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The Role of Chanting and Prayer in Buddhism: A Multidimensional Review

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Abstract: *Chanting and prayer constitute fundamental practices in Buddhist traditions worldwide, serving doctrinal, soteriological, psychological, and social functions. This review synthesizes historical, anthropological, neuroscientific, and clinical literature to examine how vocal recitation practices including textual chanting, paritta recitation, mantra repetition, and devotional prayer preserve teachings, cultivate virtues, regulate cognition and emotion, and construct communal identity across Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna contexts. Historical analysis reveals chanting as an oral technology for doctrinal transmission and ritual structuring. Soteriological frameworks position chanting as merit-generating practice supporting liberation through recollection, purification, and protection. Contemporary neuroscientific research demonstrates that chanting modulates default mode network activity, enhances attentional stability, reduces mind-wandering, and induces calm alertness characterized by increased theta and alpha brainwave activity. Clinical studies associate regular chanting with reduced stress and anxiety, improved heart rate variability, enhanced cognitive function, and greater quality of life. Anthropological work highlights chanting's role in building social cohesion, communal healing, and shared religious identity. The review identifies significant methodological gaps including overreliance on cross-sectional designs, conflation of distinct practice types, and limited integration of indigenous meaning-systems and proposes mixed-methods approaches combining neurophysiological measures with ethnographic sensitivity. This comprehensive synthesis positions Buddhist chanting as a multimodal contemplative technology warranting further interdisciplinary investigation bridging religious studies, cognitive science, and mental health research.*

Keywords: *Buddhist chanting, mantra recitation, paritta, contemplative neuroscience, mental health*

1. Introduction

1.1. The Role of Chanting and Prayer In Buddhism: A Multidimensional Review

Chanting and prayer occupy central positions in Buddhist religious life, shaping daily devotional routines, lifecycle rituals, and individual contemplative practice across diverse traditions and cultural contexts (Kumar, 2023; Piyadassi, 1999; Soeta et al., 2015). While early Western scholarship often portrayed Buddhism as a rational philosophy emphasizing individual meditation and ethical discipline, contemporary research increasingly recognizes vocal practices including sutta recitation, paritta chanting, mantra repetition, and devotional invocation as crucial vehicles for transmitting doctrine, cultivating virtues, regulating mental states, and constructing religious communities (Kumar, 2023; Yulianti, 2012; Perry et al., 2021). The term "chanting" in Buddhist contexts typically refers to rhythmic vocal recitation of canonical texts (Pāli suttas, Sanskrit sūtras), protective formulas (paritta, rakṣā), and mantras or dhāraṇīs, often performed in liturgical languages not fully understood by lay participants (Kumar, 2023; Piyadassi, 1999; Payne, 2018). "Prayer" overlaps significantly with aspirational verses, bodhisattva vows, and invocations directed toward buddhas, bodhisattvas, or protective deities, particularly prominent in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions where relational devotion and supplication are more explicitly articulated (Kumar, 2023; Jones, 2021; Beer, 2003). Unlike theistic petitionary prayer, much Buddhist prayer emphasizes aspiration for universal welfare, confession of unwholesome actions, and dedication of merit, though popular practice also includes requests for protection, health, prosperity, and favorable rebirth (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; Harvey, 2012). In recent decades, scientific interest in contemplative practices has expanded dramatically, with chanting emerging as a subject of neuroscientific, psychological, and clinical investigation (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Perry et al., 2022; Bhasin et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2012). Research employing electroencephalography (EEG),

functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), heart rate variability (HRV) analysis, and standardized psychological scales has begun to elucidate the cognitive, affective, and physiological mechanisms underlying chanting practices (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Bhasin et al., 2013; Gao, Fan, et al., 2017; Wu & Lo, 2008). Simultaneously, anthropological and sociological work has documented chanting's role in community formation, identity construction, and collective healing across Buddhist societies (Yulianti, 2012; Setyawan, 2018; Ladwig, 2012). This review synthesizes historical, doctrinal, psychological, neuroscientific, and sociocultural perspectives on chanting and prayer in Buddhism. The objectives are fourfold: (a) to clarify conceptual foundations and historical functions of Buddhist vocal practices; (b) to examine soteriological and devotional roles within Buddhist doctrinal frameworks; (c) to evaluate empirical evidence regarding cognitive, emotional, and physiological effects; and (d) to assess social and communal dimensions while identifying methodological gaps and future research directions.

1.2. Conceptual Framework Summary Table

*"***Table 1.** *presents the multidimensional conceptual framework guiding this review."*

Table 1. *Multidimensional Conceptual Framework for Buddhist Chanting and Prayer*

Dimension	Core Function	Key Mechanisms	Representative Practices	Primary Evidence Sources
Historical–Textual	Doctrinal preservation and oral transmission	Mnemonic scaffolding, rhythmic patterning, communal recitation, canonical verification	Sutta recitation, bhāṇaka traditions, saṅgīti councils	Collins (1992); Kumar (2023)
Soteriological–Doctrinal	Path to liberation; merit generation and protection	Truth-act efficacy (sacca-kiriya), merit transference, karmic purification, sonic vibration	Paritta chanting, nianfo/nembutsu, Vajrayāna mantra accumulation	Piyadassi (1999); Jones (2021); Beer (2003)
Psychological–Cognitive	Attention regulation, mind-wandering reduction, emotional regulation	Attentional anchoring, DMN deactivation, cognitive reappraisal	Mantra repetition, Amitābha name-chanting, Kirtan Kriya	Perry et al. (2022); Gao et al. (2019); Bhasin et al. (2013)
Neurophysiological	Modulation of brain activity and autonomic function	Theta/alpha enhancement, DMN suppression, vagal tone increase, HRV improvement	EEG/fMRI during mantra meditation, HRV studies	Gao et al. (2017); Wu & Lo (2008)
Clinical–Therapeutic	Stress reduction, anxiety relief, cognitive enhancement	Respiratory coupling, parasympathetic activation, neuroplasticity, cognitive reserve	Mantra-based interventions, compassion-focused therapy	Moss et al. (2012); Dutta (2024); Gilbert & Choden (2013)
Social–Communal	Community formation, religious identity, intergenerational transmission	Rhythmic entrainment, synchronized vocalization, collective ritual, shared sacred space	Communal paritta ceremonies, anjangsana gatherings, Vesak	Yulianti (2012); Setyawan (2018); Ladwig (2012)

