

as above, so below

tatha
brahmanda
yatha
pindanda

the macrocosm is in the microcosm

nada yoga

Soraya Oldfield explores the yoga of sound as a tool for meditation and a vehicle for transformation.

Nada yoga is the exploration of consciousness through the vehicle of sound and the discovery of its source. Although a distinct path of its own, nada yoga can also include other aspects of yoga that relate to transformation through sound such as music, tone, and the art of listening. The Sanskrit word nadam means sound current or cosmic vibration. The aim of nada yoga is to harmonise the gross and subtle energy fields and bring them into alignment with their natural vibration. This is in preparation for what we regard as the ultimate goal of yoga, the experience of blissful union with the divine.

FOR MOST OF US ON THE YOGA PATH, THE innumerable benefits that yoga brings along the way become more significant than this ultimate attainment. Through the practice of nada yoga, we aim to still the mind and listen, opening to an awareness of subtle psychic sounds until they lead us ultimately into a deep, restful, and healing experience of meditation.

When our nadis (energy channels) are blocked through things such as poor diet and lifestyle, or emotional and physical stress, our health becomes

compromised. The benefits from nada yoga can assist us in reclaiming our health. Healing through vibration, music, and sound have the ability to transport us into deep states of relaxation, where the body and mind are rejuvenated. Sound, music, and tone is believed to break up dense energy and disperse toxic emotions such as anger and resentment, allowing us to enter into a more peaceful state. We can use sound as a vehicle for our conscious awareness to dive deep beyond the surface distractions of the mind into a state of pratyahara (withdrawal from the outer senses). In this state of sense withdrawal, we can then enter into meditation where we can experience an environment that allows our mind and body to heal.

MANY STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT BRAIN waves are influenced by music, sound, and meditation. In daily life, we mainly experience beta brainwave patterns (13 - 30 cycles a second). However, if we listen to ambient music or enter into a relaxed state, the brainwave patterns change to alpha (7-13 cycles a second). When we enter into a deep state of meditation, we can experience theta brainwave patterns

(4 - 7 cycles a second). The benefits associated with alpha and theta brain waves include a relaxed mind-state, enhanced memory and concentration, and improved immunity. These alpha and theta patterns can be invoked through meditation, relaxation and listening to certain music, sound, and tones.

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHY YOUNG children are so 'full of beans', so eager and enthusiastic about life? It may be because they spend most of their waking hours in alpha or theta brain wave states; in their creative, imaginary world of make believe. As they become more 'grown up', children spend more of their waking hours in the logical and analytical states of mind that generate beta brain waves. Logic is of course necessary; however, when we spend too much time in the beta state as can happen in our fast and furious life styles then stress can become a contributing factor to physical, mental, and emotional disease.

Next time you are stressed, reflect on the innocence, joy, excitement, and carefree experience of childhood. This can encourage us to crave a bit more alpha and theta states to bring us back

[preparing for the practice]

Choose a quiet place where you can sit for some time following the practice without being disturbed. Traditionally these practices are done late at night or early in the morning when there is the least amount of background noise; although natural sounds are not necessarily disturbing and can enhance the practice.

You can either sit in traditional meditative posture with the legs crossed, or squat over a bolster or rolled blanket so the spine is upright and straight. If using a bolster, straddle the bolster and place the pelvic floor firmly on it, with the knees bent and feet flat on the floor. For this practice, the ears are blocked either with the thumbs or the index or middle

fingers. This helps us to focus on the internal sound. If you are practising for longer periods, or have a weakness in the shoulder or arm, the squatting posture is more appropriate as the elbows can then be bent and supported on the knees for greater comfort. Read through the following practices to familiarise yourself before attempting.

Practice 1. Bhramari

Literally means 'bee' and the sound produced in this practice imitates the sound of a humming bee. Adopt one of the postures described previously, with the spine upright and straight. Close your eyes and become still and quiet, keeping the teeth apart, jaw relaxed, and lips closed throughout, so that the sound will be experienced as a vibration inside the head. Place your fingers or thumbs in your ears, inhale deeply and hum the breath out, keeping the ears tightly closed throughout. Allow the humming sound to be smooth and continuous until the breath is fully exhaled. As indicated by its name, the sound is like a humming bee. It will sound something like 'hmmm'. Develop the practice with breath control into a smooth long stream of steady sound. It does not have to be loud, as the focus is on the sound vibration within the head. Continue the practice for five minutes, increasing to 10 minutes as you become more comfortable with it. When you have completed the practice, relax the hands, placing them in a comfortable position, keep the eyes closed, and with your awareness internalised, observe the after-effects of your practice.

We are now ready to enter into a practice of deep silent meditation, where we may discover and explore the inner subtle sounds that are inaudible to the ears. In nada yoga, we move from focusing on the outer or 'struck' (Sanskrit *ahat*) sounds such as humming, toning, or music, to a more subtle awareness of the 'unstruck' (*anahata*) inner or psychic sounds.

