

# SPIRITSOUND

Articles by David Gordon

## **A-U-M-SILENCE ... THE ANCIENT SOUND OF OM**

### **Seeking the unstruck sound**

Ancient teachings and modern science agree: you, I, all living things, all things in existence are made up at their most essential level of vibrating, pulsing energy.

For millennia, mystics have recounted their experience of this energy, which is said to manifest in our hearing awareness as a humming vibration around and within everything else.

In the Sanskrit tradition, this sound is called "Anahata Nada," the "Unstruck Sound." Literally, this means "the sound that is not made by two things striking together." The point of this particular distinction is that all ordinary audible sounds are made by at least two elements: bow and string; drum and stick; two vocal cords; two lips against the mouthpiece of the trumpet; the double reed of the oboe; waves against the shore; wind against the leaves. All sounds within our range of hearing are created by things visible or invisible, striking each other or vibrating together, creating pulsing waves of air molecules which our ears and brain interpret as sound.

So, sound that is not made of two things striking together is the sound of primal energy, the sound of the universe itself. Joseph Campbell likens this unstruck vibration to the humming of an electrical transformer, or the (to our ears) unheard hummings of atoms and molecules.

And the ancients say that the audible sound which most resembles this unstruck sound is the syllable OM. Tradition has it that this ancient mantra is composed of four elements: the first three are vocal sounds: A, U, and M. The fourth sound, unheard, is the silence which begins and ends the audible sound, the silence which surrounds it.

There are several traditional and allegorical interpretations of this ancient sound.

### **One ancient tradition of AUM**

The loveliest explanation of OM is found within the ancient Vedic and Sanskrit traditions. We can read about AUM in the marvelous Manduka Upanishad, which explains the four elements of AUM as an allegory of the four planes of consciousness.

"A" (pronounced "AH" as in "father") resonates in the center of the mouth. It represents normal waking consciousness, in which subject and object exist as separate entities. This is the level of mechanics, science, logical reason, the lower three chakras. Matter exists on a gross level, is stable and slow to change.

Then the sound "U" (pronounced as in "who") transfers the sense of vibration to the back of the mouth, and shifts the allegory to the level of dream consciousness. Here, object and subject become intertwined in awareness. Both are contained within us. Matter becomes subtle, more fluid, rapidly changing. This is the realm of dreams, divinities, imagination, the inner world.

"M" is the third element, humming with lips gently closed. This sound resonates forward in the mouth and buzzes throughout the head. (Try it.) This sound represents the realm of deep, dreamless sleep. There is neither observing subject nor observed object. All are one, and nothing. Only pure consciousness exists, unseen, pristine, latent, covered with darkness. This is the cosmic night, the interval between cycles of creation, the womb of the divine Mother.

### **The Yoga of AUM**

It might be said that the ultimate aim of Yoga is to enter this third dreamless realm while awake. Yoga means "yoke" or "join." Through yoga we "join" our waking consciousness to its "source" in the world of pure, qualitiless unconsciousness.

Which brings us to the fourth sound of AUM, the primal "unstruck" sound within the silence at the end of the sacred syllable. In fact, the word "silence" itself can be understood only in reference to "sound." We hear this silence best when listening to sound, any sound at all, without interpreting or judging the sound. Listening fully, openly, without preconceptions or expectations. The sound of music, the sound of the city, the sound of the wind in the forest. All can give us the opportunity to follow the path of sound into the awareness of the sound behind the sound.

When one really "listens" to this silent sound, this unstruck vibration, one comes inevitably to stillness, to pure and open existence. The poet Gerhart Hauptmann says the aim of all poetry is "to let the Word be heard resounding behind words." The sound behind the sound. And, in making the sound of AUM, we hear this unstruck sound most clearly in the instant when the last humming vibrations of the "M" fade away. At that moment, that instant separating audible sound and silence, the veil is thinnest, and our listening awareness is most expansive.

At that moment of silence, to use William Blake's words, the "doors of perception" are cleansed, and "everything would appear to man as it is, infinite."

### **Another way to make the AUM sound**

One of my favorite exercises with the sacred AUM sound involves a more modern interpretation of its elements. In short: "A" is the sound of infinite expanding energy in the universe, the energy of unity consciousness and Divine Love; "U" is the sound of that very energy manifesting and materializing in our waking reality; with the sound of "M" we absorb and integrate that energy into our own being. In the silence after the sound we give thanks and allow the process to resonate within us.