Note: This framework conceptualizes Buddhist chanting as a multimodal contemplative technology operating simultaneously across six interrelated dimensions. Bidirectional influences connect dimensions: neurophysiological changes (e.g., theta enhancement) support psychological outcomes (e.g., reduced mind-wandering), while social participation (e.g., communal chanting) amplifies soteriological commitment (e.g., merit dedication). The framework integrates emic (tradition-internal) and etic (scientific-external) perspectives.

1.3. Review Approach and Literature Search Strategy

This narrative review adopts a multidimensional, integrative approach to synthesizing literature on Buddhist chanting and prayer across historical, doctrinal, psychological, neuroscientific, and sociocultural domains. The review methodology follows established guidelines for rigorous narrative reviews (Sukhera, 2022), prioritizing thematic breadth and interdisciplinary integration over the exhaustive retrieval protocols characteristic of systematic reviews.

Literature searches were conducted across multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and the ATLA Religion Database, between Nov, 2025 and Feb, 2026. Search terms included combinations of the following keywords: "Buddhist chanting," "mantra recitation," "paritta," "Buddhist prayer," "nianfo," "nembutsu," "contemplative practice," "meditation AND chanting," "religious chanting AND neuroscience," "chanting AND mental health," "Buddhist ritual," "protective chanting," and "dhāraṇī." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine terms across disciplinary domains (e.g., "Buddhist chanting" AND "EEG OR fMRI OR neuroimaging"; "paritta" AND "protection OR healing OR community").

Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, edited book chapters, and doctoral dissertations published in English that addressed Buddhist vocal recitation practices from historical, doctrinal, psychological, neuroscientific, clinical, or anthropological perspectives. No strict date restrictions were applied; however, priority was given to empirical studies published after 2000 to capture contemporary scientific developments, while seminal historical and doctrinal works of earlier provenance were retained for foundational context. Grey literature, popular press articles, and non-peer-reviewed sources were excluded unless they represented authoritative traditional Buddhist commentaries or widely recognized scholarly translations.

Reference lists of identified articles were manually screened through backward citation tracking to locate additional relevant sources. Forward citation searches using Google Scholar identified subsequent studies citing key publications. The iterative search process continued until thematic saturation was achieved that is, until additional sources no longer contributed substantially new perspectives or findings to the identified themes (Sukhera, 2022). A total of approximately 35 sources were included in the final synthesis, spanning religious studies, cognitive neuroscience, clinical psychology, anthropology, and Buddhist textual scholarship.

2. Conceptual Foundations and Typology

2.1. Defining Chanting and Prayer in Buddhist Contexts

Buddhist chanting encompasses diverse vocal practices unified by rhythmic recitation of sacred texts, formulas, names, or syllables (Kumar, 2023; Piyadassi, 1999; Payne, 2018). The practice serves simultaneously as ritual speech act, meditative technique, and doctrinal recitation, embedding practitioners within lineages of oral transmission extending back to the Buddha's lifetime (Kumar, 2023; Collins, 1992). Mantra, etymologically glossed as "that which protects the mind" (Sanskrit manas + tra), emphasizes the cognitive safeguarding function of repetitive sound against unwholesome mental states (Beer, 2003; Studholme, 2002; Dutta, 2024).

Prayer in Buddhist contexts differs significantly from theistic models centered on petitionary supplication to omnipotent deities (Kumar, 2023). Buddhist prayer typically includes: (a) taking refuge in the Triple Gem (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha); (b) aspirational prayers for the welfare of all sentient beings; (c) confession and purification of negative karma; (d) dedication of merit accumulated through virtuous actions; and (e) invocation of buddhas, bodhisattvas, or protective deities for blessings and assistance on the path to liberation (Kumar, 2023; Jones, 2021; Harvey, 2012). While philosophical Buddhism emphasizes self-reliance and personal effort in achieving awakening, devotional Buddhism acknowledges relational dimensions wherein faith, aspiration, and the compassionate power of enlightened beings play crucial roles (Jones, 2021; Harvey, 2012; Hirota, 2003).

2.2. Major Categories of Buddhist Vocal Practice

Buddhist chanting traditions can be broadly categorized into three overlapping types, each with distinct doctrinal emphases and phenomenological qualities.

Textual Chanting: Textual chanting involves recitation of canonical discourses (suttas/sūtras) and doctrinal formulas. This category includes daily chanting of the Three Refuges, Five Precepts, dependent origination formulas, and extended sutta recitations (Kumar, 2023; Piyadassi, 1999; Swearer, 2010). Textual chanting serves primarily pedagogical and ethical functions, internalizing doctrinal content and reinforcing moral commitments through repeated vocalization and embodied performance (Kumar, 2023; Collins, 1992).

