

enchanting the world: the healing magic of vocal harmonics

by Tamara Watson



Jill Purce

As a sound-healing practitioner I've been exploring the effects of sound on the body using different instruments, including the Australian *didgeridu* and Tibetan singing bowls, but it's the power of the voice that most interests me, and I think it is the most powerful for healing. Last winter I attended a vocal workshop in the UK with sound healing pioneer Jill Purce, who introduced me to sacred chant. Since returning home, I have been practising the techniques that I have learned and I feel my energy shifting and notice positive transformations in my everyday relationships with others and with life.

Jill has been teaching workshops internationally for over thirty-five years, sharing with others ways to use their voices and offering them a tool for deep meditation, healing and transformation. She says one of the effects of chanting is the dissolution of boundaries, which allows for something new to take place in the psyche and body of a person.

Her goal is to 're-enchant the world' through chant, explaining that when you liberate the voice, you liberate the individual, and thereby the return to a more harmonious way of living with others and the environment.

Matthew, a participant in the workshop I attended, shared the following comment: *I feel moved by the power of the group and how the sound seems to break through the everyday barriers between all of us. Amazing for me is how I felt a sense of connecting with everybody, and felt this closeness to people who are living their everyday lives very differently.*

Chanting is an ancient practice used in different cultural traditions to create harmony in body and spirit, and foster communion. During her workshops Jill teaches techniques learned first-hand from Tibetan, Tuvan and Mongolian masters, American Indians and shamans and through personal exploration. One of the skills she teaches is overtone chanting, which involves producing simultaneous notes octaves apart. Jill

demonstrates a technique using a single note, and how to alter the resonant cavities of the body to produce bell-like sounds simultaneous to the lower fundamental note. These high sounds, or overtones, are component parts of the one note that are filtered in such a way that they become louder than the note itself.

The intervals between the fundamental note and the overtones correspond to mathematical patterns of order and harmony found throughout the universe. When we listen to them, or even better, produce them ourselves, we alter the molecular structure of our bodies and the vibration of the space around us to heal not only our physical bodies, but also to promote the transformation of limiting thought patterns that cause dis-ease.

Central to the practice is the art of listening. Jill emphasizes that it is not just making sound that is important, but that being able to listen to is essential: "in this way you complete a circuit of attention and it is this circuit of attention that enables you to go beyond the thinking mind."

Underlying all Jill's teaching is the premise that the voice is the key to spiritual transformation. A practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, she claims the Tibetan tradition is where the most precise understanding of the use of sound and the voice has survived. Jill explains that the sound of the voice is directly linked through the breath to the activities of the mind, and through working

with the voice we can learn to enter the state the Tibetans know as 'rigpa', the awareness which combines emptiness with clarity and leads ultimately to illumination. In Tibetan philosophy the voice acts as an intermediary between the subtle realm of mind and the more physical realm of body. "A person's voice is their magic."

Following is an excerpt of an interview with Jill Purce:

T: Acknowledging the power of sound and the voice for transformation, have you ever used your voice to heal an individual outside of the workshops you teach?

J: My main focus in all that I do is to get everyone using their own voices. The whole point for me about the voice is that it's a reclamation of one's own power and ability to participate in the resonant nature of all things, of life, of each other, of community. Real healing happens when you are part of something much bigger than yourself, whether that's the spirit, community or nature.

T: What prompted you to first practise Tibetan overtone chanting?

J: The kind of overtone chanting I'm doing is not Tibetan. Overtone chanting indigenously is found in Central Asia – in Tibet, Mongolia and Tuva. The form that I teach is not Tibetan, which has a very deep fundamental and one overtone over the top. It's more like Mongolian or Tuvan where you have a slightly higher fundamental note and then varying harmonics on the top of it.

Traditionally different cultures have different ways of dividing the scale. The overtone structure, or series, is not a scale. It's how the geometry of nature sounds when you allow it to be heard.

For healing purposes we need to work with the pure intervals that put us into resonance with the world we live in. That's what happens when you chant the harmonics. It's not necessary to sound like a Tuvan or Mongolian, but to use something of the same technique that enables you to make the harmonics audible above your singing.

T: Was it simply this knowledge that prompted you to seek out and study with them?

J: When I started I was interested in the power of sound to bring about form, in sound as a creative force in the universe that every tradition tells us about. Then I was led to the question – what kind of sound is the most powerful sound? The most powerful sound is the human voice. The true instrument is the human being as instrument, is the voice. This is the most sacred instrument of all.

In general we are an instrument which is not being played, getting rusty and out of tune. We have to reclaim our own voices, our own power and the resonance with community, with nature, with ourselves, and with the clarity of mind that comes from the practice.

The most important thing about the voice is that it enables us, by making a sound and by attending to the sound we are making, to come into the present moment, no longer trapped by regrets of the past and dreads of the future and caught in the grip of the anxious mind. It enables us to escape from the limitation of mind into a state of clarity where true healing lies.

T: Would you say that chanting in groups is essential or is solo chanting equally beneficial?

J: They're very different activities. I think they're both important. Chanting in community is one thing, an extraordinary one and very powerful, but doing sonorous yogas individually is also very important.

T: For someone who's never used their voice and is shy about singing is it helpful if they sing along with songs that they're drawn to?

J: Yes, absolutely, definitely. Also, just go around humming. Sit peacefully in a corner, light a candle, and just hum. Listen to yourself while you're humming. That in itself is a very simple practice which everybody can do. Or when you're vacuuming, hum along with your vacuum cleaner – there are all sorts of things you can do like that.

T: From my experience of this week-end workshop with you, I'm guessing that over the course of your teaching that you've seen many transformations occur?

J: Yes, I've seen the most extraordinary healings and transformations. There were people who couldn't sing, that joined a choir and started singing, and people whose lives were a misery that became utterly joyful. There have been countless physical healings and emotional healings – all kinds. 

Jill Purce teaches weekend workshops in 'Inner Sound and Voice' and week intensives in 'Ritual and Resonance – Healing the Family'. Visit www.healingvoice.com for her current schedule. Tamara Watson teaches 'Music of the Heart' workshops; visit www.bodymandala.net for more information.