Try this: stand comfortably, feet shoulder width apart, hands and arms hanging easily at your sides. Prepare to make the "AUM" sound, all three vowels in one seamless breath. Inhale gently, easily, expanding into your belly as you breathe. Open your mouth fully as you inhale, as if to "inhale" the "A" sound itself, creating the intention of the sound before the sound actually begins.

Then, as you begin to make the "A" sound, raise your arms out to the side, as if opening to embrace all the universe. Then as your voice transitions seamlessly to the "U" sound, extend your arms to the front, as if to hold something precious and powerful in your hands. You might wish to visualize some shape, round and energetic, manifesting between the palms of your hands. Then, gliding from "U" to the "M" sound, bring your hands, and whatever they may contain, to your heart center. Finally, in the echo of the silence, bring your palms to your chest, pressing them lovingly to your heart. Breathe gently.

**Repeat this exercise several times. It is remarkably centering and relaxing.**

The most important aspect of this second form of AUM is the combination of sound and movement. It really doesn't matter what "images" you create in your mind as you do this exercise, or what specific significance you choose to attribute to each of the individual vowel sounds. The mere fact that you are intoning this ancient sound, and combining it with gentle intuitive movements of the upper body, will have a naturally gentle and balancing effect on your body, mind, emotions, and spirit.

In that state, we can best hear the the Anahata Nada, the unstruck sound behind the sound, the very Sound of the Self.

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PERSONAL NOTES:

## **MEDITATION WITH MUSIC**

by David Gordon

Nada Yoga means "union through sound." It is the ancient spiritual art and science of inner transformation through sound and tone. Meditation on sound is one universal path to Self Realization, accessible to anyone, and appropriate for people of any religion or spiritual aspiration. The term "Yoga" means to combine, coordinate, harmonize, integrate. Actually, there are many varieties of yoga, generally grouped into five categories:

1. Jnana yoga, the yoga of knowledge and self-inquiry
2. Bhakti Yoga, the yoga of devotion
3. Karma Yoga, the yoga of service
4. Kriya Yoga, the yoga of technique
5. Raja Yoga, a yoga integrating all the other four forms

Hatha Yoga, a basic form of Kriya Yoga, is the yoga of physicality, postures, and movement. It's probably the most well-known form of yoga in the West; however, the main classical text on yoga - the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali - discusses physical postures (Hatha Yoga) in only three of its two hundred verses.

Within the heading of Kriya Yoga, or yoga of technique, there are several subtly different forms of yoga which teach meditation on sound as a path to spiritual growth and awareness. The three principal forms of this variety of yoga are Nada, Laya, and Surat Shabda yoga. The subtle differences between these three are beyond the scope of this article, and for the purpose of this discussion I group them all under the heading of "Nada Yoga." In the following paragraphs I use this term to mean, basically, "meditation on sound."

### **Absorption in Sound**

Our mind easily becomes absorbed in sound. This is why we all - even infants and animals - enjoy listening to music. When the mind is fully concentrated on anything there arises a feeling of inner bliss. In Nada Yoga, we learn that the source of the sound may be external or internal. The sound may be "gross" or "subtle." That is, it may be "struck" out loud (Sanskrit: "ahat"), as from a voice or musical instrument; or "unstruck" and outwardly silent (Sanskrit: "anahat"), arising inwardly as from the subtle currents of energy or prana moving throughout the body.

With practice, concentration on carefully selected outer or "struck" sounds will enable the mind to become calm and transparent. At this point you may begin to become aware of the subtle inner "unstruck" sounds. You might perceive inner sounds that seem like bells, or flutes, or even a hum like an electrical transformer. Some of these sounds are actually just the sounds of your own body: blood pumping, or the electrical energy of nerves and inner ear. Other, deeper, sounds are the "sounds behind the audible sound." It is into this deeper realm that Nada yoga can take you.

Some traditions tell us that this subtle, inner sound originates in the "heart chakra of the subtle body," considered the center of unstruck sound. Yogic tradition connects this inner sound with Kundalini itself.

In Nada yoga you concentrate on these finer and deeper sounds, moving from outer to inner realm, moving awareness from outer to inner sounds (Sanskrit: "nadam"), while all the time gently easing your mind into relaxed concentration and focus. This is a highly enjoyable form of meditation and it's relatively effortless: as you meditate, your entire being, every cell and atom and part of you, is being purified and balanced by the sounds that you are focusing on. Remember, whatever you pay attention to, you become. "Where you put your treasure, there you shall also find your heart." Therefore it is very important that you choose positive and enlightening music and sounds for this meditation.