Protective Chanting: Protective chanting (Pāli: paritta; Sanskrit: rakṣā, dhāraṇī) consists of specific texts or formulas believed to offer protection from dangers, illness, malevolent forces, and inauspicious

circumstances (Piyadassi, 1999; Payne, 2018; Gombrich, 1971; de Silva, 1993). Prominent examples include the Ratana Sutta, Karaṇīya Metta Sutta, Atanatiya Sutta, and Mahā-maṅgala Sutta in Theravāda traditions, and various dhāraṇī texts in Mahāyāna contexts (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; de Silva, 1993; Davidson, 2009). The protective efficacy of paritta is traditionally explained through the power of truth (sacca-kiriya), the Buddha's compassionate intent, and the merit generated by recitation performed with faith and moral purity (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; de Silva, 1993).

Devotional Name-Recitation and Mantra Practice: This category emphasizes repeated invocation of buddha-names, bodhisattva-names, or sacred syllables, particularly prominent in Pure Land, Nichiren, and Vajrayāna traditions (Jones, 2021; Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Payne, 2004; Gyatso, 1992). Examples include nianfo/nembutsu (recitation of Amitābha Buddha's name), daimoku (Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō in Nichiren Buddhism), and Vajrayāna mantras such as Om Mani Padme Hum and the hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra (Jones, 2021; Beer, 2003; Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Studholme, 2002). These practices combine attentional training, emotional cultivation, and ritual identification with enlightened qualities, often integrated with visualization, mudrā, and contemplation of profound meaning (Beer, 2003; Studholme, 2002; Gyatso, 1992).

2.3. Dhāraṇī, Mantra, and Paritta Distinctions

Scholarly discourse has attempted to distinguish between dhāraṇī, mantra, and paritta, though historical usage reveals considerable terminological fluidity and functional overlap (Payne, 2018; Davidson, 2009; Lopez, 2004). Dhāraṇī, literally "that which holds or retains," originally referred to mnemonic devices for retaining teachings but evolved to encompass lengthy protective formulas combining meaningful phrases with seed syllables, often found in Mahāyāna sūtras and Vajrayāna tantras (Payne, 2018; Davidson, 2009; Lopez, 2004). Mantras are typically shorter formulas, sometimes comprising meaningless syllables or seed-syllables (bīja), emphasizing sonic potency and esoteric transmission (Beer, 2003; Studholme, 2002; Davidson, 2009). Paritta represents the Theravāda equivalent, consisting of Pāli sutta passages recited for protection, though the texts themselves contain comprehensible doctrinal content rather than purely sonic formulas (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; de Silva, 1993).

Burnouf observed that dhāraṇī and mantra differ primarily in length rather than theological function, both invoking transformative power through sound, intention, and ritual context (Davidson, 2009). This review adopts an inclusive approach, examining all forms of sacred recitation while noting tradition-specific emphases and interpretive frameworks.

3. Historical Functions and Ritual Contexts

3.1. Oral Transmission and Canonical Preservation

Chanting emerged as the primary oral technology for preserving and transmitting the Buddha's teachings in largely pre-literate communities of ancient India (Kumar, 2023; Collins, 1992). The early Buddhist canon was maintained exclusively through oral recitation for approximately four to five centuries before being committed to writing in Sri Lanka during the first century BCE (Collins, 1992). Metrical patterns, formulaic repetitions, numerical lists, and communal group recitation facilitated accurate memorization and collective verification of extensive textual corpus (Kumar, 2023; Collins, 1992). Monastic communities developed sophisticated mnemonic systems and specialized roles for reciters (bhāṇaka) responsible for memorizing particular textual collections (Collins, 1992). Council assemblies (saṅgīti) periodically convened to collectively recite and verify canonical texts, resolving discrepancies and maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy (Collins, 1992). The rhythmic, musical qualities of chanting serve not merely aesthetic functions but constitute essential mnemonic scaffolding. Acoustic analysis of Japanese temple chanting reveals highly standardized pitch, rhythm, and timbre patterns that vary systematically across sects and ritual contexts, demonstrating how sonic properties are carefully cultivated to mark doctrinal identity and ritual efficacy (Soeta et al., 2015).

3.2. Ritual Structuring of Religious Life

Chanting structures the temporal and spatial dimensions of Buddhist religious life at multiple scales. Daily monastic schedules organize around morning and evening chanting sessions that mark transitions between sleep and wakefulness, establishing sacred time distinct from ordinary household activities (Kumar, 2023; Piyadassi, 1999; Swearer, 2010). Weekly lay devotional gatherings center on communal chanting of refuges, precepts, and protective texts, reinforcing shared religious identity and moral commitments (Yulianti, 2012; Setyawan, 2018; Ladwig, 2012).

Annual ritual calendars feature elaborate chanting ceremonies tied to agricultural cycles, Buddhist commemorations, and lifecycle transitions. Vesak celebrations honoring the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and parinibbāna involve extended sutta chanting and devotional hymns (Swearer, 2010). Funerary rites universally incorporate protective chanting to guide deceased consciousness and comfort bereaved families (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971). Spatially, chanting creates and maintains sacred environments. Paritta ceremonies are performed to consecrate new buildings, purify sites of misfortune, and protect communities during epidemics or natural disasters (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; de Silva, 1993). In Indonesian Theravāda communities, regular house-based communal chanting (anjangsana) transforms domestic spaces into temporary shrines while strengthening social networks among dispersed Buddhist minorities (Yulianti, 2012; Setyawan, 2018).

