

Sounds of Transformation: Vedic Breath, Orisha Heart

Common to the practices of almost all contemplative traditions is silence. Silence is so intimately interconnected with sound that the question naturally arises, Is there not still sound in silence? After all, the perceiver of silence still has an audible heartbeat and breath – blood rushing, air moving. Even in the deepest contemplative practice, the quietest of spaces, we are still connected to our bodies, which are continuously vibrating with sound. Where there is life, there is sound. As a musician who has often felt the web of life through sound, I believe sound is at least as much a catalyst for contemplation and inner knowing as silence is.

Sufi mystic and musician Hazrat Inayat Khan suggests, “The knower of the mystery of sound knows the mystery of the whole universe.”¹ In modern physics, string theory suggests that the universe is made up of vibrating strings of energy – like a piano or cello playing out existence. There is even a Hindu notion, *Nada Brahma*, which suggests that the world is sound and, ultimately, that God is sound – or sound is God.² Sound is vibration. Vibration moves us – physically, emotionally, and intellectually. There is an entire science around the measurable effects of sound waves on matter, called cymatics. Just listen to thunder, shattering glass, ocean waves, trees rustling in the wind, the sound of ice cracking under your feet, a baby’s cry, a lover’s moan, sirens approaching from behind your car while you’re driving. Sound can change moods, trigger emotions, alter awareness, catalyze healing, impart knowledge, and transform our entire state of being.

Sound and music therapies demonstrate how the qualities of sound can be intentionally applied toward direct transformation in healing. Research on sound healing commonly includes the physiological

effects of sound and music on human consciousness. The [Institute of HeartMath](#), for example, looks at heart rate variability and associated emotions. Different emotions are associated with different heart rates, which can be measured in beats per minute (bpm). This helps to explain why certain qualities in music, such as tempo, have a transformative effect on our emotions. For instance, mournful rhythms (such as funeral songs) tend to have a slow, downbeat tempo, while ecstatic rhythms (such as celebratory songs) have a fast, upbeat tempo.

Of course, universals in music cannot be drawn that easily. In fact, one of the only universals commonly accepted in musicology – if we can say there is a universal at all – is the notion of *an octave*.³ An octave is a note that is twice the pitch of the root note, matching the original vibration and increasing it twofold. It speaks to the notion of *harmony*, or an agreeable positioning of parts. The desire to be “in tune” or “attuned with” reality is something of value, shared cross-culturally and mirrored as an octave in music. And while this may represent the only agreed-upon universal, what else might we find when we compare how different cultures use sound? Are there similarities within certain contexts, such as how sound is used in spiritual practice?

For me, music is spiritual practice, a bridge between inner and outer worlds. A commonly cherished experience is that of being *moved*, being touched by something so deeply that you can feel it in your core and it inspires you to move from that place. Music has always offered me that experience. And because music moves me from my core, I am able to know my core and align with it. Through that alignment, a channel forms. Through that channel, energy flows. Through that energy, I am transformed.

Sounds of Transformation: Vedic Breath, Orisha Heart

At the core of my understanding and outlook on life is *interconnection*. In musical terms, I would define spiritual practice as harmony – living consciously in relationship with everything else. Through sound, I can deeply connect with myself, humanity, the world, and the divine. I can hear music in the wind, the rain, the friction of movement in work and play, conversations, even the gravitational cycles of astrological bodies. In a group of people making music together, I am able to find my own pulse, express that pulse in connection with everyone – and everything – else, and be mutually supported in the process. In other words, we can commune through music in ways that allow us to transcend social, cultural, and intellectual boundaries. We find common ground, create a sense of community, share knowledge, and, ultimately, transform ourselves through sound.

Vedic Chant, Orisha Drum

This connection between sound and consciousness is no mystery. In contemporary life, the transformative effects of sound are being recognized in research and applied in therapeutic healing practices around the globe. But for thousands of years, sound has also been at the root of various spiritual traditions. Both Vedic and Orisha traditions are examples of two cultures that have integrated sound and spirituality, specifically through practices such as chanting and drumming. Each tradition originated approximately 4,000 years ago – the Vedic tradition in India and the Orisha tradition with the Yoruba people of West Africa. Though these two traditions have very different “containing” myths and ways of living in association with their practices, comparing them through sound may help us further understand something about the human experience as it relates to sound – or, rather, how sound relates to the human experience.

