

## Sonic Yoga: Sound, Mind & Body

by Don Hill

The word universe means ‘one song’, and many wisdom traditions tell of a cosmos made with sound.

at the same time.

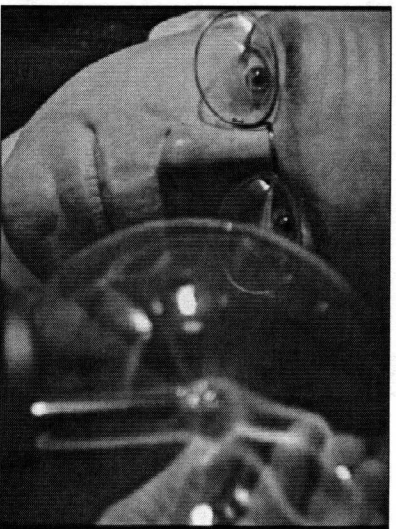
### Why Do You Feel So Good When You Hum?

There are physiological and psychological effects associated with sacred sound.

Aboriginal Australians believe the world was sung into existence. During the Dreamtime, it is said that powerful beings traveled far and wide; everything and anything they encountered became a melody – flora, fauna, people.

In the beginning, there was music.

Canada’s people of the Arctic tell a similar story of creation. Inuit throat singing, a vocal style of modulated breathing imitates sounds in nature; the intricate dance between rhythm and tone tells the story of a dramatic land that is the North.



“When we sing,” gospel singer Bernice Johnson Reagan says, “we announce our existence. Singing is running this sound

through your body. You cannot sing a song and not change your condition.”

Science confirms that when a singer intones with intention, something remarkable happens to the body and human cognition. And the sounds we hear and how we listen affects us profoundly.

At the University of Alberta and in workshop retreats, I teach people how to listen for and sing harmonic overtones. You have likely heard the low sustained chant of Tibetan monks, an example of what opera singers call a ‘sub glottal’ pitch of sound; higher frequency sound – a kind of whistling effect – is also heard floating on top of these very low notes, a vocal phenomenon which can produce as many as three distinct pitches

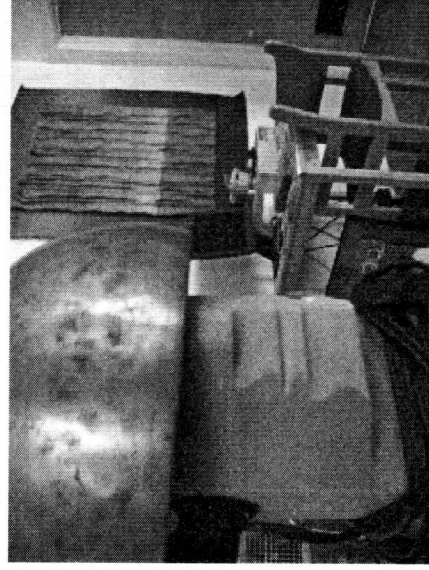
I have been a keen investigator of sounds found at special places that are designated as sacred. This past winter with my colleague Michael Persinger, a neuroscientist at the Behavioural Neuroscience Laboratory at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, I tested and learned why the perception of certain qualities of sound can have such

a profound influence on human physical health; the research focus includes acoustic stimuli beyond the range of human hearing; sound energy that is physiologically “felt” – that shapes the way we think – whether we are intellectually aware of the source or not.

### Vibration and Resonance

None of this will be news to wisdom traditions that have a contemplative practice at their core.

Daniel Statnekov notes there has been an intensive “study of sounds and the differences of vibratory modality according to the planes of consciousness,” especially in India, which he discusses in his book *Animated Earth*. “As each of our centres of consciousness is in direct communication with a plane, one can thus, by the repetition of certain sounds put oneself in communication with the corresponding plane of consciousness.”



three sounds contained within the word, it is said that obstacles on the path toward enlightenment are removed.

“The letter A symbolizes the conscious or waking states,” writes B.K.S. Iyengar in *Light on Yoga*. “The letter U the dream state, and the letter M the dreamless state of the mind and spirit.”

### Natural Sound

During my 2008 residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts, I began to experiment with specific pitches of acoustic energy, incorporating them into soundscape compositions to soothe the human central nervous system, and to tell the body to activate its capacity to heal itself. My most recent acoustic research points to the release of endorphins (a contraction of two words: endogenous morphine) alongside other natural opiates made by the body, in response to prescriptive sequences of natural sound and harmonic overtones.

Many yoga sessions begin and end with the chanting of *aum* (better known in the West as ‘om’). The word, according to Hindu philosophy, represents the primordial sound from which all creation manifests.

Patañjali, the compiler of the *Yoga Sutras*, was quite fond of *aum* as a useful tool for daily practice and as a means to resonate with the universe. By slowly elongating the

I must emphasize the word ‘natural’ sound. Electronically-inspired compositions cannot reproduce the robust range of the harmonic overtone series, which our bodies seem particularly partial to. Yes – the aesthetics of an electronic music presentation may well be attractive to the ear. However, to the rest of the body it is not nearly as effective as sitting outdoors with the hum of cicadas, the chirp of crickets, or the talk of birds gathering for a

chat before night falls.

Today, I guide students in workshop retreats and demonstrate how certain sounds and ambient acoustic energy affects the body in remarkable and positive ways. Of course, there's a downside – sound also has the power to do harm; I teach people not so much how to give up or give in to this racket, but rather 'give way' with tools and techniques to mitigate the unpleasant effects.

At a recent chanting workshop, one of the participants experienced profound affects associated with acoustic pitches and specific toning techniques. The participant reflected she had felt "a kind of sonic cleansing," and a release from "an emotional cold." It is not uncommon to hear the telltale burps and release of gas during a sound workshop; disruptive disturbances are said to occur as well – negative emotions hidden in the body are felt and released – all to the better.

### **The Beat Goes On**

Anyone who has attended a traditional First Nations powwow, which typically unfolds over several days, will know the powerful hold the rhythmic beat, beat, beat has on the body: it is nearly impossible not to be touched and moved by this sound. You might have also noticed the specific postures and gestures of the dancers, which are yogic in form and function and arrived at in a formalized structure.

Alongside the thunderous beat is an

equally powerful chant, which ranges through pitches of extraordinarily high frequency; the repetitive songs together with the ambient low tone of the drum's thumping, persists long after the last beat falls silent.

Aboriginal elders I've worked alongside at the Banff Centre have taught me that their ritual music is medicine. My scientific investigations affirm there is more than just a pleasing aesthetic associated with these numinous sounds; they have the power to transform body and spirit.

### **Sonic Yoga**

Yoga teaches one to be attentive to the body and breath.

The human breath is capable of a wide range of sonic possibilities, which creates the conditions for ongoing physiological affects upon the body and cognition. Therefore, harmonic overtones should be thought of as medicine. The contemplative practices that link 'sacred singing' with wholesome body postures are, in my view, akin to a new miracle drug.

*Don Hill is offering MUSIC IS MEDICINE: Sacred Singing, Healing Harmonies, as a three day retreat beginning 14 May in Edmonton. For more information or to register kindly contact [annehill@telus.net](mailto:annehill@telus.net).*

