

Nada Yoga and Sound Bath Meditation

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## Abstract

“When you finish reading this sentence sit quietly for a few minutes with your eyes closed and just listen” (Hersey 15).

This straightforward meditation is the first sentence of Baird Hersey’s guidebook *The Practice of Nada Yoga*, and it perfectly outlines the simplicity of Nada yoga, the yoga of sound. All you have to do is listen! Nada yoga is an ancient Indian system characterized by inner transformation through the understanding of sound (and silence). This practice takes many forms, including traditional meditation, mantra, and “sound bath” healing as demonstrated by Hersey’s book, Sara Auster’s *Namora*, and Gracelaine Osborne’s explorations into contemporary sound bath practices in New York City.

Rachel Fischer, a friend, a mentor, and a yoga teacher at Asana Soul Practice in Hoboken NJ, leads guided sound bath meditations once per month. In this essay, I will be synthesizing the contemporary understanding of Nada yoga with my own personal experience with Rachel’s sound bath, in order to better understand how to apply the practice of sound healing to myself and others.

## Literature Review

Consider the opening sentence of this paper once again. After sitting quietly, Baird Hersey offers the following questions: “What did you hear? How long did you listen? What distracted you? Were you able to go back to listening?” (16). These questions outline the basics of the practice of meditation on sound - a cycle of deep, active listening and self-reflection. As Sri K. Pattabhi Jois said, “Practice! Practice! Practice! Ninety-nine percent practice, one percent theory” (Hersey 24). Theory is important, but an intellectual understanding of Nada yoga is irrelevant and incomplete without self-study and direct experience. Hersey says, “Nada yoga is not an intellectual pursuit. It is an experiential practice. The discoveries we make are through doing the practice, rather than thinking about it” (24). This sentiment is echoed in the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, one of the seminal texts on yoga philosophy. Patanjali says, “Practice becomes firmly grounded when well attended to for a long time, without break and in all earnestness” (1:14). In this essay, I will offer a few examples of Nada practices, which are “accessible to all, even those with no experience of yoga” (Hatha Yoga Pradipika 4:65) for the purpose of examining and expanding on the current understanding of sound healing and mindful listening techniques.

Practice in “all earnestness” requires a lot of commitment and faith. Why practice Nada yoga? Hersey describes the benefits of his own experience in the introduction to his book. He says, “I have experienced a quiet mind, an uplifted spirit, and bliss. What does this bliss feel like? It is a tingling, energetic, pleasantly electric feeling in body and mind. It is a feeling of simultaneous joyful expectation and wondrous release” (9). In the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, a fifteenth-century manual on Hatha yoga (purification, posture, breath control, chakras, etc.) Svātmārāma mirrors Hersey, saying, “Indescribable bliss arises in the heart of the yogi who

meditates on the nada” (4.81). As with any new practice, it takes time and patience, but eventually the practice begins to transform us. As Krishna Das says, “Don’t go by what I say... Try it for yourself. See if you get results. See if it works for you. If it does, then go deeper” (Hersey 11).

## **Mantra**

The practice of Nada yoga can take many forms and variations. One method is the practice of mantra, devotional chanting. The concept of mantra extends back to the Vedas, a collection of over 10,000 Sanskrit hymns from the Ancient Indian sub-continent. In *Sacred Sounds*, renowned mythologist Alanna Kaivalya describes mantra as “a Sanskrit phrase that encapsulates some higher idea or ideal within the cadence, vibration, and essence of its sound” (3). Mantra is used in Japa yoga, the practice of meditative repetition or chanting. Some well known mantras include Om, Gayatri Mantra, Sri Ram, Om Namah Shivaya, and the Maha Mantra (Hare Krishna). I disagree with Kaivalya’s statement that mantras are always in Sanskrit. Some wonderful English mantras I have learned include “Ah... so!”, “I am loving awareness”, “And this too...”, among others.

How does one practice Japa yoga? Kaivalya gives a few tips on chanting: “To start, practice one chant consistently for as little as five minutes a day... Match saying the mantra with the regular, steady rhythm of your breath” (11). Kaivalya writes:

“This process takes time. Embarking on a mantra practice is like starting an exercise program. It may be difficult at first - trying out new pronunciations or words, finding time to incorporate the chants into your practice. Yet eventually, these sacred vibrations will work their magic, recalibrating our internal system so that their teachings are not just intellectually understood but

*known* and *felt* within our body and our spirit. Over time, they will take up residence in our heart, so that we emanate their profound teachings from within every time we step off our mat or rise from our cushion. Eventually we stop chanting the mantra, and the mantra starts chanting us” (27).

