

The Pulse of Good Vibrations

By Debra Huron

In 1966, The Beach Boys released “Good Vibrations,” a song that featured a synthesizer-like instrument and a cello, together with the usual drums, guitars, and keyboard tracks. The result: a layered sound that Beach Boy Brian Wilson termed a “pocket symphony.”

A multi-layered sound is something that one Ottawa yoga teacher uses a single instrument — the gong — produces during yoga classes to help people relax and heal.

Not Your Usual Music

Devinder Kaur describes the sounds of the gong as many tones within one sound. “The sounds develop and wash over and around you to vibrate all of the body’s cells,” she explains.

Is this music? Not in the usual sense. “Playing the gong is an art, because the gong is not like playing a drum or any other musical instrument. The gong is a vibration. It’s like playing hundreds of notes at the same time.”

Director of *PranaShanti* Yoga Centre, Kaur is a hatha and kundalini yoga teacher, a teacher trainer, and also a sound therapist who plays the gong at the Maplesoft Centre once a month for cancer survivors. As a child studying piano in her hometown of Vancouver, she could not have predicted that her first CD, released in 2007, would consist of a guided meditation, and three tracks with the gong. She is planning a second CD for 2013; it will feature the gong, and meditations for what yoga refers to as the Ten Bodies.



Photos: Jamie Kronick

Taking It Lying Down

Hearing the gong leaves Sheril Armstrong, an Ottawa management consultant and six-year practitioner of kundalini yoga, feeling relaxed. She says the experience is conducive to being grateful and to thinking about life in a positive way.

As with many yoga students who hear the gong at Kaur's classes, Armstrong lies on her back in corpse pose, or shavasana, to receive the vibrations, which she says seem to fill the room and "penetrate into your body and your heart."

It reminds her of the days when she would attend a rock concert and feel the music's energy. "But unlike a rock concert...the gong doesn't have a loud sound. With the gong, you're not feeling deafened by the sound at all. It's comfortable for the ears."

A Kundalini Tradition

Although teachers from any yogic tradition can offer this unique form of relaxation to yoga students, it seems most common in the kundalini tradition. Yogi Bhajan, the founder of kundalini yoga in the West, almost always used the gong in his classes and lectures, Kaur explains.

When she first heard the gong and saw the effect it was having on her, Kaur decided to take the gong's sounds to others. Kaur's research led her to purchase a Sabian gong as her very first instrument. Made in New Brunswick, the gong was manufactured for use in a symphony orchestra.

Then, Kaur learned that a German company, Paiste, was making gongs in a series called "Planet" — with each gong tuned to the tonal vibration of a particular planet. She simply

had to find out what the difference in sounds might be and now owns two from that series: the Earth and Mercury gongs.

Metal and a Mallet

Each gong consists of a round metal disc that is usually flat at the centre but slightly rounded at the outer edges. The Paiste gongs are hand-hammered and then fired numerous times at high temperatures to fuse metals such as copper and steel into a unified whole. Some of the mallets that Kaur uses to strike the gong are made of rubber covered with a sheepskin-like fabric; others are made of wood covered with wool felt.

The mallet strikes the going at various percussion points, allowing the player to use a variety of rhythms to create special effects. "You can direct the sound and the resonance from the gong to different parts of the body, such as the heart, the spine, the intuition, the mind," says Kaur. "The sound can enter and affect the body in different ways, thus having an impact on some or all of the body's energy centres [chakras]."

The fifth chakra, located at the throat centre, relates not just to speech but also to listening. Yet hearing the gong with the ears is just one way to experience it. "Our brain waves, heartbeat, and respiratory patterns can all be shifted through sound," says Kaur.

Sound Therapy for Well-Being

Using a very soft touch when she is striking the gong can produce incredibly diverse sounds — a phenomenon that Kaur describes as sound therapy. "It's a healing modality that uses sound to shift our vibratory frequency to bring the body back to a place of harmony."

At the Maplesoft Centre, where Kaur plays the gong on Wednesday afternoons each month, most people have never heard of the gong — or even done yoga.

"Yet 90 per cent of them are so receptive. They love it! They say it can be a huge help in sleeping [that night], and of course, if they fall asleep while I'm playing the gong, it's still very good because it's helping them with their healing."

As for Armstrong, who has been exposed to the gong for six years, the healing effects on her healthy body simply lead to a higher level of well-being.

"The best experience is the feeling of being connected to my body and soul," she says. "I find it's a wonderful place to think about spirituality and life, and how you can contribute to life."

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Devinder Kaur: Making healing sounds

John Ceprano

A Balancing Act

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