

ON SOUND

Listen. Hear that? Sound is all around us, whether it's just random noise or organized into language or music. Sometimes the babel of modern life seems overwhelming, and if you're like me, you've learned to tune much of it out, if only to protect your sanity. I wonder though: if I learn to selectively ignore much of the unnecessary racket in my life, what effect will this have on my capacity to hear what *is* necessary, not only coming to me from the outside world, but from my inner world as well? And if I desensitize myself to the sound the world is making, do I do the same with the "sound" I'm making, in my everyday thoughts and conversations, and so inadvertently contribute to the very cacophony I'm trying to avoid?

The yogis are avid listeners, and no sound escapes their notice. It's no surprise then that they've elaborated a "science of sound," since they've turned just about everything available to us through our senses, in one way or another, into a vehicle for self-investigation and self-liberation. Certainly Western science has also studied sound, but only as a material phenomenon; as is usual with their scientific inquiries, the yogis' occupation with sound has taken them beyond the physical realm into the metaphysical. They've discovered that the whole universe is shaped, pervaded, and ultimately, at the end of its life cycle (*kalpa*), reabsorbed by sound, or to be more precise, a vibratory power that has both audible and inaudible manifestations.

It may seem contradictory to talk about inaudible sound, though of course we're bombarded all the time with sounds we can't hear because of the inherent limitations of our sense of our hearing. But for the yogis, subsonic and supersonic sounds are still considered audible, since we can hear them if our hearing is amplified with special instruments. Instead inaudible sound refers to subtle, or what the yogis call "unstruck" (*anahata*) sound. Naturally we can't hear subtle sound with our everyday ears, for that we need to train our special "yoga ear" with constant meditation practice. Subtle sound is, as it were, like a homing device: when we hear it with our yoga ear, we know we're heading in the right direction and getting closer to the goal of our practice. The yogis describe subtle sound in concrete terms, ocean waves, various drums, a gong, a horn, even oddly enough clouds, which suggests that the "unstruck" is unlike any sounds we've ever heard before.

The yogis distinguish between four "states" (*bhava*) of sound. In effect these are four stages of world/word creation, though it might be more accurate to say that all sound, whether random or organized, issues or broadcasts from the same "soundless" source in three increasingly "sound-ful" extensions or involutes. The source is called the "supreme sound" or "supreme voice" (*shabda-brahman* or *para-vac*), similar to what we in the West call the Logos (which means both "speech" or "word" and "reason") or the Word of God. "In the beginning was the Word," writes the disciple John at the opening of his gospel, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The ancient Greeks envisaged the Logos as the creative and governing spirit of the world, while for the early Christians the Word was divine wisdom incarnated in the person of Jesus.

Shabda-brahman is the transcendent, perfectly quiescent background to sound, in which there's as yet no differentiation into subject and object, and so no world and nothing to say. In Shabda-brahman the world/word exists only in potential. But each of us is ultimately rooted this absolute, and given the proper training, we can develop our inborn ability to tap into its creative, transformative, and emancipative power.

The first faint stirring of Shabda-brahman's world/word-building impulse—actually the first moment of consciousness—gives rise to the second stage of sound, called “visible sound” (*pashyanti-shabda*). This unusual phrase needs some explanation, since *pashyanti* is still located in the subtle, wholly subjective sphere and certainly can neither be seen by a physical eye nor heard by a physical ear. The root of this Sanskrit word means, in its simplest and most literal sense, “to see, look at, observe.” Here though it's used in a more specific sense that means “to see with the spiritual eye, to have insight or discernment.” With second-stage sound there's still no distinct separation between self and other, only an intense desire to be a self, an “I,” and to “see” (and hear) itself in and through the “that,” the world of objects.

The third stage is called the “middle sound” (*madhyama-shabda*) simply because of its location in the middle of the second and fourth states, between the sheer possibility of the world/word and the world's palpable inception and sounding out. Middle sound is also known as “hidden speech” because it's associated with thought or ideation and reason. With this stage we're finally in familiar territory. Now a clear difference is established between self and other, and the Word is cut up into words, though not as yet fully “spoken” as the world/word.

