

The Science, Mystery and Magic of a ‘Gong Bath’

BY DEVPREET KAUR



When avid attendees of gong baths say why they never miss a session, they often cite stress relief or deep relaxation, but there's nearly always something they can't quite articulate; they try to describe something more healing and profound. Beyond the ineffable spiritual benefits, there's scientific and metaphysical evidence in support of this ancient healing practice.

The gong has been used throughout history as a ceremonial and healing instrument. Sources describe its use in 4,000 B.C. to as far back as 16,000 B.C. Gongs have become more popular in the current high-tech age, as the speed and amount of information has created new forms of stress for both adults and children.

Stress in any form (physical, mental or emotional) activates the sympathetic nervous system and triggers the release of hormones such as adrenaline (the "fight or flight" response) and cortisol, which directly impacts blood pressure, blood glucose, immune function and inflammation. Physical labor allows the body and muscles to use the hormones, but despite feeling more stress, most of us spend most of our time sitting. When the nervous system is chronically activated by stress, an excess of circulating hormones create dysfunctions like high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, depression, insomnia, digestive disorders, autoimmune diseases and other maladies resulting from chronic inflammation. Today's TV commercials touting pharmaceutical drugs to combat these diseases and disorders are overwhelming evidence that our bodies need a break.

The vibration of a gong is a powerful method for reducing stress. Known as a Gong Bath, the gong creates an ocean of sound that is profoundly relaxing; a state which activates the parasympathetic nervous system to balance the over-amped, over-taxed sympathetic nervous system. Water has often been used as an analogy for the rippling effect of the gong's vibrations, partially because our bodies are approximately 70 percent water and water serves to conduct sound waves. Like ripples created by a pebble skipped onto a glassy lake, the gong's sound gently reverberates over, around and through the entire body to calm, relax and soothe. Typically, the listener's heart rate slows, blood pressure drops and breath is restored to its natural rhythm. The gong induces a holistic resonance in the body and a spontaneous meditative state in the mind, resulting in a sense of expanded awareness and wholeness.

The Science of Sound Healing and Gong Baths

Sound Healing has a scientific basis in neuroscience and physics, but there are still many aspects that seem to defy explanation. Our minds and emotional experiences alter our physical state, and in turn, our physical state alters our emotions and mind. Yet only in the past few decades, with the advent of functional MRIs, have we been able to scientifically document that mind-body connection. So, even if the only benefit of a gong bath was relaxation, it is a scientifically valid healing modality.

Dr. Gloria Oberbeck, a Harvard-educated family medicine practitioner, has been a fan of gong baths since 2003. Dr. Oberbeck says, "We know music can change the mood of a person, a group, a whole room." Special education teachers and sound therapists know that sound and music have profound effects. When nothing seems to get through to an autistic child or Alzheimer's patient, the vibration of music has repeatedly and consistently created a breakthrough.

As early as the 18th century, German scientist and musician Ernst Chladni demonstrated that sound affects matter. Then the experiments of Dr. Hans Jenny, a Swiss medical doctor and scientist, demonstrated that sound both affects matter and also creates, alters and maintains form, and that differing frequencies produce different results.

In the early 1980s, French composer and bioenergeticist Fabien Maman, along with Helene Grimal, a biologist at the French National Center for Scientific Research in Paris, explored the impact of sound waves on healthy and uterine cancer cells. The human voice produced the most dramatic results—exploding cancer cells and energizing healthy ones. The sound waves of a gong being played for 21 minutes also caused the cancer cells to disintegrate or ultimately explode.

Sound is now being used as an important part of the healing process for cancer patients, as it helps calm the mind and body and assists in the management of pain. The sound of the gong cuts through mental chatter and quickly creates a meditative state and deep relaxation. Dr. Oberbeck cites research saying, "Meditative states have repeatedly alleviated or reversed many disorders and disease states. Many studies show that meditation helps relieve high blood pressure, stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, and chronic pain. Physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of the body are positively affected by a Gong Bath."

The Metaphysical Benefits of Gong Baths

The principles of sound, vibration and energy flow as healing modalities have been taught in both the East and West. Every wisdom tradition throughout the ages has used the tenets of vibration for healing and heightened states of consciousness. From Hermetic philosophers, Chinese acupuncturists and Hindu sages to Jewish cantors, Catholic mystics, Shamans and Buddhist monks, spiritual leaders knew the profoundly powerful effects of vibration on the nervous system; whether of the human voice chanting specific words (mantras) or instruments creating resonant sounds.

Guru Charan Singh, Ph.D., psychotherapist, business consultant, MEd, MIT instructor, Kundalini yogi and gong master, says, "The gong is a sacred threshold. It is the portal that links the finite and the infinite experience of the Self. As such, the gong is the most sublime instrument of the Yogi. It is a cauldron in which you can create alchemical blends of qualities that open and develop the Inner Self."

Gong master and Kundalini yoga teacher, Don Contreaux, who is in his 46th year of gong healing and teaching says, "The sounds from the gong travel from the outer ear throughout the body via the vagus nerve—impacting brain waves, respiratory rate and heart rate. Sound enters the healing equation from several directions: It may alter cellular functions through energetic effects; it may entrain biological systems to function more homeostatically; it may calm the mind and therefore the body; or it may have emotional effects, which influence neurotransmitters and neuropeptides, which in turn help to regulate the immune system—the healer within."

The wisdom traditions teach that illness is a symptom of imbalance, or dissonance rather than resonance. Sound energy healing focuses on creating vibrations that improve overall health and wellness. Contreaux adds, "Gongs open up your chakras and often release a lot of blocked energy, much like acupuncture or massage can do – it really is a sound massage."

A gong bath is excellent therapy for depression, fatigue, feelings of separation, loneliness, anger, fear, hostility and many other conditions caused by a lack of balance and harmony in the body and mind. According to Contreaux, "A Gong Bath is the most powerful form of holistic resonance known to man."

In the simplest terms, the gong awakens innate wholeness and guides the body to a state of greater balance and harmony. A gong bath is as scientifically sound as it is mysterious. It is as other-worldly as it is logical. It requires nothing but receptivity in order to be fully experienced, but it must be experienced in order to be understood.

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