As Kaivalya suggests, we begin to develop a relationship with mantra, whether with the philosophical ideas behind them, with the “cadence, vibration, and essence” (Kaivalya 3) of the sound, or with the particular deity whose name you may be chanting. A familiar example can be found in practicing music. Excepting well-trained sight readers, beginning to learn a new piece of music can be a daunting task. Unfamiliar chords, positions, and rhythms require patience and commitment to learn. Through sustained study of tablature, notation, or sound, familiarity with the piece is soon acquired. The player begins to develop muscle memory, and over time, a sort of relationship between the player and the music begins to take hold and strengthens.

The sound of Om is one of the most well known sacred sounds used in Japa yoga. In the *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali says, “The word expressive of Ishvara is the mystic sound Om. [Om is God’s name as well as form]” (1:27), and that “To repeat it with reflection upon its meaning is an aid” (1:28). Om is often written as AUM and can be split into three letters symbolizing the *trimurti* (the trinity of supreme divinity in Hinduism): Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, respectively. In AUM, *A* represents creation, *U* represents preservation, and *M* represents culmination. (Satchidananda 41). The silence after verbalizing Om is an important part of its nature. Satchidananda tells us, “After the verbal sound ends there is still a vibration. That is the unspoken, or *anahata*, sound which is always in you... There is always a sound vibration in you

that can never be destroyed” (42). Hersey reiterates this, describing *anahata* as “the unstruck sound, the eternal sound that is in all of us and connects us with the greater Universe” (7).

### **Sound Bath Meditation**

Another method of Nada yoga is sound bath meditation. Sound bath meditation is an element of restorative yoga that works to “bathe” the experiencer in waves of sound with healing instruments such as gongs, singing bowls, percussion, chimes, rattles, tuning forks, and the human voice itself. In her dissertation *Sounds of Umbra and Light: Contemporary Sound Bath Practices in New York City*, Gracelaine Osborne defines sound baths as “a collective and individual somatic listening event, where a facilitator uses a variety of instruments... as a focal point leading participants through a sonic and vibrational experience that is considered to be therapeutic, spiritual, meditative, musical, or contemplative in nature” (7). Osborne goes on to describe how “the rules of relationship between performer and audience melt, divisions between logical and intuitive thinking dissolve, and spiritual practice absorbs itself into artistic practice” (9). Sound bath practices vary widely from place to practitioner. Occasionally, practitioners will lead the experiencers through a guided meditation alongside the instrumentation. Sound baths usually consist of a “performative practice” with emphasis placed “not on melodic content but on playing instruments that produce drones and focus on relatively simple rhythms, such as a pulsing heartbeat rhythm...[allowing] for a focused presence of harmonic overtones to be perceived and the potential for a trance state to be induced” (Osborne 7). Sound baths can also be experienced in a recorded medium, such as Sara Auster’s *Namora*.

Sara Auster is a New York City-based sound therapist and meditation teacher who has traveled the world to facilitate immersive sound bath experiences. Released in 2017, Sara Auster’s album *Namora* is described as “the first sound bath to be released on vinyl” (Auster

2017). It is a two track, full length album “designed to enhance meditation, relaxation, creative and deep listening practices” (Auster 2017). Deep listening exercises meant to accompany the personal listening experience can be found on Sara Auster’s website. Suggestions for listening include: “Find a comfortable place to sit or lay down. Take a few deep breaths in and out through the nose. Play and enjoy through headphones or speakers” (Auster 2017). I lit some incense and took her advice. *Namora* is a beautiful collection of gongs and droning singing bowls. Droning notes which seem to come from nowhere fill the space. Twinkling melodies are formed out of the sound bowls, with sometimes sharp, bright timbres when hit with the wood of the mallet, or warmer, round timbres when struck by a felted tip. Throughout the listening experience, I noticed my thoughts come and go, including: *How am I going to write about this? What should I make to eat? This panning is so cool*, etc. Each time I noticed a thought, I practiced bringing my mind back to simply listening. I employed some of Hersey’s meditations: listening for the sounds that felt the closest, furthest, loudest, quietest; sounds with the lowest and highest pitches; listening through each ear individually; focusing on just one instrument and trying to hear its placement in the overall sound, among other points of concentration (Hersey 35-38). Throughout the experience, I felt firmly rooted into the ground beneath me, and a tingling sensation in my fingertips. After listening, I meditated in the calm silence, the *anahata* of Auster’s transmission.