### **How to Begin**

One easy way to begin a practice of Nada Yoga is to start with beautiful music. You must choose music which sustains a level mood: calming, quiet, maintaining an even loudness and emotion. This is one fine use of "New Age" music - Brian Eno "Thursday Afternoon" or music by Stephen Halpern or Don Campbell, for example. Eastern music is also a valuable tool - North Indian sitar; Japanese shakuhachi. Native American flute music can also be an excellent choice. Choose Western classical music with care; often the dynamic and emotional range is too great for this meditative use. Whatever you choose, it must be instrumental music - no voices. Voices and words are too "specific" and distracting.

At first, simply sit quietly and focus all your attention on the music for 10-15 minutes once or twice a day. Continue this practice with regularity, listening to the same type of music, always with your fullest concentration. Gradually you may be able to hear subtle sounds that come from within, rather than the audible sounds from outside. As you begin to be aware of the inner sounds, listen to them and focus on them. Then you can gradually change your meditation from listening to music to listening to the subtle sounds.

Go at your own speed with this. Each experience is unique. Awareness of inner sound may happen sooner - or later - but it will happen. Finally, you will no longer need music for meditation at all, and may choose use it or not, as you wish. Then continue listening to the inner sounds for your meditation practice every day. Your perception of the sounds may change as your body and mind become purified and elevated. Just continue to focus on the inner sound or "nadam" daily.

This form of Nada Yoga is actually much easier than it sounds. The wonderful bonus of this practice - meditating with music - is that the process, the journey itself, is highly pleasant. Every step of the way you are bathing yourself in uplifting sounds and music, balancing and healing your heart, mind and spirit. Thus no matter what the specific "meditative" outcome, you can receive only benefits from this pursuit. Your listening skills will also improve, and you will become more sensitive not only to music and sound, but to the subtle emotions and energies within yourself and in others. You will "listen" to others more completely and directly, and you'll find you are able to hear what others are really saying, no matter how loudly they speak...

## **MEDITATIVE TONING**

by David Gordon

### **What is Toning?**

*Toning is the creation of extended vocal sounds on a single vowel in order to experience the sound and its effects in other parts of the body.*

No melody, no words, no rhythm, and no harmony - just the sound of the vibrating breath. Its a simple yet powerful technique, accessible to everyone regardless of vocal ability or training. Through toning you can immediately experience the effects of sound on your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

By literally massaging body and mind from the inside out, meditative toning can help you focus and relax; release negative emotions; reduce stress; and improve stamina and concentration.

Toning synchronizes the brainwaves and helps relieve tension within a few minutes. Toning is also a wonderful technique for developing your voice-ear connection and enhancing your power of listening to everything around you.

Most of all, toning restores balance and harmony to the mind and body. It can help you awaken and deepen your sense of self, and align you to the deepest vibrations of soul and spirit. On the path of toning, you move toward the source of your own inner balance, creativity, well-being, and freedom.

Since the early 1980s, thousands of people have discovered toning, and found it useful for their own health and mental clarity. Doctors, nurses, psychologists, therapists, body workers, teachers, and business professionals have affirmed the benefits of toning in their lives and work.

### **Company is stronger than will power**

*You don't have to "OM Alone!" Toning with others is supportive and fun.*

Get together with like-hearted toners and make vocal sounds as a group. Create an informal toning meditation circle with a few friends. Look around you for companionship, help or guidance. Whether you're with an organized group, a casual friend, or an experienced toning "guide," you will deal better with resistances, physical difficulties, and uncertainties if you have companionship.

### **Vowels and the Energy Centers**

*The power of toning lies in the vowels (like "ah-eh-ee-oh-uu").*

Vowels are much more important in toning than the "pitch" (high or low). Most people experience each vowel as unique in energy, emotion, and effect. .

Modern medical and physiological sciences study and monitor the measureable "electro-magnetic" energy in the body - such as the electrical impulses in muscle nerves, and neural synapses in the brain. And for centuries traditional healing techniques such as acupuncture have followed and utilized the energetic map of the human body.

It seems the body has certain "hot spots" of energy. The medical and sacred teachings of both East and West describe them, and often correlate them with specific thought patterns and archetypal effects. (Some ancient spiritual and medical sources depict these energy centers as Chakras.)

Whether we interpret them metaphorically or literally, exploring the body's energy centers through sound is a fascinating journey. As we learn to perceive the relationship of objective vowels and subjective energy, as we learn to "listen" to ourselves on every possible level, we enrich our understanding of the broad spectrum of energies and emotions within us. The "simple" act of toning heightens our awareness of our own inner energies and vibrations. Through that awareness we feel more alive, and more connected with everything around us.

