

The Healing Power of Sound

excerpted from the book *The Healing Power of Sound* by Mitchell L. Gaynor, MD

The only time sound was ever mentioned in my medical training was in the context of ultrasound, the use of technologic probes that emit sound waves to diagnose disease in various organs and body parts. The notion that sound could be used as a healing modality—through bowls, instruments, or voices—was as far from my medical training as the application of magic potions. Yet I have been using sound—most often the sound produced by quartz crystal bowls—in my medical practice for the last six years. It has changed the way my patients and I view ourselves and the healing process. I don't consider the work I do with sound, meditation, and imagery as a complement to oncology; in fact, just the opposite. My healing work has become as important as my work as an oncologist. I have come to see myself as a healer who happens to be a doctor, rather than a doctor who dabbles on the side in what too many people still dismiss as "alternative medicine."

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the synergistic effect of the singing bowls and voice tones when used in combination with meditation and guided imagery has revolutionized my practice. Indeed, I believe that sound, the most underutilized and least appreciated mind-body tool, should become a part of every healer's medical bag, whether a conventional allopathic physician or a traditional healer from a far-flung culture.

The intellectual and spiritual godfather of sound medicine was Pythagoras, the Greek philosopher and mathematician who lived from about 580 to 500 B.C.E. Pythagoras is credited as the first person to take an organized approach to using music as a healing technique. One story



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has it that Pythagoras began using his analytical consideration of music while listening to several blacksmiths at work. He noticed that some sequences of hammer blow sounds were more pleasing than others, which inspired him over time to create the musical scales. He also noticed that some simultaneous hammer blows sounded well together, while others produced a jarring noise, which inspired him to develop altogether new theories of harmony based on experiments he conducted on the strings of his lyre. While the historical accuracy of this story may be questionable, we know with greater certainty that Pythagoras was the first person to use music for physical and emotional healing.

Pythagoras also spoke of how sound functions in relationship to the universe. "Each celestial body," he said, "in fact each and every atom, produces a particular sound on account of its movement, its rhythm or vibration. All these sounds and vibrations form a universal harmony in which each element, while having its own function and character, contributes to the whole."

Ever since I first became interested in sound and healing through Ödsal, the Tibetan monk who introduced me to the singing bowls, I've been eager to learn more about the earliest uses of sound and music. I was fascinated to discover that sound is a universal motif in every great spiritual and mystical belief system. Consider the obvious reality that in every religion and wisdom tradition, whether Eastern or Western, many more prayers are sung than spoken. Although the spoken word carries its own rhythms and vibrations, and it, too, is essential to prayer and spiritual practice, the vast repertoire of sacred songs and chants underscores the fact that the great religions have always used sound and music to intensify our communion with the divine power, however we define or name that power.

The Hindu tradition traces its origins to the *Rig-Veda*, a collection of over one thousand hymns written in Sanskrit during the third millennium B.C.E. A core precept of this tradition holds that song is a sacred prescription, a means to calm the mind and senses in order to achieve a deeper spiritual awareness. From earliest times, Vedic philosophers and Hindu holy men used chants and simple, one-syllable sounds (which we know as mantras) to reach a state of consciousness conducive to communion



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with the divine essence of the universe. The Vedic seers believed that the power of the mantras was such that their regular and prolonged invocation could lead to profound knowledge and understanding of the ultimate truth.


The ancient holy men understood what modern science has since proven: that the entire cosmos is “an ocean of vibration,” the source of all manifestation. The world that we perceive, as well as the realm of the Divine or Absolute that lies beyond our normal state of perception, is filled with and distinguished by waves of sonic vibration. Practitioners of Mantra-Yoga use these sonic vibrations to fathom the mysteries of the universe—and thus arrive at a level of consciousness that is at one with the undivided self.

The most basic and most easily remembered mantras are the *bija* or seed mantras, so called because they are the seed sounds by which we can move into our higher consciousness or essence. The sound of *OM*, the most sacred of the seed mantras, is still used to this day by many people who meditate regardless of their religious affiliation. I often suggest to my patients that they begin their meditations by chanting *OM*, which is said to contain all of life’s pulsations. Thus when we speak the mantra, we connect with the stream of infinite vibrations of which our universe is comprised.

“The essence of word and sound is *OM*,” we are told by the Upanishads, one of the most venerated of the Vedic texts. *OM* is described elsewhere in the Buddhist scriptures as “the most powerful one. Its power alone can bring enlightenment.”

*Dr. Mitchell Gaynor will present
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