## Conclusion

The practices and methods of Nada yoga are diverse. Through deep listening meditations, chanting mantra, exploring silence, and experiencing sound baths, anyone can begin to heal themselves and others with sound. But as the ancient masters and the modern meditators tell us, there is no greater understanding than through practice, practice, practice - that “the discoveries we make are through doing the practice, rather than thinking about it” (Hersey 24). In my

experience of researching Nada yoga, it's hard not to continually run into the same advice: Quit reading about it, go do it! So listen:



## Analysis

Rachel Fischer is a teacher at Asana Soul Practice, a Hoboken and Jersey City based yoga studio where I took my 200 hour yoga teacher training. During my training, Rachel was my mentor, but it wasn't until we first started talking about sound baths that our relationship began to deepen. I had the opportunity to interview Rachel about her experience with sound baths, quotes from which I will intersperse throughout this analysis. I took her sound bath on April 10th at 8:30 p.m. I have taken a few sound bath meditations before, but this was the first since I began a deeper exploration into the practice. After all I had read, I entered the room excited to transition from research to direct experience.

One of the first things I noticed upon entering the room was the environment that Rachel had created. There was a soothing purple light filling the room from spherical light fixtures situated on the ceiling, and the orange glow of candles along the walls. Gentle vocal harmonies of repeating melodic intervals from the sound system filled the room. I noticed the soft footsteps of bare feet on the floor, and the muted thud of blankets hitting the ground as everyone got comfortable, setting up their own unique space. Available props included blankets, pillows, blocks, and bolsters, and Rachel encouraged using them creatively. As people began laying on the ground in *śavāsana* (corpse pose), or propping themselves up in restorative poses, Rachel offered soft eye masks to block any light, and dropped one off at each person's mat.

I walked to the front of the room to examine Rachel's setup. Rachel's instruments were beautifully ordered on blankets in a symmetrical shape. There were a few pure white singing bowls of various sizes, in a semi-circular shape, reminding me of different tom sizes on a drum kit. In our interview, Rachel said, "Having a variety of different expressions of sound is so deeply effective for the listener, as each instrument uniquely affects the energies in the body"

(Fischer). Her variety of instruments included crystal and tibetan bowls, koshi chimes, steel tongue drums, ocean drums, and her voice (see figs. 1 and 2). Rachel said, “These instruments represent and evoke different emotions, and as I play for a room, I also get immersed and deeply affected by the changing melodies and rhythms that each one brings” (Fischer).



Fig. 1. Crystal bowls from Shkraba, Antoni. *Pexels*, 7 Dec. 2020.

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/person-holding-mallets-6252094/>



Fig. 2. Wooden koshi chimes from *PxHere*, 24 Feb. 2017. <https://pxhere.com/en/photo/827907>

I laid down with the covering over my eyes and a small pillow behind my head. Rachel began her sound bath with a “dharma talk”, which is traditionally a Buddhist “sermon” or public discourse, and is used at Asana Soul by teachers to introduce a theme or intention for the class. In her dharma talk, Rachel set the scene with an exposition of Nada yoga - touching on active listening, what to do when your mind starts to wander, how to bring it back to Now. Rachel began allowing the sound to flow through her.

Throughout the sound bath experience, I contemplated Hersey’s questions: “What did you hear? How long did you listen? What distracted you?” (16). I quickly noticed these questions becoming a distraction of their own, keeping my mind away from the sound I was supposedly analyzing. I could feel the distraction behind my eyes like a heavy stone, pulling me down while the sound attempted to lift me up. So I cast off my analytical mind and embraced the intuitive. In doing so, I find myself *intellectually ignorant* of the sound bath's contents, such as the actual sonic experience, composition, and structure of the singing bowls, chimes, recorded material, and other droning instruments. Because of this, I will instead focus on a few experiential tidbits that occurred during the one-hour period.