Practice 2. Nada Meditation Practice

With eyes closed, place your hands in a mudra or hand gesture of choice on the knees or lap. You may join the index finger and thumb of each hand in chin mudra with the palms facing upward; or gyaana mudra, with the palms facing downward to reflect an inner attitude of union. Soften and still the body for meditation. When the body and breath are relaxed, shift your awareness to the spontaneous sounds within. Initially, you may focus on the heartbeat, the flow of blood in the veins, or the digestive sounds. However, as you go deeper, you may begin to experience the psychic inner sounds.

Many ancient scriptural texts give examples of the actual sounds that can be heard during the practice of nada yoga. In the Hamsa Upanishad, some of the sounds included are ghanta nada (bells ringing), tala nada (cymbals), bansuri nada (flute), and magna nada (roaring thunder). It may take some time before you begin to hear these inner sounds. The simple act of just being present and listening can bring about a deep and rewarding sense of peace.

When you become aware of a sound, focus on that one sound, to the exclusion of all others. Go on listening, allowing the sound to become the vehicle that carries your awareness deeper. As you follow the sound, it may grow in intensity and then eventually fade away, allowing another inner sound to take its place. Shift your attention over to the new sound and follow that one until it also dies away. In this way, other psychic or inner sounds may spontaneously arise. Continue the practice of listening and attempt to follow or trace each sound back to its source, just as you

might follow a train of thought back to its origin. Focus on the inner nadam (sound), without being distracted by thought.

In the beginning this may seem like an impossible task; however, be patient and compassionate towards yourself. If you get caught up in the mind's chatter, just be aware of this fact and return once again, gently, to the act of listening. Even if you find yourself distracted time and time again, simply realise this and patiently return to the act of listening. With patience and practice, you will become more and more sensitive to the inner sounds.

After practising for 5-10 minutes, return your attention to the breath. Ground your awareness back into the body, and once again become aware of the room around you and your external environment. When you feel completely present, finish the practice by chanting the mantra Om three times; or you can simply open the eyes and move the body.

This meditation takes time to develop and should be practised regularly over a number of weeks or months. You can increase the time from five minutes up to 30 or 60 minutes. If done in the early morning or evening, it can improve the quality of your day and bring about restful sleep at night. It will develop in you a strong sense of intuition as it trains the mind to become more aware of the internal environment.

Soraya and husband, composer Terry Oldfield, run Mandala Light Centre and Global Spirit Records in Queensland. Contact Soraya on soraya@terryoldfield.com or browse the website www.terryoldfield.com.

into balance. Recent discoveries in the science of psychoneuroimmunology (the relationship between the mind, body, and immunity) have demonstrated associations between healing and brain wave patterns. Improved blood pressure, anger management, hypertension, relief from headaches, and minor aches and pains, are just a few of the benefits to be gained from regular periods in alpha and theta states.

In the Rig Veda, the oldest of the vedic Sanskrit scriptures, sound is referred to as 'nada brahma' sound of the creation. It is said to be the seed of all that is manifest, from the gross to the subtle, from visible to invisible. Nada yoga embraces the notion that the primary material of the universe is vibratory, and therefore made up of sound waves. Modern physics is now discovering that everything is made up of infinitesimally small subatomic strands of energy. These strands are vibrating and moving in wave patterns at different levels of frequency and subtlety, creating manifest and invisible worlds both audible and inaudible to the human ear. Through the practice of nada yoga, we can access these illusive primal vibrations that unite us all.

HEARING IS THE FIRST SENSE WE ACQUIRE AS A FOETUS. OUR experience in the womb is one of both audible and inaudible vibration. Perhaps this is why we respond so readily to sound vibration. While growing within our mother's womb, we hear and feel the rhythm of her heartbeat, the various pulses as the blood moves through her veins, and the sound of her digestive system swishing and gurgling.

There are many aspects of nada yoga, but as a starting point we will look at two practices. The first is the simple, yet profoundly effective, practice of bhramari pranayama, which is an effective preparation for the second practice of nada meditation. In the practice of bhramari pranayama, our awareness is directed to a sound or tone we produce, which resembles that of the humming bee. By directing our full awareness and attention to this humming sound or tone, scattered mental energies can be stilled and calmed. Other suggested benefits include relief from cerebral tension, high blood pressure, insomnia, and negative mental states. This practice can evoke alpha and theta brain wave patterns. If practised prior to meditation, it can induce a state of pratyahara or withdrawal of awareness from the external senses. This allows for a much more settled and profound meditative experience.

References

Satyananda Saraswati, Swami. *A Systematic Course in the Ancient Tantric Techniques of Yoga and Kriya*. Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar, India, 2004 (1981).

Satyananda Saraswati, Swami. *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*. Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar, India, 2002 (1973).

Austin, JH. *Zen and the Brain*. MIT Press, 1998.

Useful links on the web regarding nada yoga:
www.clarityseminars.com/stress_clinical_research.html
www.yogalinks.net/research/research.html
www.swanresearch.net

ad