4. Soteriological and Doctrinal Dimensions

4.1. Chanting Within the Path to Liberation

Buddhist soteriology positions chanting within the graduated path (Pāli: paṭipadā) leading to the cessation of suffering and attainment of nibbāna/nirvāṇa (Kumar, 2023; Bodhi, 2012). Chanting relates to multiple path factors of the Noble Eightfold Path: right speech (sammā-vācā) when recitation embodies truthful, harmonious communication; right mindfulness (sammā-sati) when attention remains focused on the meaning or sonic qualities of recitation; and right concentration (sammā-samādhi) when repetitive chanting stabilizes mental absorption (Kumar, 2023; Bodhi, 2012; Gethin, 1998).

The practice generates wholesome karma through ethical discipline, devotional sincerity, and cultivation of virtuous mental states (Kumar, 2023; Gombrich, 1971; Harvey, 2012). Theravāda Abhidhamma psychology analyzes chanting as a composite of wholesome mental factors (kusala-cetasika) including confidence (saddhā), mindfulness (sati), non-greed (alobha), non-hatred (adosa), and one-pointedness (ekaggatā) (Bodhi, 2012; Gethin, 1998). When performed with comprehension and devotional engagement, chanting cultivates these factors simultaneously, creating powerful conditions for mental purification and insight development (Bodhi, 2012; Gethin, 1998).

4.2. Protective Efficacy and Merit Theory

The protective power (paritta/rakṣā) attributed to Buddhist chanting represents a sophisticated integration of doctrinal principles, merit theory, and Buddhist cosmology (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; de Silva, 1993; Davidson, 2009). Traditional explanations invoke several complementary mechanisms.

Truth-Act Efficacy (*sacca-kiriya*). Recitation of statements embodying ultimate truth, particularly the Buddha's words, generates a field of protective power grounded in reality itself (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; de Silva, 1993). The Ratana Sutta exemplifies this principle, repeatedly invoking the qualities of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as supreme truths that repel malevolent forces and attract beneficial conditions (Piyadassi, 1999; de Silva, 1993).

Merit Transference. Chanting generates merit through vocal, mental, and intentional engagement with sacred teachings. This merit creates a protective "aura" while also transferring benefits to deities, spirits, and ancestors who reciprocate with blessings and protection (Gombrich, 1971; Harvey, 2012; de Silva, 1993).

Psychological Transformation. Modern commentators emphasize that paritta functions primarily through psychological mechanisms cultivating courage, confidence, and positive mental states that reduce fear and enhance resilient coping (Piyadassi, 1999; de Silva, 1993).

Sonic Vibration. Esoteric interpretations, particularly prominent in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna contexts, attribute transformative power to sound vibrations themselves (Beer, 2003; Studholme, 2002; Dutta, 2024; Davidson, 2009). Mantras are understood as sonic expressions of enlightened wisdom, where specific syllables resonate with subtle energy channels (nāḍī) and consciousness centers (cakra), directly inducing spiritual transformation when combined with visualization and realization of emptiness (Beer, 2003; Studholme, 2002; Gyatso, 1992).

4.3. Pure Land and Devotional Frameworks

Mahāyāna Pure Land Buddhism develops chanting as a primary soteriological method emphasizing faith, devotion, and reliance on Amitābha Buddha's compassionate vows (Jones, 2021; Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Hirota, 2003; Payne, 2004). The practice of nianfo/nembutsu repeated recitation of Amitābha's name serves multiple functions: (a) training sustained attention through single-pointed focus; (b) generating faith and devotion toward Amitābha's salvific power; (c) purifying karmic obscurations through merit accumulation; and (d) preparing consciousness for recognition of Amitābha and rebirth in the Pure Land at death (Jones, 2021; Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Payne, 2004).

Chinese Pure Land masters developed sophisticated taxonomies distinguishing levels of nianfo practice from scattered recitation to unified mind-chanting (yixin buluan) characterized by seamless fusion of name and consciousness (Jones, 2021; Payne, 2004). Japanese Jōdo Shinshū tradition emphasized absolute reliance (tariki) on Amitābha's vow-power, positioning nembutsu primarily as grateful response to salvation already assured rather than self-powered striving (Jones, 2021; Hirota, 2003). Neuroscientific research on Amitābha chanting demonstrates that this practice induces distinctive brain states characterized by reduced self-referential processing, enhanced parasympathetic activation, and stable positive affect, supporting traditional claims regarding its calming and transformative effects (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Gao, Fan, et al., 2017; Wu & Lo, 2008).

5. Psychological And Cognitive Mechanisms

5.1. Attention Regulation and Mind-Wandering Reduction

Contemporary cognitive science conceptualizes chanting as structured attentional training that modulates executive control, sustained attention, and meta-awareness (Perry et al., 2022; Bhasin et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2012; Dutta, 2024). A large cross-tradition survey (n = 464 respondents from 33 countries) investigated relationships between chanting practice characteristics, altered states, cognitive benefits, and quality of life (Perry et al., 2022). Structural equation modeling revealed that stronger intentionality defined as devotional engagement, clear intention, and attention to sound and higher practice engagement years of experience, session duration, and regularity predicted reduced mind-wandering, enhanced focused attention, and improved cognitive performance on self-report measures (Perry et al., 2022).

Participants whose primary practice involved repetitive prayer or mantra recitation reported significantly lower scores on mind-wandering scales compared to meditation-only practitioners, suggesting that vocal engagement with repetitive formulas effectively anchors awareness and interrupts default mode processing (Perry et al., 2022). Experimental studies using attention network tests and sustained attention to response tasks demonstrate that experienced chanters exhibit superior performance on measures of alerting, orienting, and conflict resolution compared to matched controls (Bhasin et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2012).