### **Experiential Tidbits**

As soon as Rachel began playing the droning singing bowls, I felt an almost giddy sense of excitement buzzing through my body. I had to restrain myself from audibly giggling, but I couldn’t stop a wide smile from forming on my face. My mind started swirling with thoughts - I experienced a crashing together of all my most wild philosophical ideas, tasteful misunderstandings, and *raison de très*. I wondered, *why do the singing bowls have this effect on me? What are the greater themes beyond my comprehension? What is this unimaginably profound thing, that I can never define with words? But here in these bowls, how simply, how*

*playfully; These bowls are IT! This is IT!.. This is...* DING! The sharp strike of the wooden mallet on one of the smaller, high pitched bowls tore me out of my mind and placed me right back into the moment. I returned to listening, and gently noticed my ideas crashing down into sound, returning to vibration.

As the sound bath continued, I wasn't exactly aware of how much time had passed, who I was, or what was going on. It was only sound, Here and Now. Here, a droning, beautiful resonant frequency, each overtone perfectly clear and unique, like the thousands of leaves on a tree swaying in a calm breeze. Here, the wondrous release of dangling chimes conversing with each other, lazily idiophonic in their whispery collisions. It suddenly seemed incredibly funny to me that I was lying on the ground in a yoga studio, surrounded by strangers cuddled up in blankets and pillows, while a sound facilitator guided the beauty of heaven out of Tibetan bowls and into the candle-lit room. Everything made wonderful, perfect sense and I felt like crying. I noticed my eyes gently opening. I was on my side and I saw Rachel's circular movements with the singing bowls. Her form was radiant, her eyes were closed, but she noticed me and smiled. I couldn't believe it was only her creating all those sounds - the reverberation gave an illusion that there were many more bowls and many more sound facilitators in the room. I felt expansive and empty.

### **Comparison to Recorded Sound Baths**

At one point, I heard Rachel's footsteps move around the room as she sang along to a pre-recorded track, carrying a set of twinkling chimes. Her voice was beautiful, and added to the experience in the most human way. The shifting position of the chimes exuded reality in a way that headphones would find difficult to accomplish. Listening to a recorded sound bath is a much different experience than an in-person performance. Besides the limitations of the headphone

experience, the biggest difference that I took note of was the impact of holding space. Sara Auster, the artist behind *Namora*, explores this in her book *Sound Bath: Meditate, Heal and Connect through Listening*. Holding space may begin with “clearing space energetically. You can do this by changing the air in some way: opening a window, burning a candle, lighting some incense, tapping a tuning fork, ringing a bell. The idea is to reshift and reset the energy of a space” (Auster 283). This was clearly demonstrated by the intentional lighting and candle choices Rachel made at the Asana Soul studio. I asked Rachel for her thoughts on holding space during her practice. She said,

“Holding space is a feeling that is created as soon as people walk through the door... welcoming students to arrive exactly as they are and supporting every emotion that vibrates in the space. Whether I am leading a yoga class or a sound bath or both, holding space is about creating a safe, supportive and calming environment for people to feel comfortable to trust me. Trust is so important when holding space, as you never truly know what people are experiencing in their own lives” (Fischer).

With Rachel’s insight, it is clear that sound is only a piece of the puzzle when it comes to facilitating healing. From a teacher’s perspective, holding space is hugely important. Auster notes, “As a practitioner and facilitator, I find that [in] holding space... I can allow things to unfold and happen as they will” (283). However, things are much simpler from the perspective of the experiencer. Rachel said, “Having an understanding of the chakras or energy wheels/points in the body is a huge asset to practicing sound baths... but I don’t believe that you have to have a

certain depth of knowledge to simply experience sound baths... having an openness to receive, shift, calm and breathe with whatever emotions arise is all you need” (Fischer).

### **Conclusion**

The next day, sitting outside facing the sun, I found myself practicing deep listening. The sun was warm on my eyes, reminiscent of the eye pillow from the night before, and the beautiful sounds of birds and the wind quickly surrounded me. I melted into the moment. Just listening, I felt relaxed and empty. I felt as timeless as I had during the sound bath. The beautiful sounds of the birds were suddenly crushed by a demanding, boisterous garbage truck. *Ahhh... so.* So I listened intently to the sounds of the garbage truck, and noticed its departure. When you notice the departure of my voice in the blank space of this page, I invite you to explore the unstruck sound.

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