Finally we arrive at the fourth stage of this involutionary scheme, “corporeal sound” (*vaikhara-shabda*). Several interesting explanations have been offered for the Sanskrit word *vaikhari*; for instance: it's what is in that which is most solid (*vikhara*), the body; or it's that which certainly (*vai*) enters (*ri*) the space (*kha*) of the ear. Corporeal sound, whether random or organized, is the sound of Western science and the everyday world, including human speech (*vac*).

This graduated emergence of everyday sound from its soundless source has been compared to the process of human birth, in which the child first exists only as an abstraction in the loving thoughts of its parents, then as a fertilized egg, then as a fetus, and finally as a neonate. Every sound is ultimately rooted in and infused with some quality of its “parent,” Shabda-brahman. Moreover every sound we make is a “child” of ours, and a so little world-creation. But only the yogis are aware of this intrinsic connection between their sounds and the soundless source. Their words then, as Vyasa remarks in his commentary to the *Yoga-Sutra* (2.36), are “infallible.” If a yogi “says to somebody ‘Be virtuous’ he becomes virtuous, if he says ‘Go to heaven’ he goes to heaven” (translation by Swami Hariharananda Aranya). The rest of us are unconscious of this connection; consequently our words are cut off from their source, which makes them confused and confusing, and so a source only of ignorance (*avidya*) and bondage.

Though all sound radiates out from Shabda-brahman, and possesses some degree of its

power, some sounds, called mantras, are far more powerful than others. The yogis' science of sound is often called *mantra-vidya* (*mantra-wisdom*) or *mantra-shashtra* (*mantra-teaching*). You've likely heard the word mantra before, and maybe even recite mantras in your daily practice. It's a word that has no exact correlation in English. Though it's often translated as "hymn" or "prayer," these words have associations in English that are misleading when applied to mantra, and so it's probably best left untranslated.

A mantra is literally an "instrument of thought" (the Sanskrit *man* means "to think"), though not the kind of discursive thinking most of us engage in most of the time. To fill out this definition, we might add in brackets the word "concentrated" or "meditative" right before "thought" and the phrase "about the self" right after. Mantras are really sacred formulas, through which we can invoke and affirm our identity with the soundless source, but *only* if they're properly pronounced with due attention paid to their essential meaning, and held in strictest secrecy. They can consist of a single letter, a syllable or string of syllables, a word, or a whole sentence. The building-blocks of the mantras are the 50 letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, the holy, "perfected" (*sanskrita*) language of India. Collectively these letters or sounds are known as "divine city writing" (*deva-nagami*); individually each is affectionately called a "little mother" (*matrika*), a "seed" (*bija*) or packet of spiritual energy, an aspect or spark of Shabda-brahman.

There are more mantras than we can count. Probably the most famous mantra in the West is the monosyllable OM, the "root mantra" (*mula-mantra*), which has been venerated and chanted by practitioners for thousands of years. To conclude this article, I'd like to work with a mantra that, while surely not as well known as OM, is nevertheless on every living creature's lips, breath after breath, throughout its life. It's called the "unspoken mantra" (*ajapa-mantra*).

The yogis teach that each inhale and each exhale makes a low though distinct sound. Remember how I asked you to "listen" at the start of this article? Sit back now, close your eyes, and listen carefully for a few minutes to the sound of your everyday breathing. (Incidentally, I was once taught that the yoga ear is situated at the back of the skull, just in front of that little bony bump you can feel at the apex of the neck. You might want to "listen" from this spot as an experiment). Don't get discouraged if you can't hear the mantra right away—just pretend that you do, and eventually it will come.

We're supposed to hear a hissing SA-sound with each inhale, and a breathy HA-sound with each exhale (though in some old instructional manuals the sounds are reversed). Joined together the two syllables make the mantra SAHAM (sometimes spelled SOHAM). This mantra, which we all speak with every breath we take from cradle to grave, bears witness to our eternal identity with the soundless source, "That (SA) am I (HA)." Try tuning into the unspoken mantra for a few minutes a few times each day, especially when you're feeling stressed or out of sorts. The practice will naturally draw your awareness inward, slow the speed of your breathing, and help soothe the tumultuous fluctuations (*vritti*) of your consciousness.

RESOURCES

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