H. I. Khan explains sound as being made up of two aspects: *tone* (audible vibration) and *rhythm* (inaudible, felt vibration).⁴ Chanting reflects more the

qualities of tone, while drumming more the qualities of rhythm. Of course, both tone and rhythm are found in each other, for they are both aspects of sound. For instance, Vedic chanting is often accompanied by drumming, and Orisha drumming is often accompanied by chanting. Both sonic practices are embedded in ancient spiritual traditions and usually involve an element of devotion to various deities. Both also take place within community, often in ritual, and are repetitive in rhythm, usually with shifts in tempo that are correlated with altered states of awareness, and both are associated with transformative, mystical qualities (for example, direct knowledge, psychic abilities, healing, communication with deities, and connection with the divine). If you have ever been in a room full of chanting or drumming, you can understand how powerfully transformative the sound can be, even as an outsider to the practice.

An understanding of the transformational quality of sound is at the foundation of the Vedic system; it is through the Vedic sounds themselves that knowledge is directly imparted.⁵ This knowledge is presented in the Vedas as *mantras*. Chanting, or the vocalization of mantras, is the sonic practice of Vedic tradition. Chanting is interconnected with breath. Picturing a sound wave, there is a peak and its opposite but equal valley. When we breathe, on the inhalation, the diaphragm expands to a peak; on the exhalation, the diaphragm empties out and resolves. Breathing is the act of moving between inhalation and exhalation. Yet there is also a third, more subtle point: the pause between the inhalation and exhalation – the point at which the peak and valley meet. This is the balancing point that helps sustain the cyclical nature of breath.

The *Visnu Purana* speaks of the three-part relationship among the different manifestations of Visnu. I see this relationship mirrored in the cycle of breath. Within the breath cycle, we can find *Brahma* (creative force) manifested in the inhalation, the

Sounds of Transformation: Vedic Breath, Orisha Heart

peak of the sound wave; *Visnu* (sustaining force) manifested in the pause between the inhalation and the exhalation; and *Siva* (resolving force) manifested in the exhalation, the resolution of sound. Thus, looking at the Vedic myth through sound, Brahma-Visnu-Siva awareness is within every breath.

Chanting connects us with breath, which connects us with ourselves, which connects us with the world, which connects us with the divine. Sound allows us to directly and immediately embody this connection. The chanting of mantras is so effective *because* it is sound – very specific sounds that vibrate in very specific ways to produce very specific results. It is not just the words themselves that are so transformative but also their actual sound vibrations. Vilayat Inayat Khan describes this as follows:

*In the mantram practices, one actually kneads the very flesh of our body with sound. The delicate cells of these elaborate bundles of nerve fibers . . . are subjected to a consistent hammering . . . There is a kind of seizure of the flesh by the vibrations of sound.*⁶

Sound's direct and immediate effect on consciousness is the cause of its power, anchoring the Vedas as a valid source of knowledge. This is the core belief for the power of Vedic mantras and why, with repetition, one of the most powerful mantras, *Om*, is thought to bring enlightenment by its sound alone.⁷

Similarly, in the Orisha tradition, the vibrations of specific rhythms through drumming produce specific vibrations with very specific results – cleansing, healing, acquiring knowledge, connecting with ancestors, communicating with deities.⁸ Within the Orisha tradition is the mythology of the ancient peoples, or deities, who first walked the earth, the Orishas. The term *Orisha* comes from two words: *ori*, meaning “the reflective spark of human consciousness embedded in human essence,” and *sha*, meaning “the ultimate potentiality of that consciousness to enter into or assimilate itself into

the divine.”⁹ Orisha drumming is a means of bridging human consciousness and the divine.

In the Orisha tradition, the drums not only talk to the Orishas but establish a dialogue with them, creating an emotional atmosphere that prompts these deities to possess, or “mount,” people and pass on mystical qualities.¹⁰ A common Orisha rhythm, *Bembe*, gathers community together (publicly or privately) to communicate with the ancients. Traditional Orisha rhythms are polyrhythmic, often using a 6/8 pattern (that is, a rhythm counted in 3 pulses over a rhythm counted in 4 pulses) as well as various overlapping parts at differing meters. This gives the music an inherent tension that intentionally disorients our awareness and connects us with other realms we are less likely to access while in normal, waking consciousness. The rhythms repeat at varying tempos to aid this shift in awareness.

