could transform individuals from negative to altruistic beings.

A study conducted by Kumar Sai Sailesh et al. (2015)^{xi} on a PhD scholar aimed to understand the positive effects of chanting the Vishnu Sahasranamam on stress levels, cognition, and autonomic functions. The findings indicated a significant decrease in DASS depression, anxiety, stress, and cortisol levels, alongside controlled systolic and diastolic blood pressure and improved memory. Similarly, Deshpande (2013)^{xii} and Dr. Deekshitulu (2015)^{xiii} documented the benefits of chanting the Vishnu Sahasranamam for curing fever (Jwaram).

Given the large number of studies conducted on OM and Gayathri Mantra, a very limited number of studies have been undertaken in comparison on the effects of chanting Vishnu Sahasranamam. This paper not only seeks to explore the effects of chanting Vishnu Sahasranamam on self-concept and overall psychological well-being including physical and cognitive health of middle-aged individuals but also raise a question on the reasons for conducting a handful of studies on this subject especially given the fact that out of 29 states of India chanting of Vishnu Sahasranamam is prevalent among all 5 states of south India. This paper is a qualitative study and interviews are conducted on people who have been chanting Vishnu Sahasranamam actively for many years.

6. INCLUSION CRITERIA

- Middle-aged individuals (45-65 years)
- Individuals who have been chanting the Vishnu Sahasranamam for more than 20 years
- Indian origin, residing in India

7. METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative approach, using interviews to gather data. Initial pilot studies with two focus groups of three participants each helped identify emerging themes. These themes guided subsequent individual interviews. Eight individual interviews were conducted with participants from the selected age group, revealing recurring themes

across all interviews. Some volunteers were part of a group that congregates every Sunday, while others were unrelated individuals, all having chanted the Vishnu Sahasranamam for over 20 years. Participants shared life stories and anecdotes highlighting their positive experiences, attributing these to the chanting of the Vishnu Sahasranamam.

8. EXCERPT OF AN INTERVIEW FROM ONE FOCUS GROUP

Participant 1 (“P1”): Jo Vishnu Sahasranamam (now will be referred as VS) har din bolte Un logon ko life mein kuch takleef nahin hota hai, Yeh mera personal experience hai ki mein har din VS padta hoon. Mera har din aasaan se chala jayega..kuch takleef to nahin hota hai kyunki mein..mera vishwas hai VS padne mein. Aur kya hai ki...ah..har life par ‘Ailli naati Sani’ bolte hain, ‘Shani ka peedha’ saadhe saat saal..ah..teen saal ke ek par har life par aata hai...woh Shani peedha bhi VS padne mein aasaan se chale jayega yuh to takleef nahin...bina takleef, yeh mera Anubhav hai, mera vishwas bhi hai. Itna hi.

Interviewer (“I”): Haanji. To aap kitne saal se kar rahein hain? P1: Mein nearly 15 saal se...hardin

I: Acha

P1: Yeh mera vrat hai

I: oh...Acha. Aap padhaate bhi hain yahan par? P1: mein padhate nahin...mein padhta hoon

I: ok

P1: mein padhta hoon, sirf padhta hoon. Kuch logon ko mera yehbahut kasht kaal mein chal rahe yeh yeh sab...bolne mein...koi mere saath aake bole to mein yehi bolta hoon aapko time hai to VS padne ka.

I: ok

P1: Yeh mera Anubhav hai na isliye mein yeh to ‘Sarva Rog Nivarana’ Jaisa bolta hoon. VS padhiye, kuch saal...kuch din ke baad aap dekhiye kuch takleef nahin hota hai aisa I: acha

P1: batata hoon

I: To aapka aisa personal experience hua hai jahan aapko koi emotional, koi se low feel kar rahe ho ya family mein koi problem...

P1: Ah family...

I: Medical problem?

P1: jo bhi ho mere saath nahin aata hai...takleef to mere saamne nahin aata hai...mein..mein sochta hoon yeh bahut takleef hoga aisa...lekin aasaan se woh paas ho jayega...yeh mera personally experience

I: ah

P1: No doubt

I: Yeah...to iska matlab woh aapko takleef sehne ki himmat deta hai ya kya? P2: who bhi bol sakte hain

I: Haanji?

P2: who bhi bol sakte hain...takleef sehne ki himmat dete hain aur takleef bhi paas nahin aati. Yeh dono bol sakte hain

I: Acha

P2: Mujhe jaane ke waqt accident hua I: haan

P2: to uss accident mein mujhe kuch bhi nahin hua I: haan...bilul

P2: ho sakta hai na who takleef ko...choti si takleef se ho sakti hai...takleef ho sakte hain who sehne ka

I: ...himmat ho jaati hai P1: mera...

I: haanji

P1: Mein car mein...mein car chala raha hoon I: Haan

P1: mere saath mera pitaji..ahn...70 years...aur mera bhaanji...ah..mera bhaiya ka beta...chaar log chal rahe hai, badi accident hua

I: acha

P1: kisi ko kuch nahin hua, car to bahut damage hua lekin kisi ko kuch nahin hua..yeh mera vishawaas hai...yehi hia vishwaas

I: haanji

P1: Bhagwan ka..VS har din mein bolne mein humko kuch nahin hote hai I: ok

P1: yeh bada...bada experience I: haanji

The participants reported that the chanting of the Vishnu Sahasranamam helped them avoid anticipated crises, which dissipated before causing any stress. Cited issues included medical concerns, workplace politics, and being stranded abroad without money. Participants agreed that the chanting protected them and their families, creating a protective shield (kavach) against negative forces. They also noted that chanting brought peace and clarity of mind, enabling them to make better decisions in challenging situations. This study is ongoing, with more interviews and statistical analysis needed for comprehensive scientific findings.

9. DISCUSSION

This research raises several questions that extend beyond the scope of a single paper. One question is what could be the reason for not having so many studies conducted on this mantra whereas this mantra is popular among a large community hailing from southern parts of India, if not as popular as Gayathri or OM. Analysis of interviews reflect deflection of crisis intervention, positive attitude towards life so the second question is, how do the children of participants, who were passive listeners to the chanting, fared academically and in terms of self-concept. Preliminary findings suggest that these children did well in academics and pursued successful careers, indicating a positive impact from the peaceful home environment created by regular chanting. The World Health Organization reports that globally, one in seven 10-19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder, highlighting the importance of alternative methods like mantra chanting to support mental health. Does listening of Vishnu Sahasranamam as a passive listener at home have any impact on the level of anxiety or any other mental disorder on young adults or on people irrespective of age group?

Another question is whether the effects of chanting the Vishnu Sahasranamam on middle-aged adults would differ from school students, and whether chanting other mantras might yield similar or different results. This study lays the groundwork for future research to explore these questions and suggests that educational institutions consider incorporating mantra chanting into their curricula. Reviving ancient Indian knowledge systems is crucial for developing higher intellect and resilience in students, especially in an era of high stress and competition.

10. CONCLUSION

The Sri Vishnu Sahasranamam holds significant potential for enhancing mental, physical, and psychological well-being. While the current study provides promising insights, further research is necessary to fully understand the scope and mechanisms of its benefits. Integrating the practice of mantra chanting into daily routines could offer a valuable tool for personal and spiritual development, helping middle-aged individuals navigate the challenges of modern life with greater ease and resilience and maintain good overall health.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None .

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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See Footnote 3.

See footnote 4.