5.2. Neurophysiological Correlates

Electroencephalographic (EEG) and magnetoencephalographic (MEG) studies reveal characteristic brainwave patterns during chanting practice. Increased theta (4–8 Hz) and alpha (8–13 Hz) power, particularly in frontal and parietal regions, consistently emerge during mantra recitation and name-chanting, indicating states of relaxed alertness and internalized attention (Bhasin et al., 2013; Gao, Fan, et al., 2017; Dutta, 2024; Perry et al., 2025). A systematic review of neural correlates of chanting identified theta enhancement as the most robust finding across studies, associated with reduced cortical arousal, diminished sensory monitoring, and attenuation of self-oriented cognition (Perry et al., 2025).

Functional neuroimaging studies employing fMRI and PET scanning demonstrate that religious chanting modulates activity in several key brain networks. Reduced activation in the default mode network (DMN) particularly posterior cingulate cortex, medial prefrontal cortex, and precuneus consistently appears during mantra meditation compared to rest or neutral word repetition (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Gao, Fan, et al., 2017; Dutta, 2024; Perry et al., 2025). Given that DMN activity correlates with self-referential thought, autobiographical memory retrieval, and mind-wandering, these findings support experiential reports that chanting quiets internal dialogue and reduces rumination (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Gao, Fan, et al., 2017; Dutta, 2024).

Multi-modal neuroimaging combining high-density EEG with fMRI source localization identified the posterior cingulate cortex as showing the largest decrease in eigenvector centrality during Amitābha Buddha chanting in highly trained practitioners (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019). The posterior cingulate plays crucial roles in self-related processing, episodic memory, and integration of internal and external information streams; its deactivation during chanting aligns with phenomenological reports of ego-dissolution, temporal distortion, and absorption in present-moment sound (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Gao, Fan, et al., 2017).

Event-related potential (ERP) research examining cognitive appraisal processes found that repetitive Amitābha chanting modulated late positive potentials (LPP) in response to negative emotional images (Gao, Fan, et al., 2017). Specifically, chanters exhibited reduced LPP amplitudes to aversive stimuli following extended chanting sessions, suggesting that practice influences higher-order cognitive-emotional evaluation rather than early sensory processing (Gao, Fan, et al., 2017).

5.3. Respiratory Coupling and Autonomic Effects

Chanting necessarily involves regulated breathing patterns, creating opportunities for respiratory-cardiovascular coupling and autonomic nervous system modulation (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Bhasin et al., 2013; Wu & Lo, 2008). Studies measuring respiratory rate, heart rate, and heart rate variability (HRV) during chanting consistently report decreased respiratory frequency, reduced heart rate, and increased HRV particularly high-frequency HRV indicative of vagal tone and parasympathetic activation (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Bhasin et al., 2013; Wu & Lo, 2008).

Research on Amitābha Buddha chanting documented significant increases in normalized high-frequency HRV and decreases in low-frequency/high-frequency ratio during chanting compared to rest, indicating enhanced parasympathetic predominance and improved autonomic balance (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019). These cardiovascular changes correlated with subjective reports of calmness and relaxation, suggesting that autonomic shifts mediate the stress-reducing effects of chanting (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Wu & Lo, 2008). The relationship between chanting and breathing may be bidirectional: rhythmic vocalization naturally regulates breath, while conscious breath control enhances vocal stability and attentional focus (Beer, 2003; Studholme, 2002; Gyatso, 1992).

6. Mental Health and Therapeutic Applications

6.1. Stress Reduction and Emotional Regulation

Multiple studies and meta-analyses report that regular chanting practice associates with reduced perceived stress, lower anxiety symptoms, and improved mood regulation (Perry et al., 2022; Bhasin et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2012; Wu & Lo, 2008; Dutta, 2024). The cross-tradition survey identified significant negative correlations between chanting frequency and self-reported stress ($r = -.28$) and depressive symptoms ($r = -.23$), with intentionality and engagement mediating these relationships (Perry et al., 2022). Qualitative interviews reveal that practitioners attribute stress-reducing effects to attentional absorption, devotional positive affect, and sense of spiritual connection fostered during chanting (Perry et al., 2022;Moss et al.,2012).

Clinical trials investigating mantra-based meditation interventions including Transcendental Meditation, Kirtan Kriya, and Buddhist mantra practices generally report moderate effect sizes for anxiety reduction (Cohen's $d = 0.45–0.65$) and small-to-moderate effects for depressive symptom reduction ($d = 0.30–0.50$) (Moss et al., 2012; Dutta, 2024). A randomized controlled trial comparing eight weeks of Buddhist chanting training to waitlist control found significant improvements in the chanting group on measures of anxiety sensitivity, emotional regulation difficulties, and mindfulness, with gains maintained at three-month follow-up (Moss et al., 2012).

Mechanisms proposed to explain therapeutic effects include: (a) attentional distraction from ruminative thought patterns; (b) cultivation of positive emotions through devotional engagement; (c) autonomic regulation via respiratory coupling; (d) enhanced self-efficacy and spiritual coping resources; and (e) social support when practiced communally (Perry et al., 2022; Moss et al., 2012; Wu & Lo, 2008; Dutta, 2024).

6.2. Cognitive Enhancement and Neuroprotection

Emerging evidence suggests that long-term chanting practice may support cognitive function and potentially offer neuroprotective benefits in aging populations (Bhasin et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2012; Dutta, 2024; Perry et al., 2025). Cross-sectional comparisons between experienced chanters and demographically matched controls reveal superior performance on measures of sustained attention, working memory, cognitive flexibility, and processing speed in the chanting groups (Bhasin et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2012).