## **Vowels and Energy**

*There are many vowel sounds in the human language.*

For toning we begin by focussing on several principal sounds. Remember, this is not a list of universal truths, just some traditional suggestions for you to begin with.

<b>Vowel</b>	<b>Possible Attributes or Related Perceptions</b>
<b>UU</b> ("who")	grounding, calming, relaxing, awareness of physicality, gives sensation of depth, base of spine
<b>OH</b> ("go")	conscious self-image, identity issues, solar plexus self-confidence, individuality
<b>AH</b> ("car")	centering, expanding, pleasant heartfelt emotions, gives sensation of breadth, heart area
<b>EY</b> ("pray")	self-expression, communication, listening throat and neck
<b>EE</b> ("knee")	energizing, awakening, mental and physical stamina, gives sensation of length, head
<b>MM</b> (humming, lips closed)	balancing, harmonizing and integrating, the subtlest and most powerful sound

**Examples of vowel combinations for balancing and centering**  
(to be vocalized as one continuous full-breath tone exhalation):

**"UU-AH-EE-MM"** Balance and energize. Morning wakeup.

**"MM-EE-AH-UU"** Balance and relax. Before bedtime.

**Note: this is a list of just a few traditional suggestions to begin with.** Your own awarenesses may be quite different; that's fine! These are just starting points. There is no "normal" toning experience, only "your" experience! With practice, your inner wisdom will guide you and tell you what vowels you need.

Try this for starters: let your intuition choose a vowel for you. Spend several minutes toning it. Begin in the comfortable middle of your vocal range. Then try a lower pitch, then higher, always with moderate volume and without straining. If the vowel feels physically or vocally "wrong" right now, leave it and choose another. Be open to inner experience and sensation, without seeking a specific "result." Explore the sensations of each of these vowels and their total effect on you.

Toning engages your entire being, not just your voice. Whatever specific vowel you may be toning, open your awareness to all physical or energetic sensations, without judgement or analysis. Listen to the vibrations with your whole body, and don't just "hear" with your ears. For example, place the palms of your hands at various places on your body as you tone and allow your hands to feel the sound vibrations.

### **Enhance your toning with different postures and movement**

*Whole body involvement deepens and enriches the toning experience.*

Explore different positions and movements while toning, such as:

- sit on the floor or in a chair, with your spine expanded vertically
- stand, either motionless or using intuitive movements of any kind (expansive arm motions are particularly balancing)
- lie quietly on your back with your hands at your sides
- experiment with eyes closed or open, focused or gazing softly
- tone while walking, working, driving, doing everyday tasks
- make intuitive, expressive tones while doing yoga or tai chi
- express the tone in movement and express the movement in tone

### **Let your inner Self respond, free from outer expectations**

*While toning, pay attention to everything the vibrations may be awakening in you.*

What is the effect of the tone? Is it soothing? Agitating? Balancing? Focus on the here and now. Open your awareness, and let your intuition guide you to insight.

It is very natural to experience physical sensations or emotions while toning, and it may not always be pleasant. At times you may feel boredom, anger, or any other emotion, positive or negative. Similar experiences are also well known in meditation, yoga, or any contemplative activity! Know that these feelings are natural, and that they will pass. Don't analyze the feelings or judge yourself for having them. Persevere with open heart and mind, and you will begin to see results, sometimes subtle and sometimes surprising and amazing!

### **Honor your uniqueness**

*You are a very complex and unique bio-chemical, electro-magnetic, and spiritual being.*

No two people experience toning in exactly the same way. Honor and trust your own experience. Experiment, and seek tones which work for you. Allow your voice and tone to bring you into the present moment, and toward self-awareness!

It is very natural and appropriate to experience energy, physical sensations, or emotional releases while toning, and it is not always pleasant. At times you may feel boredom, anger, fear, or any other emotion, positive or negative. Similar experiences are also well known in meditation, yoga, or any contemplative activity! Know that these feelings are natural, and that they will pass. Do not judge yourself.

During and after toning, be open to everything the vibrations may be awakening in you. Simply trust that whatever toning produces it will ultimately transform and heal your body and mind in the most appropriate way. Don't seek a specific outcome or explanation while you tone, just focus on the here and now. Open your awareness, and let your intuition guide you to insight. Persevere, and you will begin to see results, sometimes subtle and sometimes surprising and amazing!