Polyrhythm speaks to diversity and interconnection – various energies held together in the same container, the way individuals are held in a collective. It is a harmonic positioning of parts and a means of personal and collective transformation. Gandhi famously said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” This is reflected in rhythm. Through changing our rhythms, we can change our associated heart rates, emotions, states of awareness, and general approach toward the world. Drumming allows us to reflect on the rhythms within and around us, offering a means to adjust our overall outlook in a direct and immediate way. As drummer Mickey Hart describes it, “The proper rhythm and the proper life go hand in hand: a good person is one who is filled with right rhythm.”¹¹

While chanting is connected with the breath, drumming is connected with the heart. As explained in the book, *Medicine Cards*, “The drum is the universal heartbeat and aligns all beings heart to heart.”¹² With that, I suggest that Vedic chanting explores breath consciousness and Orisha drumming ex-

Sounds of Transformation: Vedic Breath, Orisha Heart

plores heart consciousness – both in an embodied, transformative, and easily accessible way. Breath and heart are central to various discussions of mystical and spiritual symbolism. They are objects of deep contemplation and meditation for cultures around the world, and each implies an intrinsic relationship to humanity and life itself. Sound is the breath of life, the heart of this ever-evolving symphony – musical vibrations pulsing through us like blood. Together, Vedic and Orisha traditions lay a firm foundation for understanding the soteriology of sound. At the root of each of these practices are the ideas that direct and immediate transformation can occur through sound and that it is all held within community.

Sound as the Connector

One of the most profound things we can share with ourselves and the world around us is our presence – simply showing up. In showing up *together*, we honor ourselves, one another, and the sacredness of life. Community is at the heart of spiritual practice. Accordingly, through community we can explore sound as a spiritual means. In sound, we are embraced, and through sound, we can share said embrace with others. Perhaps then, through music, a sort of interreligious dialogue could take place by having different cultures sonically share their spiritual practices in a cocreative way. The [Fes Festival of World Sacred Music](#) is one of the few examples of how this is being attempted. Perhaps with the rising interest in sound-based healing modalities, we will begin to hear of more events like Fes.

In the meantime, drum circles are popping up everywhere throughout the modern world – in wellness programs, professional workshops, company retreats, somatic and psycho-spiritual practices, and various recreational activities. Many of them feature West African rhythms. Similarly, yoga practices are prevalent in just about every major city, and they often involve Vedic chant. The integration of these sonic practices into our modern world speaks to the notion of a global spirituality, of bringing various

aspects of world traditions into harmony. Sound reflects who we are and how we live, the tensions we face and the transcendence we experience. Music is our legacy, our ancestry, our future, our voice, our breath, our heartbeat, our truth. Through music, we can connect and allow our stories to interconnect in an intentional and embodied way.

Exploring sound with spiritual intention can invoke spiritual insight. It can be as simple as listening to our breath or tuning into our pulse, chanting a mantra or beating a drum. Chanting and drumming are two sonic practices that have offered me this understanding. They are not the only practices or the only sounds that can be associated with spiritual transformation and integrated into a global spirituality. And so, I pose this question: What sounds of today might be informing not only the rituals of tomorrow but also our spiritual understanding of who we are in relation to ourselves, one another, the world, and the divine? In exploring how sound is being used in spiritual traditions across the globe, we may begin to hear an answer, and in hearing an answer, we may begin to open ourselves to the possibility of being transformed.

Endnotes

1. Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *The World Is Sound: Nada Brahma: Music and the Landscape of Consciousness* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1983), p. 38.
2. Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *The World Is Sound*.
3. Elena Mannes, *Music Instinct: Science and Song*, aired on Public Broadcasting System, 2009 (Elena Mannes Productions: June 2009), DVD.
4. Hazrat Inayat Khan, *The Mysticism of Sound and Music* (Boston: Shambhala Publications; revised edition, 1996).

Sounds of Transformation: Vedic Breath, Orisha Heart

5. Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound*; Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, *The Vedas* (Bombay/Mumbai: Bhavan's Book University, 1991; new edition, 2009).

6. Quoted in Berendt, p. 41.

7. Saraswati.

8. Baba Ifa Karade, *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts* (Boston: Weiser Books, 1994); Maria Velez, *Drumming for the Gods: The Life and Times of Felipe Garcia Villamil* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

9. Karade, p. 23.

10. Karade; Velez.

11. Mickey Hart, *Drumming at the Edge of Magic: A Journey into the Spirit of Percussion* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 195.

12. Jamie Sams and David Carson, *Medicine Cards: The Discovery of Power through the Ways of Animals* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999 revised edition), p. 202.