Kirtan Kriya, a mantra meditation combining chanting of Sa Ta Na Ma with sequential finger movements, has received particular attention in cognitive aging research. A randomized controlled trial in older adults with subjective cognitive decline found that 12 weeks of daily Kirtan Kriya practice produced significant improvements in verbal memory, executive function, and mood compared to music listening control, with gains persisting six months post-intervention (Moss et al., 2012; Dutta, 2024). Neuroimaging substudy revealed increased cerebral blood flow in prefrontal and parietal regions, suggesting that practice may partially reverse age-related hypoperfusion (Moss et al., 2012; Dutta, 2024).

Proposed neuroprotective mechanisms include: (a) enhanced neuroplasticity through repeated cognitive engagement; (b) reduced chronic stress and inflammation via autonomic regulation; (c) improved vascular health through cardiovascular benefits; (d) preserved hippocampal integrity via stress reduction; and (e) cognitive reserve building through sustained mental training (Moss et al., 2012; Dutta, 2024; Perry et al., 2025).

6.3. Clinical Applications and Integration

Buddhist chanting techniques have been adapted into various therapeutic contexts, ranging from stress reduction programs to complementary treatments for anxiety disorders, depression, and trauma-related conditions (Moss et al., 2012; Wu & Lo, 2008; Dutta, 2024). In Buddhist-majority countries, traditional healing systems explicitly integrate paritta chanting with medical treatment (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; de Silva, 1993). Hospitals in Thailand and Sri Lanka commonly host monks conducting protective chanting for patients, with healthcare providers viewing such practices as psychologically beneficial regardless of metaphysical beliefs about supernatural efficacy (Piyadassi, 1999).

Compassion-based therapies drawing on Buddhist psychology sometimes utilize mantra recitation as a method for cultivating compassionate attitudes and emotional warmth (Gilbert & Choden, 2013). Preliminary evidence suggests such practices enhance self-compassion, other-directed compassion, and prosocial motivation, though more rigorous trials are needed (Gilbert & Choden, 2013). Critical considerations for therapeutic applications include cultural appropriateness, proper instruction in technique, management of expectations regarding outcomes, and integration with evidence-based treatments rather than substitution (Dutta, 2024; Gilbert & Choden, 2013).

7. Social and Communal Dimensions

7.1. Community Formation and Religious Identity

Chanting functions as a powerful practice for constructing and maintaining Buddhist communal identity across diverse social contexts (Yulianti, 2012; Setyawan, 2018; Ladwig, 2012). Collective recitation creates shared sonic environments that phenomenologically unite participants through synchronized vocalization, rhythmic entrainment, and coordinated embodied performance (Yulianti, 2012; Perry et al., 2022; Ladwig, 2012). Anthropological studies document how regular communal chanting strengthens social bonds, reinforces shared values, and marks group boundaries distinguishing Buddhist communities from surrounding religious populations (Yulianti, 2012; Setyawan, 2018; Ladwig, 2012).

In Indonesian Buddhist communities, where Buddhists constitute small minorities dispersed across predominantly Muslim regions, weekly house-based chanting gatherings (anjangsana) serve crucial community-building functions (Yulianti, 2012; Setyawan, 2018). These gatherings rotate between members' homes, transforming domestic spaces into temporary ritual sites while providing opportunities for social interaction, mutual support, and transmission of Buddhist teachings to children and new converts (Yulianti, 2012; Setyawan, 2018). Temple chanting events marking major Buddhist festivals draw large lay congregations, creating immersive sensory experiences that participants describe as sacred, powerful, and emotionally moving (Soeta et al., 2015; Ladwig, 2012).

7.2. Ritual Healing and Protection

Communal chanting ceremonies constitute primary responses to collective crises in many Buddhist societies, invoked during epidemics, natural disasters, political instability, and community conflicts (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; Setyawan, 2018; de Silva, 1993). Paritta chanting ceremonies may extend for days, involving continuous rotation of monks reciting protective texts while community members maintain offerings, participate in responsive chanting, and receive blessed thread or water (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; de Silva, 1993).

Ethnographic research in Sri Lankan villages documents paritta ceremonies conducted in response to drought, crop failure, and communal tensions (Gombrich, 1971). Community members attribute subsequent rainfall, improved harvests, or conflict resolution to the protective power of chanting, reinforcing beliefs in Buddhist cosmology and merit theory (Gombrich, 1971). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Buddhist temples worldwide organized remote chanting campaigns via videoconferencing platforms, enabling globally dispersed practitioners to collectively dedicate merit and invoke blessings for pandemic victims, healthcare workers, and universal protection (Tseng,2022).

7.3. Transmission and Intergenerational Continuity

Chanting practices constitute primary mechanisms for transmitting Buddhist teachings, values, and identity across generations (Kumar, 2023; Yulianti, 2012; Collins, 1992; Swearer, 2010). Children growing up in Buddhist families typically learn basic chanting before developing literacy or doctrinal comprehension, internalizing sonic patterns, devotional attitudes, and communal belonging through embodied participation (Yulianti, 2012; Setyawan, 2018; Swearer, 2010). Monastic education systems place enormous emphasis on chanting mastery as essential qualification for religious authority (Kumar, 2023; Piyadassi, 1999; Collins, 1992).

Contemporary challenges to transmission include declining monastic recruitment, urban migration disrupting traditional education patterns, and youth engagement with digital media competing with time-intensive memorization practices (Yulianti, 2012; Setyawan, 2018). Some communities respond by developing abbreviated chanting curricula, creating audio recordings and apps to support home practice, and emphasizing conceptual understanding over memorization of lengthy Pāli or Sanskrit texts (Yulianti, 2012; Setyawan, 2018).