**The physical guidelines for toning are very simple:**

- 1) Do not tone for more than 20 minutes at any one time.
- 2) A little bit goes a long way. It's often more beneficial to tone more frequently for shorter periods.
- 3) Relax, especially the tongue and jaw;
- 4) Maintain a comfortable and moderate loudness, don't force your voice;
- 5) Be always mindful of healthy posture and deep, full breathing;
- 6) Yawn, stretch, swallow, and move occasionally to release mouth and neck tension.
- 7) Have water and some tissue handy; the energy and physical activity of toning can make your throat dry, or produce excess saliva and mucous. This is common and harmless.
- 8) If you feel tension or discomfort in your mouth or throat, stop for a few moments, breathe, stretch, yawn, and resume. Sip water.
- 9) Do not force your voice. Stop whenever you need to. You do not have to endure physical or vocal strain.

**One final word:**

*Learning any art takes time, patience, and regular practice.* It's more beneficial to tone daily, even for a few minutes, than to tone only infrequently for longer periods. With regular daily practice your body and mind will quickly learn to respond to the tone and vibrations. It doesn't need to be "pretty." If it's real, it's beautiful.

Toning is not "singing" and there's no aesthetic judgement involved. The sound you make does not have to be pretty; the point of toning is not the quality of the sound but your experience of the vibration and its results. Listen with your whole being, and be open to the total effect of the sound. Link your voice, breath, and awareness together to enhance your appreciation of your own true power in life.

Remember, there's no "right" way or "wrong" way to tone, only your way! Your natural wisdom and intuition will guide you. Your sound is unique, and the experience is uniquely yours!

*You are safe and protected in the sound of your own voice.*

## AUDIBLE PRANA: THE POWER OF THE VIBRATING BREATH

by David Gordon

My first experience of the inner power of the voice was during a yoga session years ago. We concluded with a silent meditation, and ended the meditation with the usual "Om." But this time, the teacher suggested that we prolong the sound, entering more fully into the awareness of the vibrations of the tone. The group began toning, each of us breathing at our own natural pace, so the group sound was continuous. When the sound ended, it seemed like my entire being was still vibrating. This experience opened a new door of perception to me.

Soon after, another wise teacher invited me to release the very concept of "Om." We focused awareness on the breath, imagining what the tone would sound and feel like even before the sound began. We then initiated the audible tone with a low murmur, dark and breathy: the sound of "uh" as in the word "cup." Through this low, unformed, earthy sound I experienced more fully the reality that it is my breath itself that vibrates to produce this sound. I deepened my connection with prana, with "spirit," as if "respiration" gave me "inspiration."

Only later I realized that we were practicing an aspect of Nada Yoga - the use of self-generated sound vibration to draw awareness inward in order to experience the deeper layers of the self. Ever since those early experiences, I have been fascinated with the connections of breath, sound and spirit. I even found connections in the language itself. Our English word "spirit" comes from the Latin word "spiritus" which connotes both "breath" and "Spirit." Many other languages use related word forms to denote breath and spirit.

Breathing itself is a basic human need. We can exist only minutes without breath. And so the arts of Pranayama, chanting, toning, and singing all derive their power from a basic and elemental human function. I love this connection of sound and spirit: by uniting sound and breath, we release physiological tension in specific areas, induce relaxation, energize, and promote deep breathing with prolonged exhalations. We balance the body's subtle energies and powerfully draw our awareness deep within, while expressing ourselves outward through the sounds we generate. This simultaneous inward and outward movement integrates who we are inwardly with how and what we are externally. It develops a willingness to be heard, unlocks creativity, and enhances self-acceptance.

The self-generated sounds of toning are a natural breathing exercise. To make a prolonged sound, you must breathe fully and exhale in a steady, slow stream. Try this simple exercise:

Stand in *tadasana* (feet shoulder width apart, firmly on the floor; arms at your sides). Inhale, raising the arms high above your head, gently reaching your hands toward the ceiling. Exhaling, lower the arms while toning AH. Find the pitch that feels best. Time the movement so that the tone is complete when the movement is complete. Do this five times, then stand in stillness and take in the effect.

The power of sound is that it makes us mindful of inner, more subtle levels of vibration. Tension and relaxation, joy and depression, clarity and confusion have different vibrations. What we experience at the physical, mental, or emotional levels is the result of what is occurring at the energy level of vibration.

When you tone, introversion is deepened. At first, the vibration deep within the physical body becomes a focus while toning aloud. When the external sound is extinguished, the vibration continues, and the awareness of this subtle sensation continues to draw the practitioner into meditative stillness. Through "respiration" we are led to a deeper connection with Spirit. - *David Gordon*

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