8. Comparative Analysis Across Buddhist Traditions

8.1. Theravāda Paritta Traditions

Theravāda Buddhism emphasizes textual chanting of Pāli sutta passages for protection, blessing, and merit-making (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; Swearer, 2010; de Silva, 1993). The canonical basis for paritta practice derives from several suttas where the Buddha explicitly instructs disciples to recite specific discourses for protection from snakes, spirits, illness, and other dangers (Piyadassi, 1999; de Silva, 1993). Major paritta texts include the Maṅgala Sutta, Ratana Sutta, Karaṇīya Metta Sutta, and Mora Paritta (Piyadassi, 1999; de Silva, 1993).

Theravāda orthodoxy maintains that paritta efficacy derives from the truth-power of the Buddha's words, the merit generated through recitation, and the psychological transformation cultivated through reflection on Dhamma (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; de Silva, 1993). Ritual performance typically involves monks reciting texts while holding a thread that is subsequently distributed to laypeople or wound around buildings for protection (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; de Silva, 1993). Water placed near the recitation becomes "blessed water" (paritta water) consumed or sprinkled for purification and healing (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; de Silva, 1993).

8.2. Mahāyāna Dhāraṇī and Sūtra Recitation

Mahāyāna Buddhism developed extensive dhāraṇī literature, with numerous sūtras containing or entirely consisting of protective formulas addressed to bodhisattvas and celestial buddhas (Payne, 2018; Davidson, 2009; Lopez, 2004). Famous examples include the Heart Sūtra's concluding dhāraṇī, the Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī, and the Great Compassion Dhāraṇī associated with Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (Davidson, 2009; Lopez, 2004). Mahāyāna sūtra recitation itself constitutes a primary devotional and merit-making practice, particularly for texts like the Lotus Sūtra, Heart Sūtra, Diamond Sūtra, and Amitābha Sūtra (Jones, 2021; Payne, 2004; Lopez, 2004).

Chinese and Japanese Buddhist traditions developed elaborate liturgical systems integrating dhāraṇī, sūtra recitation, and devotional hymns into daily services, seasonal ceremonies, and lifecycle rituals (Soeta et al., 2015; Jones, 2021; Swearer, 2010; Payne, 2004). Melodic structures, instrumental accompaniment, and choreographed movements transform recitation into total aesthetic-devotional experiences engaging multiple sensory modalities (Soeta et al., 2015; Swearer, 2010).

8.3. Vajrayāna Mantra Practice

Vajrayāna (Tantric) Buddhism elevates mantra recitation to central soteriological status within elaborate sādhana (ritual) frameworks integrating visualization, gesture, and philosophical contemplation (Beer, 2003; Studholme, 2002; Gyatso, 1992). Mantras function as sonic expressions of enlightened beings' wisdom and compassion, with specific syllables corresponding to aspects of awakened consciousness (Beer, 2003; Studholme, 2002; Gyatso, 1992).

Esoteric initiation (abhiṣeka/wang) from qualified teachers is prerequisite for advanced mantra practice, establishing karmic connection with lineage holders and empowering students to identify with the meditational deity (yidam) (Beer, 2003; Gyatso, 1992). Quantitative accumulation practices are prominent in Vajrayāna, with practitioners committing to complete specific numbers of mantra recitations often 100,000 or more as preliminary practices (ngöndro) or ongoing commitments (Beer, 2003; Gyatso, 1992). Contemporary Vajrayāna teachers emphasize the importance of understanding mantra practice within complete doctrinal frameworks of emptiness, compassion, and pure perception rather than treating mantras as mechanical formulas (Beer, 2003; Studholme, 2002; Gyatso, 1992).

9. Methodological Issues and Research Gaps

9.1. Study Design Limitations

Current literature on Buddhist chanting suffers from several methodological limitations constraining causal inference and generalizability (Perry et al., 2022; Bhasin et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2012; Dutta, 2024; Perry et al., 2025). The majority of studies employ cross-sectional designs comparing experienced practitioners to non-practitioners, which cannot distinguish whether observed differences result from practice effects, self-selection bias, or pre-existing individual differences (Perry et al., 2022; Bhasin et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2012). Sample sizes are typically modest (often $n < 50$ per group), limiting statistical power and precluding examination of moderating factors and individual differences (Perry et al., 2022; Bhasin et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2012).

Measurement relies heavily on self-report questionnaires assessing subjective well-being, cognitive difficulties, and practice characteristics, which are vulnerable to demand characteristics, social desirability bias, and limited insight (Perry et al., 2022; Bhasin et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2012). While some studies incorporate objective measures (EEG, fMRI, HRV, neuropsychological tests), multi-modal assessment combining subjective, behavioral, and neurophysiological indices remains uncommon (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Bhasin et al., 2013; Gao, Fan, et al., 2017; Perry et al., 2025).

9.2. Conceptual and Definitional Challenges

Much research treats "chanting" and "meditation" as interchangeable or subsumes chanting under generic "mindfulness practice" or "mantra meditation" categories, obscuring important distinctions between practice types and traditions (Perry et al., 2022; Gao, Fan, et al., 2017; Perry et al., 2025). Similarly, conflating Buddhist chanting with non-Buddhist practices (Hindu mantra, Christian prayer, secular humming) may obscure tradition-specific mechanisms and phenomenology (Perry et al., 2022; Gao, Fan, et al., 2017).

Operational definitions of practice variables show considerable inconsistency across studies. "Experience" may be operationalized as years since beginning practice, total lifetime hours, current practice frequency, or retreat experience, making cross-study comparisons difficult (Perry et al., 2022; Moss et al., 2012). Similarly, measures of "intentionality," "devotion," and "engagement" vary widely, hindering meta-analysis and theoretical integration (Perry et al., 2022).

9.3. Integration of Indigenous and Scientific Frameworks

A persistent challenge involves integrating Buddhist frameworks emphasizing karma, merit, blessings, and liberation with scientific frameworks emphasizing neuroplasticity, autonomic regulation, and psychological well-being (Dutta, 2024; Gilbert & Choden, 2013). Traditional explanations attribute

chanting efficacy to factors like truth-power, compassionate blessings of enlightened beings, and karmic purification, which resist straightforward translation into scientific constructs (Piyadassi, 1999; Gombrich, 1971; de Silva, 1993).

Few studies examine how practitioners' beliefs about mechanisms influence outcomes, despite evidence from prayer research and placebo studies suggesting that meaning-systems and expectancy effects significantly modulate intervention effects (Perry et al., 2022). Development of culturally grounded assessment tools and validation studies ensuring measurement equivalence across cultures remain important priorities (Gilbert & Choden, 2013).

10. Future Research Directions

10.1. Methodological Recommendations

Future research should prioritize randomized controlled trials with adequate sample sizes, active control conditions, and longitudinal follow-up to establish causal relationships between chanting practice and psychological-physiological outcomes (Moss et al., 2012; Dutta, 2024). Dismantling designs comparing different practice components (e.g., chanting alone vs. chanting plus visualization vs. chanting plus doctrinal study) could elucidate specific mechanisms and optimal practice parameters (Moss et al., 2012; Dutta, 2024).

Multi-site collaborative studies pooling resources and standardizing assessment batteries would enable adequately powered examinations of moderating factors such as tradition, experience level, individual differences in personality and motivation, and cultural context (Perry et al., 2022; Moss et al., 2012). Methodological innovations integrating ecological momentary assessment via smartphone apps could capture real-time relationships between practice sessions, environmental contexts, and psychological states, overcoming limitations of retrospective self-report (Shiffman et al., 2008).

10.2. Mechanistic Research

Greater attention to potential mediating mechanisms would advance theoretical understanding and inform intervention optimization. Candidate mechanisms deserving systematic investigation include: (a) autonomic regulation and vagal tone enhancement (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Bhasin et al., 2013; Wu & Lo, 2008); (b) attentional network strengthening and cognitive control (Bhasin et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2012); (c) default mode network modulation and reduced self-referential processing (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Gao, Fan, et al., 2017; Dutta, 2024); (d) respiratory coupling and coherence effects (Gao, Leung, et al., 2019; Wu & Lo, 2008); (e) positive emotion cultivation through devotional engagement (Perry et al., 2022); (f) social support and community belonging (Yulianti, 2012; Perry et al., 2022; Setyawan, 2018); and (g) meaning-making and spiritual coping (Gilbert & Choden, 2013).

10.3. Tradition-Specific and Comparative Studies

More research explicitly examining tradition-specific practices within their indigenous doctrinal and ritual contexts would enrich the literature and honor Buddhist diversity (Perry et al., 2022; Gao, Fan, et al., 2017). In-depth studies of Theravāda paritta ceremonies, Pure Land nembutsu practice, Nichiren daimoku, or Vajrayāna mantra sādhanas, conducted in partnership with Buddhist communities and informed by ethnographic sensitivity, could generate culturally grounded understanding while identifying both tradition-specific and universal mechanisms (Yulianti, 2012; Beer, 2003; Setyawan, 2018; Payne, 2004).

10.4. Clinical Translation and Adaptation

If therapeutic applications are pursued, rigorous development and evaluation of chanting-based interventions following established guidelines for complex intervention research is essential (Moss et al., 2012; Dutta, 2024). This includes formative research with target populations assessing acceptability and cultural appropriateness, systematic adaptation maintaining fidelity to core practice elements, pilot feasibility and acceptability testing, adequately powered efficacy trials with appropriate controls, and implementation research examining scalability and sustainability (Moss et al., 2012; Dutta, 2024; Gilbert & Choden, 2013).

Critical ethical considerations include respecting Buddhist intellectual property and religious authority, avoiding cultural appropriation and commodification, obtaining proper authorization and guidance from qualified teachers, and maintaining transparency with participants about evidence base and intervention rationale (Gilbert & Choden, 2013).

11. Conclusion

This review has synthesized diverse scholarly perspectives on chanting and prayer in Buddhism, revealing these practices as multidimensional phenomena integrating historical, doctrinal, psychological, neurophysiological, and sociocultural dimensions. Historically, chanting functioned as primary technology for oral transmission and canonical preservation while structuring ritual life across temporal and spatial scales. Doctrinally, traditions position chanting within graduated soteriological paths, emphasizing merit generation, karmic purification, protection, and devotional connection with enlightened beings. Psychologically and neuroscientifically, research demonstrates that chanting modulates attention networks, reduces default mode activity, enhances autonomic regulation, and supports mental health and cognitive function through multiple mechanisms. Socially, chanting constructs communal identity, enables collective healing, and transmits religious values across generations.

Despite accumulating evidence for psychological and physiological effects, significant methodological gaps persist. Overreliance on cross-sectional designs, conflation of distinct practice types, modest sample sizes, and limited integration of Buddhist and scientific frameworks constrain causal inference and theoretical development. Future research employing rigorous experimental designs, multi-modal assessment, process-oriented approaches, and ethnographically informed comparative methods promises to advance understanding while respecting Buddhist traditions' complexity and integrity.

For practitioners, scholars, and clinicians, this review underscores the importance of recognizing chanting not as a uniform practice but as a diverse family of techniques varying in doctrinal emphasis, sonic properties, ritual context, and phenomenological quality. Ultimately, Buddhist chanting traditions offer rich resources for contemporary contemplative science and mental health research while embodying millennia of wisdom regarding human consciousness, suffering, and liberation.

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